



Merry Mix-Up

Author: *Lydia Hall*

Category: Erotic, Romance

Description: 'Tis the season for secrets, scandals, and sizzling romance!

Who knew playing Santa's little helper could be so naughty?

I'm Jade, the girl who's always behind the scenes, stitching dreams into reality.

But this Christmas, I'm stepping into my twin's stilettos for a wedding extravaganza.

It's just one little white lie, right? What could possibly go wrong?

Enter Newt Phillips: best man, billionaire, and the guy who makes my heart jingle all the way.

He's like a Christmas feast for the eyes, and suddenly, I'm starving.

But here's the catch:

He thinks I'm my sister.

I'm drowning in tinsel and guilt.

And did I mention there's mistletoe everywhere?

Just when I think I've got this deception wrapped up with a bow,

My sister's ex crashes the party like a runaway sleigh.

Now I'm juggling two identities, one smoldering romance, and a very confused ex.

Talk about a holiday tangle!

As the wedding bells draw near, the temperature rises.

Stolen kisses, secret rendezvous, and a whole lot of holiday magic.

But when the truth unravels faster than a cheap sweater,

Will our budding romance be snuffed out like last year's candles?

Unwrap this delicious tale of twin-swapping, trust-testing, and toe-curling romance. "Merry Mix-Up" is the holiday treat you won't be able to put down.

Because sometimes, the best gifts come in unexpected packages.

And sometimes, they come with a side of chaos.

Total Pages (Source): 44

Page 1

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 7:59 am

1

JADE

The dining room table in my parents' sprawling 2400-square foot home was full, both with an array of food dishes and numerous friends. Amber and I made the unanimous decision to host our friends for a "Friendsgiving" celebration knowing she would only be in town for just over forty-eight hours before jetting back to LA and more classes. My belly was full and so was my heart despite my real friends all being in Chicago where I left them.

"And you guys are never, ever going to believe this." Naomi, Amber's best friend, clapped her hands and stood up after having already roused us all to a fit of laughter. Her jokes were always the center of attention and tonight was no different, though she seemed adamant that we stop laughing immediately after her intentional stab at comedy.

I fit in with these guys the way a donkey fits in with a herd of horses, but they accepted me. While an outsider would look at the group and think I didn't fit in because of my brightly colored hair and wild sense of style, these guys didn't seem to mind. And I needed people around me as much as anyone else, so rather than being a recluse, I just followed on Amber's skirt tails and did what she did. Except business school—that was all her.

"What now? You're buying a puppy?" Amber joked, and the group continued chuckling at Naomi's expense, but when Jared, her boyfriend, stood up next to her, I got the point. This was something serious. Most of them probably assumed she was

pregnant or something, but I noticed the tiny diamond on her left hand earlier in the night and wondered when that happened. Naomi was my twin's best friend, not mine. And Amber wasn't exactly a Gabby Gossip when it came to friend-type things.

Naomi's hand shot out and she bent her wrist down, displaying the ring I had spied there earlier. She wriggled her fingers and Jared shouted, "She said yes!"

Everyone around the table erupted into shouts of congratulations and applause, and Amber shot to her feet and rushed to Naomi's side and hugged her. I was happy for them, but slightly discouraged too. It seemed like everyone had someone lately, and I was a lone wolf. Maybe it was my rainbow updo that scared guys away, or maybe because I was bold and outgoing and that intimidated them. Whatever the case, Amber had always been the flower to whom all the bees were drawn while I was a weed in the garden meant for plucking and discarding.

I clapped with them but thought the ridiculous display of hugging and jumping up and down giddily was a little dramatic. Amber always did have a flair for that, though. Even when she was trying to be modest, she loved the attention. Mom said she did it with her body language and actions, but I did it with my wardrobe and hairstyles. Chalk that up to one of the reasons her degree was something sustainable while I had chosen fashion design.

I sipped from my glass of wine and watched them all chatter about how happy they were for Naomi and Jared, and when Naomi started handing out orders regarding her wedding party, I was grateful that my place in this tribe was on the fringe, like a lost puppy that tagged along.

"Mav," Naomi whined, grabbing both of Amber's hands. "You just have to be my maid of honor!" The way she whimpered out the nickname melodramatically made me chuckle and hide it behind my glass of wine as I sipped it more. She could win an Emmy for that act.

Amber tossed her jet-black curls behind her back and nodded eagerly. "Of course. You're my best friend, closer to me than my sister." Ouch. Amber's words stung, but they were true. We were identical twins but nothing alike, and she was definitely closer to Naomi than me. We weren't the cutesy, dress-alike, do-everything-together type of twins. We had separate lives and I liked it that way.

They hugged again in a sickening display and moved away from the group, but closer to my end of the table. I heard them snickering about Jared and the wedding night and when Amber asked, "When are you planning to set the date?" Naomi's response shocked us both.

"Christmas Eve, of course."

I looked up at the bold redhead who had always been impulsive and a bit reckless and still, I was surprised. It was the day before Thanksgiving, and this woman thought she was going to pull off a wedding in just over thirty days? For a moment, both Amber and I thought it was laughable, so we laughed. But Naomi pouted her bottom lip out and shook her head.

"It's not a joke, Mav." Amber's nickname sobered her when Naomi said it. She had called Amber Maverick, or "Mav" for short, since the fourth grade when Amber refused to back down to bullies. It later proved useful on the basketball team when there were two Ambers, and it just stuck with her. Now it was a signpost indicating her tenacity and refusal to give up or underperform, which was why she was tackling her doctoral thesis while studying for her finals midterm and completely unavailable to play maid of honor this month.

I pushed myself away from the table that had descended into chaos of individual conversations so loud I couldn't hear myself think. My belly was too full to eat another bite, and I wanted to slip out and go back to my apartment before Mom and Dad came home and made us clean up. It just wasn't my thing. Amber pushed for this

party here where we had more space. She could clean it up.

"Of course, yes!" Amber belted out, but she sounded nervous and giggled. "Oh, hey, Jade, hold up!"

Her words clawed at my back and I turned and looked over my shoulder as she rushed out, "Be right back." She walked away from Naomi and followed after me as I continued my march through the kitchen toward the living room. I was tired and I wanted to just lie down now.

"Hey, Jade, I said hold up." Her feet slapped on the tile floor and I heard her galloping toward me, but I didn't slow down. She was just going to tell me she was going out drinking with the gang tonight and then make me clean up.

"No, Amber. I'm not doing the dishes. You are staying here tonight. Do them yourself." I reached for my heavy jacket on the hook near the back door. I was parked out front, but we hung our coats near the mud room because the front hall closet was packed with our friends' coats.

"It's not that," Amber blurted out, stopping my hand before I could get my jacket.

"What, then? Go have fun with your friends. I'm tired. I appreciate your letting me hang out with everyone, but I'm just not feeling the whole 'I'm a happy bride planning my wedding' vibe." I reached past her and snagged my coat and purse and slid my arms into the silk-lined sleeves as she stared at me with puppy-dog eyes. "I swear, I'm not doing the dishes."

"She asked me to be her maid of honor, Jayjay." It was her turn to pout a lip out and her eyes turned to large, round moons. I didn't know what the heck she wanted me to do about this. She was the one who agreed to help her best friend when she knew damn well she'd be in California, a four-hour flight from Chicago plus an hour drive

to Danville.

"So what?" I asked, and I turned and marched up the hallway. "You'll figure it out. Maybe Newt will pay for you to fly back here every time there's some sort of event." Naomi's fancy older brother who was basically old enough to parent her past her pre-teen years was loaded. He owned a stock-brokerage firm in the city and used dollar bills to pad his mattress to sleep well at night. Hot, but kind of a show-off.

"Jade," Amber said, grabbing my arm. I whipped around, unable to stop the momentum, and noticed her looking back from where we'd come. She pulled me into the bedroom we used to share as teens, where she'd be sleeping tonight as I went home to my lovely private apartment across town to sleep peacefully alone.

"My God, Amber." I winced and pulled my arm out of her talons and rubbed it. "What gives?" Amber was the insistent type. She never really let up or stopped nagging until she got what she wanted. I, being the younger twin, ended up doing whatever she wanted most of the time or risked the wrath of Mom and Dad when they heard how I traumatized her by not giving her what she wanted.

"Jade," she hissed. "You owe me."

Amber was the poster child for perfection. She never got in trouble. She got straight As, and she was on the dean's list when she graduated with her bachelor's. Now finishing her master's and moving on to a doctorate in business studies, I paled in comparison. My dad called my degree useless and told me I'd never find a decent job. I was the wild child who got in trouble and messed up.

Like the time I wrecked Mom's Suburban on icy roads on a night much like tonight. I had no one to call but Amber, and she bailed me out. She lied to Mom and Dad and said she was driving it because she knew they'd never get angry with her. But I'd have been banned from borrowing their cars and forced to walk everywhere I went.

Danville wasn't a huge city, but when winter hits, it's too cold to walk from house to car, let alone to the supermarket or school. High school would have sucked. Amber saved me.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 7:59 am

"What do you want?" I asked, reluctantly resigning to the fact that I knew she had me. Even now, years later when I was an adult and Mom and Dad should have laughed it off, if she told them about that coverup, they'd be angry. It was the holidays. I didn't want anyone to be angry. And I didn't want this secret hanging over my head anymore, either, but now wasn't the right time to divulge it. Mom had a knack for holding a grudge.

"Pretend to be me." Her expression got suddenly serious and thoughtful, and her eyes pleaded with me even as I burst into laughter. The look on her face was priceless.

I walked toward the plaid-covered bed and flopped onto it, laughing at her suggestion. We tried that once in middle school with gym class and everyone knew I wasn't her. I had two left feet back then, and now, I had bright red and yellow hair, with splotches of green and blue. Her jet-black beauty and all-natural makeup were boring. I couldn't pull that off if I tried.

"What's so funny?" she asked, walking over and sitting down next to me.

"You. Oh, my God, Amber. You think I'm going to pull it off, dressing like you, and how? My hair looks like a unicorn vomited on it. Your hair is longer than mine too, and how the hell will I learn to do makeup the way you do?" Perfectly contoured and next to nude colors, she was my polar opposite. My makeup was "clownlike at best," or at least that's how she and my mom described it. "No."

"Oh, I swear, Jade." She sounded next to tears. "Naomi is my best friend. I can't be here and in UCLA at the same time. You have to help me. I can't let her down." Her eyes welled up with tears, and no doubt, she was feeling emotional, but I could tell

when she was fake crying. I had always been able to tell.

"I can't do this, Amber, I'm sorry. I'm supposed to be working with Ginny this month to gear up for the opening of the studio in January. I have?—"

"Please," she begged. "Your mentor will understand if you take the month. You're learning so much and your designs are already finished. You said so yourself earlier." Her lip quivered, and I bit mine, not wanting to snap at her. What she was suggesting was rude and inconsiderate. She'd never give up her future or put it on hold for a month for me. I was always doing stupid things like this for her.

"Just tell her you can't do it." I shook my head, determined to stand my ground this time.

"Tell my best friend whom I love so much that I can't be the maid of honor at her only wedding? Are you listening to yourself? That's cruel." She crossed her arms over her chest and gave me that look—the one with puppy dog eyes and pouty lips.

"And sending your twin in to do it for you isn't?" I scoffed, but she was wearing me down. I grew up with Naomi the way I did with Amber, sleepovers and slumber parties. I knew Naomi would be crushed, and even though I shouldn't have felt guilty about this and Amber should have just fessed up, I was leaning toward helping her.

"Please, Jayjay," she whimpered, and her use of my childhood nickname won me over. I was weak and I caved like the front end of a Honda in a collision.

"Fine... but I have no clue how this is going to work. Naomi is going to see right through it." I closed my eyes and wished I could sink into the mattress beneath me.

"Makeover tomorrow morning." Amber smacked a kiss on my cheek and ran to the door. "Eight a.m. don't be late. I'll go to the pharmacy as soon as they open to make

sure I have everything, and you'll get a crash course on being me!"

The door slammed and I knew she was gone. I covered my face with both hands. I didn't need a crash course on her. She was my twin. I memorized her wacky behavior and quirks years ago. What I needed was a glass of whiskey and a time machine. Christmas couldn't come fast enough.

2

NEWT

December 29th

Not much changed over the years here at home. I might have missed a few holiday traditions now and then, but when Naomi pleaded with me to come home for Thanksgiving, I humored her. We weren't close—in relationship or in age—but I loved my younger sister fiercely so I cleared my schedule to be here for her.

"Newt, my God, look how you're doing that!" Naomi's snarky chiding made Mom snicker as she untangled the lights that would string the tree.

It still amazed me that there were two women on this planet who hadn't subscribed to the consumerism mindset of day after Thanksgiving shopping. Mom and Naomi never broke this tradition of erecting and decorating our tree the same Friday every year, and I was prostrate on the floor trying to screw the base bolts in place to keep it upright while Dad watched the game with a lazy hand on a high branch.

"Dad! It's leaning!" Naomi continued to chide and lecture as I unscrewed the bolts and Dad repositioned the tree over and over until it was perfect.

Life was like that sometimes—having to redo things because they just weren't quite

straight, like my first several attempts at getting my brokerage firm off the ground. I was a flop for four years in a row, but then I struck gold and ever since, I'd been raking in the money like we raked the leaves in fall.

"There, it's perfect." Mom sat with the wad of tangled lights on her lap, looking up at our Christmas tree with sparkling eyes and a broad smile. She loved every Christmas tradition in her soul the way I loved the sight of more zeroes at the end of my bank account balance. It was no wonder they lived in this little Christmas-obsessed town for so long and refused to give up the home I tried to help them graduate from.

I slid out from under the beast and helped Dad position it in front of the large bay window in the great room of their home. The old place was too sentimental to them to give up. Otherwise, I'd have had them in a much nicer spread uptown where they could be closer to everything. But money only goes so far when the heart is involved. Mom and Dad would let me help them update or renovate to modernize, but they wouldn't move. I respected that.

"There, now can I just get a hoagie and sit and watch football?" I dusted the pine needles off my button-down, and Naomi picked one out of my hair and patted my chest. Her manicured nails were red and green with tiny little cubic zirconia peppered on them. Very festive.

"Nope, you have to do the tree with us. It's tradition." Her wink would have looked playful to any outsider not familiar with my family traditions, but I knew it was a threat. It said, "Miss this and your ass is mine." If Mom was the Christmas Queen, Naomi was the sorceress, able to bring grown men to their knees with a single glance, and I was weak. She was my sister, and as much as I just wanted to relax, I had to participate. I couldn't let her be disappointed.

"Fine, but I can at least eat while we're doing this, right?" Her insistence on forcing me to continue traditions I had skipped in previous years was her way to hold on to

her own childhood for one more year.

She was getting married now, and that meant a new world was beginning. One where new traditions would start and old ones would end. Naomi and Jared would have their own tree now, their own holiday meals. Unlike me. I thought I'd have that at one point, had the ring and was ready to propose too, but it didn't turn out how I planned and at thirty-six, I was still single and searching.

"Nope again." Naomi picked up a box of ornaments and thrust them into my chest with a grin.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 7:59 am

I reluctantly accepted the torture device and resigned myself to the fact that my stomach would be growling a little longer. She plucked a red bulb from the box by the metal hook and walked over to the tree to find the perfect position for it. I followed her, setting the box down on the nearby armchair and taking out an old snow globe marked "1988 Baby's First Christmas."

"Aw, Newt, we got that the year you were born." Mom sounded sentimental and sappy, and I hung the ornament next to the one Naomi just placed on the tree. "You know what? We need cocoa! You guys keep going." Mom shot out of her chair and the lights fell to the ground.

Naomi chuckled and turned to get another ornament.

"So, you're getting married, huh?" I asked, taking several smaller ornaments in hand to minimize the time I was stuck doing this. As I hung them, Naomi and I chatted.

"Yeah, we are. And actually, I wanted to talk to you about that." Her eyes caught the movement of my hand as I hung a popsicle stick ornament she made when she was in elementary school. "Aw, that was my favorite year." The sticks had been painted brown and were glued together in the shape of a deer, decorated with pipe cleaners and beads.

"Yeah? What about?" I hung the ornament and a few more, spacing them out. Each one brought up some sort of memory of the past for me or for her.

"Yeah, well Jared's best friend is stationed in Japan and there's no way he's getting leave on this short notice." She turned to face me, biting her lower lip. "So I

suggested that we ask you to be the best man."

Naomi stopped abruptly and waited while I let the request sink in. Best man duties weren't for the faint of heart. There would be tuxedo fittings, talking him down—usually with alcoholic drinks—when he got frustrated with the bride's demands, cake tastings, and the all-important bachelor party. I wasn't sure I even knew Jared well enough to be his best man.

"I don't know, Nomie," I told her, using the nickname I gave her when she was just four years old and I was fifteen and forced to babysit her. With eleven years between us in age, we had nothing in common for so long, I didn't know where to begin. I knew her best friend was a twin—Jade and Amber. Their names always made me think their father was a jeweler, but he was just a farrier who got paid really well. And I knew even less about Jared, who had only been in Naomi's life for the past two years. I met him exactly three times.

"Come on, Newt," she pleaded, hanging an average round bulb ornament. "Jare doesn't have anyone. And you know me inside and out. Pretend you're my best man, and I'll make sure you and Mav can handle things. Jare and I will make it easy on you by combining everything except the part with my dress. Okay?" She grabbed my free hand and held it and shook from the waist up like a toddler demanding her sippy cup.

"Look, I have a multimillion-dollar business to run, Naomi. I have to be in Chicago tomorrow. As it is, I stole this time away from my work to come here and support you when you made your announcement." I was flattered by the idea of being asked, considering I had relatively no friends of my own, but I was in the middle of a few really important projects. I didn't have anyone to run things for me when I wasn't around.

The work I was in was cutthroat and competitive. I was alone at the top for good reason. I had trusted one too many people only to get burned, which only added insult

to injury when Val did what she did and our relationship ended so abruptly. There was zero chance I'd be asked to be someone else's best man. My high-school friends were already married, and none of them had extended the offer because I ditched this small town and aimed for the stars as soon as I threw my graduation cap in the air that day.

"Newt, please. You run the company. You can take a few days off to drive home." Her begging wouldn't stop until I gave her the answer she wanted. I knew that much. I just didn't know how to let her down gently. I didn't even know Jared that well. I didn't want to play best man.

"Or you can stay here, work remotely," Mom said as she walked back into the room. It was obvious she had been eavesdropping on the conversation. Meanwhile, Dad was sitting across the room with the game volume off so I couldn't even listen and enjoy it.

"You two ladies are persistent, I'll give you that." I reached for the tray of mugs Mom carried and selected the largest one loaded with mallows and drizzled in chocolate sauce. "Mmm, Mom, you make the best cocoa."

"She'll make it every day if you say yes." Naomi's hands folded together in front of her face as if she were saying a prayer, and I rolled my eyes as I sipped the hot winter drink.

"Fine," I grumbled, realizing this meant my December looked more like the end of fiscal year than the merry holiday time it was supposed to be. Naomi threw her arms around me and giggled while I was already busy planning how I would manage my clients and tasks remotely. It wouldn't be impossible, but it would be challenging, and I'd have to drive into the city several times, too.

Now if "Mav"—whichever twin that was—could pull her weight, that'd work out for

the best. I just hoped it wasn't the more brightly colored twin. I knew Naomi's personality and style so I didn't assume it was. And I knew one of them was dating and one was single, but not which. But at least I could tell them apart.

3

JADE

December 30th

My boots crunched on the snow underfoot as I rounded the front of Mom's suburban to see Amber off at the airport. After the debacle with my Thanksgiving makeover—which turned into a Black Friday makeover since nothing was open on Thanksgiving day—Amber delayed her flight. Now, Saturday morning when she was supposed to be meeting Naomi to go dress shopping, I was dropping her at the airport.

Amber struggled with her large suitcase, totally unnecessary for the two-day trip she had planned, and I helped her wrestle it to the curb. All while staying upright on the icy patch of concrete I just happened to park on.

"I can't believe you're doing this for me. Oh, Jayjay, thank you." Amber flung her arms around me and squeezed, and since my arms were pinned at my sides, all I could do was pat her hips.

"Yeah, well you owe me." I grunted and squirmed, and she pulled away.

"Actually, this is payback. Remember?" Amber stood back and grabbed the handle of the suitcase, tilting it until it rocked on its wheels. "And don't tell anyone. This is Naomi's big day we're talking about. Let her have her moment."

"God, you're bossy." I grinned and pushed her playfully, but I knew she was right. I wasn't just doing this for payback. I was doing it for Naomi. She would think Amber was here the whole time taking care of her and no one would be the wiser. "I got it, Sis. I'll make sure it goes off without a hitch. You just have to tell me everything you two talk about on the phone or in text messages."

The icy breeze kicked up, and I pulled my black sock hat down farther on my head. My long, wavy hair clung to my neck inside my heavy coat, keeping me warmer, but it wasn't all mine. Amber had forced me to get very expensive extensions—which she reminded me were only a smidgen of the price Mom and Dad paid to fix the car which she told them she was driving. I swear, Amber had a way of justifying everything.

"Oh, gosh, I'm so sad I'm going to miss everything." She squeezed me again briefly and then backed away. No doubt this was just as much of a disappointment for her as it was for me or would be for Naomi, but I respected that she was strapped for time and emotional energy. I never did a master's program, but I imagined it was rigorous.

"I'll send lots of pictures. Now go, you'll get hung up in security and miss your flight." I shooed her off to make her plane boarding and to get her out of my hair so I could go meet Naomi.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 7:59 am

Amber blew kisses and tugged her suitcase behind her as she did a half-jog toward the doors. The booties she wore had a three-inch heel and made her legs look narrow and trim. I wore some of her clothing too, but I doubted I looked anything like that. I'd always felt my frame was boxier than hers, but Mom insisted we were identical in every way, except the birthmark Amber had on her left ass cheek. Mine was creamy and bare.

When she was safely through the terminal doors, I hopped back into the Suburban and pulled out into traffic. I had never been a part of a wedding, but since the moment Amber insisted I take her place as maid of honor, I'd done some research. It didn't look too difficult, but I gathered that it depended largely on the personality of the bride being married off. Some coined the term "Bridezilla" as a way to describe more difficult women. I knew if Naomi wanted to be, that would be her. The drama...

The shopping plaza was full to the brim, even the day after Black Friday shopping had likely cleared a lot of shelves. It was difficult to find a spot to park, and with the massive size of the vehicle I was driving, it was even tighter. But I managed a spot near the back of the lot without too much hassle and made my way toward the bridal shop.

Danville wasn't known for its large selection of department stores. We had only two dress shops and one Men's Warehouse. Most folks just made the hour trip into Chicago for their shopping, but Naomi insisted that she get everything from here in town. She was huge on "Mom and Pop shops", which I fully supported. I just doubted with as picky as she was that she'd find anything, and this dress shopping would turn into a few days instead of a few hours.

I flipped my collar up to the wind and jammed my hands into the pockets of my puffer coat as I crunched more dry snow beneath the soles of my boots. What I wouldn't have given for a real mall with warm corridors lined with Christmas trees and twinkling lights. We had no warm hallways with shops, but we did have wreaths on light posts, snow piled high on every corner, and men with bright smiles ringing a bell at almost every shop door, a donation bucket for local charities somewhere nearby.

When I walked through the door of the dress shop and stomped my feet, the first thing I heard was Naomi's giddy squeal. I hardly had a chance to dust the snow from my shoulders before I was suffocated in another hug. These people drove me nuts with their touchy-feely shit. I could see how perfectly Naomi and Amber were matched—they were exactly alike. Which meant I had to be exactly alike.

I returned the hug with one of my own and squealed and jumped just like Amber would have done, and as I was doing it, my cheeks burned. Newt Phillips stood staring at me with a curt expression and his hands coolly in the pockets of his wool trench. The dapper trilby sat on his head just slightly crooked, making his stubbled jawline even more attractive.

"Oh, my God, I can't believe you're doing this for me." Naomi was giddy, and I had to play along, all while my body warmed to a cozy internal inferno at the sight of her older brother. I'd always thought he was hot, and I always had a crush on him. I had no clue he would be here today, and Naomi caught me staring.

"What's he doing here?"

"Oh, Newt? He's the best man." She waved me off and grabbed my wrist, dragging me toward the fitting rooms where she already had several dresses laid out. "Wait here, and I'll put the first one on."

I let that announcement sink in as she forced me forward. The closer I got to him, the warmer I felt until I started to sweat. When she let me go, I unzipped the thick coat and let it open in the front, and I yanked off my sock hat without regard to what my hair looked like. Amber had already ruined it anyway by dying it back to its natural black color.

"Hey," I said sheepishly as I popped a hand in the air in Newt's direction. He nodded at me as I slid my coat off and Naomi grabbed the first of what looked like many dresses and darted off into the large dressing room. He was in a different world—a world of expensive things and money to throw away. My simple sweater and slacks felt so out of place and paled in comparison to his six-hundred-dollar coat.

"Hello," Newt said, and then he stepped closer to me. The hint of a very pleasant cologne wafted past my nose as he extended a hand to me. I shed my coat before taking his hand and shaking it, surprised at his gentle grip. "I believe we've met a few times."

"Uh, yeah..." I felt disoriented and overwhelmed by how close I stood to this gorgeous hunk of a man, and I was glad Naomi was off in the dressing room putting on a dress for us to look at. I had no clue how Amber would react in a situation like this, and I figured I was failing at this act already.

"Mav?" he said, narrowing his eyes.

The old nickname was better than him calling me Amber, but only a little. I hated when people confused the two of us when we were young and called me my sister's name so many times that I decided that I'd be different so they'd know it was me. It was the beginning of my crazy hair-dying stage and all because of the slight hint of disappointment in their eyes when I'd have to say, "No, Jade."

"Yeah, that's me." I glanced away and dropped my coat and hat on the row of chairs

set out for wedding parties waiting on their brides to show off dresses.

"You've got a..." Newt pointed at my head and added a sideways smirk as he reached up and pulled some of my hair. I had no clue what it looked like, but he was fixing it and I was feeling jitters as he leaned in. "There."

I reached up instinctively and smoothed the hairs on my head and backed away self-consciously. He smelled so good, and the stubble on his jaw was just long enough to make me want to scratch it or bite it. God, he was hot.

"Thanks." My true self-conscious nature kicked in, and I felt my cheeks warm to the low temperature of the surface of the sun. I never knew how to act around a guy, but this one took the cake. He wasn't just a guy. He was probably the hottest guy on Earth.

"So, we'll be working together this month, I guess. Don't worry about money at all. You keep your savings account locked down and stick to your Christmas budget. I'm covering everything. I know that's not why Nomie asked me to help, but since I have the means, I want to make this Christmas wedding the most amazing experience for her." His hands returned to the pockets of his coat and he stood with his chest puffed out, or maybe that was just how he always stood.

I awkwardly hugged myself and waited for Naomi to come out in the first dress. Each time she paraded around in front of us, Newt offered to buy the gown and she pouted that something about it wasn't quite right. When we were ten dresses in, I was exhausted and sick of playing Amber, and I plopped onto a chair to rest my tired legs. Newt sat next to me.

"She's a handful, huh?"

"Not quite bridezilla," I said, letting my inner Jade come out. I immediately noticed my mistake, and he chuckled.

"Not quite... But it's her special day and that's why we're here, right?" Though he sat two chairs down, his long arm draped along the back of the seats and he could reach out and touch me if he wanted.

"Uh, yeah. I'm just stressed with school stuff, I guess." It was what the real Amber would have said, anyway. I was just annoyed because Naomi couldn't just pick a dress. Of course, had she been my best friend, I was sure I'd have felt differently.

"Want to go to the coffee shop after this and plan the bachelor party? I guess Nomie said it would be combined, to make it easier on me since I don't know Jared well." His finger toyed with a lock of my hair, or the fake extensions, I didn't know which. It made me feel tingly that he was so familiar with me. I angled my body to face him more and my hair swished out of reach of his fingers.

"Yeah, sure. Kill two birds with one day," I said sardonically, and he snickered again.

"You're funny. You know?" Newt relaxed and unbuttoned the suit coat he wore under his trench. I didn't see how he could still have the heavy coat on and not be sweating, but maybe he wasn't feeling the same heat of attraction that I was. Or maybe as a swoon-worthy billionaire, he was used to women being flustered around him.

"I, uh..." Words refused to form, and I felt stupid sitting there blushing and squirming.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 7:59 am

"How about this one!" Naomi announced, and it broke the trance I was in. I turned to look at her. The dress was hideous, some floral thing with huge, puffy shoulders.

"Uh, no..." I chuckled, and I saw Newt rub his mouth as if covering a smirk. "This is awful, Nomes. I'm not letting you marry Jared wearing that." In my best "Amber" attitude, I shook my head and crossed my arms. She pouted and dropped her shoulders, letting her head crane backward.

"Nothing is working. I hate this. I need a beautiful dress." Her head shot up. "Mav! Jade!"

At the mention of my name, my heart rate shot up. I had been doing so well pretending to be my sister. I almost had a heart attack when I thought she'd figured it out.

"What?" I gulped and sat a little straighter, feeling nervous.

"Jade should make my dress! Oh, my God, it's perfect!"

"What?" There was no way I'd have time to keep working on my designs and make a dress for her, on top of maid of honor duties, holiday festivities, and still keep my shit together to play Amber. "No."

"Oh, but it's so perfect! She lives here in town and she's got a holiday break coming up too, right? Please, please ask her to do it for me." Naomi came off the pedestal and rushed over to me, and a saleswoman started in our direction. The white satin bunched and dragged on the floor, and I thought the sales lady would have a panic

attack.

I had a horrible feeling about this. Playing maid of honor to the bridezilla was one thing, but designing a dress for her? And what would happen when she didn't like my design?

"It sounds like a good idea to me," Newt said, and I felt his fingers touching my shoulder again. It was a strange bit of encouragement I didn't necessarily invite but didn't hate. I looked at him.

"You think?" I asked, and he smiled so warmly I thought I'd lose myself.

"I know. Whatever Nomie wants, Nomie gets. Tell Jade I'll pay her the cost of the materials and a hundred dollars an hour for her time to design and create the perfect Christmas gown for my sister."

I swallowed hard again as blood rushed to my head and made me dizzy. He was flirting with me, like legitimately making eyes and touching me softly. My groin tensed with arousal, and I had to look away to Naomi who was being hoisted back onto the pedestal by the sales lady who was fussing over the dress getting dirty.

"Okay," I mumbled as I made eye contact with Newt. This handsome billionaire was throwing money at anyone and anything just to make his sister happy, and all the while, he was trying to get me to notice him. Well believe me, I noticed.

"Good girl," he purred quietly so Naomi couldn't hear. "Now let's get her off to Jared to pick their rings and we'll go get coffee and plan a party."

Nothing on earth could keep me from getting to that coffee shop. I hopped off my chair and helped the saleslady get Naomi back into the dressing room to put on her street clothes, and the entire time, my heart was skipping beats. Newt Phillips was

flirting with me and I didn't even care that he was like a decade older than me. He was hot and he was rich, and as far as I could tell, he was a good man.

Maybe helping Amber out for this wedding wasn't such a bad thing, after all.

4

NEWT

December 1st

Amber and I had an amazing time chatting about the bachelor party once we ditched Naomi to pick out rings with Jared. She was smart and funny and beautiful, and I enjoyed her sense of humor. So when I walked her to her car and heard how it barely turned over when she tried to start it, I jumped at the chance to offer her a ride and extend our time together.

She sat behind the wheel as I walked back toward her small black sedan, and I noticed her frustrated look as she engaged the ignition but the car sat and clicked. I knew that feeling, though it hadn't happened to me in a long time. I tapped on her window and she opened the door.

"It won't start," she mumbled, and I grimaced.

"I can see that...." I wished for a split second that I was one of those handy guys who could look under the hood and fix what was wrong, but I poured my attention and learning efforts into different things. Cars interested me, but not in the same way as some other men. I preferred buying expensive ones and driving them, not fixing them up. I just sent my vehicles to the repairshop when needed, and if they broke down a lot, I just bought a new one.

"I'm not sure what to do. Can you give me a jump?" she asked, and she climbed out of the car and stood with one hand resting on the door, but I could only shrug. I knew my way around a bank account or budget, not a car.

"I... Uh... How about I give you a ride instead? We can call a tow truck." I felt stupid but at this time of day, we'd be waiting hours for a tow. It was either I give her a ride home or we'd sit together and chat while we waited for the truck. Either way, I got more time with her, which made me happy.

"Alright. I don't have time to wait for a tow. I have studying to do." Amber shut the car door and locked it, then pulled her hat down on her head farther and crossed her arms over her chest. It was below zero and breezy, not a good combo for standing in the cold and waiting, and it was probably the reason her battery had gone dead.

"My car is just up here," I told her, gesturing. I'd already seen Sean pull up, so I knew he was waiting on me. The limo would be warm and toasty when we climbed in, and maybe that would help her loosen up a bit.

"Which one?" she asked. Her eyes scanned the parking lot as I walked toward the entrance of the coffee shop we had just vacated. She followed along behind me but seemed to be keeping her distance.

"There," I said, nodding, and her eyebrows rose as we approached the limo.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 7:59 am

Sean hopped out and opened the door, and Amber looked at me with wide eyes. "You drive this?" she asked and glanced at the car with amazement.

"Uh, no. Sean drives for me, and I... well..." I realized how over-the-top my ritzy car and driver must have seemed to her. Amber came from a hard-working family just like I did, but I had worked hard to dig my way out of the hole I grew up in to make something of myself. Not that she wasn't or that her family wasn't perfectly normal, but normal wasn't enough for me. I wanted it all.

"Go on," I told her, but mentally, I made a note to tame down the lavishness of my normal lifestyle.

Amber climbed into my limo which was as warm as I knew it would be. I followed her and settled into the seat, and Sean closed us in. She looked uncomfortable, huddled against the far door as I unbuttoned my coat and put my gloves in my pocket. Maybe she thought this was too weird, a man more than a decade older than her flirting with her and then offering her a ride home, but age was just a number after twenty-one, wasn't it?

"So, you're really as rich as everyone says you are?" She turned a little, angling her body so that her shoulders were more open to me. She pulled the hat off her head and smoothed her hair down and again, I was reminded of the wild peacock colors her sister sported and was thankful that the "quieter" of the two twins was the one seated next to me.

"Uh..." I laughed. "Probably richer, but don't let that make you uncomfortable. I'm a pretty normal, down to Earth guy. I was raised here in Danville too, you know?"

She smiled, and I swore her cheeks tinged red. "So, what exactly do you do?"

"I'm a stockbroker." The car started to move, and she swayed a little. I resisted the urge to scoot closer to her so she wouldn't think I was creepy. There was something alluring about her beauty. I wanted to treasure her and each second with her in ways I couldn't explain. She had this mesmerizing effect on me I couldn't put into words. I was smitten instantly, though I wouldn't have said it was love at first sight.

"Oh, that's cool... Not really what I expected, though." Amber's smile was a thing of beauty. I wanted to say anything and everything to make sure I could enjoy it again and again.

"What about you? Nomie said you're in business school?" I licked my lips and noticed how chapped they were, then saw how soft and supple hers seemed. I was acutely aware of how scratchy it would feel if I just kissed her and I wanted ChapStick to remedy that because I found myself wanting to kiss her now.

"Uh, yeah, but it's stressful and I don't want to even think about school while I'm here." Her words seemed stiff and distant, but I understood. Master's-level courses were challenging. I finished mine by the skin of my teeth and with a little luck, too. Talking about that stress would have been the last thing I wanted as well.

"Okay, well what is your favorite holiday tradition here in Danville?" It'd been a long time since I enjoyed any of the small-town festivities here. I was so busy building my business, I barely made it home for Christmas day.

"Oh, gosh." Her face lit up as she spoke. "I think the festival of lights at the park, or maybe the parade. There are so many amazing traditions." She gushed about the way people would decorate their houses and how she and her twin would drive the streets after dark just looking at the homes lit up for the holidays. I loved listening to her speak. And while my favorite part of the holidays wasn't any of the things she

mentioned, it made me feel more at home.

"What's your favorite?" she asked, and I noticed she had scooted closer to me.

"My favorite time is family time. It's why I can work the whole month and miss all the other things, but as long as I am home with Mom, Dad and Nomie on Christmas, it's all I need." I felt really relaxed and I was enjoying the conversation. I didn't want it to end. I really liked her personality and found myself being so enamored of every word she said.

"You seem to really care about Naomi. That's really sweet. I hope I find a man who loves me like that someday." She bit her lip and blushed hard, and I could tell she was embarrassed.

"I'm sure you're going to meet someone who thinks the world of you. Probably sooner than you think." The last thing I wanted was to come on too strong and push her away. "If Naomi and her melodramatic personality can find someone to love her, it should be simple for a woman as smart and beautiful as yourself."

Amber smiled and looked down at her hand splayed on the leather seat between us bracing her as the car bumped over potholes. Her fingernails were painted in a rainbow similar to that of her sister's hair, and I had to grin at how they were similar yet expressed themselves differently.

"Thanks," she mumbled, but I felt she maybe hadn't accepted the compliment I'd intended.

"Naomi told me your sister was dating someone, and if that wild child with rainbow hair can find a man, you'll have no problem. Maybe you're just really busy and stressed with school." I saw her stiffen, and her expression shifted from happiness to uneasiness almost instantly. I was an idiot. I shouldn't have said anything that could

be misconstrued as negative about her sister. Everyone knew twins were always really close to one another, and she could have been offended by that.

"Yeah," she said, her voice almost a whisper. "She's something, isn't she?"

"I didn't mean that in a bad way. I'm sorry." My apology felt stilted, but she took a deep breath and turned back to me with the same bright eyes, albeit a bit less enthusiastically.

"No offense taken. I know Jade has a loud style. Some people say that about my personality too." The warmth of her smile returned, and I felt a bit better.

"I find your personality to be charming and endearing, and I would honestly love to spend more time with you. Would you be okay if I got your number?" The car rolled to a stop as I asked the question, and she glanced out the window.

"Uh, we have to turn right here, and then I'm just a block down." She seemed to get nervous at my statement, and I realized I hadn't given Sean directions. He was heading toward my parents' place and conveniently enough, we were passing through Amber's neighborhood too.

I took my phone out and called Sean right away, and he answered. "Turn here... Right?" I looked to Amber for confirmation, and she nodded.

"Three forty-two." When her tongue flicked over her lips, I again got the urge to taste them.

"Three forty-two, and park out front." I hung up the phone and handed it to her. "Your number?" I asked again, and she blinked hard a few times but nervously smiled and took my phone. I watched her program the number as the car rolled to a stop outside her apartment building. When she handed it back, I said, "I'm having such a

good time with you, I don't want it to end. Would it be okay if I come inside?"

I swore I heard her whimper as she opened the door and climbed out, then leaned back in as I scooted toward her. "I'm sorry, Newt. I can't today. But I'm looking forward to picking the trees out in the morning. It should be a fun time."

She straightened and took a step backward up onto the curb, and my heart sank. "Alright, then. Well, have a good evening. Let me know if you need help with the tow bill. I feel bad." As I said the words, I winced because I realized I was trying to throw money at her issue in an attempt to make her see me more favorably. For all I knew, she was the type of independent woman who wanted to do things by herself and hated that archaic, chivalrous gesture.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 7:59 am

"I think Dad can handle it, but I appreciate the offer. Thank you. And thanks for the ride." Her genuine smile returned and made me wish she'd have let me come in, but I had to be patient. She was overwhelmed with studies according to Naomi, and cutting her school time short to be a part of this wedding was stressful enough. I didn't want to burden her with more stress or make her feel guilty.

"See you in the morning," I said and reached for the door.

She wiggled her fingers in a goodbye wave and backed away as I shut the door and Sean took off. Damn that woman for being so magnetic, and damn my impulsivity and need to claim whatever it was that I saw that I wanted. Because I wanted her really bad, not just in a sexual way, though truth be told, I did want her like that. No, I found someone I clicked with instantly and I wanted that type of energy around me all the time.

If it were up to me, by the time Christmas rolled around, she'd be a fixture on my arm permanently. I just had to play my cards right. I smiled the entire ride back to my parents' house, giddy with the thrill of the chase.

5

JADE

December 1st

The apartment felt lonely when I locked myself into it. Not even the smattering of rainbow-colored artworks hanging on my walls made it feel full and vibrant right

now. Not after the interaction with Newt and the day spent talking about Christmas and the wedding. And I didn't mind his flirting at all, though it stung a bit to hear what he thought of the real me—or rather, the real me when I was being my true self.

My rainbow hair and "wild child" personality must not have sat the right way with him for him to make a comment like that. But it didn't deter us from really connecting on other levels, and the fact that he asked for my number so nicely made me feel giddy. He was stupid rich, ridiculously hot, and very available.

I shed my coat by the door and kicked off my boots. It wasn't even fifteen minutes later that Amber called me with a video call. Ever since Mom's car was dinged in that fender bender, they made us use a GPS app for our phones. She had to have been watching me everywhere I went, agonizing over how I was handling things. I grabbed a soda and sat on the couch to answer her, propping my phone on the coffee table among a dozen design binders, all brightly colored.

When the call connected, I said, "Hey, Sis. How's it going?" I made sure the camera got my good angle and had a drink of my soda before reclining and propping my feet up.

"Hey, yourself. How was the day?" Amber had a bag of chips on her lap and what looked to be a dozen textbooks scattered around her in bed. As usual, her phone was set up on a tripod near the foot of the bed where she didn't have to touch it during the call. We did this about once a week anyway, but under the circumstances, I figured we'd be doing more calls than normal this month.

"Well, Naomi tried on a jillion dresses and hated them all. And believe me, they were ugly. But Newt was so sweet. He offered to buy whatever she wanted, but she just hated them. So anyway?—"

"Newt?" Amber asked. "How'd you go with that?" She knew I had a slight crush on

him for a while, but she didn't realize how hot he was now. He'd been away for so long, I doubted she'd even seen pictures of him. We were all so busy, and Naomi lived on her own now, not with their parents. Besides, Amber had been at college, so no time to play catch-up with her best friend's family.

"Uh, interesting," I said, but I changed the subject. We had to exchange all the information every time I interacted as her so that if Naomi called her, she'd be clued in on the details. "Anyway, she was flustered and asked if I would do the dress for her."

"I like as in me, or like...?" At times, my sister was a dunce, even though she was set to graduate magna cum laude.

"I, as in Jade. Me. I'm going to design and sew her wedding gown, so thanks for roping me into this." The comment came out with a bit more snark than I planned for it to, but it was Amber's fault. If she had asked me about the dress, I'd have just said no. But now I had to deal with Naomi, the bridezilla, and try to make a dress for her because how could I let her down now?"

"Whoa, that's a lot of work." Amber sounded amazed at me, but in reality, after pushing my entire month's plans off to January, I knew I'd have the time. It was just a mindset to get into.

"Yeah, well Newt offered to pay me too, so I'm gonna do it." I could use the extra cash. There was a super cute pair of boots at the mall on the south side of Chicago I wanted, but they were way out of my price range. It would be a Christmas present for myself. I sighed happily, remembering the way Newt's fingers curled up in my hair while we talked and Naomi tried on dresses, then how he looked at me in the car when he asked for my number. The man was a dreamboat.

"You sound happy. I thought you were pissed about doing this for me." I reached for

my soda and noticed Amber looked annoyed with me as she munched on some chips.

"Yeah, well things change." I never told my twin everything like some twins do. I figured some sisters were just not meant to be best friends. We were too far apart in taste and personality, and she was the "older sister" by like two minutes. She never let me forget that, either.

"What changed? You hate 'boring hair' and 'boring makeup'. I figured you'd be a tortured soul by now." Amber got up and did something unusual for her. She took her phone off the tripod and held it in hand as she walked through the house. I noticed her earbuds and knew what I said would be private even if her roommates were there.

"Well, so Newt was flirting with me. He asked for my phone number and he put his fingers in?—"

"He what?" she snapped and stopped in her tracks. The ceiling fan overhead looked like it was going backward, then forward as it spun around.

"He was flirting. What's the big deal?" I set my soda down next to my phone then picked the phone up and lay down on the couch, holding it over my face.

"The big deal is Newt can't flirt with you, Jade. You're not you. You're me. You are Amber Lyons, grad student and business major. If someone sees him flirting with 'Mav' and tells Derek, I'm screwed." Her eyebrows were high and her lips were pursed.

"Oh, chill out. Just tell Derek what's going on. No one will care." I rolled my eyes at her, but the beginning of embarrassment crept in. I was able to pull off the perfect Amber impersonation and Naomi never doubted me for a second. Amber was right. Even if no one told Derek, if Naomi saw me flirting with Newt or if he told her we were flirting, it would blow Amber's cover.

"Chill out? No. Newt Phillips is off limits. Got it? You aren't flirting with him. I don't care if you have a crush. You have to protect my reputation." She started walking again, and I sighed hard.

"Fine," I grunted, but it physically pained me. I understood why she said those things, but I hated it. I would just have to make sure Newt knew I was taken—or that Amber was. If he stuck around after the wedding long enough to meet "wild child Jade" and liked the real me, then so be it.

The next morning, I was bundled up in my pink puffer coat and woolen mittens waiting out in front of my building when Newt pulled up. I expected his fancy limo and never noticed when Mr. Phillips' beat-up old truck stopped right in front of me. He honked the horn once, startling me, and I looked over in surprise.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 7:59 am

"Getting in?" he asked through the passenger window which was down.

The old truck had seen better days. By now, the thing could have been considered a classic, though it had some body work that needed done and the engine sounded like an old diesel instead of the V-8 I knew was under the hood. Naomi and Amber had taken groups of friends out to the drive-in in this old thing back in the day, and I'd been with them a time or two.

"Sure, yeah..." I crunched the snow on my way to the truck, and he reached across the bench seat and pushed the door open from the inside.

When I started to climb in, my foot slipped on ice, and Newt grabbed my hand to help me steady myself. He pulled me up onto the seat, and I slammed the old door shut and buckled in.

"Thanks," I mumbled, and he chuckled.

"Icy day... I figured this old thing would be better than a limo." Newt put the truck in gear and pulled out onto the slippery road. "Dad refuses to let me buy him a new truck. Says if it ain't broke, he don't fix it, and if it needs fixed, he'd rather do repairs than to buy a new one."

"That does sound like him." The inside of the truck smelled like cigars and pipe tobacco, a habit I'd heard Mrs. Phillips nag him about several times. But it had character. There was a dancing Hawaiian hula dancer on his dashboard, bobbling as the truck hit bumps. And the original cassette deck had a cassette protruding from it.

"Wow, this must feel like you're going back to the stone age, huh?" I asked him, and he smiled and shrugged at me.

"Nah, it just feels like home. It's good to get back to my roots. I'm not afraid of how I grew up or hard work. But I'm not gonna shy away from luxury or ease, either."

Damn, that dimple was going to kill me. I tried to remind myself of what Amber told me, that he was off limits, but I couldn't remember why she had said it. It was like my brain went stupid every time I saw this handsome man.

"So, we're buying the trees today?" I asked, pulling my mittens off. One thing that still worked really well in this truck was the heater. It had no problem keeping up with the temps in the teens.

"Yeah, I figure it's easier than ordering and coming back later. Plus, we'll have a better selection now." Newt focused on driving as I grilled him about the types of trees Naomi would like. I figured her for a Douglas fir kind of girl, but Newt insisted she'd said blue spruce.

It was a fun debate that carried us all the way to the tree farm twenty minutes west of Danville. He parked and climbed out, and I had forgotten to put my mittens on, so I took an extra second in the warm truck to do that. Before I even got the door open, he was there at my side, opening it for me. He held out his hand, and I felt my cheeks warm as I put my gloved fingers on his.

"Down ya go, and there." He didn't even back up when I slipped off the seat and my boots hit the slippery gravel. He just guided me aside and shut the door. I didn't know if it was the freshly cut pine trees or his cologne, but something smelled like Christmas and magic. I breathed it in and he smiled.

"Let's go pick out some trees." Newt winked at me and put his hand in the small of

my back as we started for the lot.

For twenty minutes we weaved in and out of trees, some growing, some cut. We found four large blue spruces that were perfect and hung our tags on them, then headed to the barn to select wreaths. The woman welcoming customers at the front door handed us warm cocoa and told us how to check out and then it was us, the barn full of other Christmas decorations, and the heat of the cocoa.

"Oh, look how pretty," I said, finding a fully decorated tabletop tree. It had rainbow tinsel and a bright yellow star on top. It reminded me of the special trees Dad and Mom used to let me and Amber decorate ourselves. I'd always been obsessed with rainbows, and that led to my getting my own private tree in my bedroom, since Amber hated them.

"It's very... you," he said thoughtfully, and I smiled. "Or your sister... I can't tell right now."

I chuckled. "It's very Jade, that's true. But I like it." I lightly touched the branches and forced myself away from it. I hadn't set up my own tree at my apartment yet, but it would have been the perfect addition to my holiday mess I had going on.

"I think we're about ready to pay," Newt said, nodding at the register. I sighed, not wanting our day together to come to an end, but he was right. I couldn't drag my feet any longer. It was cold in here and my feet felt like ice cubes.

"Alright, well let's have them load the truck and we'll pay." I let him lead me toward the register, once again with his hand in the small of my back, and I gave the cashier my empty cocoa mug.

"Alright, well you're party 270?" she asked.

"Yes, that's the number on our tags outside. And we tagged a few wreaths too." Newt pulled out his wallet, and I saw the wad of cash, but he opted for a silver credit card, which he slid across the counter. "And the rainbow tree too."

My jaw dropped and I looked up at him. "No way. You don't have to do that."

"I want to. It's Christmas. The way your eyes lit up when you saw it... I have to." He winked at me and turned to the woman behind the register who was grinning, and when I finally managed to stop looking at him and his amazing rugged good looks, I noticed she was pointing up.

My eyes drew upward to the sprig of mistletoe hanging just inches above Newt's dark, wavy hair. Holiday tradition deemed that we were now supposed to kiss, but my God, if I did that, there was no going back. Amber said he was off limits to me, and for good reason.

"Oh, we're not... I mean... I can't." I stammered around like an idiot as Newt looked up and smirked at me when he looked back down.

"Oh, come on, Mav. It's a tradition. And what will the town think if you break Christmas tradition?" He was already maneuvering, putting his hands on my hips, which alone was enough to send a flood to my groin, but when he turned the full force of his one-dimpled smile on me, I was undone.

"Uh, okay?" I squeaked and didn't have a chance to do anything but shut my eyes.

Newt's lips pressed to mine in a fiery explosion of hormones that had me melting. It wasn't just a peck, either. He slipped his tongue past my lips to meet mine, and I moaned into his mouth as he pulled my body against his. If I wasn't mistaken, he wasn't entirely limp, either. The bulge rubbing against my thigh was definitely not his wallet.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 7:59 am

Oh, God, How was I going to explain this to Amber? Or Naomi? And how was I going to keep myself from wanting this again? He pulled away and looked in my eyes, then whispered, "There, that wasn't so bad, was it?"

"No," I squeaked again and whimpered when he pulled away.

I was ruined. I had to have him. I just didn't know how to pull it off.

6

NEWT

December 5th

Naomi had her entire wedding party and Mom and Dad all waiting, refusing to allow anyone to even think about tasting cake samples until Amber arrived. It was snowing lightly with a few inches forecast, but I hardly believed that was the reason for her twenty-minute delay. When I sent her a message, she didn't respond, so I assumed she was driving. The cake testers parked in my parents' living room would just have to wait.

They chatted about the snowfall and how a snowball fight was in order when the cake testing was done, while Mom worked on a crossword puzzle and Dad read the news from an app on his phone. I listened to Naomi's tale of being younger and having a snowball fight with Amber at the park when a group of teenage boys joined in and slaughtered them. The group laughed and chimed in, but I saw lights flash across the mirror hanging on the wall and went to the front door.

Amber arrived twenty-five minutes late and dusted in snow with a crimson smile beneath rosy cheeks. I opened the door for her and she brushed the snow off her dark hair, tied into a messy bun, and the shoulders of her pink puffer coat.

"Hey, I texted you. Nomie's being a czar when it comes to cake samples. We need you." I stepped aside so she could enter, and she stomped her feet on the mat outside before stepping in and unzipping her coat as I shut the door.

"Yeah, sorry. I didn't mean to lose track of time." She shrugged the coat off, and I took it from her. With her face chilled from the cold outdoors, she looked very much like a pixie. And the messy bun was hot. I'd taken her for a very put-together and bold woman the way Naomi talked about her. It was nice that she felt she could relax around me.

"What kept you so busy that you almost forgot your best friend's cake tasting when you're her maid of honor?" I chuckled and hung the coat in the coat closet, and she brushed a stray hair out of her eyes.

"I was working on the dress. The design is one of my favorites." Her hand slid down the front of her red and green Christmas sweater and into the pockets of her jeans.

"You, working on a dress?" I raised an eyebrow and her eyes widened.

"I, uh... I mean I was helping Jade. She needed to know more about Naomi's tastes." Amber looked flustered but also startled, like she almost let a secret slip. But we all knew her sister was designing the dress.

"Merry mix-up, I guess," I said comically, and she chuckled nervously before darting into the living room.

Confused, I followed her and sat across the room while she went right to Naomi's

side and started corralling the bridezilla. Even Jared looked relieved that Amber was here to help out. Naomi calmed down as each person ate their small one-inch by one-inch square of cake from each flavor they had selected. I favored the chocolate, which seemed to melt on my tongue. When Amber ate it, she looked like she was in heaven, eyes shut and head arched back as she enjoyed it.

"What do you think?" Naomi asked her, but Amber scrunched her nose up.

"It's okay. I think the strawberry is my favorite." Amber licked her lips and used a finger to scrape the rest of the chocolate icing off her plate and lick her finger clean. It didn't appear that she liked the strawberry best.

People watching was one of my favorite pastimes. I enjoyed studying them, getting to know who they were as people based on their body language and facial expressions. It was almost like Amber was picking strawberry to keep Naomi happy, not because it was actually her favorite. I'd have to ask her about it later, but right then, I found it very intriguing that she went back for a second square of chocolate while everyone else donned their hats and gloves.

"Time for a bit of a romp before everyone goes home. We decided on snowball fighting." Naomi dragged Amber toward the coat closet, but Amber protested.

"I'm not feeling up to it. I think I have a sore throat coming on." She coughed a few times, very obviously fake, and Naomi scowled.

"You sound like Jade. She hates the snow but you love it. You'd never pass up a chance for a good snow fight." Naomi's whiny tone didn't even convince Amber, who crossed her arms over her chest and shook her head.

"I mean it. I feel sick, Nomes. You go on, okay? It's your big day." Amber planted herself resolutely in the front entryway and refused to budge, so Naomi and the rest

of her friends donned their coats and dashed into the darkness without her. I watched as she stood near the front door staring through the window as her friends threw snowballs at each other until I joined her there.

"Not feeling up to it?"

"No," she grumbled, but it sounded more like she had no desire to go out into the cold, not the fact that she was sick.

"Well, it looks like Mom and Dad retired for the night. Care to join me in the kitchen for another slice of cake and some wine?" I held my elbow out toward her, and she wrapped both arms around my bicep and grinned.

"I'd love to," she announced happily, and I decided she'd planned this too. How could a woman who loves the snow as much as my sister not want to go out with her entire friend group to mess around? Unless the real reason she didn't want to go out was because I was here and I had shown interest in her.

I led her into the kitchen and pulled a chair out for her, then grabbed the box with the rest of the cake samples and two glasses for wine. I set them in front of her and returned to the wine cooler for a bottle of wine, and when I came back, Amber had a slice of chocolate cake in her hand, licking her fingers on the other hand.

"I knew it," I told her, laughing softly. "You told Nomie you liked strawberry, but I saw your face when you tasted that chocolate. It's heavenly, isn't it?" I popped the cork on the wine bottle and poured some into each glass as she covered her mouth and grinned behind her hand.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 7:59 am

"So good," she said, and her mouth was full of cake.

"Why'd you do that?" I asked, sipping my wine. The first few sips are always so tart, but I love it.

I sat down on the chair next to her and our knees brushed under the table, but she didn't shy away. She chewed and swallowed, and it looked like she was thinking. And I swore her hand shook a little as she picked up her glass of wine and downed the whole thing in one gulp.

"Careful now, you have to drive home... Unless you want to sleep over." I made the comment in jest, but having Amber share my bed tonight wasn't a horrible thought. She had slept over at this house hundreds of times over the years, but never with me. And Naomi and Jared had their own place now, so there would be no mistaking the reason behind something like that.

"Newt, I..." Amber nervously looked down at the cake.

"I was joking." I sighed. "You take this maid of honor thing too seriously, I think. It's okay to tell her if you hate the strawberry and want chocolate." I poured a bit more wine into her glass then selected my own slice of cake to eat. It appeared we would be fighting over the last three slices of chocolate if she kept devouring them.

"It's her big day. I know what she likes. I just want her to be happy...." Amber bit her lip and her shoulders dropped. "Which means I don't want anyone to know what happened... you know. At the tree farm... and the mistletoe."

"You mean when I kissed you? It was mistletoe. That's tradition."

Amber's face blanched, and I could tell she was really nervous about it for some reason. The hand shaking wasn't mistaken, because now they were folded in her lap, wringing together with anxiety.

"Okay, I won't tell anyone," I said, touching her knee. "But can you tell me why?"

"I just..." she blurted, then she looked away. "It's her big moment. I don't want anyone taking any attention off her. I want the spotlight on her."

Her explanation made sense, but now that I had touched her, all I could think about was that kiss. And all I wanted to do was kiss her again.

"You seem anxious." I rubbed my thumb back and forth across the denim, wondering what had her so flighty and fidgety.

"Finals... I have to study, and then the master's thesis I'm writing." Her tongue flicked over her bottom lip, and I watched it vanish behind them.

"You mean doctoral?"

"I mean... Yes... I'm sorry, I..." She exhaled, and I couldn't take it. The faint hint of wine paired with chocolate on her breath was intoxicating.

"I'm going to kiss you now, okay?" I said, but I was already leaning in, and I caught the brief head nod before my eyes shut.

When our lips touched, it was nothing short of miraculous. The same heat and chemistry I'd felt between us at that tree farm under the mistletoe was here now, too. She parted her lips and slid her tongue along mine like an expert, and I was hungry

for so much more. The thought of asking her to come to my room crossed my mind, but if she was trying to keep this a secret for now to honor Naomi, she'd say no, and I hated the thought of that rejection.

But it didn't stop me from pulling her onto my lap where she straddled me and kissed me harder. I found myself swelling, aching to feel her skin against mine. My hands rested on her hips and pulled her down hard onto my lap, and she moaned against my mouth. And when I slid my hand up inside her sweater to cup one tender, fleshy globe in my hand and knead it, she tensed. I could almost imagine the feeling of her pussy clamping down on my girth.

"Oh, God," she whined and shot off my lap so fast it made me lightheaded. "I'm so sorry, Mr. Phillips. I should..." Amber looked sick to her stomach. Her face was white as a sheet as I looked over my shoulder at Dad, who had a stupid smirk on his face.

"Oh, don't mind me. I'm just getting a nightcap." He reached between us and took the bottle of wine and winked at me as he nudged me with his elbow. Then he retreated through the door toward the back hallway.

But when I turned, Amber was gone. I heard her shoes in the hall and got up to follow her. She moved so quickly, I'd have thought she was running away, but maybe she was just embarrassed that he'd caught us. Or maybe she figured he'd say something. I'd have to speak to him about her request. Dad would keep it quiet for me if I asked.

"Amber, please..."

"Uh, Mav, okay. Please call me Maverick," she spat, but she was already diving into the fluffy pink puffer coat. "And I have to go. I have to study."

I caught her by the elbow and made her stop. "Tell me I can see you again?"

She looked like a deer caught in headlights, but she nodded. "Of course, I'd love that." And her tone told me she meant it, unlike the way she lied to Naomi about that strawberry cake. More merry mix-ups, if you ask me, but I knew hardly anything about Naomi's friend group.

I led her out, but I watched her drive away wishing Dad hadn't interrupted us. I'd like to have seen how far we got. Maybe next time. Until then, I had some cake to polish off.

7

JADE

December 7th

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 7:59 am

The crisp sheen of the red taffeta dress caught the light as I stood in front of the mirror next to Jill and Sara. It was scratchy and uncomfortable to me no matter what the others said about it. And Amber and I weren't exactly the same size, so I had to cram my size four body into a size three dress to make sure it would fit her. There would still be last-minute alterations when she got home on the twentieth, but this was the best way to get closer to her size.

"It's so pretty!" Naomi clapped her hands and sighed. "You guys are so gorgeous. The red dresses will look amazing with the guys in their green cummerbunds and bowties." The whole Christmas theme was taking things a little far for my taste, but Naomi loved it. She'd surely go nuts over the design I had for her dress, too. She and Jared would look like Mr. and Mrs. Claus on Christmas morning as they walked down the aisle as man and wife.

"This is so uncomfortable," I grumbled, but Naomi couldn't hear me. Jill, on the other hand, heard me loud and clear and rolled her eyes at me.

I just wasn't the type of girl to conform to societal norms. My wedding would probably be different, no wedding party or crazy traditions. I wanted something simple and sweet, maybe a summer ceremony outdoors to honor Mother Nature. But I had to be Amber. I had to pretend to love this shit because it was exactly the way my sister would act. She and Naomi should have been the twins.

"You can have them do alterations, duh." Jill and Amber never got along anyway, so I didn't feel bad annoying her. It was one small relief in this mess my twin had cooked up for me.

"I'll do them myself." I spat but realized my mistake immediately. "I mean, I'll have Jade do them."

Jill again rolled her eyes and turned to Naomi, who was fussing over Sara's dress. It was a bit large for her hips, but she needed the extra size in the bust. They were talking about alterations which I wasn't even going to think about volunteering "Jade" for. I had enough to deal with in designing and creating Naomi's gown.

"Oh, it's just not perfect, and we need it perfect." Naomi frowned and the saleslady nodded at her.

"We'll have a seamstress right up here to get measurements for you ladies. I'll be right back." She rushed off with her phone in hand, and I stepped off the pedestal they'd forced me to stand on. I hate getting so much attention over this. I just wanted to go hide like a hermit.

"So, Nomie, how's the dress coming?" Jill asked, and I tensed. She was going to call Amber, who would then call me, and I was standing right here. I told Amber something stupid like this would happen, but she insisted.

Naomi turned to me and said, "Well, Mav? Does Jade have a design yet? Can I see it?"

I felt like a small animal on the road as a semi bore down on me. My throat constricted as I turned toward the messenger bag Amber loaned me. She said I had to be convincing, and since she never put her phone in her pocket, I was learning a new habit. At least around the friend group. Around Newt I could be myself, except for my name.

"Uh, let me ask her." I pulled my phone out and faked sending a text message to "Jade" by sending one to Amber with a 9-1-1 incoming and the situation I was stuck

in. The girls talked about how Jill's dress fit her and how much she needed a tan to pull off that color, but I was sweating bullets.

When Amber didn't respond, I almost panicked. I had images on the phone that I'd taken of the dress, but I meant to forward them to Amber so she could forward them to Naomi later when I wasn't around. I knew they talked daily, but I didn't know how much Naomi was going to push this. The "morning debrief" from my twin when I woke up said nothing about her getting pushy or nosy about my design yet.

"Just call her," Naomi whined. "Get her on the phone so I can hear myself that she's working on it. You know how Jade procrastinates things."

It annoyed me that my own sister talked negatively about me behind my back with her best friend. It was obvious she did or Naomi would never have felt comfortable saying something so rude right to my face.

"Uh, I'll try." I dialed Amber's number and turned away to hide my frustration. The phone rang through to her voicemail and I ended the call and turned back around. "She's busy or something. No answer."

The dressing room area of the store suddenly became stiflingly hot. My cheeks flushed and I fanned my face. I didn't want to be here anymore. I had the urge to run out into the crisp December air and suck in a breath, but my feet stayed planted. I couldn't move.

"Mav," Naomi whined again, doing that thing with her shoulders where her arms dangled and shook and she looked like a toddler throwing a tantrum. I hated that. I didn't see how Amber put up with it at all. It was so immature, and they called me the immature one because I chose a profession that was artistic instead of "serious."

"I'll try," I breathed, and my fingers went to work on the keyboard of my phone. I

sent her a message and shot all the pictures to her, but I added my phone number to the texts too. Then I turned my ringer up and waited. As my phone dinged over and over with the images I'd taken of the design and fabric, Naomi's eyes lit up.

"Yay!" she celebrated, and she clapped several times as she rushed over to me.

I opened the message and then the images, and she peeked over my shoulder as I swiped through them. Of course there was no color on the sketches yet, but the sheen of the white satin and red ribbons and fluff I intended to use on the dress showed a little of the sass, and Naomi squealed in happiness. She gripped my head and smacked a kiss onto my cheek loudly.

"Oh, my God, your sister is a genius! I love it! Oh, my God, when can I go try it on?" She was too excited. Maybe she missed how the dress was still a folded pile of fabric, not yet assembled or even cut yet.

"Uh..." I laughed. "You'll probably have to wait until she has the thing at least pinned together. She's busy, you know." I almost scoffed at her because I was so annoyed that she enjoyed it so much. That was the point, right? So why was I so frustrated? My negativity should have been aimed at Amber, not her best friend. I was a good person. I was better than this.

"Yeah, but you'll make her do it fast. She does everything you ask her." Naomi and Jill high-fived, and I was so angry I could have stomped and screamed at them, but I snickered and rolled my eyes in true Amber fashion.

"Yeah, you're right... Uh, I have to go do some shopping with Mom this afternoon. Are we done here?" My blood was boiling, but there was nothing I could do about it. It was pointless for me to go out of my way to make sure Naomi's special day was special for her and the dress was perfect and then ruin it by blowing the secret. I could tell Amber off later.

"Yeah, I think we're done. Go on," she said, flipping her wrist.

The saleslady was approaching with another woman who wore a seamstress tape around her neck like a scarf, and I slipped back into the dressing room to put on my warmer clothes. When I was buttoning my jeans in place, my phone dinged again. I expected it to be Amber replying to my chaos, but the notification was just a random number, which meant I didn't have them programmed into my phone yet. I looked at the green box and didn't recognize the number either, so I picked my phone up and swiped to open the messaging app.

Newt 2:17 PM: Hey, Amber. It's Newt. I was hoping you'd join me for dinner. I can pick you up at five?

I smiled at the sweet message and most of my frustration toward Amber melted. She insisted that dating him was off limits and that I couldn't be seen with him. But we were the maid of honor and the best man, and our job was to take care of the bride and groom. If I was seen dining with him somewhere, I'd just tell them we were talking about wedding stuff. So long as we didn't get handsy or overly public with any displays of "affection", I'd be fine.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 7:59 am

Jade 2:18 PM: Sure, sounds good. I'll see you then.

I almost squealed in giddiness the way Naomi had when she saw the dress design. I didn't know why it thrilled me so much that he was interested in me because I wasn't so shallow as to only think about his good looks and money. Maybe part of it was the fact that Amber said he was a no-no and I just got very irritated by how I knew she thought of me.

When I was dressed, I slipped out without even saying goodbye. I didn't want to have to kiss Naomi on each cheek and give her a hug when I was annoyed by the way she and my sister talked about me. I went straight to the door and then straight home to work on the dress. I had a date tonight and I wanted to keep this mood going.

I had just tied my hair up when I heard the bell ring. The clock said Newt was a few minutes early, and I wasn't quite ready. My apartment was in better shape than it was the last time he asked to come in, but it still looked like a unicorn vomited in here. I took my large tan blanket and draped it over the pile of brightly colored clothes on the end of the couch and decided I'd blame the rest on Amber if he asked. I couldn't ask him to wait in the car so long.

I scurried to the door and opened it, and he stood with a bouquet of roses and a smile on his face. The cold breeze blew his scent in toward me, and I inhaled the cologne and practically swooned. This incredibly hot man with dreamy blue eyes and wavy, dark brown hair literally had the whole package.

"Hey," I said and stepped back, feeling butterflies in my chest. "I'm not quite ready," I told him, and then I noticed what was in his other hand. It was a white plastic sack

with takeout containers in it. He had brought food with him and probably planned to eat in, not at a restaurant. My cheeks warmed at the thought of being alone with him here, and not just because his eyes were raking over my messy living room of rainbow vomit.

"These are for you," Newt said, handing me the flowers. They were a boring shade of red, but they were the most beautiful things I'd ever seen.

"They're so pretty, thank you." I took them and brought them to my nose to sniff the soft petals as he shut the door behind himself.

"Your apartment looks like your sister's hair." He chuckled and hoisted the bag into the air. "I brought Mexican."

The scent of the food hadn't even hit me yet. I was too busy enjoying how incredible he smelled. I stood staring at him in a daze. Newt Phillips—billionaire with the smile of a God—was standing in my living room prepared to entertain me for the evening. I suddenly felt inadequate and shy.

"You okay?" he asked, snickering. He set the sack down on the stand by the door and shed his layers, first the trench coat, then the suit coat and scarf, and when he loosened his tie and draped his coat over the end of the sofa, I finally unfroze.

"Uh, yeah. I'm okay. I'm sorry about the mess." I winced at the fact that I was drawing attention to the colorful array in the room. I never had to apologize for my style before, but I felt like right now, I had to. Newt thought I was Amber, tame and predictably boring. It didn't bode well for any real connection we might be building, either. If he didn't care for "Jade's" wild hair, maybe he didn't really care for me at all.

"Jade lives with you?" he asked, and I shrugged and sighed as I headed toward the kitchen for a vase.

"I stay with her when I'm home, actually." It wasn't a total lie. Amber did stay here sometimes when she came to town. The only parts that were lies were the "I" and "me" parts.

"Wow, this is your place?" he picked up the sack and followed me, and I stood at the sink trimming the flowers and arranging them in the vase while he opened the food containers and set them on the tiny table in the kitchen area.

"Uh, yeah?" I said hesitantly. If he hated the décor, I'd say Amber was a slob, but I really hoped he didn't hate it. I wanted to know that he liked me the way I was. If not, then I was just dreaming hopelessly and I might as well stop while I was ahead before my heart got broken.

"So, you love color as much as she does? Hmm..." His "hmm" sounded positive, but I felt insecure.

"Well, we both love it, but she just puts it on her head and I put it on my walls." I turned with the vase in hand to see the spread on the table. He brought chimichangas with rice and queso and my mouth was watering. "How did you know I love Mexican?" It was one thing Amber and I unapologetically had in common. We both loved ethnic food.

"A little birdie told me." Newt winked and gestured as he took the flowers from me. He set them in the center of the table and we both sat down.

The meal was delicious. We talked a bit between bites, but he seemed as serious about his dinner as I was about Mexican food in general. He was pleasant company, and I couldn't believe he complimented my style. This was my space and he felt completely comfortable with me, even though he probably thought at least some of the influence in my décor was due to Amber. And while the flowers didn't exactly match the drapes, I proudly displayed them.

When we were done eating, I stood to begin clearing the takeout containers away and he helped me. I got a bit of queso on my finger and went to lick it off, but he captured my hand and put my finger into his mouth to suck it clean.

I snickered and felt very embarrassed as his eyes met mine. "What'd you do that for?" I asked playfully, and he moved closer, pulling me against his body with a hand in the small of my back.

"You know, I was really disappointed when Dad walked in on us the other night." Newt let my hand go, and I rested it on his shoulder.

"You were?" My voice was barely a squeak. I felt where this was going and my heart started to hammer against my ribs.

"I was. And I'd like to try that again and see where it might lead."

Why would a man like him want anything to do with someone like me? He was eleven years older than me with his career set. He owned fancy cars and probably a flashy house. He had a driver to chauffeur him around, for Christ's sake.

"Newt, I..." I couldn't really pull away from him. He held me so snugly. But it wasn't like I wanted to, either.

"Amber, I think you're one of the most beautiful women I've ever met and for some reason, I can't get you out of my head. The sound of your voice is calming to me in a world where not many things are calming. Please, let me kiss you, and see what you feel when I do. And if you don't like it, I'll stop and we can just watch a movie or something." Newt's thumb strummed the waistband of my jeans like a guitar string and I nodded, but I bit my lip.

The minute his lips brushed over mine, my body was on fire. He was tender yet

hungry, and his lips were so soft, like he'd moisturized them just for this moment. He started to pull away, but I hooked my hands behind his neck and pulled him back, too greedy to let him go.

His hands slid up my sides, sending shivers down my spine, and he picked me up, carrying me back to the couch where he set me down gently. His hands moved to the buttons on my shirt, unfastening them slowly, as if he had all the time in the world to explore every inch of my skin. His lips left mine and trailed a heated path down my neck, his tongue dipping into the hollows of my collarbone, making me moan.

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 7:59 am

"God, Amber, you're so incredible," he breathed, his hands resting on my hips. But I winced at the sound of my sister's name. It made me feel a pang of guilt right in the moment I wanted nothing more than to forget anyone else even existed. I continued to whimper as his lips trailed fire across my chest to the valley between my breasts, and he kissed each softly as he slid my shirt off my shoulders.

"Newt," I whispered, but either he didn't hear me or he thought I was just moaning his name. He unhooked my bra and kneaded my right breast while he suckled the other.

"You have no idea how badly I've wanted to do this," he mumbled against my skin, his breath hot against my nipple. I put my hands in his hair, pressing him closer, trying to block out the sound of my sister's voice in my mind. All I could hear was her lecturing me and telling me why I shouldn't be doing this, how bad it would turn out for her or for Derek, or even for Naomi.

"Newt," I moaned again, arching toward him as he worked the fly on my jeans.

"Mmm," he groaned as he undid the button, and the zipper slid right down. My green lace panties did not match my blue bra, but I wasn't intending to have sex, or at least I wasn't planning to. "My God, Amber, I want you so bad."

It was almost physically painful to hear him saying her name when I wanted him to say mine. "Mav," I blurted out, now feeling a bit uncertain about this. I was lying to him, making him believe I was Amber. It was leading him into a tangled mess, and what if he was hurt by it all?

“Huh?” Newt, paused his suckling and nibbling to look up at me.

“I just... Call me, Mav, please. I don’t like the name Amber so much.” The impact of her nickname wasn’t quite the same, not as harsh or confronting, and he didn’t seem to mind at all

“Whatever you say, Mav.” Newt winked at me and pulled on my jeans so hard I rolled backward as he yanked them off. It made me snicker, and my feet were straight in the air as he shimmied my panties off too.

He stood over me, watching me lie awkwardly on the couch while he shed his clothing and kicked the pile of laundry off the end. His body was bronzed, but not by the sun. He probably spent time in a tanning booth somewhere, but it was worth it. The rippling muscles on his chest were toned and chiseled and one hundred percent man. It made my pussy ache, so I touched myself as he lowered to his knees by the couch and pulled me by the backs of my knees closer to him.

“You are so fucking gorgeous,” he breathed as he parted my thighs. He kissed my inner thigh, then the other, and as he moved higher, my hips bucked toward him. “I need to taste you,” he mumbled, and I wasn’t about to argue.

I bit my lip as his tongue swirled around my clit, making jolts of electricity course through my body. He worked me over, as if he’d known exactly what I needed. I moaned, louder this time, and he smiled against my center, making me grip the couch cushions and moan even louder. His fingers slipped inside me as he sucked me, and I found myself arching my back.

“Oh, my God, Newt, yes!” I cried out, forgetting for a moment anything about my pretend identity. He just looked up at me and grinned, his tongue still working me into an almost frenzy.

He was going to make me come, and hard. I could just tell. His tongue was magic as he went right to my sweet spot, and I whimpered as he hit it perfectly. I whimpered again as he continued to suck me. "Oh, my God!" I groaned louder this time as Newt continued to work me over with his mouth and his magic fingers, and my entire body was on fire, and I couldn't get enough of this feeling.

"Oh, God, I'm coming," I panted, and my body convulsed and pulsed. I twitched and spasmed and had to force my hips not to buck off the cushions. It was so intense I almost pissed myself and probably would have if he hadn't pulled away.

When I managed to open my eyes and blink them into focus, he was rolling a condom on his dick and it looked like it wasn't going to fit. He was massive and I wanted him inside me.

"Shit," I hissed, trying to catch my breath, but he gave me no time at all.

He slid himself inside me, and it burned, but not in a bad way. It had been so long since I had felt anything remotely close to this, and I was almost sure I was going to combust. My nails dug into the flesh at his hips, and he squeezed both my tits at once as he started thrusting.

"Amber," he moaned as he slid in and out. "Oh, fuck, you feel so good." This time, I didn't even care that he said her name. I was too lost in the moment to care what he said. The sensations shooting through my body made me forget my own name or why I even thought this was a bad idea to begin with.

"Harder," I moaned, and he obeyed, slamming into me with a force that almost sent me to a second orgasm. I wrapped my legs around his waist and pulled him even closer, tilting my hips to meet his each time he thrust. The couch creaked under our combined weight, and we both moaned as we moved in a perfect harmony that couples only dream of having.

"Oh, shit, Mav," he grunted, and I knew he was close. I could feel his cock swell inside me, throbbing as he continued to pound into me.

"Oh, God, I'm going to come!" I cried out, and at my words, he groaned loudly, his body tensing up. More waves of pleasure sucked me into their current, and I never even felt him coming. His thrusts slowed, though, dampening the pleasure I felt, and finally, he draped himself across me and kissed my shoulder.

We lay there, panting and sweaty, and for a brief moment, my world was at peace. Newt pulled out, though, tarnishing the perfection, and I watched him slide the full condom off his hard dick. He wasn't shy about it, either. He strolled into the kitchen naked and erect with confidence while I turned on my side on the couch and used the position of my body to cover my sensitive parts.

What had I just done? Because if anyone found out, Amber would kill me. Newt thought I was someone I wasn't. And at the end of the day, that made me a liar, and it made Amber a perceived cheater. This might have just gotten out of hand.

8

NEWT

December 8th

My watch chirped and woke me. It was the only piece of clothing or jewelry I still had on after last night. Amber was exquisite all three times we had sex, and even now, I was getting hard just thinking about it. Her body against mine was arousing, but even more so was the bare curve of her naked ass in the sunlight streaming through the crack between her blackout curtains.

I smiled at the way she drooled a little. Her hair fell in tangles around her head on the

pillow, and her hand was splayed on my chest. These were the moments I lived for. When I told Mom and Dad not to wait up for me, I never actually believed I'd sleep over, though I did hope we'd wind up having sex. I wasn't disappointed with how the evening turned out, though.

I slipped out of bed and snuck into her bathroom to empty my bladder. She was sleeping peacefully as I shut myself into the bathroom. My hair stuck up at odd angles and I needed a good shave, but I felt better than I had in months. It was amazing what sex could do for my mental health, and I was just too picky about my sexual partners to have vapid one-night stands. But this—wow, was it incredible and definitely something I wanted again. Besides the long talks and cuddling, Amber was perfect in every way.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 7:59 am

I washed up and tried to straighten my hair a little, and when I walked back into the bedroom, Amber was propped on an elbow watching me. She looked sleepy. Her mascara had left smoky circles around her eyes and her lips were dark pink, rubbed raw by my stubble last night.

"Morning," I said as I climbed back into bed next to her. Her eyes never left my body until it was buried beneath a blanket, and then she met my gaze.

"Good morning," she said as she snuggled into my embrace. "How did you sleep?"

Her tits pressed against my chest in a most pleasant way, and I had to kiss her. Her lips were soft but needy, and the kiss lingered, but when I pulled away, I said, "I slept better than I have in years. You wore me out."

"I did?" she asked and snickered. "You were like robot-dick over there. I swear if you'd gone any longer that last time, I was going to cry."

I tickled her side and she giggled. "You loved it..." The closeness we had was otherworldly. I felt like I'd known her my whole life, and I had known of her for a long time, but not like this. This felt like a connection we had transcended time and space for. It was surreal.

"You're right. I loved every second of it." Amber kissed me again and then sighed contentedly.

"Except when I called you Amber. Man, you really hate your name, huh?" I laughed, but she rolled over and then backed into my chest so I was spooning her. It seemed

like she didn't want to talk about it so I changed the subject. "You know, the last woman I dated hurt me really badly. I wasn't right for a long time. So it's a miracle I even felt confident enough to get the courage to ask you out."

Amber took my hand and kissed my knuckles. "I'm sorry you were hurt, Newt. I hope nothing like that ever happens between us. I don't know what this is, but I like it, and I want to find out where it goes." She sighed hard, and I could tell there was something on her mind, but I didn't want to be pushy.

"What's going on is a little bit of Christmas magic, I think. You're the best thing that's happened to me in a long time, and I want to see what's going to happen too." I kissed the back of her shoulder and looked up at the tabletop tree situated on her dresser. It fit in with her apartment so well, I wondered why it wasn't out on a table in the living room, but I figured Jade didn't like it or something. We hadn't even plugged it in last night. We were too busy obsessing over each other.

"You like the tree?" I asked, planting more soft kisses on her shoulder.

"Yeah, I do." Her voice was small and timid. She was thinking about something. I could tell it was troubling her.

"Did you enjoy dress shopping? Do you like the dress Naomi picked for you?" My stab at making conversation with anything that wouldn't make her feel pressured was failing. She had gotten really quiet when I mentioned her not liking her own name, but it wasn't a normal reaction.

I had hated my name once upon a time, when kids in elementary school called me lizard because a newt was an amphibian. I got picked on so badly for a few years, and I hated my parents for naming me that, but this felt different.

"Uh, yeah. I might have to have Jade do alterations, but the dress is nice." Now her

tone was empty and dull.

"Are you okay, Mav?" I purposefully used her nickname so as not to upset her more, and she turned and lay on her back looking up at me.

"No... There's something I want to tell you." She looked serious and almost apologetic, and I couldn't even fathom what she'd have to tell me that would make me desire an apology.

"Sure, anything," I told her, but as I said the words, I heard my phone ringing. It was a ringtone I had selected specifically for work calls, which meant they needed me for something. And on a Saturday morning, it had to be something important. "Hold that thought."

I rolled out of bed and dashed my naked ass out to the living room. My phone was on twelve percent, which meant I had only a few minutes of a call before it started screaming Low Battery at me. I swiped and answered and heard my assistant's voice.

"Mr. Phillips, we have a problem. The Berkshires are requesting a live meeting with you in an hour, but I told them you were out of town." Peggy sounded a bit frantic, but I knew Harold Berkshire and he was just a stern businessman.

"Wow, okay, Peggy. Thank you for letting me know. Let me touch base with him and set something up for this afternoon. I'll have a bit of time to drive into the city to meet." I thought of the evening and the town's holiday parade complete with Clydesdales and the arrival of Santa Claus in his sleigh. I didn't want to miss that because I wanted Amber to go with me.

"Alright, are you sure? Should I send him a message that you'll be calling him?" I could hear her chewing her lip and I almost chuckled.

"Yeah, sure. Thanks, Peg." I hung up knowing I had just enough time to get back to Mom and Dad's, shower, drive into the city, meet with Harold, and get back to Danville in time for the parade that started just after dusk. No time to waste.

I grabbed my clothing and started dressing hastily as I walked back into the bedroom. Whatever it was Amber wanted to tell me would have to wait or I'd mangle my timeline. I thought I'd have all day to bask in the glory of her presence, but it looked like a long day of driving and unhappy clients.

"What is it?" she asked, sitting up. She still held the sheet over her chest shyly and yawned.

"Work... I'm so sorry. I have to go to Chicago for a last-minute meeting. Fires to put out and whatnot." I leaned down and kissed her forehead as I buttoned my shirt. "I wish I could stay."

The apprehension I'd seen on her face earlier was gone, replaced with a calmness that mirrored the afterglow I watched her enjoy last night more than once.

"No, it's okay. You're important. Go work." Amber smiled at me and scooted back against the headboard where she leaned and let the sheet hug her tits. Damn. If I didn't have to go rushing off, she'd be getting spread for me again.

"The parade... It's tonight, right?"

"Yeah, why?" She pulled her knees up to her chest and hugged the sheet around them, and I grinned at her.

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 7:59 am

"Come with me. Let's go watch the parade and then go see the lights afterward." I tucked my shirt in and did up my pants, then jammed my shoes on my feet.

"Um... Well... I have to talk to Jade about the dress today." Again, there was apprehension in her tone, but I wasn't taking no for an answer.

"I'll pick you up at five thirty. Be ready." Kissing her again, she whimpered in protest, but this time, I claimed her lips. "And if you're a good girl, when the parade is over, I'll buy you more Mexican."

She only smiled at me as I rushed out, stuffing my phone in my pocket and grabbing my coat on the way. When I got to Mom and Dad's for my fast shower, Dad was in the kitchen pouring a cup of coffee.

"Oh, God, I need some of that," I told him, winded from jogging up the sidewalk. It wasn't so much that I was out of shape as that I felt pressured to make everything fit in the short window of time I had.

"Coffee, huh? No walk of shame?" Dad snickered at me and gave me a knowing look. I hadn't really reconnected with anyone in town except my family since being back, so he had to have figured out that I slept over with someone. "Who was she?" he asked as he pulled a second mug out of the cupboard to fill with the hot brew. "That Lyons girl from the other night?"

I kicked my shoes off by the door to avoid leaving puddles from snow I tracked in, and I reached for the mug he held out toward me. "Uh, yeah. Amber..." I smiled when I said her name even though she didn't like it. I thought it was sweet.

"Naomi's friend? She's a little young for you, right? Ten years younger?" Dad raised an eyebrow of concern, but I shrugged him off.

"Yeah, eleven, actually, but age is nothing but a number when you're an adult." I sucked a sip of hot coffee through my teeth and started for the stairs to go have a shower.

"Well, be sure you know what you're doing, Son. I know Naomi really likes those girls a lot. They've been friends a long, long time. If you mess it up with her, Naomi will have your throat." He chuckled at the thought, but I took that seriously as a warning. He wasn't wrong. But I didn't plan to do anything that would make things between my sister and her best friend awkward.

"Thanks for the warning, Dad. I gotta shower. Running into the Windy City today for a quick meeting, then the parade tonight." I was a few steps from the door when he caught me by calling my name.

"Newt," he said, and I stopped and looked over my shoulder. "I'm happy you're finally moving on."

I smiled at him but said nothing as I darted up the steps two at a time. I was happy to be moving on too. And it couldn't have been with a better person.

9

JADE

December 8th

Newt was running late on his trip back from the city. He sent me a text and told me to meet him at the gazebo next to Santa's workshop—which was on the town square

next to the bleachers set up for folks to view the parade. They brought in the little shed they'd painted to look like a north pole workshop every year and parked it on the same spot. Kids would line up all hours of the day to sit on some strange man's lap and tell him what they wanted. It was weird, but it was tradition. I was pretty sure Amber and I were two of those kids at one point in our lives.

When he found me, I was seated and the parade was underway. I draped a blanket over the empty spot next to me to make it look like my seatmate was just off using the porta potty or something, so he had a spot saved for him. He climbed the bleachers and squeezed past the soccer moms with their little kids and finally collapsed next to me, toting a cup of cocoa in each hand.

"Long day?" I asked, taking a cup of cocoa from him as he sipped from the other one.

"My God, traffic was awful, and getting into Danville just as a parade is starting is a nightmare too." He settled next to me at a comfortable distance and I sipped the cocoa he'd brought. It wasn't scalding, but it wasn't lukewarm yet. It was the perfect temperature to enjoy without burning my mouth, though he probably didn't plan it that way.

"How'd the meeting go?" I asked him, because this morning, he seemed so rushed to get out of my apartment, I figured it was pretty important.

"Ah, well I have a client who is pretty particular and if things don't go his way exactly how he wants them to, he throws a fit. I know how to handle him, though. Now, it's a Saturday and I'm on a date with a very beautiful woman. I'd rather talk about the parade than work." He bumped into my shoulder with his and I smiled at his compliment.

"Okay, well you missed the firetrucks. They were covered in tinsel and holly. And the parade always opens with Santa, so you missed him too." I took a long swig of the

cocoa and detected a hint of peppermint. I should have been flattered that he'd been talking to someone who knew Amber thinking it was me. But this one I had to pass on. I disliked peppermint in my cocoa, but I'd drink it and be thankful.

"Ah, well Santa was the highlight for me, and the Clydesdales." Newt gave me a cheeky grin, and I snickered.

"You didn't miss those yet." We watched a few floats roll past, then listened to the cacophony of the Danville Marching Band as they played a few upbeat Christmas tunes. A person joined the party to my right, so I had to scoot closer to him, and Newt put his arm around me. It was nice and I felt warmer, but I was a bit nervous someone would see us like this.

"Will you be helping make the centerpieces?" I asked as my eyes scanned the crowd. I was no longer able to enjoy the parade like a normal person because I was too busy fearing someone who knew Amber would see me snuggled up to Newt and tell Derek. I hated that feeling, especially because I should have been able to just get lost with this man and fall freely.

"Uh, I think so, barring any other work emergencies." He pulled me closer and leaned in. "I heard there's a really hot woman going to be there to help. I wouldn't miss that for the world."

I blushed and hung my head. He was so sweet. The compliments felt so amazing, but in the back of my mind I wondered if he knew I was the "wild child" with rainbow hair, would he feel the same way?

It felt like a dangerous conversation. I knew we'd make the centerpieces at Mr. and Mrs. Phillips's house, and Naomi would leave with Jared when the wedding party left after finishing. It would leave me and Newt in too comfortable of a position. He'd want to cuddle or talk, and it would lead to kissing and then more. I wanted it. I

desperately craved it. But I spent the whole day today thinking as I was sewing Naomi's gown, and I knew Amber was right. Newt had to be off limits if for no other reason than I couldn't hurt him. I didn't know what situation he went through with his ex or how she hurt him, but I didn't want to be that woman. I even tried to tell him the truth, but the work emergency sprang up.

"Oh, we need playlists!" I blurted out as the first thing that popped into my mind. Here and now was not the place to have that conversation about my real identity. It needed to happen, sooner rather than later, but the holiday parade was loud and there were too many people around.

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 7:59 am

"Oh yeah. You're right. I told the DJ love songs, but we should probably have Christmas love songs. That Mariah one, maybe?"

"You've got to be kidding me," I groaned as if he were murdering me. "That song is hideous. Who even likes it?" I laughed, and he tickled my side.

"It's better than the one by Wham!" Newt started singing, "Last Christmas, I gave you my heart but the very next day—" I elbowed him and took his hand, forcing him to stand.

The parade was almost over and I wanted to beat the crowds. I led him down the stands and past the trash can where we tossed our empty cups. He held my hand, though I couldn't feel the warmth of his hands because of the mittens I wore. We walked down the sidewalk away from the noisy crowd and into the dark side street where I'd parked my car.

"You know, I haven't had this much fun at a Christmas parade in years. Thank you for inviting me. I probably would have sat at home watching reruns of old sitcoms or something." Our arms dangled between us as we walked, and he kept in step with me. We passed Santa's workshop, closed for business since Santa was at the other end of the parade route right now.

"Aw, it was my pleasure. I know you and Nomie love the holidays so much. I was never much of a believer, but I loved the gifts." The way his dimple peeked through his stubble was so cute. I wanted to pinch his cheeks.

"You mean you never believed in Santa at all?" I gasped in feigned shock and pressed

my other gloved hand to my chest.

Newt sucked in a deep breath and blew out a puff of frosty air. "No, can't say I did. My first encounter with Santa was when I was super young. I walked into the bathroom at a Macy's and saw a man dressed up like Santa fixing his beard. He barked something about privacy and I knew at that point that it was all a sham. His name was Bob and he worked for Honda. Found that out later that day when Dad invited him for steaks. Never forget that."

I laughed so hard I might have peed a little and found myself hugging his bicep and leaning on his shoulder. I didn't care if the story was made up or real. We were really bonding.

"I was a hardcore believer long after my sister stopped believing. I think I was eleven or twelve when the mirage cracked and I found out Mom and Dad were the ones playing Santa's elves." The memory was a fond one now, though at the time I was devastated.

"How'd you figure it out?" Newt asked, and he covered my gloved hands with his and patted them.

"Well, I happened upon Mom and Dad's gift-hiding spot in the garage and saw they bought me a sewing machine that year. My first one ever, and man, had I begged for one. I told Santa in my letter that it was all I wanted." I sighed. "Fast forward to Christmas morning, and I opened a package that said From Santa, and it was the very machine I found in the garage. Kabam. That was it. Magic ruined."

The ice crunched under my feet as we stopped by my car, fixed thanks to Dad's handiness with a few tools, and I looked up at Newt's confused expression.

"Sewing machine, huh? That sounds more like your sister."

The lie snaked around my chest and squeezed me until I cleared my throat to avoid looking guilty. "Yeah, she and I were more alike back then. She went off the deep end into designing her own clothes and I... well..." I let my voice fade out as he reached up and cupped my face.

"Let me come home with you again. I really want to be with you tonight." The request was so sincere and heartfelt, I hated saying no, but I had to. It was bad enough that we were in public together, but going back to my place meant getting so much more wrapped up in this. I had to pump the breaks to protect him—and my sister's reputation.

"I'm sorry, Newt. I can't tonight." I gave no explanation or excuse, but I did rise up to peck him on the cheek.

He turned and caught my lips in a scorching kiss that took my breath for a moment. Then he said, "Alright, but if you change your mind, call me. I'll come any time." Newt backed away, and I lowered to my flat feet. He walked backward for a few steps as I watched and felt the heat of his presence dissipate the farther he got. Eventually, he turned and continued with his back to me, but I stood there for a few more minutes feeling torn.

I hated myself.

I really liked him, like... I thought I might be falling in love with him. And Amber would kill me because everyone in this town who knew her knew she was with Derek. Neither of them were even home for the holidays yet, though. But if someone saw me kissing Newt like that and it got back to any of them, it would hurt a lot of people. I couldn't let that happen, which meant I had to deny myself. At least until Amber came home and cleared this up.

But it was the hardest thing I'd ever have to do in my life.

NEWT

December 11th

The tuxes Jared picked for us were nice. Nothing like my Armani, but Frank and Evan weren't loaded like me. And Jared had this chip on his shoulder about accepting help. It was good to see him wanting to be independent and do things on his own. I liked that quality about him because it meant he would take care of Naomi, and that was every big brother's standard.

"Looks like Newt's dressing down for a change." Evan chuckled, and he watched my reflection in the row of mirrors as I straightened the tie.

The cut was off, and the fit wasn't great either, but this was what Jared wanted. "Looks like Evan needs to use that bowtie to muffle the jokes." I eyed him, and they all laughed. "You can't even fill out the cummerbund. You have no room to joke about me."

Jared laughed and elbowed his college buddy. "Newt's right, man. We'll have to get you a Superman chest plate from the Halloween clearance if you're going to wear that suit like a real man."

That comment made Jared's uncle Frank—who was only a few years older than him but an uncle nonetheless—snort. Frank looked down his nose at the two and said, "As the eldest, I should point out that?—"

"Fact check," Jared interrupted. "Newt's the old man on campus. He's pushing forty."

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 7:59 am

"Thirty-four," I corrected, and the salesman approached us, cutting off our banter. Each of us took turns telling him where our suits needed fixed or tailored. I took the opportunity to pull Jared to the side for a quick chat. I seriously had to convince him to spruce up the wardrobe. After seeing what Amber's sister had done for the gown, I knew these suits weren't up to snuff.

"Yeah, what?" he asked, cocking his head. I knew he wasn't entirely fond of having me as his best man. I was the consolation prize since his real best friend couldn't be here. But he'd be my brother-in-law soon and that meant he had to go along with Naomi. I was trying to make this as painless as possible.

"I can splurge for the tuxes, man. Consider it my gift." I patted his chest, but he shook his head.

"I told you, Newt. I'm not going to take your money. Not even if it's a 'gift'. I can do this on my own. You might spoil Naomi, and as her brother, that's your right, but as her fiancé, I have to show her I can provide for her."

His heart was in the right place but his attitude sucked. He patted my chest the way I'd just done to him and clicked his tongue at me. "Money doesn't buy everything, buddy. You get to be average like the rest of us."

I caught his wrist and pulled his hand away from me. "Well, average men in this position would have something to say to the fiancé of their little sister." Naomi made me swear I wouldn't do this, but now I felt obligated. "If you hurt her, you will regret it. You've never seen an avalanche the size that will bury you if I find out."

Jared grinned at me and pulled his hand away. "That's the spirit, Newt. We all have our place, and I'm glad you know yours. Naomi is my world. I'd never hurt her. She's safe. Now, can we get back to my tux fitting? I have to go home to the most beautiful woman in the world soon." He winked at me, and something shifted. It was like by standing up to him, I'd been accepted.

I almost counted with a comment about Amber being the most beautiful, but since he was marrying my younger sister, I couldn't argue with him.

The rest of the trip went smoothly with more joking and making fun of the "rich old man", and while I was driving home, I got the craving to hear Amber's voice. I called a few times but the calls went to voicemail, and I almost gave up. But the urge to speak with her and see her was so strong. She'd been busy all day Sunday with family gingerbread day, and she was working yesterday. Today, I'd spent the morning in the city and the afternoon until now with Jared.

We just weren't connecting, and I couldn't stop thinking of her. So I tried again, and this time, she picked up.

"Hey, Newt. What's up?" She sounded chipper, and that made me happy. A good mood hopefully meant her not rejecting my invitation.

"Hey, beautiful. What are you up to?" Snow was really falling, so it was essential to use hands-free, which I had only just installed in Dad's old truck earlier this morning. I sent my driver back to the city and I'd been using Dad's truck or Mom's little sedan when I needed to. As it were, the "hands-free" device was just a FM transmitter plugged into the cigarette lighter and connected to my phone via Bluetooth.

"Oh, just helping Jade work on the dress. You should see how beautiful it is." The dreamy tone in her voice made me picture her smiling.

"Want to ditch and come to my parents' house? They're out for dinner and I don't want to be alone." I slowed the car at an intersection and the tires slid on ice for a short time.

"Oh, Newt. I'd love to, but I promised Jade. I have to pass this time." She sounded apologetic, but I was still disappointed.

"Are you sure? I mean, I can come get you if it's the roads you're worried about." I pulled out and my tires spun and spun. The roads were actually really horrible. It wasn't a good idea for her to drive at all. I stopped accelerating and let my car calm down, then turned toward her apartment and tried again. This time, the wheels caught and my car lurched forward.

"No, nothing like that. I just promised her."

Now she was just being stubborn, but I had to see her. I wasn't taking no for an answer. "Alright, well, stay warm. Maybe another time," I told her and then ended the call after our goodbyes.

Ten minutes later, I was standing under heavy snowfall on her front step and she opened the door and gasped.

"My God, it's a blizzard. Are you nuts?" She snickered and gestured for me to come in.

"You said you didn't want to come out, so I thought I'd join the dress-making party." I dusted the snow from my hair and shoulders as she shut the door. "Where's Jade?" I looked around as I took off my coat but didn't see the elusive sister anywhere.

"Oh, um. You just missed her." Amber locked the door and spun around. "Went to get more thread." The comment seemed odd, considering there was a pile of thread

on the table next to the white fabric and sewing machine. I wanted to question her, but I was here with her, and I didn't want to start the evening by questioning her.

"I missed you," I told her, cupping her cheeks with my cold hands. She gasped and pushed me away while snickering.

"Cold! You monster." Amber playfully swatted at me and took my hand, leading me to the couch. It felt like balm to a wound I didn't know I had.

Maybe if Jade got slowed by the road conditions, we could fit in a little necking. Or maybe Amber would just want to cuddle and talk. Either was okay with me. As long as I was with her.

11

JADE

My hands must've been clammy when I pulled Newt away from the door to the kitchen where I had the dress all laid out. It was almost completely basted together in preparation for stitching, and I had more than enough thread to finish what I needed to do tonight, but I had to have an excuse yet again. Pretending to be my sister sucked so badly. I wanted to be myself and just relax and let my guard down, but the façade wouldn't be over until Amber came home and did what she should have been doing all along.

"I told you we're so busy with the dress." Flopping down on the couch, I tried my hardest to hide my shaking hand and fluttering heart. It wasn't just butterflies because Newt was around, though he did do that to me.

He sat down next to me and draped an arm along the back of the couch coolly, then reached up and brushed a few strands of hair out of my face. The black was already

fading a little, though thankfully, Amber had been able to remove all of the color. My hair felt brittle now too, which disappointed me. I had to make an appointment at the salon for an oil treatment to fix it or I'd end up with a pixie cut because of breakage. Amber owed me big time after this.

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 7:59 am

"Well, I figured you ladies could use a break from all the hard work. Besides, I haven't met Jade officially yet, and if she's working so hard on my sister's dress, I figured it was only natural. How long will she be gone?" His hand trailed down the side of my face and my arm to my hip, and he slid closer to me. I had a feeling his question about how long she'd be gone had more to do with how long we'd be alone than it had to do with his wanting to meet "Jade".

"Oh, I don't know. A while..." I started to relax a little. I'd have to figure out a way to make sure he never found out that "Jade" hadn't really gone for thread. The twin swap was getting harder and harder to keep up with, but I could manage it as long as he wasn't suspicious.

"Well, we can chat about wedding stuff. Or we can do something else..." One of his eyebrows lifted, and he grinned at me, but after the last time and how Amber really freaked out about my flirting with him, I still felt like putting the brakes on this thing was the best idea.

"Did you secure the lodge for the party?" I asked, knowing we had selected the old game lodge on the outskirts of town for the bachelor party and wedding. It was the only place that hadn't been booked for Christmas Eve yet due to the expense of heating the place. The rental fee was astronomical, but of course Newt came to the rescue. It was booked for Saturday, last we checked, so I wasn't sure Newt would be able to get it.

"I did," he said, winking. "The family who had it booked for their family Christmas party was pretty stubborn, but when I promised to build them a heated lanai on the back of their house to use year-round for all gatherings, including a swimming pool

with a hard cover to serve as a floor so they'd have more space, they went for it. Then I rented them the hotel ballroom and we got the lodge."

"Oh, my God, Newt," I gasped, shaking my head. "That will be a fortune." I couldn't believe him at all. If he were doing something like this for me, I'd have told him it was way too much and he was insane. It probably would even be a turn-off. But seeing him do it for his sister just shocked me so much, I didn't know how to respond.

"Naomi is my sister, Amber. She's only getting married once in her life—hopefully. She wants a magical Christmas wedding, and I'm giving it to her. Money is nothing but a tool to make things happen. I have it. She wants things. I make them happen." He retracted his hand, but it lingered on his thigh, only inches from returning to my knee.

"You don't think she should learn that to get things, you have to work hard?" Arms folded across my chest, I studied his expression thoughtfully. He really didn't have to think about money at all anymore, though he knew the value of hard work. A lanai on the back of someone's house would be twenty grand, which wasn't something just anyone could afford. But to him, it was probably pocket change.

"Naomi has worked so hard her whole life. I'm not giving her a free ride, Amber." I winced when he said her name again and almost told him to stop saying that, but he kept talking and I listened. "She will go back to her life of hard work, though I don't want her to have to. She's just getting the wedding of her dreams because of me."

I felt foolish for protesting his lavish treatment of his sister, but I didn't get a chance to say anything else. My phone started chirping and I didn't know where it was. "Hold that thought," I told him, jumping up to find it. I looked around the living room and realized it was coming from the kitchen, so I walked in there to search. It stopped ringing for a while, then started again, and I finally found it under the sheets of pattern material next to the basted fabric.

It was Amber, and my heart nearly stopped. I swiped to answer and prayed Newt didn't ask who it was.

"Now is not a good time," I mumbled, but I couldn't just hang up. I walked into the living room on my way to the bedroom, and Newt smiled at me.

"Who is it?" he asked at the same time Amber spoke.

"Jade, my God—Hey. Is that Newt? What the hell, Jade? He's not supposed to..." I pulled the phone away from my ear and covered the microphone.

"Uh, be right back, okay? It's Jade."

Darting into my bedroom, I put the phone back to my ear to hear Amber finishing her lecture. "And I told you it was off limits."

"Listen," I hissed, "he's here to check on the dress and talk about the bachelor party venue. What was I supposed to do, kick him into the snow? God, you don't know everything." I sighed hard and rolled my eyes. I stood with my back to the door, hunched over, trying to listen for any movement in the living room while getting rid of my sister.

"Well, I'm telling you if the town starts talking about?—"

"They're not, okay?" I was nervous Newt would hear us bickering, and the only reason I was so defensive was because of guilt. I knew she was right, but I liked spending time with him.

"Fine, but?—"

"Everything okay?" he asked, and I straightened and the hairs on my arm stood on

end.

"Yeah, okay, Jade. Alright, tell Mom I love her." My rushed words must have pissed Amber off, but I didn't care. I ended the call and turned my phone off and turned around to face him. My hands were shaking again. He looked concerned, and I didn't know why I was panicking so much.

"Jade's stuck at Mom and Dad's... Snow and all." My hands were sweating and my pulse was racing. I came so close to getting busted.

"I thought she was getting thread...." His eyebrows went up and he walked toward me, taking my phone from my hand and setting it on my dresser. He kissed my knuckles, and my belly knotted.

"Uh, craft store is on that side of town... Why are you prying?" I asked, trying to sound playful and not snarky.

Newt placed one of my hands on his shoulder, then the other. Then he wrapped his arms around my body and pulled me closer to him until our bodies were touching. "That means we're alone for the night?"

Warmth started to thaw the icy chill anxiety had on me. I let the tension out of my shoulders and back and smiled at him. "For the night?" I asked. "You planned this, didn't you? Probably thought you'd have a threesome with twins..." My cheeky smirk made him chuckle, and he ground his pelvis on me.

"You wouldn't throw me out with the roads like this. Would you?" Newt leaned down to brush his lips over mine, and his eyes caught my gaze, as if asking permission.

"I could never..." I breathed, realizing where this was quickly going.

"We could order takeout later," he said as if reading my mind. "And watch some movies after..." He leaned in this time, his lips lingering on mine, teasing me or maybe himself, I wasn't sure. "Or..." His hand slid down to my thigh, then under the hem of my T-shirt, making my breath catch when his fingers touched my skin. "We could have our own private movie marathon."

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 7:59 am

I bit my lower lip, trying to resist the whimper. This man made me want to melt into a puddle. "Well, since you put it like that..." I purred, running my fingernails down the back of his neck. "I guess we can have our own private screening." I nipped at his jawline and felt his low groan vibrate through him.

Newt scooped me up in his arms, carrying me to my bed, but not before kicking the door shut. He laid me down gently, but there was nothing gentle about the way he undressed me, as if he couldn't get my clothes off fast enough. My heart pounded in my ears, my entire body on fire for him. I touched my clit while he tore his own clothes off and then joined me in bed. He was already hard, just the insinuation that we'd have sex enough to arouse him.

"You're so beautiful," he whispered, trailing his fingertips along my collarbone and down to the swell of my breast. "I've been thinking about this all day."

"I... I've been thinking about it too," I confessed, my cheeks flushing crimson. "About you, I mean."

He grinned, his eyes dark with desire. "I'm glad to know I'm not the only one."

It wasn't a lie, either. Newt was the only thing I could think about. I couldn't focus or concentrate. I'd made so many little mistakes on the dress and had to redo things. And every time my phone rang, my heart jumped. It was fear that Amber was calling to chew me out or flutters hoping it was him. My adrenal glands were getting a big workout this month.

Newt leaned in, his lips brushing mine, his tongue teasing my bottom lip. My body

arched toward him, wanting more. His hands cupped my breasts and his thumbs brushed my nipples, sending electricity straight to my core. I moaned and tangled my hands in his hair to pull him closer.

"I want you, Mav," he growled, the hunger in his voice making my sex throb.

"God, I want you too," I panted, lifting my hips as he slipped his hand between my thighs, his fingers finding my slick folds. "Please..."

He kissed me again as his fingers dipped through my slit and the moisture my body was making. "You're so wet," he said, his voice a low growl, as if he couldn't believe his luck.

"Newt," I breathed, arching toward him. I couldn't get enough of him, couldn't get close enough. He teased me for a few more moments, his fingers dancing over my swollen clit before he inserted two of them inside me. I gasped and my head lolled back.

What followed was an erotic blur of sensations. Newt's lips on my neck, the wet sounds of his fingers inside me, the ever-increasing tension building in my core. His thumb found my clit and rubbed it in such a way that made the pressure within me coil tighter and tighter, like a coiled spring. I was so close, I thought I might explode.

"I'm... I'm..." I panted, my fingers digging into the sheets.

"That's it, baby," Newt encouraged, his voice a soothing rumble in my ear. "Let go for me."

A white-hot sensation coursed through me, and I cried out, my body shuddering around him. Newt didn't stop there, either. He kept up the pace, his fingers and thumb working in tandem, sending wave after wave of pleasure through my body until I was

a quivering mess beneath him. I convulsed and whimpered, gasping for breath, twitching up off the mattress as he finger fucked me.

When my orgasm subsided, I was left panting, my chest heaving. Newt crawled up the bed and looked down at me with dark, hooded eyes. He leaned in, his lips brushing mine, his tongue teasing my bottom lip.

"Wow," I breathed, my entire body tingling.

Newt chuckled with a self-satisfied grin on his face. "I'm not done yet."

The anticipation of what he'd do next had my heart racing all over again. His gaze left my lips and rose to meet my eyes, his own still swirling with that same unreadable heat. Slowly, he reached out his free hand and brushed a stray strand of hair from my face, tucking it behind my ear. His touch was like lava, making more warmth pool in my groin.

"What's next?" I asked, still partially breathless.

Newt didn't utter a word in response. Instead, he dipped his head and lavished my kiss-swollen lips with his tongue, swirling it around in delicious circles before biting my lower lip and tugging it. His fingers were not idle either, massaging my entrance, spreading me open invitingly. I let my body go limp as he rolled to his back and took me with him. I had no choice but to straddle him, and as I did, he slid into me with force that had me seeing stars.

"Oh, God," I groaned. My eyes fluttered shut and I sucked in a breath.

Newt's hands gripped my hips, guiding me as he thrust upward. "Ride me," he growled, and I did as he said. I rocked my hips, meeting his every thrust.

The headboard slammed against the wall, the bed creaking under our weight.

"I can't... I can't," I panted, every muscle in my body tense, ready to fly apart.

"That's it, baby," he grunted, his hips grinding against mine. "Come for me again."

In a matter of seconds, I shattered apart, crying out his name as the second orgasm crashed over me, ten times stronger than the first. Newt's grip on my hips tightened as he groaned, burying himself deep inside me one last time before quickly lifting me so his cock slid out. His warmth spewed onto his chest and belly, then puddled under his stiff cock, and I felt dizzy, lightheaded from the intensity of it all.

It was strange how one minute, I could feel so anxious and uneasy about things and the next, I could not give a single damn about it. I dropped to the bed next to him, panting, and he took a deep breath and blew it out.

"Right back... Then give me twenty and we can go again." He got up and headed for the bathroom, and I snickered. For an old guy, he had stamina, at least. I could get used to this.

NEWT

December 12th

When I slid out of bed, I felt the ache in my thighs from a night of exertion. Amber and I really gave each other a workout, and I'd never loved bad weather more. I wondered if she'd have made me go home if Jade had come back.

After tugging on my clothing quietly, I headed to the kitchen and rifled through the fridge. She had a few eggs and some ham, but no bacon. I knew I could make a decent sandwich, so I set out the ingredients and neatly folded up all of Jade's wedding dress mess and set it aside before getting out a skillet.

By the time I had the fried egg, ham, and grilled cheese sandwich done, Amber came shuffling out of the bedroom. She wore an old, oversized T-shirt of a nineties rock band and her eyes were still puffy with sleep. She yawned and leaned on the doorway in the kitchen while she wrangled her messy hair into a knot.

"Good morning. I made you breakfast." I plated the sandwich and turned with it in hand to see her reaching for it.

"God, I'm so hungry. You are amazing." She didn't waste time with a kiss or a good morning hug. The sandwich went straight to her mouth, and I chuckled.

"I was thinking of going sledding. The snowpack has to be perfect for it." I got my own sandwich and a plate and joined her at the table. Nothing much was going on at work, and I deserved a snow day.

Amber winced then smiled while chewing. I started eating while she procrastinated answering. Based on the stories Naomi told the group the other night while waiting on her to arrive at my parents' house for cake testing, it sounded like Amber loved being outdoors in winter. But looking at her pained expression, maybe I got her wrong.

"I, uh... have a lot of studying to do today." I knew how rigorous her classes were, but all work and no play makes people stodgy.

"Come on, Amber..." Another wince crossed her face, and I realized my slip. "I mean, Mav. Go sledding with me, and I'll help you study later tonight." I winked for good measure, and she sighed.

"Fine, but just a few times. I really do need time today."

One hour later, after finishing breakfast and having a steamy shower with her, we were on the back side of the old Elk Lodge where Naomi and Jared would wed with brand-new sleds in hand. The bright red plastic reflected the morning sunlight, making Amber squint, and she looked adorable. Her pink puffer coat and matching sock hat made her dark locks stand out, though I'd have chosen something more than just jeans for pants.

"Ready?" I asked her, leading her to the top of the hill. It was early enough that no one else had been on the hill yet, and even though schools were canceled for the day, children weren't cluttering the slope now, either.

"Remind me why people do this?" she asked comically, and I chuckled.

"Because it's fun!" I dropped my sled and put a boot on it to hold it in place, and she glowered at me. Her facial expression told me she wasn't impressed, and I got the distinct impression that she'd been faking enjoyment of winter weather with my sister

for a long time.

"Let's get this over with and then you owe me a hot cocoa." Amber dropped her sled on the ground next to mine, but instead of holding it with a boot, she stood there staring at it as it started to slide down the hill.

"Oh, catch it!" I coached, and she dived after it, face planting on the thing. The sled went sailing down the hill to the sound of her screams as she rode it on her belly with her feet in the air behind her. Snow puffed up in front of her as the sled's nose dipped and bounced, and I could only imagine the way she'd land at the end.

I laughed and dropped to my knees on the sled and rode it down in her wake. The air against my face was brisk and refreshing. I watched Amber's sled twist and turn sideways, rolling to a stop as mine hurtled across the fresh powder, and when she came to a stop, she pounded the snow with her fists and I continued to laugh until my sled skidded to a halt next to her.

"Wow, that was an awkward way to ride a sled," I joked, and she glared at me.

"Wow, you're a jerk," she said and grabbed a handful of snow and launched it at me. Then she burst out laughing and jumped to her feet. "Last one to the top's a rotten egg!" She raced over and grabbed her sled and took off up the hill, and I chased behind.

For the next fifteen minutes, we zipped down the hill and climbed back up. We were huffing and panting, cheeks rosy with chill and hearts full of joy. Amber lined her sled up for another run and put a boot on it to hold it in place as she swept some of her hair away from her face. I noticed another vehicle pulling up and figured some kids had gotten the news that school was out and the hill was perfect for sledding, but the momentary distraction was long enough for me to miss Amber slipping.

I heard a thud and turned to see her on her ass, holding her ankle. "Ow... oh, ouch!" She winced and rocked back and forth, and her sled was sailing down the hillside.

"You okay?" I asked, dropping to my knees. I let my sled go too, not caring at this point for the five-dollar plastic sleds.

"It hurts... Ouch, Newt. It hurts really bad." Amber tore her hat and gloves off and started to unlace her boot, but I laid a soggy-gloved hand on top of hers.

"Don't," I cautioned. "If it's sprained, undoing your shoe will let it swell up and you won't get it back on. Better to go home first where it's warm." I frowned. We were having so much fun and this had to happen. "What happened?" I asked, as if it would change anything.

"I was just trying to get on the sled and it moved when I put pressure on it. I slipped and..." Amber shrugged and sighed. "It hurts." Her bottom lip pouted out, and I knew our snow time was over.

"Let me get you to the car." I stood and held out a hand, but even with my support, she couldn't stand, so I scooped her up and carried her cradle style to the car. Her arms wrapped around me with confidence as I walked, and a couple of kids raced out of the other car in the parking lot toward the hill. "You can keep the red sleds!" I called after them, and I heard cheering.

"That was nice of you," Amber said and pecked me on the cheek.

"Hey, I'm a nice guy, you know?"

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 7:59 am

I got her buckled in and climbed into the car myself. When I started toward her apartment, she cleared her throat and said, "Can you take me to my parents' place instead? I don't want to be alone at home."

When I realized our time on the hill was done, I had hoped to help her settle in at home and maybe spend the day with her, but I understood. "Yeah, I can do that," I told her, but I couldn't keep the disappointment out of my tone. She didn't say a word about it, though, so either she was relieved to be going to her mom's or she was in too much pain to notice.

I pulled up a few minutes later in front of the Lyons residence and Amber tried getting out of the car herself. I worried she'd end up in the emergency room, but she insisted she was fine, even as I draped her arm around my shoulder and helped her hobble up to the front door. At least her dad had taken the time to shovel the walks already. When we knocked, her mom answered the door in a house robe and rollers in her hair.

"Oh, my! What's wrong, baby?" Mrs. Lyons immediately reached for Amber, and I backed away.

"We were sledding and I slipped," Amber told her mom, switching from using me as support to putting her arm over her mom's shoulder. I remembered how she had specifically requested to keep the chemistry between us a secret until after the wedding to let Naomi have her big day.

"I think she might have a sprain, Mrs. Lyons," I added and watched them struggle to get her in the house. "I could drive her to the hospital if you need." The roads this

morning weren't bad at all. The plows had really cleared them overnight. And Dad's truck was four-wheel drive, anyway.

"Oh, dear, Jade, it's that bad?" Mrs. Lyons stopped so Amber could shed her coat, and I chuckled at how she called her daughter the wrong name.

"You mean Amber?" I asked, and I didn't think she heard me because she was focused on helping Amber get her coat off while not falling over. But when the coat was on the floor and they were moving toward the living room, she shook her head.

"I think you've got a merry mix-up, Newt." Mrs. Lyons parked Amber on the couch and patted her knee. "Let me get Dad. He'll want to look it over. We might end up in the hospital." Then she rushed off, and I was standing awkwardly halfway between the end of the couch where Amber sat and the open door.

"Does she call you the wrong name all the time?" I asked, snickering, and Amber rolled her eyes.

"Might be getting dementia," she mumbled, but part of me felt like she wasn't being honest with me. "You should go. Dad will ask a billion questions and I can't have him knowing I was out alone with you. He talks to your dad a lot, okay? Call me, though?"

I nodded and said, "Alright. You tell me if it's something serious. I'll pay for the hospital bill." I almost winced at my own stupidity. I knew Amber wasn't the sort of girl who wanted me throwing money at her.

"Alright," she said, glancing over her shoulder as her father's voice came within earshot. "Go on." She flicked her hand at me, and I gracefully backed out the door and shut it, but I still thought it was odd that her mom called her Jade.

As I walked back to the truck, I got an uneasy feeling I couldn't shake. I was so busy enjoying every second with her that I hadn't stopped to realize things weren't adding up all the time. Naomi swore Amber loved the snow, but I could tell she wasn't as into it as I was, and she didn't want to go to begin with. Then her mom called her the wrong name—but that could be easily explained too. Dad called me Kevin a lot when I was young. Kevin was his little brother's name. Parents did that all the time, right?

13

JADE

December 14th

I limped into Naomi's house with the large garment bag containing her dress, and she was squealing so loudly I wanted to cover my ears. I should have known she would. I should have worn ear plugs, but I hoped she'd heard about my mishap on the hill and might ask about my ankle. But true to his word, Newt hadn't said a thing, and there was no way I could tell Amber about it, though I did tell her I had a slip and fall. How would I explain being on a sledding hill with Newt that early in the morning?

"Oh, my God, Mav! Open it! Open it!" Naomi was too excited and I was so over this twin swap.

"Hold on a sec," I told her, struggling to hang it on the open door to her bedroom. I was tired, and more than just my ankle hurt. My body was stiff from so much physical exercise. I'd spent a few hours at Mom and Dad's and then I had Dad take me home and did nothing but work on the dress until well past midnight. I told Newt I was still with Mom and Dad and reneged on the promised dinner and movie. I had to finish the dress, but he wanted to help me study.

If he knew I was sewing and not putting my nose in the books, it would blow

Amber's cover and Naomi would be heartbroken. Not to mention Newt and how he'd react to knowing I'd been faking being someone I wasn't. But my hard work and sneaking around had paid off. I had an almost-finished product Naomi would love and I could be proud of.

I unzipped the gown bag to reveal my creation and slowly slid it away until all that was left were the satin and ribbons. The strapless gown looked like it came straight off the set of the most Christmassy movie ever filmed, red and white and silver, with a sweetheart neckline and a drop waist. If I were going to marry someone at Christmas, this would be the dress I would want.

Naomi seemed to agree. She gasped and covered her mouth, then started tearing up. "Oh, God, Mav. It's perfect. I love it! Where is Jade? She needs to be here to make sure it fits right."

I already knew she'd say that, and Amber and I had a plan for this if something went stupid again the way it had on dress-shopping day. I changed her contact info to mine and she knew I might call her to pretend to be me.

"She told me it is your measurements exactly, but I know how to pin things for her." It felt bad lying through my teeth, but I was able to assuage my guilt by seeing how much Naomi loved the dress.

She held out the fabric of the skirt and admired it, then took it off the hanger and turned around. "Well, get her on the phone and tell her to get over here. I'll go put it on." I opened my mouth to protest, but she marched off and I sulked. Dealing with drama queens wasn't my thing, but I had no choice now. Clearly, this was why Amber wasn't my best friend and why I hadn't chosen Naomi as a close friend, either. They were perfect for each other.

While Naomi was out of the room, I called my twin and waited for her to pick up the

phone. I had to keep reminding myself what day it was and that I only had six days left until Amber was supposed to be back in town. We updated each other on what was happening, but it didn't lessen the stress. Now I had to keep up with wedding party gossip and how Naomi was upset that she'd chosen Jill to be in the wedding. All the details were tedious and I found myself forgetting some at times, which only annoyed Amber more.

"How's it going?" Amber asked when she picked up.

"Horrible. She wants you here, or me here, however you look at it." I had a scowl on my face and I wished Amber could see it.

"Does it fit, though? You did a good job, right?"

Page 22

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 7:59 am

Oh, my God, Amber was the perfect person for the job of maid of honor. She was just as obnoxious as Naomi, and I knew she'd have made sure every detail of everything was worked out perfectly for her best friend.

"It's fine. Okay? I'm just making this look good so she knows you're—or I'm—not coming." Keeping things straight was getting frustrating.

"Okay, well make her happy. Oh, and I heard you hurt your ankle." Amber's words made my blood cool, but it was the tone with which she said it that alarmed me. I tensed and wondered how she'd heard anything, or from whom. It wasn't me, and it definitely wasn't Newt, so that only left my parents.

"Yeah, I told you. Slip and fall..."

"Uh, down the hill at the lodge with Newt?" she grumbled. "I told you he was off limits, Jade. What if someone had seen you two out?"

"No one saw us," I hissed and glanced at the closed bedroom door. Naomi was still putting the dress on and I was glad. "It was eight o'clock in the morning and there wasn't even anyone there." I felt guilty even defending myself. I was toying with her reputation and it wasn't even on purpose. I really liked Newt a lot, and I wished he knew I was me. But I was pretending and I knew any second, this whole thing could backfire for everyone involved. "Why can't you just come and?—"

"Is that Jade?" Naomi squeaked. "Jade, get your ass over here!"

I felt the blood drain from my cheeks. My bickering match with Amber was over for

now, but she had only just started. I knew the call later tonight would only be more of her telling me what a horrible position I was putting her in.

"Just tell her I'm too busy screwing your life over to show up." The snarky comment upset me, but I had it coming.

"Fine," I grunted, and I ended the call and locked my phone to deal with Naomi. She looked beautiful in the dress even without hair and makeup. I knew I'd outdone myself on the tailored fit, too. She would only need a few alterations, if any at all.

"Is she coming?" Naomi asked, and I could already hear the annoying tone she got when she was going to say something negative about me, thinking I was Amber. It was disappointing, to say the least.

"Uh, no. She's too busy screwing up my life right now..." The words stung as I said them because I knew it was something Amber would really say about me, and it was true, too. I was screwing with her life. Openly dating Newt had always been off the cards, so I had been stupid for risking being seen with him in public like that yesterday.

"My God, she has to be the biggest pain all the time. Doesn't she understand how important this day is to me?" Naomi's whiny tone took over now, and it was easier to deal with than the rude, snarky tone but still annoying. "I only get one dream wedding."

I took her by the shoulders and forcibly pushed her into the bedroom to stand in front of her full-length mirror where I could focus her on her beautiful dress instead of the momentary discouragement of "Jade" not showing up. I did realize how important this day was to her, and while I should have just taken my lumps for wrecking Mom's car and gotten it over with, at this point, we were in too deep.

Naomi might have been annoying, but Amber was my sister. I had to keep up the ruse and make sure her friendship didn't suffer. Besides, I was too nice and my heart was too kind to sabotage the twin swap just because my sister was a tool at times.

"Who needs her? Look how gorgeous you are." And with that the squealing commenced again, and I just had to play pretend a bit longer. Then I could go home and hide and try to think up a way to avoid Newt for the next few days so I didn't piss Amber off any more.

He was just so damn tempting...

14

NEWT

December 15th

The music was pumping, strobe lights flashing in time with the beat, and I was on the dance floor having the time of my life. The DJ I hired for this combined bachelor-bachelorette party was on fire, playing the hottest hits from a few decades. Naomi and Jared were enjoying it too and getting wasted in the process. As an outsider from their friend group, it seemed they all got along well, except Amber, who seemed to stick out like a sore thumb. She was rigid and serious and stone-cold sober. I hadn't seen her drink one sip all night, though I had plenty of time to check out that red miniskirt she wore, showing off her sexy legs.

I also had barely interacted with her. Having given her my promise that I'd keep our fling on the down low, I couldn't exactly ask her to dance. And since I wasn't even close to Naomi's friends' age, I felt a bit out of place trying to fit in and dance with them. So I stuck to the edge of the room where I could observe Amber and enjoy the night, but I kept dancing, anyway.

When Amber slipped away to use the toilet, I picked up a few drinks from the bar and followed. The old lodge felt more like a barn that had been renovated and turned into a venue for events. It was rustic with wood paneling on the walls and pictures of the horses they stabled here mounted in rustic frames. It had a very unique atmosphere, and I could see why Naomi wanted this for her wedding venue.

Amber walked out of the bathroom and looked shocked to see me. "Newt, I, uh..." Her eyes flicked toward the dance floor just down the hallway. The lights were brighter here, and I could see how she worried her lip between her teeth.

"You've been having some fun tonight... I thought maybe we could just talk a while." I handed her the drink, and she looked into it and then back at the party we were missing. I wondered if my standing here in this hallway talking to her constituted our being alone together or risked a negative reaction from Naomi.

"Uh, sure, we can talk." She sipped the drink, but I noticed her nose scrunch a little.

"You seem to be avoiding me tonight, and I wondered if it was because?—"

"Just don't want Naomi's big day to be shadowed by us flirting and hanging on each other. That's all." The way she cut me off seemed uncharacteristic, but I gave her the benefit of the doubt. She was the only sober person in a room of wild twenty-somethings getting their groove on.

"Your ankle feels better?" I asked, remembering how she was just out there twirling around the dancefloor easily.

"Yes, much." Amber took another sip and her nose scrunched again. It was cute.

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 7:59 am

"I can get you something different if you want." Standing in the hallway was uncomfortable, but I did actually prefer it to the main hall. The music was too loud to hear each other talking.

"I'm trying to stay sober tonight. I have to drive home." Her tongue traced her lips and then she bit her lower lip again, and I felt like I had to kiss her. I stepped forward but she took a step back. "Newt, not here. Okay? Naomi and Jared..."

I didn't see the big deal about it. Even if they saw us kissing or knew we were secretly seeing each other, neither of them would be upset. We didn't have to make some huge announcement either, which was the only way we would "steal their thunder". But I respected Amber's request even though it might actually make Naomi happy for me that I was finally moving on.

"Okay, well how about in here?" I asked her, nodding at a door in the hallway that was slightly ajar. I took her hand and glanced out at the crowd. No one was watching as I pulled her into what appeared to be an old tack room turned into a storage room for the venue.

Amber gasped but she didn't resist me. She followed me into the room and I shut the door and pinned her against it. "Newt, my God." She snickered, and suddenly, I had the Amber I was falling for. She draped one arm over my shoulder as I took her drink and set it aside with mine on a shelf.

"I can't seem to get enough of you, Mav." Maybe it was the alcohol talking, but I had zero inhibitions and this seemed like the perfect place to do very private things with her.

"Naomi will wonder where I'm at." Her gentle protest turned to a whimper of desire when I kissed her and bit her lip.

"She can wait. Besides, she's wasted and Jared is probably looking for his own little storage room to have some privacy with her." I grabbed Amber's ass and squeezed, pulling her against my body hard.

"Mmm," she groaned into my mouth and kissed me back harder. Then she pulled away slightly, so I worked my way down her jawline to her shoulder and collarbone. "But I tried to tell you that maybe we should keep things private for a while... you know?"

"This is private." I reached under her skirt and felt the silk of her panties, moist with arousal. "And this is private," I told her as I slipped my fingers past the elastic so I could touch her soft folds.

"Newt, this is insane. Someone could walk in on us." Her words told me she was resisting, but her legs parted as I hooked my fingers around the crotch of her panties and pulled a little.

"No, it's not. The staff is too busy in the front of the house. Besides," I said, pushing two fingers inside her wet canal, "no one but us is allowed back here. I paid the staff to keep this area private." I nibbled her earlobe as I added, "I want you, Mav, and I know you want me too. And I don't want to wait until after the wedding to have you again."

"Oh, Newt..." She groaned as I began to finger her, stroking her slowly but building up to a satisfying pace. She moaned, digging her nails into my back as I kissed her again, deeper this time.

As I continued to kiss her, her hands went from pushing me away to pulling me even

closer against herself.

"There's my girl," I purred against her ear. "Tell me you want this."

"God, I want this so bad, Newt." Amber became an animal. She started undoing my pants, her hands shaking with anticipation and desire. I couldn't help but groan as I felt her hand slip inside my waistband, her cool fingers wrapping around my hard length. "Condom," I grunted, pulling back just enough to reach into my pants pocket to withdraw a foil packet. I tore it open with my teeth and sheathed myself.

"You planned this?" she teased, but her voice betrayed the lust she was feeling. She reached under her skirt and shimmied her panties down. They dropped to her ankles, and she kicked off a heel to step out of them with one leg, which I quickly hoisted into the air as I slid my dick out of my open fly.

"Wait for it," I told her as I positioned myself at her entrance. With one swift push, I entered her, filling her up completely. I groaned in ecstasy as she tightened around me, clenching my length as I stroked in and out of her, our bodies moving together in a passionate rhythm.

Amber's moans drowned out the noise from the ballroom, which had faded into the background. I could smell her fragrance, the scent of arousal and the musky scent of our sex permeating the air. "Oh, God, fuck me," she panted. I kissed her neck, sucking and nibbling on her skin, fucking her even harder. I wanted to possess every inch of her, mark her, make her mine.

"Newt," she gasped, her back arching. "I—I'm c—coming."

"That's it, baby," I groaned, feeling her tighten around me. "Come for me."

Amber's walls clenched around me as she orgasmed, her cries of pleasure music to

my ears. I couldn't hold back any longer, either. When she moaned my name, I filled that condom and bit down on her shoulder to keep myself from being too loud. We both rode the waves of our orgasms, panting and sweaty. I rested my forehead against hers as we caught our breaths and I pulled out.

“Wow,” she groaned and leaned against the wall. Her skirt fell back around her thighs and I stepped back to give her space, but the orgasm was so intense I wasn't even seeing straight yet.

“Wow is right,” I told her as I leaned on a shelf to remove the full condom.

Amber put her panties back on and fluffed her hair, and I tucked my dick away quickly. But there was a thought pressing on me that had been there for days. “Amber, I want us to be exclusive.”

The words seemed to halt her. Her hands paused in mid-air, hovering over her hair that wasn't even messed up. She blinked a few times and smiled, then leaned forward and avoided the soiled condom in my hand as she pecked me on the cheek. It was such a chaste kiss, anyone who'd have seen it wouldn't have believed we'd just had incredibly hot sex.

"I'd like to see where this goes," I told her, nipping her earlobe, but before she could answer, the door swung open and one of the event staff in their dark green polos with the lodge logo on it walked right in.

"Oh, God, you shouldn't be in here," she blurted out and looked at the condom dangling from my hand. "You really shouldn't be in here."

Amber blanched and scurried past her, and I chuckled. "Uh, I'm sorry. I'll throw in a tip for your trouble." I pushed past the startled and embarrassed woman, but I couldn't go after Amber right now. I had to duck into the men's room to throw away the

condom, and then I'd have to wait for a more private moment to make sure I got my answer. I wanted her, and I got what I wanted every single time.

I just had to convince her that I was what she wanted too because I could tell I was.

15

JADE

December 15th

When that woman walked into the room and interrupted me and Newt, I couldn't have been more relieved. Newt was everything I wanted in a man and more, but he thought my name was Amber. He thought I was someone else, someone very available and someone very much into him. I was—and I wanted to be with him, but the path from here to there felt overwhelming. It would be so much easier if I had Amber's support too. She'd been too busy thinking of how this would blow back on her and Naomi to even tell me how she felt about the real Jade dating Newt.

I weaved through the crowd of dancers hoping no one even looked at me. As Jade I was invisible and at a function like this, I would have sat in the corner by myself and been ignored. But as Amber, everyone had to say hi and chat about topics I had zero interest in. But I faked being Amber to the best of my ability and had a cheerful smile on my face, loaded with extra drama for anyone who seemed to have a flair for it.

When I found my coat where I left it on the back of a chair, I picked it up and draped it over my arm. Naomi wouldn't even know I was leaving because she was as drunk as Newt said shewas. I knew he would keep an eye on her too, as would Jared, and she'd get home safely. I didn't care what Jill or Sara thought about me—or Amber, rather. They didn't even register on my radar.

I walked to the front door, and when I saw Newt's head poking above the crowd

looking for me, I ducked out into the cold. The air was crisp, and my breath puffed out in giant clouds of icy air. I had no clue what to tell Newt. I wanted to throw myself at him wholeheartedly and agree to be his forever, but to do so would be a lie.

As it was, continuing to have sex with him while he called me Mav or Amber was only cementing my fate. I should have told him right from the beginning, when I asked him to keep this a secret for Naomi's sake. I should have just told him the twin swap idea, but then he might not have liked me at all. He was pretty protective of Naomi and her heart. I didn't know if he'd think it was funny or if he'd be angry with both me and Amber for pulling the swap.

Shivering, I slid my arms into my coat and started toward the parking lot. The long walk snaked across the expanse of lawn beneath lit arches decorated for the holiday. Under any other circumstance, I would think this was a magical Christmas oasis, but tonight I felt sad and overwhelmed. The man I was falling for had made the next move, taking the relationship to the next stage, and I had to run away like a child.

I didn't have to, but either way, at this point, I was risking his being upset with me. Twin swap or not, Newt would dislike Amber and me. We were punking his sister, though it was with the best of intentions to make sure she had everything she desired.

My foot slipped on a patch of ice and I almost fell. Holding my hands out for balance, I must have looked like a buffoon, but I managed to keep myself upright. Then lights flashed across the parking lot and I noticed a car pull into a parking spot. I recognized it by the many black and white bumper stickers that glowed in the dark. No one else in the world drove a beat-up sedan with dozens of bumper stickers besides my sister's boyfriend.

My heart almost stopped. I stood there like a hoofed mammal on a frozen lake staring at the sight of Derek Turndale climbing out of his car and walking toward me. A lump formed in my throat and my body flushed hotter than the surface of the sun.

despite the temp being below freezing outside. I didn't know what to do, but I did know Derek could not go into that venue and talk to anyone.

"Mav?" he said, snickering. "Need some help?" He jogged a few steps as I righted myself and straightened, but I thought I'd throw up instead of speaking. "What's wrong? I thought you'd be happy to see me."

"Uh, I am..." I collected my thoughts quickly and tried to form a coherent sentence. Amber was going to flip out now. "I was startled. I didn't expect to see you here." I was sure Amber would have jumped all over him, groped his dick, and stuck her tongue down his throat or something, but there was no way in hell I was doing any of that with him. Gross.

Derek reached for me and I was helpless. I had to play along until Amber informed him what was going on. But he wrapped his arms around me tightly and I was uncomfortable. This was something I didn't have to do with him. I pushed his chest as he tried to kiss me and turned my head so he got my cheek.

"Wow, what a reunion. We haven't seen each other in six months and you won't even kiss me."

"You didn't tell me you were coming," I protested then faked a cough. "I'm not feeling well."

Derek's hold on me loosened but he didn't let me go, and all I could picture was Newt walking out the door to see me in his arms and feel like Amber was a backstabbing bitch. My heart felt so panicked, I really did almost puke.

"I wanted to surprise you. Jared and Naomi are your best friends. I have a few weeks off school and I figured you'd be home. Here you are. Here I am. And you said you were cramming for finals, anyway. I thought maybe I'd help."

Derek was such an idiot. I knew he talked to Amber three times a week and he never put two and two together that she was still in California doing her schoolwork. But of course, Amber and Naomi were so close, there should have been no way she'd miss her best friend's wedding planning.

My heart paused for a second as I stared up at Derek blankly. Amber was missing her best friend's wedding planning. It wasn't like her. The Amber everyone knew would never have skipped out like this, even for school, and that made my heart feel sad for Naomi and Amber. I wondered if there was some sort of falling out between them, which was why Amber didn't mind missing some of this, and Naomi didn't seem to notice that her best friend had changed recently.

"I just... I'm not feeling well. Can you take me home? I'm staying at Jade's with her." It was the perfect reason for not wanting to kiss him and for not allowing him to come into the apartment with me when we got there. I never let Amber bring her friends into my place. If she wanted to host something, it had to be at Mom's.

"Sure, baby," Derek purred. He pecked my forehead, and I winced, and the moment he let me go, I made a beeline toward his car.

It was starting to make more sense now. Maybe the harsh way Naomi spoke about me wasn't Amber's doing at all, and maybe that was why they had the falling out. I'd never know unless Amber fessed up, but her heart was very loyal, even when she was annoyed with someone. I'd keep up the charade, but now it meant more to me than it ever had. Amber wasn't just trying to make Naomi happy. She was trying to figure out what the future of that relationship looked like.

And I was trying to carry the weight of all of this on my shoulders by myself. We really had to have a heart to heart when she got here.

NEWT

December 16th

It felt good to get out and let my feet hit the pavement. The street teams hadn't cleared all the sidewalks, but the roadways were mostly clear and I hadn't been to the gym in weeks. My lungs craved the burn of exertion, so I did my typical three-mile run and got back to Mom and Dad's house before they were even out of bed.

I slipped in the back door and into the kitchen and made myself a cup of coffee while I caught my breath and stretched. I was soaked with sweat, so I peeled off the layers of clothing I'd worn to keep warm and dropped them in the laundry room. Nothing felt quite like the rush of adrenaline from runner's high. Not even the most incredible sex, which was pretty amazing when it was with someone you cared about.

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 7:59 am

The coffee maker finished about the same time my thoughts rolled around to Amber. Last night's party was fun, but after I pulled her into that storage room for the quickie, I never saw her again. Someone said she didn't feel well and that she rushed out looking a bit green, but I had my doubts. She was acting off the whole night, though, and her friends knew her better than I did. I just couldn't shake the feeling that she was either pulling back from me because I was moving too fast or that she was having her own doubts.

We had been mutual acquaintances for a very long time, as long as she'd known Naomi, obviously. But maybe dating for two weeks was too soon to ask her to commit to exclusivity. Maybe she wasn't as certain as I was about what she wanted. If so, that was okay. I just wished she'd tell me. I'd still commit to not dating anyone else as we figured things out. In time, Amber would decide if I was the right one. I felt a little foolish for pushing her.

However, if she was having doubts because of something I said or did, I didn't know how I'd respond. I couldn't think of anything I did lately that would have upset her besides rushing. And since I was sworn to secrecy, it wasn't like I could ask Naomi for advice about her.

I carried my coffee up the stairs to the bathroom and removed the rest of my sweaty clothing. The shower heated up quickly, and I stepped under the flow to wash away the stress and get clean. All I could think was that Amber was more of a slow-burn type, which seemed to be the opposite of what she had put forward. We'd already had sex a few times despite it being only roughly three weeks since I even "met" her.

In my book, that was moving pretty quickly, which I was fine with. I wasn't like this

with other women. But when she and I clicked, I felt like fast was the only way to do things, as if she'd be snatched up right in front of me and I'd lose my chance. She was young and beautiful, and any man would be a fool to not look at her twice.

I washed up, but the more I stewed over her reaction to my asking her to be exclusive, the more I had the urge to talk to her. I couldn't get it out of my head that somehow, I'd upset her. If that were true, she'd go running to her best friend to vent and that would upset Naomi—or if Amber really was the type of friend she said she was, she would hold it all in and suffer alone. Since she ditched the bachelor party, that was more likely the case.

I dried off and wrapped the towel around my waist for the short trek up the hallway to my bedroom, and when I got there, I didn't even put clothes on. I flung myself over the bed and took my phone off the charger. I had to make sure she was okay, so I sent her a text and waited for her to respond.

Newt 7:47 AM: Hey, good morning, beautiful. I missed you at the party. Are you okay?

My thumbs hovered over the keyboard, poised to send another message, but I didn't know what to say. I didn't want to come across as sounding desperate or clingy. I just wanted to know what was going through her head. I didn't even know if she was awake, either, which made the almost ten-minute wait excruciating.

Amber 7:56 AM: Morning...

Amber 7:56 AM: Feeling sick. Sorry I ditched.

The thermometer emoji she sent me made me half smile. She used it like punctuation and it just felt fitting for her personality. I was ready with a response immediately.

Newt 7:57 AM: Party wasn't the same without you, but Nomie was so drunk she never knew you left.

This time her response came more quickly, and I sat up in bed to be more comfortable. It would have been much easier to just have a phone call, but I figured she preferred this. I was a decade older and not exactly fully informed on all the trends these days.

Amber 7:58 AM: That's good. I didn't mean to disappoint anyone. They looked like they were having fun.

Amber 7:58 AM: I wasn't running away from you... promise.

Three dots appeared as if she were typing something, but then they vanished and no message came through. I waited, hoping she'd just say whatever it was, but I assumed after a few minutes that it was one of those messages a person typed and deleted because they didn't know how to phrase it. But the fact that she was promising she wasn't running away was a good start.

I wasn't sure where to take the conversation. When we were face to face we could talk for hours, but this felt awkward.

Newt 8:02 AM: Want me to come over? I can bring soup or maybe some warm bread. I can take care of you.

This time the three dots appeared then vanished, then appeared, then vanished again. It looked to me like she was really struggling to compose her thoughts. But now I had the reassurance that it wasn't me or something I did, so I felt a bit better, even when she texted me declining my offer.

Amber 8:05 AM: That's so sweet, Newt, but I really am sick. I don't want to get

anyone else in the wedding party sick. I'll suffer through, but if Jill or Sara get a sniffle, they're drama queens. I'd rather just suffer alone. But you can feel free to send gifs or memes all day and I'll smile at them between naps. Jade is taking care of me.

Discouraged but not entirely deterred I tried to convince her.

Newt 8:06 AM: You sure? I hear I'm pretty good at nursing. Should have gone to med school. And I have a nice, healthy immune system too. Haven't been sick in ages.

Amber's response was prompt this time, and it was final. She wasn't going to be persuaded and that was okay. I respected that she was feeling sick. It made sense to me now why she'd been so out of sorts last night.

Amber 8:06 AM: No, please. I'm really tired and I should just sleep. But thank you. Feel free to DoorDash me some hot coffee, though.

There were a dozen hearts and smiley faces on that message, and I decided that was exactly what I'd do. If she didn't want visitors, I could swarm her with flowers and coffee and even a teddy bear if I could find one at a store that used the delivery app.

Newt 8:07 AM: Rest, then. I'll check in on you later, and I'll have coffee at your place at 9:30.

It was my turn to throw in a heart emoji and a smiley face, and then I switched apps to get her delivery order ready to go. I hated that she felt like she'd rather be alone than with me when she was sick, but we hadn't been together long enough for her to feel comfortable. Hopefully, in time, that would change. Until then, I could do everything in my power to shower her with affection and attention and hope she saw how I felt about her through those means. It wasn't quite the same as offering her a back rub or getting her water and medication, but it would have to do.

I had already decided that she was worth waiting for, so even if this was just some lame excuse to keep me at arm's length by putting on the brakes, I was okay with that too. Maybe she didn't know how to communicate that I was moving too quickly for her comfort, and maybe I could learn a lesson from that and just be a bit steadier and more even for her. If this was the love I believed it could be, we had all the time in the world.

JADE

December 17th

The dress hung on my body form, gracefully filling my living room with a touch of Christmas beauty. It felt odd and out of place among my quirky design palette, but I liked it. I found myself enjoying the tranquil beauty of how plain the skirt was and how the satin toppled to the floor and spread out in a small semi-circle. After the fitting with Naomi, I had a few alterations, and I was soaking up my time with a task to avoid dealing with my emotions about Newt.

He asked me to be exclusive with him, which meant he wasn't looking at this like a fling at all. It both pleased and troubled me because I knew he was catching feelings. I was giddy at the thought of his actually entertaining the idea that I could be his girlfriend. But I was sick in the stomach at the thought too, because he had no idea who I really was. He knew my personality—I never shied away from that with him—but I just gave it a different label and a slightly different package.

I was afraid when he saw me with color-streaked hair, or toting my tailor's tape measure instead of a textbook and black hair, he'd freak out. He thought he was falling in love with a business major who had her future planned out. In reality, he was falling for a seamstress at worst, or a fashion designer at best. I still had no clue where my journey in this industry would take me, but for now, it was mentoring with a local shop owner to get my designs out there. I didn't even have my own line yet. I spent most of my time doing alterations for her customers on her designs.

The disappointing thought that Newt would just reject me because I had no real plan

for life yet only soured my mood. I dropped my pincushion and plopped onto the couch about the same time my phone started to ring. It was early, before nine a.m., but when I saw the caller ID say "Jade's phone" I knew it was Amber. I only changed her name in my phone in case Newt or Naomi was around when she called.

I picked it up and swiped to answer. "Hi," I sighed, feeling ambivalent. I should have been enjoying this part of the dressmaking, but all I could think about was Newt and how much I wanted what we had to be real.

"Oh, my God, Jade. Why didn't you tell me Derek was in Danville! Are you insane?" Amber sounded frantic and slightly out of breath, but still tired at the same time. I gathered she had awoken to messages from Derek.

"Uh, it was late and I figured you were sleeping or something. I planned to call. I just thought I'd let you sleep in a little." What did she want me to do? Call her after midnight to tell her that her plan was backfiring? My night had already been ruined at that point. Why ruin hers too? Besides, after sex like that, I knew I couldn't have held it in. I'd have told Amber what I did with Newt in that storage room and she'd have flipped out on me and ruined that moment too.

"My God, Jade. He texted me like seventeen times in the past five hours. What is going on? He's demanding to come see me and bring me soup." For once, she wasn't angry with me, so that was good. But her frantic tone meant she was worried that her very real, very loving relationship with her boyfriend was going to be hurt. I felt sorry for her.

"Calm down, Sis. I had to tell him I was sick. He tried to kiss me. I turned my cheek, so don't freak out." The memory roiled my stomach. Derek was nice, but he wasn't my type. "He drove me home, and that was that."

I picked at the tatty gold fabric of the old sofa I'd thrifted and tried not to feel so

hollow or empty. I should have been reveling in joy about how in love I was feeling, but the gloom cloud only foreshadowed suffering.

"This is horrible. What am I going to do?" I could picture her pacing and running her hand through her hair. I didn't want to tell her "I told you so", but the words were on the tip of my tongue. I forced them back and sighed.

"I don't know, Amber. I'm kinda dealing with my own shit. I'm literally falling in love with Newt, and he asked me to be exclusive, so I think he really likes me too." The confession spilled from my lips, drawing a whimper from her. I could tell she was crying now, though I didn't ask her to confirm it. She was probably beating herself up for all of this, but I was to blame too. I went along with it instead of trying to make it possible in a different way.

We could have just had me stand in as me the whole time, took my phone and FaceTimed her at every event. It wouldn't have been the same, but it would have given Naomi a special memory. But here we were, neck-deep in a lie that could go really wrong, really quickly.

"Why don't we just tell Derek the truth?" After the incident with Mom's car, I was a big advocate for the truth at all times. Lies just got messy, and you had to tell more lies to cover the previous lies. It wasn't worth it.

"I can't!" she hissed, and I could hear the defensive anger wanting to come out. I had opened my mouth about Newt at the wrong time. She was too sensitive and feared Derek being hurt by this.

"Okay, well, I don't see why not..." A loose gold thread pulled out of the sofa, leaving a small hole, and I scowled at it. I felt like my love life was in about as good of shape as my couch, and I was picking it apart one thread at a time, all thanks to my sister's harebrained scheme.

"I just can't, Jade. Okay? He would be hurt that we never told him from the beginning. He thinks I'm home. He flew all that way to see me for Christmas and I'm still in California." She sniffled and sounded defeated. "You have to convince everyone that you're really sick."

I scowled again, but this time, not at the thread. I knew I had to be realistic about my chances with Newt, but the idea of convincing him I was sick so I had to lock myself away and not see him made me feel upset with her. I didn't want to stop seeing him, especially if when the truth came out, he pulled away. It was one week until the wedding, and that meant only seven more days of enjoying him as myself, if I could get him away from everyone else while Amber was here in town.

"I don't want to do that," I whined, but she was insistent in her "older sister way". It was annoying that a few minutes made that much difference.

"You have to. I've already sent Derek a message saying I'm really sick." I heard her fingers touching buttons on her phone and knew she had me on speaker. She was actively torpedoing my relationship with Newt.

"Amber, don't do that!"

"Too late," she blurted out. "It's sent, and you can't date Newt, anyway." She sighed, and I lay down on the couch and rested my head on the armrest.

"But I really think I'm falling in love..." I pressed my eyes closed and listened to her explain again why it wouldn't work.

"He thinks he's dating Mav. Jade, he could be really hurt and angry with you and me. And Naomi would get hurt too. You have to know how upset he'd feel to find out you were lying to him the whole time... Besides, now that Derek is in town, he's going to find out 'Mav' is dating Derek. What will he think then?"

I didn't want to think. I didn't like any of this. I had a big heart and I wanted to help everyone in this situation end up happy and unaffected by it all, but I was at my breaking point. I deserved a happy ever after just like Naomi, but I was being shelved again.

"He could think it's funny, like that movie we watched as kids where the twins swapped places."

"Jade, you're not thinking rationally. Naomi won't even think this is funny. I just have no choice. You're right. Maybe this was a bad idea from the start, but we have to see it through. The earliest I can make it back there is Saturday." She huffed and grumbled a few words I couldn't understand, and I heard her texting again, probably to Derek who was being insistent.

"The twentieth? That's only a day sooner than you originally planned. That's three days. You expect me to stay inside and do nothing for three days? What about taking the dress to Naomi?" I sat up and gritted my teeth so I wouldn't say something I'd regret. I didn't want to not have any time with Newt for three days.

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 7:59 am

"I'll do it when I'm back. I'm already changing my flight to Saturday. I hoped to have the day to work on my thesis more, but I guess I have no choice now." I heard more typing and her frustrated mumbling and gave up.

I was going to have to pretend to be sick now, and I hated that. She would tell Naomi, a germaphobe, and that would be that. I hated this, and I wished I were a heartless bitch who could blow the whole thing and get what I wanted—Newt. But I couldn't, and even if I could, there was no telling how he'd react if Amber was right and he'd end up being so angry he just left town.

"Fine," I grumbled and put her on speaker phone. I was already composing my text message to Newt telling him why I'd be MIA for a few days. My heart felt really sad about the whole thing, and I knew I'd have to make excuses to him the way Amber was making excuses to Derek.

"You're the best, Jade. Thank you for doing this for me. I know this goes way beyond your paying me back for the car incident. I definitely owe you one." Her emptyI owe youwasn't ever going to be enough. I didn't want her to be indebted to me. I wanted to have the fairy tale I thought I was living.

I hitSendon my message and slumped back onto the couch. "Tell me I'm not insane and that Newt could actually like someone like me?" Amber might have been a little crazy at times, but she was my sister and honestly, the only one I had to talk to about stuff like this.

"I have no clue what to say, Sis. He's way older than you, filthy rich, driven, and has zero intention of being tethered to our little hometown. But I believe if he says he

wants something, he really wants it. I'm so sorry..." Her words trailed off as tears streaked down my cheeks.

I was falling in love with Prince Charming, but I was the ugly stepsister, not Cinderella. It hurt.

18

NEWT

December 18th

When Amber sent me that text message saying how sick she was, I felt awful. I begged her to let me come over and take care of her, but she swore me off. I knew how big of a germaphobe Naomi was and if I got sick, it would ruin everything. Amber talked me down, promising to make up for everything when she was better and swearing she was pumping herself full of Vitamin C in order to recover more quickly.

"No, no," Mom chided, redirecting my hand toward a lower branch. I had a silver bulb in hand ready to hang it because she insisted I help her with the decorating since I was in town, but she was so picky it made no sense. I might as well have just been company because I couldn't do a thing right. "Put it here," she said, nodding at a lower empty branch.

"You wanted my help, but you are micromanaging me." I chuckled, but I did as she said. Still, my mind was on my beautiful girlfriend who lay in bed sick across town in her apartment. I wondered if Jade was sick too, then if that was affecting the dress-making process. I wondered a lot of things, like why she hadn't given me a response to my question about being exclusive, or why she ran out. But while she was sick wasn't the best time to press for answers. She was probably miserable.

"You just don't have the eye for this. I need Naomi." Mom's grumble of complaint was heard and accepted. I backed away and put my hands in my pockets.

"Naomi is busy doing wedding stuff, but I'm here. Is there something else I can do?" I had to smile at how particular Mom was about her Christmas tree. When we were kids, things were always haphazardly thrown on the tree in clumps while other places were bare. She probably had enough of that and opted for a more elegant touch now that we were grown.

"Uh, well, you can string the lights, I guess. Only the white ones." Mom took over hanging the bulbs, and I started stringing lights on the tree.

For the past twenty-four hours, I'd been entertaining her. Work was functioning well without me, and Jared's buddies were keeping him occupied. Most of the "best man" duties were finished up. The last thing I had to do was pick up the rings from the jeweler and keep them safe. We had the rehearsal dinner on Monday evening, but my time was mostly mine. And now that Amber was sick, it was boring.

We kept a conversation going for the most part, but there were only so many topics we could discuss before we circled back to things that were more pleasant to talk about. I learned quickly that her studies weren't something she wanted to discuss. She shied away from that topic every time and asked me questions about life in Chicago instead.

"Yes, oh, Newt, it's so perfect." Mom clapped her hands as I positioned the lights and smiled at me. "Oh, this is so beautiful. I love it."

When I had the lowest branches lit, I stepped back and admired my handiwork. It really did look amazing. Mom's pickiness had paid off. The tree was up and decorated, and with just enough time to get dressed and ready for the Christmas pageant at the local performing arts theater.

"Well, I'd better go shower. Can you pick up the boxes and stack them over there?" Mom nodded across the room and continued, "I have to wash my hair before the show."

When I lived here in town, I never missed a single Christmas pageant, but somehow, I just didn't have the desire to go tonight. I wished Amber were feeling better and could attend as my date.

"Sure, Mom," I told her and started packing up. She rushed off to clean up for the pageant, and I slowly collected the boxes and plastic sacks she had stored all of her decorations in and cleaned up the living room.

As I did, I felt sluggish. When it was all tidy, I sat on the couch and took out my phone to see if Amber had messaged. The last one I got was her saying she was going to nap for a while. It was good for her to rest up if she was sick, so I focused on helping Mom to keep my mind busy and not missing her.

Newt 5:47 PM: Hey, beautiful, are you awake yet?

While I waited for a response, I looked up the weather forecast. It had been an above average year for snowfall, but if the roads were clear, I could go for a run to pass the time. It was dark, though, so I'd have to wear reflective gear to make sure I was visible this evening. But anything was better than sitting in this empty house alone. Mom would understand my skipping the pageant if Amber wasn't feeling up for it.

Amber 5:49 PM: Woke up a few minutes ago. How was tree decorating?

Newt 5:49 PM: Mom's too picky. But it looks pretty.

Newt 5:50 PM: Want to go to the pageant with us? I don't want to go alone. I thought if you were feeling up to it, you'd join me. I can drive.

I tapped the screen and waited. Three dots appeared showing she was typing, but I saw them disappear and knew she was struggling to compose a decline to my invitation. I locked my phone and put it in my pocket and strolled into the kitchen. Mom had a new container of eggnog, which was one of my holiday favorites. I wished they made the stuff year-round. It was so delicious.

Page 28

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 7:59 am

I poured myself a glass and put the container back in the fridge and heard my phone chime. When I looked down at the notification, I wasn't even the least bit surprised.

Amber 5:53 PM: I'm sorry, bud. I'm just not feeling up for it.

If she didn't want to go in public, that was okay. I just craved her so badly. Just being around her made me feel happier. I never wanted that feeling to stop. It was like she had a way of soothing the very wavelengths of my existence.

Newt 5:54 PM: Then I'll come over. We can watch a cheesy Christmas movie and make fun of the bad tropes.

I hitSendand took another gulp of my eggnog, but already her fingers were typing a response.

Amber 5:55 PM: I don't know. Jade's kinda sick now too. Probably won't appreciate company.

Everything she said just felt like an excuse, but I tried not to think that way. It was cold and flu season and there was every chance she was really just sick. I just couldn't shake the unnerving feeling that something was going on. I had my ex to thank for that. Being cheated on had a way of destroying a man's ability to trust again. I had to battle those thoughts, though, because I knew Amber wasn't like my ex, or at least I hoped she wasn't.

Newt 5:57 PM: Then come over. House is empty and I have Lysol to kill germs. lol Mom and Dad are going to the pageant and I'll be alone and lonely.

This time she didn't respond, at least not for a while. I finished the eggnog and rinsed the glass, then went to the bedroom and hid from Mom so I didn't have to make an excuse for why I wasn't going to the pageant. I heard Dad come home and the two of them bustle around, and somewhere about six thirty, the house grew quiet. I thought about picking up my phone and nudging Amber for a reply, but she had left me on read. That meant she was either considering it or didn't want to keep saying no.

I scrolled my socials as the house got darker, the sun setting and taking any natural light with it. My stomach rumbled, and I considered getting food but had no motivation to get up, even to walk to the door for a delivery driver, so I just kept scrolling. And when the doorbell rang, I ignored that too. Everyone in town would be at the pageant. Naomi wouldn't ring. She'd just walk in. So I figured it was carolers making their rounds or something.

But when my phone chimed and it was a message from Amber, I sat up in bed with a smile.

Amber 6:38 PM: You gonna leave me standing in the cold all night?

I rushed to the front door and flung it open to see her in her pink puffer coat, hugging herself and shivering. I looked out at the driveway, but her car wasn't there. I was confused.

"Where did you park?" I asked, stepping aside so she could come in.

"Car was dead again, so Dad will have to fix it. I Ubered," she said, and I heard her shivering.

I'd have bought her a new battery or even a new car if she'd let me, but I was just glad she was here.

"I'm so glad you came," I hummed and shut the door, turning to catch her hand as she slid her coat off. She didn't look so sick, but even that mattered very little to me right now. She was here, and that was all I wanted. "Let's go find something to eat." I led her toward the kitchen with only one thing on my mind—soaking up every second of her time and enjoying being with her. My soul was at rest again.

19

JADE

Newt was so amazing. He made me a bowl of soup and some grilled cheese, though I really didn't need the special treatment. I hadn't eaten, but only because I had no appetite. Boredom did that to me. I found myself doom scrolling or sleeping to kill time. Just getting out of the house after feeling cooped up all day was nice. But being with him was nicer.

"Thank you," I told him as I slurped bites of soup and nibbled on the grilled cheese. He was busy enjoying his own bowl of soup, but he smiled over the rim as he tipped it to his lips to sip.

"You're welcome," he grunted as he set the empty bowl down and wiped his mouth. "Is it good?"

The canned concoction was no better or worse than the brand I typically bought, but the fact that I hadn't had to cook for myself, and he was my company, made it seem like a gourmet feast.

"It was delicious, thank you." I took another bite, though I was starting to get full already. Pretending to be sick sucked, but it had helped me avoid Derek. Amber must have put him on a leash or something. Otherwise, he'd have shown up at my apartment demanding to be let in. As it was, I had to leave my car out front just in

case he drove past the place and thought I wasn't home. Amber told him I was so sick that I had demanded no one come by. If he saw my car gone, he'd be standing there banging.

"Not being able to see you for almost forty-eight hours was torture," Newt said, taking my hand. He hadn't brought up the "exclusivity" conversation yet, but I wasn't sure what to tell him if he did. I wanted more than anything to say yes, but I felt he deserved an explanation first. Even if it blew things up with Naomi, I wanted him to know what Amber and I were doing and I wanted him to hear it from me.

"Torture? You're that addicted to me?" I joked, and I chuckled so hard I almost snorted like Amber when she got to laughing hard.

"Yes, and I need a fix..." He brought my hand to his lips and kissed it softly. "And I don't just mean sex." Newt sighed and had a dreamy look in his eye, one that was so unnatural for a man, I could almost tell what he was going to say before he opened his mouth and said, "I think I'm falling in love with you, Amber."

I had to force myself not to wince when he said my sister's name. It took a lot of mental focus to keep my smile looking genuine and not fake, but once the initial shock of hearing her name wore off, the surprising warmth of affection swelled in my chest. I was falling for him too, so hard it was going to hurt like hell if this didn't work out.

"Newt, I..." I struggled, desperately needing him to know I was Jade and not Amber, but my mind wrestled with the idea that if I told him and he knew we were going behind his sister's back, he'd be hurt anyway.

"It's okay. I know you might feel like this is going too fast, but I just needed to say that. You make me different, Mav." The use of the nickname was even starting to have the same effect on me. I wanted so badly to hear my name on his lips. "When

I'm around you, I feel calm and confident and full. And when you're not around me I feel, like, this desperation to get to you and see you and make sure this is real."

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 7:59 am

I chuckled as his honest confession of affection for me momentarily distracted me from the racing thoughts. "I think you've been watching one too many Christmas romances." I tried to pull my hand away from his, but he gripped it harder.

"Well, call it Christmas magic or something, whatever you want. I need to know you feel the same way, that I'm not reading into this too much." He pulled my arm, and I leaned forward, but when he pulled harder, I got the point. He wanted me to sit on his lap the way I had that night only two weeks ago when his dad walked in on us making out.

So I stood and straddled him, resting my hands on his shoulders and trying to remember that I was supposed to be playing sick. I was the furthest thing from sick. I was horny and my heart felt clingy, and I wanted to lose myself with him.

"I don't think you're crazy, Newt. I feel it too." As I lowered onto his lap, he gripped my ass and pulled me closer. But I had my own confession, and it wasn't a confession of love. It was something that might nuke the moment. "But there's something I need you to know."

His hands slid up my back under the sweater I wore and their warmth spread through my body like wildfire. I swallowed hard as he found the hook for my bra and undid it. Then I chewed the inside of my cheek as his hands slid around the front of my body to cup my breasts.

"I know, you hate your name, and you don't want me to say it while we're doing this." His voice was so smooth and buttery, I felt bad breaking the chemistry of the moment. I almost whimpered at the idea that he loved me and I was going to ruin it.

"Yes, but..." I protested as he kneaded my tits and pinched my nipples.

"I'll call you whatever you want," Newt purred and nipped at my chin. "What do you think about 'baby'? You like that pet name?"

This time, I did whimper. Amber hated that pet name, but just hearing it did something to me. It made me melt inside that he was so perfect for me, and I found myself looking down to let him claim a kiss. My core was on fire, juices puddling in my panties, and any thought of pretending to be sick was gone now.

"Fuck, I want to be your baby so bad," I groaned, and I meant it. I felt like this was the realest I'd ever been with him. "I want to be your only baby forever, Newt."

He purred into the shell of my ear, his callused hand palming my core through my panties. "That's my girl," he growled. "Now, let's see to your other needs." Then his lips were on mine, his tongue teasing mine as his hands worked the fly of my pants. He kissed me so hungrily, like he was starved for me. The way his tongue twisted with mine made me moan into his mouth.

Newt then trailed kisses down my jaw to my neck, licking and sucking. I arched into him, needing more contact. His hands expertly unbuttoned my pants, and then he was on his knees in front of me with my ass perched on the edge of the table, tugging them down my legs.

"Holy shit," Newt muttered as he gaped at my lacy panties. "I need you so bad, baby." He groaned and ran his thumbs along the wet material, smearing my arousal on my inner thighs before leaning down to kiss my skin and lick the moisture through the material. I shuddered and hissed and firmly planted the heels of my hands on the edge of the table for support. I was scalding, so hot I felt like tearing the sweater off, but to do so would have me sliding off the table onto his face.

There was no denying it. The way he stroked my thighs made my knees shake and I clutched at the table for support. Slowly, he peeled the panties down my legs, the lace catching on my heels as he did. Then he kissed me from knee to groin on one leg, then the other mercilessly teasing.

“Fuck, I can’t take this,” I said, and he chuckled a deep baritone that made me clench with need. Any thought of confessing our twin-swap was out now, at least for the moment. The insatiable lust searing through my body had to be quenched first.

The first touch of his tongue to my sensitive parts was like a lightning bolt making me jolt and almost scream with pleasure. I laced my fingers through his hair as he licked and sucked.

“Oh, God, Newt,” I panted, my hips bucking into his face. His low growl of approval spurred me on.

I tightened my grip on his hair as he lapped at my clit, circling it before flicking it with his tongue in quick strokes. My breaths were coming in pants and my eyes were squeezed shut as I rocked my hips against him. He knew exactly how I liked it, as if he’d done this a million times before.

My climax built steadily like an approaching thunderstorm, the pressure between my legs coiling and tightening. “Fuck, Newt, I’m gonna come,” I panted and ground against him.

“That’s it, baby, come for me,” he purred against my folds, his hot breath sending a fresh wave of pleasure through my core. But when he put his fingers in my slit, I lost control. The thrusting and stroking made my coil snap like a cheap guitar string. I convulsed and clenched and clawed at his scalp, praying his parents wouldn’t come home from the pageant early and walk in on us fucking like horny teenagers.

The bliss was blinding, crashing over me like rapids and breakers. The rip current of pleasure chewed me up and spat me back on shore, only to suck me in deeper the next time. It was the longest orgasm I'd ever had in my life and I never wanted it to end.

It was only when my heart rate had returned to something resembling normal that I became aware of Newt standing before me, his cock hard and straining against his pants. His face was flushed and his chest heaving with exertion. My juices glistened on his chin, and he wiped them away with the back of his hand.

"Your turn," I said and tugged him closer, unbuttoning his pants. His cock sprang free, hard and hot and leaking. I ran my tongue along the underside, tasting him, then took him in my mouth. I sucked and licked and teased him, all the while feeling so connected to him that I was lost in the moment.

He groaned and bucked his cock into my mouth as I sucked. I massaged his balls and worked my way down the shaft. I could taste him now, the musky sweat and salt. He was all mine.

"Fuck," he grunted as he shoved his pants down, giving me more room to work. But he forced my mouth away from him as he kicked off his shoes and stepped out of the pile of clothing. "You're getting me too worked up, baby. I need a sec." His naughty grin as he bent to take his wallet out of his pants pocket was cheeky. It made me smile too, wondering what he was thinking.

I pulled my sweater off, thankful for the chill of the slight draft in the kitchen as I shed my final vestments and he tore open a condom and rolled it on. Then he used one hand to reach over his back and pull his shirt up over his head and off. I expected him to bend me over the table or something, but he took my hand and sat down.

"I've been fantasizing about this since that night Dad interrupted our kiss." He pulled me closer, and I smirked.

“You want me to ride you right here on this kitchen chair?” I snickered as I let him pull me onto his lap where his sheathed cock slid between my wet folds.

“Yes, and then again in bed. And maybe I can bend you over the clawfoot tub upstairs.” Newt pulled my mouth against his, and I felt his hips rock upward against my pelvis. The need in my core was returning, building a raging inferno that needed dousing.

I lowered myself onto his cock and a grunt of satisfaction escaped my lips. Holy fuck, it felt good, his dick filling me to the hilt. I rocked my hips and moaned as he wrapped his arms around my hips to guide me up and down.

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 7:59 am

“Oh, fuck, you feel so good,” I gasped as he pumped into me, grinding his pelvis against mine. I put my hands on his pecs for leverage and bounced on him, my pussy clenching around him.

“G–God, baby,” he gasped. “I love the way you feel.” I rocked my hips against his, grinding my clit against his pubic bone as he picked up the pace. The sensations were so powerful, I couldn’t breathe right.

Newt hiked me up higher, angling himself so deep inside me that I thought I would shatter as our bodies slammed together with fury. The chair creaked in protest, but all I could focus on was the building pressure and the way his dick felt, hard and throbbing inside me.

“I–I’m...” I panted, my orgasm bearing down like a freight train. I closed my eyes and clenched around him as I convulsed. “Fuck!” I grunted as a white-hot cascade of pleasure washed over me and my nails dug into his skin. Every muscle in my body contracted at the same time, milking him, and my stomach began to spasm and twitch.

“Fuuuuck,” he groaned, and his hips bucked furiously. He locked his arms around my waist as his body found release too, shuddering and shaking. I wished I could feel the heat of his explosion, but the sensation of his mouth encircling one of my nipples was enough distraction to allow me to enjoy the final few convulsions of orgasm before I drooped onto his shoulder, heaving.

"My God, you're incredible," I breathed out, and I meant it in every sense possible. My body was sated and starving at the same time, and my heart was full.

"Just wait for round two," he whispered, and I felt him kiss the top of my shoulder. It was enough just to be near him, but knowing he wanted to make me feel this amazing all over again made me smile.

"Okay, but in your bedroom this time. I don't want to shock your parents into heart attacks." I reluctantly climbed off him and his dick slid out of my body. I couldn't tell him now, not tonight. But I knew I had to.

I owed it to him. I just couldn't ruin this precious moment, not when my heart finally felt one with his. I loved the pet name he gave me. Maybe it was that reason I believed we could possibly pull through this. Or maybe I was still kidding myself. It was yet to be determined.

20

NEWT

December 19th

I kissed Amber awake, placing light, feathery pecks on her forehead, eyelids, and cheeks until her eyes fluttered open. I considered rubbing her pussy too, but I didn't want her to think she was nothing but a sex toy to me. The sex was phenomenal, but the real treasure was her heart. Which was where I placed the palm of my hand, careful not to grope her tits either.

"Good morning, sexy," I purred, and she grinned and blinked her eyes a few times. I was glad she was feeling better and had even volunteered to stay over. It put all my insecurities to bed in a single act.

"Hello, handsome." Her soft tone was heavy with slumber, but the way her lips curled into a smile was inviting.

"Have I told you how incredible you are?" I kissed her again, this time on the lips, not giving her a chance to respond right away. She didn't need to respond. I was here to lavish compliments and kisses on her for as long as she would let me.

I had a hand on her hip now, pulling her body against mine, and she didn't protest. Last night was nothing but sensational. We barely slept, but it wasn't just the three rounds of sex that made it so amazing. Amber and I lay awake talking for hours about life and what we hoped would happen in our futures. We both wanted kids, both of us a chance to do something with our careers. She hoped for something bigger, maybe New York City, and so did I. Wall Street had always been on my bucket list.

"Hmm, I think at least six times last night, but they were all after orgasm, so I'm not sure they count." She snickered, and I kissed her again and bit her lip. My God, I couldn't get enough of her.

"You are perfect, you know that?" I finally relented and grabbed her tit and squeezed. She was too tempting to not enjoy when I had the chance.

Amber playfully swatted my hand away and sat up, tossing the blanket back. Her naked body was a work of art. The perfect curve of her tit down her side to her hip mesmerized me. I found myself staring as she slipped out of bed and found her clothing.

"I have a lot to do today. I really need to call an Uber and get home." For a second, I watched her dress. I didn't want her to go home yet, but I understood the moment couldn't last forever. We both had lives. And if Naomi came by and saw her here, it would break her heart. She wanted what was left of this month to be all about my sister, not us.

"Stay for breakfast? Mom usually makes French toast or eggs." I climbed out of bed and grabbed a pair of sweats and a T-shirt to wear. My morning wood was

distracting, but she didn't make a thing of it. We had enough sex to satisfy her for days, probably, though I'd be lucky to make it to lunch after that night. Just thinking of how she sat on my face made me feel like the morning wood was a little more than just a spontaneous body reaction from waking up.

"Yeah, okay," she said, but I got the feeling it was just a polite response, like she'd be more comfortable going home. At this point, I would take what I could. I knew she had three days left to finish her studies and I couldn't be a distraction to that. She was laser focused, and rightly so. Her entire future and everything we discussed last night about dreams to make it big in the Big Apple rode on good grades. Though, she never came right out and said that, or what her big plans for New York even were. Just that she saw herself there.

Come to think of it, we had mostly just talked in abstract about those things or focused on my desire to trade on Wall Street and not just from an office in Chicago. I was building toward something, and she seemed eager to support me in that. I loved that about her.

We dressed and I walked her downstairs. The smell of bacon frying perked my appetite, which was previously only focused on Amber. It made my mouth water as I paraded her into the kitchen past Dad—who gave me an "atta boy" look—and Mom, who seemed to scowl a little. I chalked that up to her being disapproving of premarital sex, but she had to figure it was happening. I was a grown man with needs.

"Good morning," Amber said sweetly as she sat down, and I grabbed an extra plate for her. She seemed shy and a bit intimidated, and her shoulders looked tense when I set the plate in front of her and sat down next to her.

"Good morning, Amber," Mom said, but her tone was a bit short. I didn't understand why, but it seemed to make Amber more tense too. "What are you doing here so early?"

Frustrated at Mom's prying, I decided to answer for Amber and then change the subject as I dished food onto our plates. "She slept over, is that okay? Dad, could you please pass the syrup?"

Dad winked at me and snickered under his breath, but he passed the syrup. I focused on plating food for me and Amber, who held her hand over her plate to indicate she didn't want any sausage. One slice of French toast was all she let me put on her plate, though, and I wondered if it was her stomach. I hoped whatever it was hadn't been passed on to me or Naomi would hear about it and make a big fuss.

"What do you have planned for today?" I asked Amber, hoping whatever it was that Mom was annoyed about would just slip her mind. She stayed by the stove cooking, but I could see she was irritated.

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 8:00 am

"Uh, just more studies. Probably helping Jade with the dress too." She licked her lips and cut a bite of her French toast, but when she brought it to her mouth to take the bite, I saw how uncomfortable she looked.

"Not feeling well still?" I asked, and she nodded. But there was more to it. The emotion in her eyes wasn't sickness or embarrassment. It was fear. Mom had made her feel too uncomfortable.

"You don't have to eat, baby," I told her, but I made sure to say it quietly enough that Mom couldn't hear me over the sound of the popping grease in the pan.

"I just want to go home," Amber whispered, and I nodded. "I can get an Uber." She pulled her phone out, but I shook my head.

"Just let me wolf this down. I'll take you." I already had a huge bite of food in my mouth as she started searching her phone for the app, but I wasn't about to let her pay to Uber when I could use Dad's truck just fine. I grabbed her phone and swallowed hard before saying, "Let me take you."

Dad was watching and Amber's eyes flicked in his direction. Then she politely smiled and dropped her head. She did manage a few bites of her meal as I devoured mine practically without chewing. I had to leave the room to get shoes, socks, and my coat, and when I came back, Amber looked on the verge of tears, and Mom looked up at me with a sternness in her expression I'd not seen since I was a child, but I didn't ask what had happened. I promptly escorted Amber to the front door where she left her coat last night, and then to the truck.

The drive across town was quiet. I heard her snuffle a few times, but I felt bad for what had happened, and I didn't understand it, so I didn't want to pry. Something might have gone down between Amber and Naomi to make Mom upset with her, but if so, I thought I'd have heard about it by now. I just held Amber's hand and drove with only the sound of Christmas music on the radio to keep us company. The closer we got to the apartment, however, the more flustered she seemed to be until she looked like she couldn't take it anymore.

"Newt, there's something I have to tell you and I want you to hear it from me." The way she said the words made the hairs on my arm stand on end. This had bad news written all over it, and I got breakup vibes, wondering what she could possibly need to tell me.

"Okay, I'm listening." We were only a block from the apartment and she seemed panicked.

"Newt, I'm not really who you think I am." She looked up the street and I watched her face blanch.

"What?" I asked, feeling confused. Not who I thought she was? She was Amber Lyons, my sister's best friend and maid of honor in her wedding. What else could there be?

I pulled into a spot behind a beat-up black sedan covered in hideous bumper stickers and put the truck in park, letting the engine idle. Amber seemed to freeze up as her eyes traced across the snowy front lawn of the complex toward her door. I looked too, noticing a man standing there banging on her door, and my stomach sank.

"I, uh... You need to go," she spat and jumped out of the car. "I'll call you." Amber practically jumped out of the car and marched through the snow with her head down and her hands in her pockets. Either she was afraid of the man at her door or she was

afraid of me seeing the man at her door, or maybe she was afraid for Jade, who, based on her previous statements, was inside the apartment sick as hell.

Whatever the case, my heart was hammering now, and I couldn't just drive home. I felt like I was losing control again, the way I had when I found my ex cheating on me. My mind raced as I watched her walk up to the man and they started arguing. He looked angry enough to hurt her, and my protective instinct kicked in.

I climbed out of the car and bounded across the lawn too. My strides were twice as long as the footprints left behind where Amber walked. I heard their screaming match and started to piece together a picture of what was happening.

"You have no clue what you're talking about," she shouted, complete with waving hands.

"Oh, give it up, Amber. I can't believe this. You spent the night with him?"

"Whoa, buddy," I said, putting a hand squarely on his chest, which he didn't seem to like at all. His fist balled up and he swung right at my face and connected despite my best effort to dodge the blow. The impact made me see stars, but at least he wasn't unleashing. One punch was all he gave.

"What the hell do you think you're doing with my girlfriend, Phillips?" The man was fuming mad and his words were a kick to the gut. I stood there staring down at the snow where blood from my lip dripped and turned the pure white to red.

"It's not what you think, Newt," Amber pleaded. "Let me explain."

"You fucked him?" the man said, and I got the feeling he was going to hit me again, so I held both hands up in surrender and let the blood run down my chin.

"Hey, man. I didn't know. She never said anything." I backed away a step and saw the tears sluicing down Amber's cheeks. I felt sorry for the poor schmuck. Man, she had fucked us both over. My heart was ice cold and I didn't know if it would ever thaw. She was using me to cheat on her boyfriend?

"Newt, please. I promise I can explain everything..." Amber walked toward me, but the man grabbed her arm and pulled her backward, quickly snatching her key out of her hand.

"Just leave," he spat before unlocking the door and yanking her inside.

I slogged to the truck and stood there for a minute listening to the muffled sound of more screaming emanating from inside the apartment. My heart was breaking into a million pieces and I couldn't stop it. How could I be so unlucky as to have two different women who I thought were perfect both turn out to be lying cheats? How was I this unlucky?

21

JADE

Before Derek even had me into the apartment, I was swatting at him. The way he grabbed my arm was totally unacceptable even if I was his girlfriend cheating on him. I smacked his hand hard, and he let go and then I smacked him square across the face. I didn't care that he thought I was Amber or that he was upset. No man had any right to manhandle me like that.

"What the hell do you think you're doing!" I spat, and fuming, I yanked my coat off and threw it at him. Snow was caked to my shoes, but I turned and walked through the living room toward the kitchen for a beer from my fridge so I could calm down. I tore off my hat and gloves and dropped them in my path, and Derek followed me.

"What the hell is going on, Amber? What are you trying to pull here? I came home to visit you and you swore you were sick and couldn't see me, but you were out with that bastard? Did you stay the night with him? Did you sleep with him?" Derek sounded hurt and angry, and as I took the beer from the fridge, I felt a twinge of guilt.

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 8:00 am

The ruse was clearly up now. I had to come clean and I couldn't wait for permission from my sister to do so. If he really thought I was her, this would be the end of their relationship, which would destroy her. I couldn't let that happen, but at the moment, I was so upset about that look on Newt's face that all I could do was blink back tears as I gulped the beer and he stared at me incredulously.

"Nothing is going on. I'm not Amber, you idiot." I finished the beer as he wrapped his mind around things. I'd have drunk wine if I had it, but all I had was Amber's stupid secret stash of her favorite beer which probably made me look more guilty.

"So you're going to blame this on Jade now? You think I really believe a man like that would have anything to do with your psychotic sister?"

His words were a dagger to the heart and more incriminating evidence that Amber let her friends speak about me in hurtful ways. But she was my sister and I had to make this right. Just because her friends were assholes didn't mean she was. I knew she didn't feel like that about me.

"You listen to me, buddy. You don't talk about me like that. I don't care if Amber lets you say what you want. I'm not psychotic, and Newt actually likes me. So fuck off!" I pushed past him and carried my nearly empty beer back toward the door where I kicked off my soggy shoes and turned back to face him and his disbelieving expression.

"This is low, even for you, Amber. I can't believe you'd try to pretend you're your sister just to get out of this. You fucked him, didn't you?"

I was raging mad, fearing Newt would never talk to me again, and Derek didn't even believe the truth when it was right in front of his eyes. "Yeah, I fucked him. Four times, to be exact, and I'll do it again if you didn't ruin things. I told you, I'm Jade. Amber is in California. If you don't believe me, just call her."

My chest was heaving, sobs wanting to escape, but I kept the tears minimal as I explained to him our plan to keep Naomi happy, but still, he didn't believe me.

"You know what, I'm done. I've had enough. I can't do this anymore." Derek threw up his hands and marched toward the door, but I stepped in his way and refused to let him pass.

"Derek, please. I swear I'm jade, and Amber is in California. She loves you. She'd never hurt you. I swear this is just a twin thing—you know, a merry mix-up—to help Naomi have a good wedding. You have to believe me." I put a hand on his chest, and he moved it away in anger and I knew things were really bad. "Please," I whimpered.

But he forced me aside and opened the door. "Yeah, well your 'merry mix-up' is fucked up. I need some space to think," he growled, and he slammed the door on the way out. When I heard his car peel out, I knew it was bad.

I threw myself on the couch sobbing and panicking. Amber was going to kill me, and this time, it really was my fault. If I had been at home instead of out with Newt where she strictly warned me not to be, none of this would have happened. Oh, God, how was I going to explain this to her? How would she ever even look at me again? And now I'd really fucked things up with Newt, too.

When I stopped sobbing long enough to catch my breath, I grabbed another one of Amber's secret stash and opened it, then took out my phone to call her. Day drinking had never been my thing, and on an empty stomach I knew I'd feel these six-percent craft beers quickly. She answered but sounded tense.

"Yeah, what?" she asked, and I almost threw up.

"Amber, uh... I have to tell you something." The tears started again faster than they stopped. I hated myself.

"What? What's wrong? What happened?" She sounded frantic right away because of how I said things. It was bad no matter how I said it and she was going to flip even if I framed it delicately. So I just blurted it out.

"Uh, Derek caught me coming home this morning. I stayed the night with Newt and well... We had a fight."

"He what!" she screeched, and I swore she dropped her phone. "What are you saying, Jade?"

"I'm saying he thinks you are cheating on him with Newt." I barely choked the words out before gagging on them. A swallow of beer only made it worse. I was so nauseous from anxiety and emotion, I could feel the few bites of breakfast making an appearance in the back of my throat.

"Oh, holy fuck, you're kidding, right? This is a prank. You're getting back at me for making you go along with this." She sounded like a woman learning her partner was dead and she was about to lose it.

"No, Amber. I mean, he saw me get out of Newt's dad's truck and then Newt followed me to the door. Derek sluged him. He punched Newt right in the face, and Newt walked away bleeding, and I'm so sorry." I sobbed and then sobbed some more. And then I felt guilty. I had no right crying over this when it was me who ruined things for her. Naomi would find out, and Jared, and they'd probably both be very upset with Amber and me. It wouldn't derail the wedding, but Amber might be out, and it might end the friendship too.

"You've got to be kidding me. Jade, I told you not to see him anymore. I told you from the beginning not to get involved, to not date him. I told you this would happen." She was panicking, but maybe we could at least still fix things with Derek.

"Look, please listen. I know this is all my fault, but you have to call him. FaceTime him and show him you're in your apartment in LA. Make him see that I was telling the truth..." My heart sank. It wasn't going to fix things with me, and maybe it wouldn't fix things until Derek was no longer so angry he was ignoring her. But eventually, he would see, and then he would feel bad and maybe even laugh at it.

I would never laugh, though. The hurt in Newt's eyes was so sharp, it was like I'd knifed him. He drew back in pain and couldn't even look at me. He really thought I was cheating on him, and there was no way to make that go away. We didn't have the history that Amber and Derek had. He had no rational reason to believe me at all, and unless Amber came clean to Naomi about the whole thing, he never would.

Even then, he'd still just be hurt that I'd let him believe I was Amber that whole time. He would never have a reason to trust me again. I blew it big time.

"I have to call him," Amber snapped, but I knew he wouldn't answer.

"Are you coming home?" I asked, now feeling like hiding from everyone. "Because someone has to finish doing this thing and I don't think I can even look at Newt again. I can't stand the pain I saw in his eyes. I can't be Naomi's maid of honor anymore." Now I was crying so hard, I didn't even know if she could understand me.

"I'll fix it, Jayjay. I have to. I'll be home Saturday." Amber hung up on me, and I curled into a ball and called Newt's number. It rang through but I didn't leave a message. I needed to hear his voice. So I tried again and again until it suddenly started going straight to voicemail instead of ringing, and I knew he'd shut his phone off.

My heart hurt so bad, but it was probably nothing compared to how he felt. He would probably never speak to me again, or Amber, and I prayed it wouldn't ruin Naomi's wedding too.

NEWT

I climbed back into Dad's truck and sped off feeling so angry I knew if I didn't leave, I'd tear that man limb from limb, and not because he was putting his hands on Amber. All the anger and rage I felt a few years ago when I found out my ex had cheated on me came bubbling back to the surface, and I was almost blind with rage. I had to stop a few blocks away at a stop sign and take a few deep breaths to calm down.

I was in pain—hurting so bad I could have done anything reckless to stop it. And it wasn't pain from my busted lip. My heart hurt. How could this happen again, and how did I not see it? The times Amber shied away from me and was distant, she was probably with him. Every time I asked her to do something and she said no, she wasn't studying. She was with him. My mind started to fill in every blank with accusations and rationalizations and I couldn't think straight. So I did the one thing I knew might help. I turned toward Naomi's apartment.

It was still early, and there was a chance she was still sleeping, but I had so many questions and right now, I was too angry with Amber to answer them. I let my heart get so carried away with her to the point I was falling in love, and I never stopped to question whether she was seeing someone or not. I didn't even ask Naomi if her best friend was dating. The only thing she and I spoke about was if Amber liked cocoa or how she felt about the snow—but thanks to Amber's insistence that we keep things quiet for now, I played that off as wedding stuff too.

Even that made more sense now. She was keeping our fling quiet because she didn't want Naomi to learn about our fling. Naomi would have told me she was dating someone. Naomi would have told Amber how wrong that was and maybe even told

that man what she was doing. None of this would have happened. It's why she wanted it to be a secret.

The tires of the car squealed as I turned the corner onto Naomi's street and I realized how out of control I was acting. I felt so foolish for letting yet another woman get to me. I didn't know how I could just fall for someone so blindly and not know they were cheating. I was starting to wonder if all women were like this, if my mother had done it to my father, or if Naomi had done it to Jared.

My heart was too full of negativity to even think clearly, and when I knocked on the door a little too loudly, I winced at my own lack of tact. Naomi answered the door with her hair tied up in a bonnet and a sleep mask on her forehead. She was frantically tying her house coat around her body and scowling at me as she blinked at the harsh sunlight flooding her front room.

"Newt, what the heck? What time is it, anyway?" She held her arm in front of her face and backed into the dim room as I stomped my way into her house to keep the snow outside.

"It's early," I grumbled, and I didn't even bother taking my coat off. I shut the door a little too hard and raked a hand through my unwashed hair. And to think, just last night, Amber's hands were the ones snaking their way through my waves. It felt so surreal and almost like my emotions were out of place or unwarranted.

"What are you doing here so early?" Naomi flipped on a light and followed me as I started pacing her long, narrow living room. I left puddles on the floor from the snow on my soggy boots and avoided the poinsettias lining the wall. There wasn't a surface untouched by wedding and Christmas decorations. It looked like the inside of Santa's workshop had exploded in here.

"I'm really upset..." How did I just come out and tell her that her best friend was a

lying cheat? Should I even do that? It might wreck the wedding for sure, or maybe Naomi would be the forgiving type who would try to bring peace and harmony to the situation, but I doubted it.

"Okay, well slow down." She grabbed my arm and tried to pull me toward the sofa, but I opted to head to the kitchen table where my boots would do less damage to the floor. I parked my ass in a chair and rested my elbows on the table, burying my face in my palms.

"Tell me what's going on, Newt." I heard a chair scrape against her linoleum floor and felt her presence near me on my right side.

"I don't know if I can be a part of your wedding now, Nomie." The decision was a snap one, made on the spot, but it was the first thing that came to my mind. I'd have to walk down the aisle with Amber and she'd be touching me. How could I do that? How could I look her in the eye ever again, when I was ready to give my heart to her, body, soul, and spirit?

"Oh, God, what did Jared do? My God, I told him to be nice. I know you weren't his first pick, but it's stupid. I'll call him. I'm so sorry, Newt. I promise I'll fix whatever it is." Naomi started to get up from her chair, and I grabbed her wrist.

"It's not Jared." Our eyes locked and she looked down at me confused, then sank into her seat slowly.

"What happened?"

I realized I was holding her hand a little too tightly and I let it go. She peeled off the sleep mask and then the bonnet, and I sighed hard. It hurt me enough that I had to talk about it. I just wished I didn't have to tell my sister five days away from her wedding.

"I can't walk down the aisle with Amber." If I just avoided the whole reason, that would be the best thing for both of us, but I knew Naomi would pry. It was her wedding, after all. She'd want to know what was going on behind the scenes.

"Why not?" she asked patiently. "Amber is my maid of honor. She's my best friend. You have to escort her..." Naomi nervously clasped her accessories in her hands on her lap as I rubbed my forehead in grief. The room suddenly felt colder than it was outside, but I found myself sweating under my coat.

"She's uh... she's seeing someone." God, it was killing me to even talk about it. I was such an idiot. I fell in love with her and she just used me for sex, or for an emotional boost, or whatever her ridiculous reason was.

"She's been seeing someone for a few years. I thought you knew that." Now Naomi's expression really shifted toward confusion, but her words gutted me. It felt like someone had put a vacuum to my lungs and sucked all the air out. She'd been dating this guy for years? Which meant I really was just a fling to her and nothing more. I really was her toy. "What's going on, Newt?" Naomi asked.

"I... We..." I gritted my teeth and looked away in embarrassment. Telling a person I got played by my ex felt liberating. It felt empowering, like I was the victor for dumping her and leaving her behind as the trash no one wanted. But this felt horrifyingly shameful. I had let her play me so well, I came out looking like a buffoon. "I had sex with her—more than once. We were sort of having a fling and?—"

Naomi burst out laughing and laid her bonnet and mask on the table between us. The reaction was so strange, I had to look at her face to make sure she'd heard me correctly, because she clearly had the wrong impression of her friend. But even when I scowled at her, she didn't stop.

"Uh, great joke, Newt. I know Amber. She'd never cheat on Derek. They're totally in love." Naomi stood and started out of the room as if I were pranking her, and I tore off my coat and left it on the seat then followed her. I could smell my own musk from anxiety sweat and felt angry that Amber did this to me.

"It's not a joke, Nomie." I caught her hand and made her face me.

"You expect me to believe a girl I've known almost my whole life pulled a fast one and is cheating on her boyfriend with my brother right under my nose?" She scoffed, then glowered as if annoyed by my pranking. "She tells me everything. She'd have told me."

"I'm serious." If only I had pictures of us together, something to show her so she'd believe it. "And she's not sick. She's at her apartment right now with that guy." I pointed to my lip. "He did this to me. I confronted her right in front of him and he slugged me." The busted lip was scabbed now, but it was proof enough.

Naomi backed away and shook her head. "You're wrong, Newt. Amber wouldn't do that, not to Derek, and not this close to my wedding. She'd know how it would affect me."

"She swore me to secrecy. She made me promise I wouldn't say anything to you because it would take the spotlight off you and your special day. I'm not lying." I could see the truth sinking in, but she didn't want to believe it. She shook her head and rubbed her tired eyes.

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 8:00 am

"Why are you doing this to me?" Naomi's whine came with a hunched-over posture and a self-hug across her middle.

"I'm just telling you, I'm not sure I can be a part of the wedding now. I can't stand to look at her. I'm in love with her and she just used me." My words were the final straw. Naomi's eyes welled up and she knew I was serious. She blinked and tears streamed down her cheeks.

"I'm getting married..." Her whimper broke my heart. I hated seeing her hurt like this, and maybe I should have just been man enough to hold it all in and not say a word until it was all over, but if I saw Amber at the wedding and then she put her arm through mine, I was likely to lose control. It would cause a scene right when everything was supposed to be magical. It was better this way.

"I'm sorry, Nomie," I told her, pulling her into my arms. She sobbed against my chest and I felt the pain, though no tears would come. I didn't want to cry over this. I cried enough over my ex, so much that I even put her name out of my vocabulary and any time it came up in conversation, I spat on the ground to clear my tongue.

The name Amber would forever be the same now. I just couldn't think it or say it without feeling that stabbing pain in my chest.

"I messed things up. I'm really sorry. I don't know how to fix it." I could only stand there and hold her while she cried. I was sure she'd call Amber and they'd have words, but for now this was my solace, that at least Amber wouldn't be pulling the wool over my sister's eyes too. She'd see Amber for who she really was.

JADE

December 20th

Seventeen—the number of calls I made to Newt's phone before finally having the courage to leave a voicemail. At least it wasn't off now. It would ring four times then go to the machine and I would hang up. I didn't call back-to-back. That would have been creepy. I started this morning when I woke up and seven hours later, I was still trying now and then. But I left him a voicemail if he even wanted to listen to it. I explained everything. I just didn't know if he cared anymore.

My body ached, probably from pent-up emotions I carried around with me. I'd been so tense when I slept last night, and even when I napped this afternoon. I didn't feel like going out for coffee so I had none, which made me extra sleepy. And I had no appetite either, so I didn't bother to even cook myself anything.

I lay on the couch most of the day, alternating between crying and doom scrolling my socials. I made sure to stalk Naomi's profiles everywhere to see if she posted anything. Amber, of course, hadn't even been online. Derek never came back, so either he was totally done with things or Amber had gotten through to him. When Amber tried calling me five different times, I ignored them all. I'd had enough.

My head throbbed, my heart was broken. I tucked my chin down and pulled the throw blanket over my body more tightly. I was set to deliver Naomi's dress to her in less than an hour, but I had no motivation to do it. If Newt said anything at all, it would be me taking the lecture for my sister because of my screw-up. It made my brain hurt just thinking about her screaming at Amber but smacking my face.

Yes, it was my dumb fault for taking the risk, but I blamed Amber, anyway. This was

all her idea. I could have fallen in love with Newt as myself, and he'd have known it was me the whole time. We could be happy right now, kissing under the mistletoe and sharing eggnog and gingerbread cookies. Instead, we both had broken hearts and he didn't understand at all.

The thought brought tears to my eyes again. They welled up and I sobbed under that blanket for the tenth time, wanting to fall asleep and wake up in May when all of this was just a memory and I was in New York setting up a ritzy shop with my designs and living in a tiny studio apartment that cost me a jillion dollars a month.

Someone knocked on my door and I ignored it, though curiosity made me wonder if it was Derek. I knew it wouldn't be Newt. He'd have answered my calls or sent me a text. He wouldn't have just shown up.

Then I heard keys jingling and sliding into the lock and I knew it was Amber. I sat up abruptly and scooped up the pile of used tissues and started shoving them into my pockets. She and Naomi were great at putting their emotions on blast so everyone knew how they felt, but I much preferred to be private with mine. Even when it came to my twin. Amber would never understand.

The door swung open and she waddled in dragging a few suitcases. She looked flustered and frustrated and dropped things as she did. Her face was screwed up into a stormy expression and she kicked the door shut before leaning back against it and dropping her head onto its cool surface.

"I thought you'd be here tomorrow," I told her, forgetting how she said she could come today. My mind was so scrambled by everything that had happened, I even forgot what day it was.

"It's Saturday, duh." Her snarky reply came with a roll of her eyes before she shed her coat and hung it in the coat closet. She left her keys in her pocket and her shoes by

the door and flopped onto my recliner. "This room is hideous. It gets more nauseating every time I visit." It was evident our styles had never been the same, and I was glad that she didn't visit more often.

I rubbed my eyes and lay back down, not feeling like dealing with her. "You can take the dress. I'm done."

"Yeah, idiot. Of course I'm taking the dress." She huffed out a sigh. "You really messed things up. You're damn lucky Derek took my call and I was able to talk him down. Can you believe he was going to tell Jared? Of all things." Amber sounded exasperated, and it only made me start crying again.

I was happy for her that Derek believed her and that they weren't breaking up, but it just meant I was the only one single for this holiday season. I didn't want to go to Naomi's wedding anymore at all, not even to see her in the dress I'd made. Mom and Dad would balk at it, but I just couldn't.

"What the hell is your problem? You didn't even lose anything. I almost destroyed a four-year relationship with the man I love more than anything."

I hated her tone. I hated her plan, and I hated how she was blaming any of this on me. How was I supposed to have known that I'd fall in love with the most incredible man? How was I supposed to just put my feelings and my heart on hold for her? Why hadn't she just told people the truth?

"You should have told Derek from the beginning. This would never have happened!" I felt like screaming, but all I could do was sob. My eyes were literal fountains and the ugly crying demanded tissues, and I had used all of them. I dug into my pockets to find one that wasn't really gross and half of them spilled out onto the floor.

"You should have just listened to me and stayed away from him," Amber blurted out,

and I winced. I was done with being angry and shouting and telling her she was wrong. My heart hurt so badly, I just wanted to be alone. She was never going to comfort me. I was the only person who even cared how much I had done for her, what I tried to do for her, anyway. I lay there and sobbed until my body shook, and she railed on me for a few more minutes.

Things got quiet and I stood and let the rest of the tissues fall from my pockets to the floor, then gathered up the blanket and went to my room, leaving my phone. Newt was the only one I'd even want to talk to now, and he wasn't going to call me, anyway.

I curled up in bed and left the light off, ready to go back to sleep if sleep would come. A few minutes later, Amber walked into my room and turned on my bedside light. I felt the bed shake and then strangely, I felt her curl up next to me and she wrapped her arms around me.

"I'm so sorry, Jade." Her words felt foreign, like eating ice cream in winter, or cocoa in July. They weren't unpleasant, but they went against the grain. I didn't reply. I just let her talk.

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 8:00 am

"I should have done what you said from the beginning, and I'm sorry I shouted at you and took any of this out on you." Her arms tightened, and I cried a little harder. It was too little, too late. If she'd just have let me tell Newt weeks ago, I could be with him. I'd have him now.

"You really love him, don't you?"

The soft question helped my heart grow still. It was a blanket in the cold of night that wrapped around my heart and brought comfort. Of course the reason it hurt so badly was because I was so deeply in love with him. I nodded but I didn't speak, and Amber squeezed harder. We weren't like this—weren't the type to be lovey-dovey or super affectionate with each other. It was like she demanded to break all stereotypes of twins with me because Mom had pushed them so hard. But here we were, being real sisters for a change.

"I'm gonna try to fix this, Jayjay. I don't know what type of guy Newt is or if he will even care if I apologize, but I don't want my baby sister to be hurting like this."

I winced, hating when she called me that. "It was two fucking minutes," I grumbled, and she snickered.

"See, you're already feeling more like yourself."

"I hate you," I told her, but I didn't mean it. I knew all she wanted was to be successful at her schooling while being there for her best friend. If I hadn't believed she had the best intentions, I never would have agreed to help her out.

"I love you," she whispered, and then she withdrew. I heard her leave the bedroom. Then I heard some rustling in the other room, then the closet door open and shut, then the front door. When the house was silent, I pulled the blanket around me more snugly and closed my eyes.

Amber—the real Amber this time—was off to deliver a dress, and I was here feeling sorry for myself. I hoped sleep would come. If not, I'd resort to a stiff drink, or three. I didn't figure Newt would look at her twice, but I did fully expect Naomi to understand, even if she wasn't happy or didn't laugh like she could. I knew their friendship would be fine. I just didn't know if my heart would be.

24

NEWT

Dad's old pickup truck bumped along the fresh coat of ice on the roads from last night's storm. Naomi beckoned me again, this time after having been told off by Jared for backing out of the ceremony. I felt awful, but I didn't see what the big deal was. They had the other four attendants and if Naomi was smart, she'd have cut Amber off too.

When I pulled up in front of Naomi's place, I didn't want to get out. I figured she'd pull the little sister card and try to force me to still be a part of the ceremony. I loved her, but she was lucky I was even willing to agree to come to it after what happened. I'd have to tolerate Amber, but it would be from a distance, not up close and personal like it would have been. I shut off the truck and sat there staring at the house. I wanted to just turn it back on and keep driving until I was in Chicago.

The truck cooled off substantially and I began to get cold too. I had to face up to Naomi's frustration with me and pray she understood. She knew what my ex had done to me and she knew how it affected me. It should have been obvious to her how I'd

react to a situation like this, whether or not she understood how much it hurt me. I slid out of the truck and shut the door, then headed up the walk.

Naomi met me at the door but didn't say much as I tracked snow in on my shoes. This time, I kicked them off and shrugged out of my coat. She hung my coat on the back of a chair and stood with her arms crossed over her stomach as if she were waiting for me to say something. I was told to come here. It wasn't like I wanted to come. I stood staring at her blankly, waiting for the lecture to start.

"How are you feeling?" Her thoughtful question came with a look of concern. The way her hair swept down over her eyes partially and the fact that she had no makeup on surprised me. Naomi was the epitome of class and style. She never let herself be seen like this by anyone, except maybe Amber. The only time I ever saw her without hair and makeup was when I surprised her like yesterday morning.

"I'm feeling like someone I trusted and cared about lied to me after knowing what happened to me in my past..." I crammed my hands into my pockets and stalked forward into her living room. It was a bit more put-together today. Most of the decorations had been moved out of the room, probably to the hall where I was supposed to have gone last night to help decorate. The fact that I didn't show up must've been the clue to Jared that I wasn't going to be the best man anymore.

Naomi followed me to the couch where we both sat down. She had cleaned up quite a bit, and I figured she was having someone over today. This was more her style, to make sure she made herself presentable and her house hospitable. Probably a learned trait from Mom.

"I know what you think, Newt, but I promise you, Amber would never cheat on Derek. There has to be a reasonable explanation for all of this." Naomi tried to lay her head on my shoulder, but I shrugged it off and curled my hands into fists in my pockets. She was wrong. The sex Amber and I had was very much real, and the

connection I felt was so tangible I could sense the frayed ends of it floating in the wind where she was supposed to be.

"I know you're trying to help, but it's not helping. Is this why you made me come over? You want to convince me that I'm wrong?" I shouldn't have been angry with her because she knew nothing about it, but all the frustration and hurt feelings I had toward Amber were piling up and it just started pouring out at my sister.

"No, Newt, I promise, I wasn't trying to say you were wrong. I just know Amber, and if she says there is a logical explanation, then there is." Naomi sat up and pulled her knee up onto the couch as she turned to face me. "I talked with her and she's on her way over. I want you to?—"

"No," I told her as I pulled my hands out of my pockets and stood up abruptly. "I'm not talking to her. You set me up. You just wanted me to be here so you could corner me into listening to her." I stormed over to the door and shoved my feet into my shoes before reaching for my coat, but I was too late. The doorbell rang as my coat was dangling from my hand. "Dammit, Naomi."

"Please, Newt. Just stay here. You don't have to have some major sit down or anything. Just hang out while I try on the dress, and maybe you'll see that I'm not wrong."

Anger pulsed through my veins as Naomi opened the door and stood aside. "Hey, Mav," she chirped happily as if we hadn't just been bickering. "Come on in."

My entire body was one tight string ready to snap at any second. I stepped back with my coat still in my hands and watched Amber carry the dress bag in. This should have been an ecstatic experience for my sister full of joy and laughter. But she stood with her back to me, hand on the doorknob, and her shoulders were slumped. I couldn't help but feel like I had played a role in ruining this moment for her.

Now I would feel foolish trying to sneak out without saying anything, and I'd already lost enough of my dignity. I wasn't going to give her the satisfaction of knowing how much this was affecting me. I coolly put my coat back on the chair I'd taken it off and leaned against the wall, watching them interact.

"Jade finished up things last night..." Amber draped the dress over the back of a chair, which was odd to me. She always seemed so particular when I visited their apartment. The dress was never just lying somewhere. It was always on the dress rack or hanging up somewhere, at least after Jade had it tacked together.

"I can't wait to try it on again." Naomi's voice was flat and dull, not the usual squealing of delight or jumping and clapping. She was hurting, and if Amber couldn't see that, I wondered if she even cared at all—about Naomi or me, or anyone other than herself, for that matter.

"Let's go put this on you," she told Naomi, but her eyes flicked to meet mine and there was something distant about the expression on her face. Hollow and cold. I didn't see the expressiveness or the connection we had, and I wondered if I'd been reading into things too far all along.

"Sure," Naomi said, and she glanced over her shoulder at me. "Please don't leave. Beer's in the fridge," she said.

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 8:00 am

I couldn't promise her I wouldn't leave, but I did meander toward the fridge as they crated the dress into her bedroom and shut the door. As I cracked a beer open, I thought about the interaction. It was Amber, the same dark hair, full, pouty lips, stormy eyes. But she seemed indifferent and absent, not the least bit interested in me, or even nervous. It felt like she was a sociopath or something, unable to feel the emotion she should have been feeling, which was remorse or guilt.

Sitting on a chair and slurping the beer down, I listened to the interaction behind doors. At first it sounded a bit heated, though I couldn't make out any of the words they were saying. I was curious and wanted to eavesdrop, but I stayed planted on the chair. If I heard something that upset me, I'd just lose my cool and my ability to be here for Naomi. She asked me to stay and I would, so long as Amber kept her focus on my sister and didn't try to talk to me.

Then I heard laughter and joking. A bit of squealing seeped out of the room and frustrated me. Whatever Amber was telling her had shifted her mood entirely. Naomi was sounding like herself again, and it meant things were going forward as she originally planned, except I still had no intention of doing it. I couldn't walk that woman down any aisle, even if it was just in support of my sister. I stood and dropped the beer bottle in the trash on my way to the door, but the bedroom popped open and Amber walked out.

"Newt, can we talk?" Even her voice sounded different, the way she enunciated my name.

I closed my eyes for a second and then opened them slowly and sighed. I was hoping to just leave town and not have to have this discussion—or argument. That was yet to

be determined.

"You have five minutes," I said coldly as I walked toward my coat. She was lucky I was even giving her this much attention. I should have left and not even cared to listen to their makeup session.

"Newt, I need to explain something to you, and I'm not sure if you're going to fully understand, but I'm not who you think I am."

I rolled my eyes but my back was to her, so I knew she didn't see me. "You knew the entire time I was sleeping with you and we were sneaking around that my ex cheated on me." I turned and slid my coat on my arms and up over my shoulders. She had a look of sympathy but not of remorse, which only infuriated me. I wanted her out of my face.

"Newt, please let me explain." She stood between me and the door, and I wasn't about to just put my hands on her the way that douchebag had done the other day. I was a gentleman.

"Please move."

"Newt, you're right." Her confession stopped me in my tracks even as I tried to walk around her. I stopped and caught her gaze. "I did know your ex cheated on you. Naomi told me several times over the years how hurt you were. She worries about you."

"Then how could you?—"

"Stop. Please." Her tone was firm and pleading, and her eyes offered only compassion, still not the remorse she should have had. I stood still but I looked away. I couldn't bear to look at her one more second. "I knew that, but Jade didn't."

Jade? What did her sister have to do with any of this? She was a hermit, isolating herself from everyone this whole time. She wasn't so close with Naomi that she got to be a part of the wedding, and if it weren't for the dress shop having nothing my sister liked, Jade wouldn't have been involved at all.

I didn't even want to hear Amber talking, but now I was curious what her excuse would be, so I said, "Go on."

"Okay, this is probably going to upset you, but I need you to hear me out." Amber sighed and continued. "I was so swamped with my finals and my thesis that I didn't have time to be a part of Naomi's plans. I didn't want to let her down because I care too much about her, but I just couldn't come home. I made Jade promise to pretend to be me this whole time. You've been hanging out with my twin, not me."

"That's insane. I don't believe you." My throat constricted, and I forced myself to look at her again. I could see she really believed this spiel, and that was probably why Naomi was laughing. She thought this was funny, some prank they played, while she was really just lying to me.

"I don't expect you to take my word for it. I just want you to talk to Jade. She's really hurting." Amber pressed her lips into a thin line.

"But she has rainbow hair and?—"

"Hair dye and makeup, Newt. This isn't the first time we've done a twin swap..."

The words "Merry Mix-Up" stuck in my head. I stared at her feeling even more gutted than before. I dropped her off at her mother's house calling her Amber and even her mother corrected that. She called the woman I went sledding with Jade and I never thought twice. "But..." I muttered, and Amber, or Jade, or whoever the hell I was speaking with, touched my hand.

"I promise you, if you can believe what I'm saying and move past this, there is a woman who is feeling wretched and hating herself, and she loves you so much."

I backed away and barked, "Get out of my way." And without even stopping to say goodbye to my sister, I stormed out. It was too much. My brain was on overload. Why the hell would anyone do something like that to another person? Did they not think anyone would find out?

I stomped to the truck and slammed the door, then started it up and squealed my tires pulling out. It felt like one slap after another, and now I didn't even know what to think. If I believed that, then I had completely overreacted, but it was still an affront. Jade? I was seeing the wild child? I fell in love with the rainbow-haired one?

And I still loved her even though I was so furious. There was just no way I could ever trust any of this. I had to be alone for a while and think.

25

JADE

December 22

It was dark outside again, but I was thankful it wasn't snowing again. No snow was forecast between now and Christmas, but it would still be white. Temps were forecast to be below freezing through New Year's. I sat in my living room hunched over my design desk with a few designs spread out on it. They were spring formals I hoped to piece together and put in a local shop for local promgoers, but my mind wasn't able to focus on them.

The chill just outside the window in front of me left frost on the glass and ice in my heart. Newt had refused all phone calls or messages from me since Friday morning,

and I didn't blame him. Even when Amber got home, he hadn't responded. I thought Amber would have somehow gotten through to him, but he remained uncommunicative, even after Naomi had forgiven Amber and they were happy as clams again.

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 8:00 am

I sat brooding, though, wondering how everything always seemed to work out for my sister and never for me. Sure, Derek called to apologize. I let it go to voicemail and listened minutes after he left the message, but I didn't even so much as text him back. He was a total jerk and I was sure Amber had words for him. But they'd work things out and be fine, and I'd struggle to dig myself out of this pit of self-loathing after a while.

I picked up my pencil and made a few marks on the design, tweaking the shoulders of the retro 80s-style puffy shoulders and decided I hated the look so I crumpled the paper up and threw it. It was the fifth one I'd done that to tonight. Nothing looked good. Nothing felt good, and nothing perked me up. Not even the chai latte Amber brought by when she picked up the dress yesterday.

Tonight, they were all celebrating and going through the motions of the rehearsal. They'd walk down the aisle and pair off for the recessional. They'd eat dinner and enjoy a few drinks, and I wondered how that interaction was going between Newt and the real Amber. I wondered if anyone told him the whole story or if he had the same animosity toward her that he had toward me.

I couldn't stop obsessing over it, and it was ruining my mental state. I dropped my pencil on the desk and went to the kitchen. I had some wine somewhere that I'd bought a long time ago, yet unopened. I just had to find it. I dug through the few cupboards and remembered I'd put it in the pantry when I was cleaning things out last week. So I went there to open it.

If Amber could go out drinking with her friends after all of that, I could drown myself in wine and hope I woke up with amnesia or something. I found the wine behind a

box of cereal and went straight to the cupboard for a glass. My wine opener was lost—go figure—and I had to search for it too. By the time I got the damn thing open and a few ounces in my cup, my phone was ringing.

"Goddammit," I cursed and set the glass down. It was already nine p.m. and I'd been torturing myself all evening. I deserved a break, but Amber made me swear I'd be available in case they had issues. I couldn't even see why they'd have issues, but I promised her, nonetheless.

Leaving the wine on the counter in the kitchen, I walked back to the desk where my phone had Amber's name and face lit up on caller ID. It was late enough that I figured if they had any issues, it would have been before now, but I picked up my phone and swiped to answer anyway.

"Yeah, it's me," I grumbled, and Amber instantly sounded like her dramatic, frantic self.

"Oh em gee, Jade. We have a dress emergency. You need to get over here now."

I rolled my eyes. She made it sound like the end of the world when in reality, it was probably nothing more than a slipped seam or a too-long strap. "What is it? Maybe I can tell you how to fix it."

She was supposed to be able to handle all of this now. I wasn't supposed to be there. I wasn't even invited. As a person only attending the ceremony—which wasn't likely now—I had no interest in being a part of their little rehearsal.

"Gosh, Jade, you don't have to be snippy. We just need you. It's like a strappy ribbony thing. And I'm not a seamstress." Amber's usual snarky twin routine was in full force, and I found myself scowling. I didn't want to go, but if there was a problem with the dress, I had to. Naomi's wedding was tomorrow and tonight was the only time I had

to make any quick fixes.

"Fine. I'll come. Give me twenty minutes." I hung up without any further explanation and sighed hard. That glass of wine would have to wait. Duty beckoned me to the one place on Earth I did not want to be. But maybe I could slip in and out and I wouldn't have to see Newt.

Not only would I feel deeply ashamed and embarrassed, but I just couldn't handle the pain in his eyes. When he stormed off from the apartment last week, it took the air right out of my lungs. He wasn't supposed to find out like that. I was supposed to be able to tell him, but I kept Amber's confidence and now it was over. He'd never forgive me.

I put on a pair of black jeans and a red sweater. I wanted my crazy hair back but I hadn't even had the motivation to go to the pharmacy to get hair dye or bleach, so I still looked exactly like my twin, other than the rainbow shoes I wore. Those were something she'd never wear, so I chose them on purpose to make a point to her and myself. I was never doing a twin swap with her again.

Twenty-five minutes after I hung up on her, I was standing outside the lodge. There were only a few cars here—Amber's, Derek's, Newt's father's truck, and mine. It meant most of the wedding party had left, and probably, Naomi had ridden here with Amber or her brother. My shoulders sagged at the idea of walking in and seeing him, but I had to do this. I carried my seamstress tools in my messenger bag that hung on my shoulder cross-body and headed for the building.

When I walked in, everything was dark. I called out for anyone, but no one responded. I knew Amber was here somewhere, but not which room they were in currently. So I walked to the main hall, which was dim. Almost all of the lights were off, except for one near the very front of the room over the podium behind which the officiant would stand, or so I assumed. I stood near the entrance feeling lost. I thought

about getting my phone out, but when I heard a door shut behind me, I figured it was Amber coming to look for me. I ducked back through the double doors of the main hall and almost slammed right into Newt's chest.

"Whoa," he chided, grabbing both my arms to steady me. "Slow down."

"You're not Amber..." I blurted out, stupidly. Obviously, he knew he wasn't Amber.

"Neither are you..." His voice was gravelly and low, carrying an undertone of pain, though the light was so dim, I almost couldn't see his expression. I felt the sting of the words, though, and my head dropped.

"Where is everyone?" My fingers curled around the messenger bag's strap and I felt a lump forming in my throat. It was good that I couldn't see his face. I'd have been crying already. Crying because I wanted so badly to tell him I was sorry and for it to mean something, and also because I hated that I'd hurt him.

"Not here. I think they set us up." Newt didn't sound very upset about that, but I was fuming. I took out my phone and messaged Amber three times in a row demanding that she tell me what was going on.

"They're jerks. I'm sorry..." I typed so fast, I didn't even know what I was saying until Newt reached out and took my phone. He locked it and then handed it back. "How do you know they're gone?"

"I came in, did what I had to do, then left before the meal. That was three hours ago." His fingers brushed mine as I took the phone from him, and I raised my chin so I could look him in the eye.

"Why are you here, then?" I was confused. If he left hours ago, he had no purpose in being here right now. And if they were all gone, neither did I.

"They told me it was a ring emergency." His explanation threw up all sorts of red flags. Amber had set me up. He was right.

"They told me a dress emergency." I bit my lip and took a step back. "I'm sorry, Newt. We don't have to do this. You should just go home. You should enjoy Naomi's wedding tomorrow, too. I won't be there." I turned with my bag clutched in one hand and my phone in the other and started for the door, but his words stopped me mid-stride.

"Tell me what happened... In your words." He paused as I stood staring out over the parking lot where my car was thirty yards away and still warm. I could bolt, vanish so I didn't have to do this, but he was giving me a chance to explain. How could I hurt him again?

Looking down at my feet, I turned toward him. "What happened?"

"Yeah, from your point of view. Because I heard your sister's story and I just want to make sure she told me the truth." He moved closer, and my body grew stiff. Never in a million years did I think Newt would hurt me physically. But it wasn't physical pain I feared.

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 8:00 am

I fumbled with my words for a few minutes, not making sense, and finally, in an exasperated huff, I was able to spit it out. "Amber is my twin, obviously. She is Naomi's best friend and was supposed to be here doing all the things herself. I promise you, if she'd been the one here, you never would have done whatwedid." I cringed at my own stupid explanation. "She's literally so straightlaced, it's not funny. She has a boyfriend and she'd never cheat on him. The whole time, I was pretending to be her because of her schooling."

So many lies were told, lies upon lies. They all had to come out now, and I couldn't even begin to tell him how sorry I was or which things we shared were lies and which were the truth. I tried my best to lay it all out, but my heart was too heavy and I wound up crying.

"So it's true, then." Newt took a few steps closer.

"I swear I didn't want to do any of it, but I love my sister, and I care about Naomi's big day, even if I don't even like her as a friend." As I said it I hoped he didn't take offense at that. He took another step closer to me, and my body started to get stiff on me. I didn't want him closer. It was going to hurt. I was going to cry harder.

"That's why you didn't want to go out into the snow?" he asked, and I wilted.

"Yeah..." Amber loved the snow. I hated it. I wished it would never snow again.

"And that's why you loved the chocolate cake and lied to her about strawberry. Because Amber would have chosen strawberry." A few steps closer, and he was almost able to touch me.

"Yes." I didn't back away, but I did look away. I couldn't take it. My heart felt so raw. Admitting to all these lies felt like someone was pouring acid in my chest.

"And it's why your mom called you by your name and I corrected her to say your name was Amber. She called it a 'merry mix-up'." Newt stood in front of me, and all I could do was stare at the tops of his boots, damp from snow.

"Yes." Tears sluiced down my cheeks and I sniffled. The nail in the coffin hurt worse than anything else.

"And you led me to believe you were Amber just so you could keep your sister happy, but you didn't tell me the truth. Even though we were so intimate, so much that I fell in love with you."

My skin bristled, goosebumps forming on my arms. He fell in love with me? I raised my chin and looked him in the eye and nodded as I bit my lower lip so hard I tasted blood. The copper hints on my tongue were the only evidence, though. I couldn't feel the pain. My heart hurt too bad to let my physical body feel pain.

"Newt," I squeaked, but he didn't look angry.

"You know what I think?" he asked, and I got a faint hint of peppermint on his breath. He'd had eggnog, and probably a good thing. It probably helped him calm down.

"What?" I asked, sniffing again. I used the back of my hand to wipe away my tears.

"I think we need to start over." He held out his hand. "It's so nice to finally meet you, Jade. My name is Newt Phillips. Naomi's older, very available brother."

I stared at his hand as tears streamed now. What in the Christmas magic was

happening? With a shaking hand, I took his, and his grip was warm and so soothing, I almost clung to him.

"I'm Jade Lyons, Amber's twin. It's so very, very nice to meet you, Newt."

He didn't hug me or try to kiss me. It wasn't a moment like that. There were too many questions left, and unresolved anger, but it was a start, and after we talked for twenty more minutes, he walked me to my car and went home in his dad's truck—but only after I promised to go to the wedding.

26

NEWT

Christmas Eve

"And while I'm standing in for Jared's best friend who can't be here because he's deployed overseas, I don't know as much about the groom as maybe I should, but I will say this. Jared loves my sister very much, and the two of them have a great support system. I've had an interesting journey this past month getting to know everyone a little better." My eyes scanned the crowded tables yet again for the one face I wanted to see. I hadn't seen her all night.

"And I am honored to be a part of this union. Jared and Naomi," I said, turning my attention back to my sister and her new husband, "I hope your connection is always strong, your love is always fierce, and the sex is incredible." The crowd burst into laughter as everyone clinked their cups against one another's.

I lowered back into my seat, frustrated that I still hadn't seen Jade. She promised me she'd be here, and while I didn't fully expect her to after last night's interaction, I hoped she would keep that promise. It was tense and awkward, and we only spoke

about why things went down the way they did and how she could have done things differently to mitigate the damage. Afterward, I felt like a fool for not having asked her to just have a cup of cocoa with me or something.

Tonight, surrounded by poinsettias and festive Christmas trees, it felt so depressing to be alone. This entire month, I had planned this evening to be magical for us. I intended to tell Naomi right before she jetted off to her honeymoon that I had finally found someone. As it was, Derek had been made an honorary member of the wedding party so I didn't even have someone to dance with when the wedding party had the second dance, following Naomi and Jared's first dance.

I sipped my champagne and listened to Amber give her speech about my sister. It was spot on—filled with stories of their teenage years, and even the twin switch they'd done so that Naomi could be happy leading up to tonight. Naomi totally laughed it off and Amber apologized to the rest of the wedding party for "punking them", but the bride found it hilarious.

I decided it was a bit funny, though my heart was still a mangled mess. After a long heart-to-heart with Naomi, I chose to be a part of all of this. I saw past the cruelty of what had been done to my heart for what the girls really tried to do, and I knew they were never malicious. In fact, the way they did that for Naomi was sweet. I was just collateral damage they never planned on.

Jade probably never imagined that I'd hit on her or be so interested. When I saw that wild hair, I thought the personality behind it would have been too out of the box for me. But wrapped in a different package, I saw how beautiful she was. I had wrongly judged her based on her appearance, and I was glad when I thought I got the calm twin to flirt with. Man, was I ever an ass.

When the speeches were done, including one from Jared's best friend via video conference, Jared and Naomi cut their cake. I still didn't see Jade anywhere, not

dressed like Amber, and notwith wild hair either. They did their first dance, then announced the wedding party had to come to the dance floor, and I didn't know what to do. I stayed seated at the table until Naomi marched over and poked me in the ribs.

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 8:00 am

"You're supposed to be on the dance floor," she hissed in her bridezilla way.

"There's no one for me to dance with." My staunch complaint earned me another jab to the ribs as the music started. They chose Chicago's *You're the Inspiration* as the song we'd dance to, and I felt dumb standing to go to the dancefloor with no dance partner.

But the wedding party all paired up and there was one person standing alone—long, dark hair streaked with a vibrant purple, a deep emerald dress that didn't quite match the other women's dresses, and full ruby lips, pressed into a thin line.

"What?" I asked Naomi, and she grinned.

"I made Jade an honorary member of the wedding party for just this dance... Like Derek." She pushed the small of my back. "Go get the girl, Newt." I swore I saw tears in her eyes as she said it.

"Why, though?" I asked my sister, who was supposed to be celebrating her special day, not worrying about me.

"Because you love her, idiot. Now go dance with her." Naomi pushed me again, and I could have hugged her.

Clearing my throat, I nodded at Naomi and pecked her on the cheek as I buttoned my suit coat and then strolled out to the dance floor where Jade stood waiting with rosy cheeks.

"Hi," she mumbled, and I smiled so brightly I thought it might blind her.

"Hey," I said. "Uh, can I have this dance?" When everything went down, I thought my plans for tonight were ruined. I had booked a room at this lodge hoping to convince her to stay with me, but that was when I thought she was the maid of honor named Amber. I felt like I knew nothing about her, but I loved her so deeply at the same time.

"Of course," Jade said, and she waited for me to pull her close. The satin of her green gown tangled between our legs, but her body felt right pressed against mine. She draped her arms over my shoulders as the song played out and we swayed to the music.

"So, Naomi planned this? Have you been here the whole time?" I studied the purple in her hair and decided I liked it very much. The shade wasn't flashy or over the top, and it highlighted the gold flecks in her brown eyes.

"I've been lurking."

Jade smelled amazing, like vanilla and cinnamon, as if she'd rolled in a batch of Christmas cookies right before she walked up here. I breathed her in so deep, I could have whisked her right off this dance floor to my private room I had completely forgotten to cancel on when I was so upset. I was glad I forgot.

"Newt, I'm?—"

"I'm sorry, Jade."

We both spoke at the same time and she smiled. "Why are you sorry?"

Just having her against me felt healing. I never wanted the song to end. I'd done so

much thinking over the past four days, and I knew I couldn't let her go. With as much chaos and upheaval as their trickery caused, I should have just washed my hands of her, but she was so much more than any woman I'd ever met. More in every way—her personality, her charm, her intelligence, the way she made me laugh, and most of all, the way I felt like making every one of her dreams come true.

"I'm sorry for my reaction." I swayed time with the song and tightened my grip on her. "I should have given you a chance to explain, and I should have believed you when you said you'd never hurt me."

Jade's eyes brimmed with tears and I hated that she'd cry again, unless they were happy tears. She deserved only good things. She got caught between her sister's plan and the attraction she had to me, and she'd done her best to protect everyone. I saw that now, though it did hurt when I first learned about it.

"I'm sorry too. I should have told you sooner. You didn't deserve that. Amber told me what your ex did to you, and I felt so awful. I never meant to make you think I'd cheat on you. The whole situation was messy and complicated, and I just got carried away. I liked being with you so much..." Jade blinked, and a tear rolled down her cheek. I wiped it away with my thumb and made a mental note of where on the dancefloor we were.

Hanging from the center of the room, under the cluster of holly plants, was a single sprig of mistletoe. I had been maneuvering us closer and closer without her knowing it, and we were almost there.

"I think what you did for my sister and yours was such a sweet thing to do. You must have been so stressed out. Jade, I'm sorry you felt like you couldn't tell me. And I know it wasn't your decision, but I could have been a bit easier on you in that regard." I bit the end of my tongue as I remembered how many times I'd playfully insulted her as a person thinking I was speaking to Amber and not her.

"It's okay..." Jade laid her head on my chest and I swung her around again, finally positioning us under the mistletoe.

Ever since last night, I'd been waiting for this moment. I had hoped to catch her much earlier in the evening, perhaps at any of the doorways to this main hall where Naomi and Jared put mistletoe, or maybe during a common dance. Right now, every eye in this place was on the wedding party, including us, as we danced to the music. I didn't care. I would profess my love for this woman to the ends of the earth.

"Did you mean it?" she asked, turning her chin back up so our eyes met again.

"Mean what?" I asked, very aware of how we were expected to kiss, and I hoped she'd look up and see it too.

"When you said you loved me."

My heart warmed, and I looked straight up at the mistletoe as she stared at my face. Then I looked back down to see her eyes locked on the sight overhead.

"I meant it with every beat of my heart, every breath in my lungs, every ounce of my soul."

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 8:00 am

Jade's gaze returned to my face again, and I saw more tears in her eyes, but I didn't even give her a chance to let them out. I covered her mouth with mine and kissed her hard, searching her mouth with my tongue then biting her lower lip as I pulled away.

"I..." She looked pleasantly surprised and blinked back the rest of her tears.

"I mean it." I kissed her again, simultaneously pulling her against my body hard. I didn't care who was watching or what they'd say. I was in love and I needed her to know it. When I pulled away, I said, "I don't care what happened yesterday or the day before that. I need you in my life, Jade."

When I said her name and she smiled, I realized yet another thing. She hated me saying "Amber" when we were having sex because it made her feel guilty or awkward. My God, I couldn't wait to grunt her name while I was fucking her.

"I got a room. I planned it more than a week ago. I thought—" I cut myself off, not wanting to rehash any negative things right now. "I want you to stay with me tonight."

The music was coming to an end, and I wanted nothing more than to skip the rest of the reception and head straight to the room, but she politely backed away and bowed to me. "After cake," she said, then she pulled me off the dance floor toward the cake table and I followed with a massive grin.

I thought I had my life planned out—build my firm in Chicago and then move to New York to trade stocks. I thought eventually, along the way, I'd meet someone traveling my same direction and make a life with them too, but I never expected it to bring me

back to Danville and my roots. But there was something about Jade that made me want to rearrange everything I had planned just to be with her. I'd throw it all away if she asked me.

She was the one. Of that I was certain.

27

JADE

The music continued to play, but Newt and I found a quiet table away from the noise and lights. He picked a slice of chocolate cake for each of us and two forks, and we watched what was going on more than anything else. My body was antsy, nervous about being alone with him as if it were the first time we'd spend a night together. Obviously, it wasn't, but my nervous system was on overload for some reason.

Now I had no anonymity. There was no persona to hide behind. Of course, we'd had sex before, but only when he thought I was my twin. Now I was me, well and truly, right down to the purple streak in my hair which he didn't seem to notice or point out. Following some of his comments over the past few weeks, I wondered if he was riding the skirt tail of a fantasy he dreamed up about Amber or if he was really willing to give me a shot. He said he loved me, but I had doubts.

"It's good," he shouted over the din of music, and rather than make my voice hoarse, I shoved a bite of cake into my mouth and nodded. It was delicious, and I was glad Naomi and Jared had chosen to make at least some of the cake chocolate. It melted in my mouth and served as a good distraction from the way Newt's knees seemed to bump into mine on purpose under the table.

Amber was having a good time too, dancing with the rest of the wedding party and Derek. Jared and Derek weren't particularly close, but it would have made more sense

for them to pick him over Newt. He fit right in while Newt stuck out like a sore thumb because of his age and his personality. Just like I would have.

"Want to get out of here?" he asked, shouting again, but I shook my head. I had to talk to Amber before I did anything with Newt. I knew what my voicemail message said to him, and I knew what I'd told him last night when I explained it all. But I didn't know what Amber told him or how she'd feel about my really dating Newt.

"Gotta find my sis," I yelled, and then I stood. He grinned at me as I shoved the last bite of cake into my mouth and wiped with a napkin before sashaying off to find Amber.

She was flailing around to some upbeat tune and almost elbowed me as I approached, but I managed to grab her wrist and pull her away. She shouted something at Naomi but allowed me to lead her to the bathroom where the music was muffled and normal volume speech was possible.

"What is it?" she asked, and she turned to check out her appearance in the mirror. Red was a good color for her, though I always thought she looked better in green like me.

"Uh... I just need to..." I bit my lip. "I wanted to see if..." Why was it so difficult to talk to her now? After being around her friends posing as her, I learned a lot about what they thought of me, and even what she allowed, too. Maybe she even thought some of those things, and while I shouldn't have let it get to me, it had.

"Jade, what's wrong?" Amber turned to focus on me instead of her own appearance, and I rubbed my face.

"Newt said he loves me," I blurted out. "He got us a room at the lodge tonight, which was probably meant for 'Amber', but I'm not Amber and I'm super nervous and?—"

"Babe," Amber said, taking my hands. "Don't overthink this."

I opened my eyes and let my gaze settle on her serious expression. Self-doubt had become my first reaction now, and I didn't know how to change that. How could everyone like me better as her? What if Newt felt the same way?

"Amber, none of your friends like me. I had to listen to all of them rag on how awful your twin is. They mocked me and criticized different things about me. But when I was you, they loved me. They thought the world of me. Newt only knows me as you..." My lip quivered, but I didn't feel like crying. I felt like vomiting.

"Yeah, I understand that..." She let her shoulders drop. "I feel like maybe I didn't help that much. We're sisters and we bicker, and they're my friends so I complain to them. They used to just tell me that I was dumb, that I had a sister to do everything with, and they'd shoot me down. Now I guess they just got used to me complaining, but I swear I don't tolerate it anymore. I shut them up and defend you."

"Now, like after the twin swap?" I asked, feeling degraded. My own sister had to defend my honor. What sort of person did that make me or her?

"No, like the last few years." She leaned against the wall and sighed. "I'm really proud of you for doing what you're doing. That dress is amazing, Jayjay. Even Naomi admits it. You have a gift, and you're doing what you are created for. You make gorgeous clothes."

The compliment started to thaw that icy part of my heart that wanted to be angry with her. I totally understood how she needed someone to complain to. If I had friends, I'd complain about her from time to time too.

"Newt got to know you. He just thought your name was something different." She smiled and squeezed my hand. "Just trust that he will love you as much as I love

you." Amber hooked her pinky around mine, and I took a deep breath to relax.

She was right. All I could do was be myself and hope that was good enough. I never hid my true personality. I only hid my true passions, which he knew about anyway. Any time he asked me questions about "my twin, Jade", I gave him straight answers.

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 8:00 am

"Okay," I sighed, and she hugged me.

"Go have fun. I gotta get back to dancing." Amber gave me a peck on the cheek and darted out the door. I was left in the bathroom staring at my reflection in the mirror. The purple in my hair was so subtle, but very pretty. Maybe I didn't have to be as out of the box of normal if Newt was averse. I could get used to being more traditional.

With a bit more confidence, I returned to the party. We had a few more dances then sent Naomi and Jared off to their honeymoon with some bubbles and a lot of cheering, and Newt swept me away to the elevators where a few other folks were clustered and ready to retire to their rooms. I never said goodnight to Amber or the others, but with Newt's hand in the small of my back, I was too jittery to care.

The bell dinged and the doors for the second floor opened, and Newt led the way. His tux fit so well it could have been a glove, though it looked simpler than his normal business suits. And his hair was slicked back, not loose and tumbling around his face like normal. I sort of liked it.

When he held his wallet in front of the lock, it turned green and clicked and he opened the door.

"After you," he said, and butterflies took flight in my chest.

I walked into the room to find it absolutely full to the brim with roses and poinsettias. Mistletoe hung from multiple places on the ceiling and in each doorway. I grinned as I turned around and thought I'd get a comment out about his creating a sex lair, but Newt was already on me, hands on my waist, lips on mine, backing me toward the

bed.

"Mmm, don't you want to talk?" I asked, but I wasn't disappointed when he grunted.

"No, I need you, Jade. I've felt so many things the past four days, things I hated, things I loved. And the one thing I wanted to feel more than anything was this connection again." His lips covered mine, and I let him steal kiss after kiss. My arms hung around his neck, and his hands held me close.

"So it's not weird? I mean..." I didn't know why I felt the urge to talk it through. That niggling insecurity ate at me. I needed to know that we could just pick up where we left off, but I wanted to hear him say it. He seemed eager to just prove it with action, but those words were important to me.

His fingers found the zipper pull for my dress, and I heard it more than felt the zipper open. The strapless dress parted in the back, allowing his hands to find my skin. The sensation was welcome and comforting. I kissed him hard, but his mouth moved away from mine, trailing kisses down my neck to my collar bone.

"I mean, you thought you were having sex with Amber and?—"

His teeth sunk into my pulse point before he growled and it cut me off. I sucked in a breath when his hands shoved the dress down and it dangled around my hips.

"Amber, Maverick, Jade... It never mattered to me what your name was." Newt stopped and pulled back only slightly. My hands rested on his chest as he looked me in the eyes and made me whimper. "I love you, not a name, not a persona, not some ideal of what could be or could've been. You, Jade. I love your laugh and your smile, and I love the way you love color so much, you wear it like a badge." His lips brushed over mine.

"Your heart is what draws me back. The way I watched you care for my sister was incredible, but even more so now that I know the whole truth. You are an incredible woman, and I want to know everything about you. You." Newt's hands cupped my ribs as his thumbs pressed into my nipples and swirled. I hissed at the action and let my head arch back. The sensation had blood pooling in my groin, making me drip.

"I love you, Newt..." I breathed, and his lips were on mine again.

His kisses weren't slow or gentle. They were frantic and demanding, as if he couldn't get enough of me, either. His hands moved down to my panties nestled beneath the emerald fabric, and with a swift pull, they and my dress met on the floor. Taking my cue, I got to work on his pants. We both breathed heavily, our breaths mingling in the cool air of the room. I managed to free him as he removed the green bowtie and unbuttoned his shirt. With one tug over his shoulder, his shirt and tie joined my dress and panties, and he stepped forward, causing me to topple backward onto the bed with a giggle.

Newt shoved his tux pants down and kicked off his shoes, and I reached for the strap of my black heels to remove them, but his hand caught mine. "Leave them," he said playfully as he stroked his dick.

He crawled on top of me, and I could feel his erection pressing against my center and it made me wetter. Newt kissed my neck, and I squirmed under him, knowing the moment he entered me, I'd be a puddle of goo on the bed. My arms wrapped around his neck as he whispered against my ear, "No more secrets now. Just you and me, raw and vulnerable." He kissed me again, sliding his tongue inside my mouth in a mimic of what I knew was to come.

It. Was. Electric. The way he moved against my tongue, the way his body covered mine, even the way his breath puffed against my skin made my entire body hotter than the sun. His hands cupped my breasts and gently squeezed, thumbs rubbing around

my nipples before he tugged lightly.

I moaned into his mouth, and Newt took it as an invitation to slide his hard length between my folds. His tip teased me, and I arched my hips to meet his. "I need you now," I whimpered.

His thrusts were slow at first, but as our bodies got more acquainted with each other, they increased in speed. His hands moved to my hips as he used them to hold himself up, but I couldn't get enough of his skin. I trailed my nails down his back, and I felt him shudder against me. Newt groaned and altered his pace. It was like he was searching my depths with his cock, hoping to find what made me tick, and my God, did he. His shaft ground against my G-spot so roughly, he had me whimpering.

"Please... oh, God, I'm so close." My body was on the edge, teetering, begging to be pushed over, and Newt knew what to do. His thrusts were so slow but so perfectly positioned that when his thumb pressed into my clit, I was done.

A high-pitched sound escaped my lips as my orgasm washed over me, and my toes curled into the sheets. "Newt!" I cried out as my body shook with the force of my release. Spasms and convulsions shook me so hard, I couldn't breathe or even whimper. My mouth popped open, and my stomach twitched and clenched. My pussy hugged his length tightly as wave after erotic wave of pleasure flooded my senses.

I felt him grow even hotter and thicker inside me, and I knew he was close. Sweat beaded on his forehead, and his jaw clenched. His thrusts now were erratic and hard as he tried to find his own release. But I slowed him, angling my hips and pushing his body back. His eyes met mine in a knowing look. No condom meant babies we weren't ready for.

Newt backed away, and I sat up, stroking his shaft seductively as he did so. When my lips wrapped around his girth, he grunted, and when I started sucking, he moaned. His

hands tangled in my hair and he angled my head so he could watch. I sucked and squeezed and pretty soon, his eyes were squeezed shut, and he was cursing a blue streak.

He came in my mouth grunting, "Jade," and I was surprised by how much he actually came and by how I swooned hearing my name on his lips while he shot his load in my throat. I swallowed it all down. The taste of him, the salt and musk, it was addicting.

Newt slumped over me. The weight of him was comforting, and I ran my fingers through his hair. His heart hammered against his ribs, but mine seemed to be slower than normal, calmer. It was so relaxing, I almost dozed off until he cleared his throat.

"God, you're amazing, you know that?" He tucked strands of my hair around my ear and kissed my forehead.

"I'm surprised you actually think that after everything." I wasn't taking anything for granted, and I hoped I didn't annoy him with my insecurity.

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 8:00 am

"It's because of everything that I think that, Jade." Newt held me tighter, and I curled against his chest.

I never expected him to even want to talk to me again after what I put him through, and here he was, holding me after the most incredible sex of my life. My heart felt so full and my body felt so relaxed.

"You live so far away, though..." I mumbled, thinking of how he'd have to go back to Chicago for his business after the holidays were over. How I'd be stuck here in Danville and he'd be so far away.

"Let's talk about that tomorrow... Okay?" He kissed my forehead and said, "Now, I want to ask you again. I'd like for us to be exclusive, Jade. No other people, just me and you and getting to know one another."

I smiled against his chest and kissed his breastbone. "You aren't hip on sharing." I snickered, and he tickled my side.

"I can share... my cocoa." His fingers dug into my ribs, and I laughed so hard, I thought I'd pee myself before he pulled away. "I meant, just me and you... What do you say?"

I looked up at him and admired the dimple in his chin. "I say yes. I'd love that."

Newt kissed me long and deep, then pulled me into his chest again and covered us with the blanket. My heart finally felt calm and hopeful again. It was Christmas Eve, we were together, and I didn't see any other reason for us to be separated. Not even

Newt's mother, who gave me nasty eyes that morning at breakfast, could say a word. She knew Amber was dating, and I knew she didn't approve. Now everyone would be okay with us, and everything would work out.

I didn't see how I'd be able to survive a long-distance relationship, but I'd make it work. Newt was worth it.

28

NEWT

Christmas Morning

When I woke before either of our alarms, Jade was still sleeping. She looked so peaceful with her hands curled around the edge of the blanket and her hair strewn out over the pillow. There was just enough light coming in from the bathroom door left open after our last romp that I could see the purple streak in her hair and smiled at it. My first impression of her wild side was entirely wrong. I loved that she was so expressive now.

I thought of waking her, of kissing her face and curling her dark hair around her ear to see her face more clearly, but I also thought of how tired she must've been. The last glance at my phone before we dozed off said three a.m. I knew her alarm was set for eight so she could make it to her parents' house for their family breakfast and exchanging of gifts. I wanted her to rest as much as possible.

So I slipped out of bed and found my clothing in a tangled mess by its foot. I dressed quietly and grabbed my phone and charger, shoving them in my pocket. Then I found the little notepad with the lodge logo on it on the desk across the room and a matching pen, and I scrawled a note for Jade when she woke up, asking her to meet me at the park at five for a date. I left the note on my vacant pillow and let myself

out, sure to tell the lodge staff Jade would be checking out around eight thirty.

For pre-dawn in Danville, the town was bright. Every single business and home had lights strung around them, and even bushes were illuminated. The city power bill would be outrageous, but for one glorious night, the world shone with twinkling lights and a message of hope. In the darkness of the world around us, one season can shift your perspective and change your world.

I slipped into Mom and Dad's house before seven, thinking they'd still be sleeping, but Dad was at the stove making pancakes. He greeted me with a grunt and a cup of coffee.

"So?" he asked in a questioning manner. His one eyebrow was higher than the other, and I could see the curiosity in his eyes. "Naomi told us everything. You might as well spill it. Mom's going to go nuts now. She can't wait for grandkids."

I chuckled at his frankness and sipped the black brew. "Well, Amber wasn't Amber, and she wasn't cheating, and all I can say is, there won't be grandkids until Jade is ready to settle down. She has big dreams, Pop."

"So you got it all figured out?" he asked as he turned to flip the pancakes. He was a smart man, and if Naomi really did tell them everything, he'd understand how much I cared about this woman.

"I think so. And if it's alright, I'd like to just take my time and enjoy savoring every moment. No pressure to get married and pop out babies." I moved toward the stairs with the intention to get a shower before breakfast was ready. Dad said nothing, so I went on my way.

When I was clean and dressed in a warm sweater and crisp jeans, I made my way back downstairs. Mom was seated at the table and Dad served up a gourmet feast of

pancakes, waffles, French toast, bacon, and sausage links. We indulged, and I made it almost all the way through breakfast without Mom saying a word.

It was only when I had a few pieces of bacon left that she said, "I'm sorry I didn't point out what was happening sooner, Newt." The way she'd treated Jade Friday morning at breakfast made sense now. She probably knew about Amber and thought I was going to be hurt.

"It worked out exactly how it should have, Mom. No hard feelings." I popped the last slice of bacon into my mouth and wiped my lips clean. Mom stood and collected the dirty dishes. Dad and I helped, and in no time, we had the table clean and we were seated around the living room waiting for Dad to pass out a few gifts. It felt odd not having Naomi here for this, but her honeymoon was more important.

Our morning gift-giving ritual was typical. Dad got new socks and a power tool. Mom got a new bathrobe and some bulbs to plant in her garden in the spring, and I got a sweater and a tie and the knowledge that the woman who'd crashed into my life for the good would meet me later for a date in the frigid park. Jade texted me a good morning message and a few emojis, and my heart was full.

Around a quarter to five, I took a few pairs of gloves, a few hats, a carrot, some charcoal from Dad's summer grilling stash in the garage, and a scarf and I headed to the park where I told Jade to meet me. It was only a short wait for her, and when she pulled up and parked, we were the only two people there.

I climbed out of my car with my duffel bag full of goodies and she gave me an awkward smile. "Why are we here?" she asked as she rubbed her bare hands together. She wore her pink puffer coat, but her long, dark hair was free to roam, not contained under a hat. So I opened the bag and took out two hats and two sets of gloves, giving one set to her.

"Hat and gloves before I tell you." I grinned and decided it was high time she learned to love the outdoors. If we were stuck here in Danville for any amount of time, we had to get used to it.

"Okay?" she said, chuckling. She donned her hat and gloves, and I put mine on, then set the bag on the hood of Dad's truck. "Now what?"

"Now, we make a snowman together." I bent to begin a small ball which I'd roll through the snowpack, and she grumbled a little.

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 8:00 am

"You know I hate snow, though," she complained, and she kicked some snow at me playfully.

"It's only because you've never had anyone to play in the snow with. Trust me?" I stood and took her hand, and she shrugged at me, rolling her eyes.

"Alright..." Jade stooped with me to begin rolling our base for our snowman. She heaved and pushed, and I checked out her perfect ass. Then I pushed it when it got too large for her as she started the middle ball. A few times, she took a wad of snow and threw it at me and I returned the gesture, hitting her butt more than once. We laughed and joked, and in about an hour, we had the resemblance of a snowman.

"See, I told you it wasn't that bad," I said, hooking an arm around her waist.

"But I'm freezing." Her teeth chattered, and I could see how cold she was by the rosy tint of her cheeks and nose.

"But it was fun... and I can think of a few ways to warm up." I pulled her against my body and kissed her frigid nose. "But first, we finish our creation." After a smack on the butt, I jogged to the truck and got my bag and carried it back to our snowman. Jade helped me position the coal for eyes and mouth and buttons. She draped the scarf around his neck while I found sticks for arms, and finally, we shoved the carrot into the top ball for his nose.

"Oh, he has no hat!" she chided, then took off her sock hat and stretched it over his big, round head. "There, perfect."

The smile on her face was priceless, and I wished my fingers weren't so cold or I'd have taken a picture of her just like this.

"You're beautiful, you know that?" I held her again, as if it were the first time, feeling her body melt against mine.

"You're insane, you know that? Who likes the snow, anyway? This is crazy." Her chattering teeth didn't dissuade me from enjoying the moment. I was soaking up every second of it, knowing I had to go to Chicago next week and my time with her would be limited.

"I think I love the snow even more today than I ever have." I kissed her softly and felt how chapped her lips were. Poor girl really was cold.

"Why's that?" she asked, and her hands splayed on my woolen trench coat which barely cut the sting of the winter breeze.

"Because out in the snow is where I knew I was in love with you. I think winter is my new favorite season, specifically when it's very snowy and icy. And especially when you're here with me." I kissed her hard again and felt warmth flood my body.

When she pulled away, she said, "If I still like summer better, would you hate me?" Her laughter met mine, and I spun her around.

"I could never hate you, Jade. In fact, I love you so much I'm thinking of working from Danville and my parents' house one week a month. Might even get a place here... Might even just go fully remote so I can be closer to you all the time." I couldn't help but kiss her again.

"But your dream... the firm and going to New York?—"

"Can wait until it meets your path, and then we'll travel together. You're my dream now, Jade." My heart felt in sync with hers finally, and I didn't want anything to ever change that.

"I love you, silly boy." Her playful chiding only made me more fond of her.

"Now, let's go warm up... Is Amber at your place?" I asked, and she smirked at me as she rolled her eyes.

"It's empty, and my bed is very warm and toasty." Jade winked as she left me standing there and headed to her car. Now this was the sort of date I could get used to.

29

EPILOGUE: JADE

December 18th, One Year later...

The church was packed with people of all ages decked in their Christmas finery. Mom wore a hideous sweater that lit up and flashed. Amber and Derek wore matching reindeer antlers and bright red noses, which I made fun of them for, but that's what sisters are for. Newt sat next to me in his very dapper brown leisure suit and green tie. He was gorgeous, as always, matching my army-green leggings and oversized tan sweater.

I nestled into his side as we watched the pageant unfold. This year's Mary and Joseph were portrayed by none other than Naomi and Jared, brand-new parents and so over the top happy about it. Though, the baby in the manger was a doll, not the newborn. Little Jared Jr. sat on Newt's mom's lap to the right of him and made me get all the baby cravings.

"He's so cute," I whispered as I watched Newt's mom try to bottle feed the mostly breastfed infant. His elf hat and striped onesie were adorable.

"Shh, it's Naomi's big line," Newt said, shushing me. He touched the tip of my nose and I turned to pay attention.

Naomi was beautiful in the costume, still blushing with postpartum afterglow, and Jared stood tall and strong behind her as she announced the birth of the Christ. The entire thing was a timeless tale, told every year during this pageant, but it was the first time I paid much attention. To me, Christmas had always been about family and togetherness, and now that I had Newt, I knew it would forever be that for me. I laid my head on his shoulder and my hand on his stomach as Naomi recited her lines and the church erupted into applause.

He kissed my forehead and whispered into my ear, "Let's sneak out before the crowd goes wild."

"You don't want to tell Nomie she did a good job?" I asked, using his sister's nickname. We'd gotten closer over the past twelve months now that I was dating Newt. He got his own place here in town but still spent every other week in the city. But every time he was home, his parents hosted a family dinner, to which I was always invited now.

Page 44

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 8:00 am

"I have a surprise..." He stood and took my hand, and we excused ourselves, shimmying past the knees of every person in the pew until we were in the aisle and able to walk freely.

He guided me to the foyer where we found our coats and hats and put them on. Then he opened the door and a burst of cold air beckoned us into the snowy outdoors.

Giant flakes fell from the dark sky overhead, piling up on cars, bushes, and light posts. Newt's hand in the small of my back was the only warmth to be found. I crammed the hat on my head, covering my hair now streaked with red instead of my favorite purple in honor of the holiday.

"Where are we going?" I asked, but he was tight-lipped.

When we turned the corner and I saw the horse-drawn carriage with two stunning white stallions and a sled behind it, I gasped. "God, it's so beautiful." The horses had red ribbons braided into their manes and tails. Holly and ivy hung around the sled along with lights and Christmas bulbs. And a driver sat on the bench with a whip in one hand and the reins in the other.

"Care to join me?" Newt asked, and I glanced at him in surprise.

"You did this?" I asked. This year had been full of him offering pricy things and me rejecting them, but how could I resist this? It was so romantic.

"For you, my dear," he said, and he bowed comically. "Now, let's get under those blankets and drink the cocoa before it's cold."

Newt helped me into the wobbly carriage and then climbed in next to me. The benches were covered in plush red velvet cushions, and a thick white blanket lay on one bench, while two cups steamed from the drinking spouts and a plate of cookies was laid out next to them. It was perfect.

Newt covered us with the blanket and served up the cookies and cocoa, and the driver clicked his tongue. The horses started off and the sled started moving, and I leaned into his chest as he put his arm around me.

"This is so beautiful and perfect." My body was chilly, but my heart was warm and full. All year, I'd been looking forward to our anniversary—Christmas day, the day we decided to be exclusive. It was the only day we could pinpoint as being special after all the drama surrounding how we met and got together. And I thought it was perfect too, the magic of the season and all that.

"You are so beautiful and perfect, Jade." Newt's warm lips on my cheek made me smile. I still hadn't gotten used to the idea that this amazing man wanted me, though I was at least accepting his unfettered affection now.

"Why did you do all this?" I took a bite of a cookie and found the core still warm, as if the driver had pulled them right out of the oven before we climbed onto the sled. The chocolate chips melted on my tongue and I almost groaned in enjoyment. They were delicious.

"Well, I wanted tonight to be really special for us." Newt pulled the blanket up around me more tightly, and I appreciated it.

The sled zigged and zagged through the city streets until we were passing the city park where we made that snowman last year. Newt insisted it was going to help me love the outdoors and snow more, but I still hated being cold. I did soften my stance a little, and we decided if there was snow, a Christmas Day snowman would always be our tradition now. But I secretly hoped for no snow, unlike tonight, where seven

inches were forecast.

"Oh, look." Something caught my eye in the distance. In the park, right where our snowman had been made last year, stood one identical to it, right down to the bright sock hat I'd taken off my head and put on the snowman we made. "Did you do that?" I snickered and looked at Newt, who was holding a small black velvet box in his hand. "Oh..." I mumbled, realizing what this was.

"Jade, when I met you—the real you—I thought you were loud and crazy. I judged you based on your appearance and I wrote you off as someone I'd never date. Then I absolutely fell in love. I thought the prim and proper look you had meant you were someone I could see myself with. I was hung up on your appearance only, and that's why I was attracted to you.

"But in getting to know your heart, I realized how shallow and judgmental I was. I never expected something so amazing to come in such a colorful package, and I realized how wrong I'd been. Every single day, you surprise me with your wit and charm. You're funny and smart and beautiful, even with crazy hair and wild fashion choices. In fact, they make you more beautiful to me now. Jade, I love you, and I've spent this entire year in agony waiting for this moment. I've wanted you to be my wife since basically the day you said you'd commit to being exclusive, so today I want to make that official."

"Oh, God," I squeaked.

"Jade Lyons, will you make me the happiest man on Earth and marry me?" Newt's eyes sparkled with emotion as he asked me the question, but mine became fountains. I covered my mouth and nodded at him, sobbing as he took my hand and peeled my glove off so he could place the ring on my finger.

It was a small diamond, which I was certain he had tortured himself over. He knew me so well, and I loved that. I threw my arms around him in a warm embrace,

dumping the plate of cookies off my lap, but I didn't care. The man I loved was asking me to be his wife forever. Besides, he could buy more cookies.

"I love you, Newt," I blurted out between happy sobs, and he squeezed me hard.

"I love you too, Jade." His arms were so tight, I knew he'd never let me go, and I never wanted him to.

What started out in chaos evolved to the best and happiest moments of my life, and it was only the beginning. Christmas magic brought us together and helped us conquer all the hurdles thrown at us. I had no doubt it would help us continue to be strong and love deeply the rest of our lives.