



Mister Marriage

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Description: Jimmy's first kiss with Melena tanked hard and ended where they least expected. One expensive diagnosis later, a marriage of convenience doesn't sound so bad. Melena gets his insurance. Jimmy gets someone to come home to. The pledge: one year, drama-free. Fated to fail or fated to fall?

Jimmy Torres: My life as a firefighter revolves around serving and protecting. The last thing I wanted was to be the kiss of death. When Melena collapsed at my feet, I knew I'd do everything in my power to help the woman who'd already stolen a piece of my heart. Our marriage was a match made for mutual convenience, but my feelings were anything but. Did Melena share my malady? Or was I the only one suffering from a different kind of heart ailment?

Melena Nemitz: Jimmy was amazing when I needed him most. His insurance was life-saving in more ways than one. My faulty heart may recover medically, but something tells me Jimmy's impact is long-term. He's been so kind, but does it mask something more, or am I alone in thinking this marriage deserves a real shot?

Total Pages (Source): 94

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:50 am

Chapter 1

Jimmy – Kiss of Death

I was a killer kisser, but I never expected her to pass out. Melena's lips were luscious and soft. Everything about her was luscious and soft, and I was enjoying every second until she wasn't. Conscious, that is. She went limp in my arms, and I realized it was more than desire. I ripped my lips from hers. She hung slack in my arms.

Shaking her gently had no impact.

"Melena! Melena! Are you okay?"

Her face was lax, and eyes closed. Not okay. I was an idiot. The worst kind of idiot; the kind who hurts people. I didn't think I'd sucked the life out of her, but clearly, I was doing something wrong.

I could easily handle her weight, but boneless as she was, the best I could manage was to help her slither awkwardly to the cold linoleum. Her kitchen floor was icy compared to the heat we generated together. Laying her on a blanket would be better, but breathing was a priority.

Melena's lashes lay like deep shadows beneath her eyes, and her skin had a bluish cast. "Melena!"

Idiot. Saying her name wasn't doing anything for her. I'd trained for this. I shouldn't be panicking. Apparently, an EMT grade first aid certification wasn't enough to keep

calm when it was someone close to me. Focus. First step: get her on her back. Check. Second step: see if she's breathing. I held my own breath, watching intently for hers. Her chest moved slightly. Thank God. Check her pulse. I placed my fingertips at her wrist. Her heart beat was rapid, but so was my own.

Her lashes fluttered, but her eyes didn't open.

"Melena, come on. Wake up. Please? You're scaring me here. If you don't wake up in a moment, I'm calling EMS. I'll never hear the end of it with my squad. Come on."

I scanned her body for anything restricting her breathing or blood flow. Our evening up to now hadn't been strenuous; we'd had drinks, and I'd lost track of time talking to her. Melena had become more than the cute girl I'd met at yoga. I'd noticed her slipping into the weekly class at my gym but hadn't worked up the nerve to do anything other than steadily move my mat closer to hers. After weeks of subtle maneuvering, I'd finally managed to score a spot a few mats down from hers. I'd nearly groaned aloud when Dina, a silver-haired cougar, slid in between us. As the teacher led us through each new pose, the older woman let out ostentatious groans more suited to a porn set than stretching. No one else seemed to find anything odd as more moans filled the quiet studio, but Melena's sparkling eyes met mine in the mirror in barely suppressed laughter, and her conspiratorial smile told me I was more than empty-headed gym scenery, but someone she could joke around with. But tonight's episode wasn't funny.

Her shiny dark hair was fanned around her head like a halo on the cool floor, but her lax expression was more Madonna than imp. Please, stay earthbound, angel.

Melena's cherry-red top showed a fair amount of generous cleavage. I slipped my fingers beneath her back, scrabbling for a clasp. It was first aid. #NotAPerv. I made quick work of the fastener and tried to convince myself she was breathing easier. She still wasn't awake. Her top was long, covering the wide waistband of her leggings.

There was nothing there to restrict blood flow or breathing. My gaze continued down her shapely thighs and calves to her feet, clad in killer heels with pointy toes. Torture devices for sure. But they didn't look like they'd induce unconsciousness. Still, to be safe, I pried them off her feet.

"Jimmy?" her weak voice got my attention. She glanced down at me in confusion.

"Melena. You had me so worried."

"What are you doing to my feet?"

"You were unconscious. I wanted to make sure you weren't wearing anything restrictive," I answered in my most matter-of-fact tone.

"I'm not one of Cinderella's stepsisters. My shoes fit just fine."

I ignored the fine tremor in my hands as I moved back up to her shoulders. What healthy thirty-something woman passed out?

"How do you feel? You scared me there."

Her breath was shaky. "I scared me too. I'm not sure what happened. One moment, we were kissing, and my heart was racing, and the next moment, I woke up to you removing my footwear. Are you sure you don't have a weird foot fetish?"

I was pretty sure she was joking. Pretty sure. "Nope. Feet are not my thing. I'm a boob man." Smooth. I was smooth like that.

"Is that why my bra is undone?" she asked.

I sighed. "I wish. No, that's still the first aid. Do you know why you passed out? I

mean, I'm a good kisser, but that's not the usual response."

She shrugged and took a big breath. "I'm not sure. My blood was rushing in my ears and then, boom, lights out. It hasn't happened before."

I squeezed her hand. "I'm glad you're back with me."

Her liquid brown gaze met mine. "Thanks," she said softly. Her voice tremored as she continued. "I'm glad you were here."

I smiled. "Me too."

Her expression turned wry. "But don't go getting a big head."

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:50 am

“About what?”

“About how swoony you are. I’m pretty sure this was a one-time thing.”

She surprised a laugh out of me. If my kissing skills were that good, I’d be used to this kind of reaction, but a woman fainting in my arms was all new territory. She was all new territory. Her color was improving while we talked, but I didn’t like that she’d passed out. I was charming, but I wasn’t that charming. “Well, Cinderella, your carriage awaits,” I said. “I’m happy to carry you to the car.”

“My carriage?”

I nodded. “You’re getting a ride to the emergency room.”

She pulled away, and I frowned.

“That sounds expensive. And unnecessary. I’m fine.”

I smoothed my face into the stern mask I used to convince unreasonable adults out in the field with the Tacoma Fire Department. “You had a significant shock. It took time for me to revive you. A trip to the ER is advisable. I’d be happy to take you.”

“I don’t want to go,” she said again, reluctance seeping through every syllable.

Part of me understood. My own experience with hospitals didn’t get rave reviews. She picked at a thread on her pants. Was she embarrassed? Did she want me to play the asshole and force the issue? I hated that role. I was much more comfortable

relying on my charm. Too much eyelash batting and she'd be insisting I was the one who needed medical attention, but I couldn't help laying it on thick, slathering each word in honey.

"Well, I suppose you could have someone else drive you. Or call a cab. But then I'd worry. You wouldn't want me to worry, would you? When I'm right here and ready to take you?"

"I don't want to inconvenience you, but my insurance isn't the greatest," Melena said. "A trip to the ER doesn't exactly figure into my budget this month."

I couldn't help my frown. "If something's really wrong, you'll be glad you went. You have to be alive to worry about expenses. As for me, it'd be more of an inconvenience not to take you," I insisted.

"Still, I'm sure the last thing you want to do on a Saturday night is spend it in the ER."

"If you recall, I wanted to spend my Saturday night with you, and I'll still be doing that. From my perspective, that's winning."

"Weirdo," she said with a small smile.

Sensing her capitulation, I helped her sit up slowly. She took a moment to refasten her bra while I pretended to find a half-eaten bag of cheddar sour cream potato chips fascinating. How could she eat only half the bag? I always consumed them in one sitting.

We'd been chatting rapid-fire all evening and the sudden quiet felt ominous. She was probably still feeling woozy, and I was even more determined to take her to the hospital. We'd skipped dinner in favor of a more casual pub known for their drinks

and appetizers, but maybe sharing a plate of loaded nachos hadn't left her enough to eat. "Do you want some water or a snack before we leave? Is your blood sugar low?" I asked.

She shook her head. "No, let's go. I'm okay."

I grabbed her arm and supported her as she got to her feet with a wobble. "Whoa there. Take it easy. Do you have shoes other than these torture devices?" I asked.

She nodded. "Flip-flops by the door."

"Flip-flops it is." I bundled her into her jacket and walked with her to my car. It was one of the few times I wished for something nicer. My aging Honda blended, which is why I bought it. When your other ride is a bright red fire truck with sirens, it's nice to operate in stealth-mode off-duty. I handed her in as gently as I could to the front seat. She didn't pass out again, so I was doing okay.

Fainting was no joking matter, but I was managing my fear for her the only way I knew how. Firefighting meant battling destruction on a daily basis. Fire always consumed. Sometimes we won, limiting damage, but there was a price to pay. Loss of property, precious memories, or loved ones. I'd watched families lose everything, feeling powerless. My sense of the absurd kept me sane. When I'd first joined my crew, their gallows humor felt harsh, but over time I'd learned comedy was a legit coping strategy. There was too much awful shit to push through, most of it at work, to survive without a sense of humor. A slightly unhealthy one, but still.

"You okay there?"

"Yeah, I'm okay. I'm feeling better all the time."

Melena pushed her hair back from her face, and the fine tremble in her hands gave

her away. Feeling better, my ass. Pressing her would get me nowhere. There was little I could do other than take her to get checked out. My training only went so far. I wasn't the medical expert she clearly needed.

Did I drive like a calm professional to the emergency room? Not exactly. On our two previous dates Melena had teased me gently about my law-abiding ways. I was usually a stickler for the speed limit, but this was an emergency. Lights and sirens would be better, but instead I pushed the gas pedal harder. Melena was quiet on the ride, and I kept sneaking glances to reassure myself she was still conscious. One unexpected fainting spell was enough for a checkup. Two would have me regretting not calling in a full team with medical supplies to monitor her on the way.

I was thankful for the hospital's valet when we arrived at the doors. There was no way in hell I was leaving Melena while I parked. What if she passed out again? She needed someone conscious to get her to help. I took as much of her weight as she'd let me on our walk to the front desk. The attendant smiled. "What can I help you with?"

"My fiancée passed out. Is Dr. Albright working in the ER tonight?"

Did I ignore Melena's quick side-eye at my pronouncement and obvious attempt to work my hospital connections? I did. Two dates did not make a fiancée. But I had a better chance of accompanying her through any testing and treatment if I presented us as a unit. Otherwise, I was destined to while my time away in the waiting area. If she needed me, I wanted to be there. The receptionist had Melena fill out paperwork and checked her in, letting me know Albright wasn't on shift.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:50 am

“Sorry,” I muttered as we took seats. “I should have checked with you before saying anything about our relationship. With patient privacy laws, I thought this would be the only way to stay with you. I hope that’s okay. I can wait for you here if you want.”

She shook her head, and I grabbed her hand in mine, squeezing tight. I felt better about my decision when she squeezed back and shot me a hesitant smile.

“I’ve never been to the ER,” she said softly.

I wanted to tell her she was lucky, but I held it back at the last moment. Melena didn’t need to hear about teenagers supergluing themselves together. Then again, Truth or Dare injury stories might be just what she needed. She looked more than a little scared. I didn’t want to add to her fears.

“I’m right here,” I said. “I’ll stay with you the entire time if it’s where you want me.”

Frowning, she tucked her dark hair behind one ear before responding. “I feel like I should do this myself.” She looked at the range of people sitting in chairs around us. A couple in their seventies in one corner held hands. A young family tried to soothe a fussy baby at the other end of the room. She glanced at me with over-bright eyes. “But I really, really don’t want to. I’m still a fully functioning adult even if I’m afraid of needles and want you to hold my hand, right?”

I clasped her hand in mine and watched some of the tension around her eyes ease. “Absolutely. Do you want to call anyone? Your family?”

Melena bit her lip. “I’ll do it tomorrow. We don’t know anything yet, and I don’t want to freak my parents out.”

We sat in the stiff chairs and waited for her to be called back. I tried to let myself be distracted by a few *House Hunter* episodes playing on the lobby TV. They made it look easy to find a dream home. Make an offer, and boom—accepted. Move in and live the dream. Bullshit for the TV cameras. Every few seconds I glanced at Melena out of the corner of my eye. Still stable. Still conscious. She was pale, her skin too white against the backdrop of her bright shirt, but she’d lost the fine tremor in her hands. With every squeeze, I’d tried to give her some of my strength. The hospital gods were smiling on us because we didn’t have to wait much longer before a perky attendant appeared. “Malayna?” she said tentatively.

Melena’s grimace tried to masquerade as a smile. “It’s Ma-lean-a.”

The nurse huffed a quick laugh. “Sorry about that. Follow me.”

Her hospital ID said Anais, and she held it up as she introduced herself and showed us back to a procedure area. “Ah-nah-EES. Believe me, I feel your pain.” She took a quick history from Melena before asking, “Could you be pregnant?”

“No,” I answered quickly. *Shit.* I hadn’t gotten her pregnant. We’d barely rounded first base. I gazed at Melena with an apology in my eyes and held my breath. My answer was an overstep. In all the ways. My training had kicked in. I was used to rapid-fire Q&A with the medical staff when we brought patients to the ER. She shook her head no, and I released my breath. I needed to keep my mouth shut. I kept my resolve as another member of the medical team peppered Melena with questions, listened to her chest, and drew blood. As each minute passed, more of Melena’s color returned, and she looked more like the vibrant woman I’d started my evening with and less like the ghost of dates gone wrong.

It was reassuring to see Melena appear less like Tree Pose would land her in a heap on the floor. We hadn't known each other long. Admiring her at the gym didn't count; our first kiss had been hot...until it was not. Participation was my bare minimum. Nothing less than enthusiastic consent. Even as a kid, I could watch Cinderella but was never a Sleeping Beauty fan. I grimaced. My sister Andi would be proud. Look at me, naming Disney princesses.

"Here, please put on this gown, and we'll get you in for tests when we have availability."

The nurse handed Melena a hospital gown, and I tried not to smirk. Shoes and gowns, next it would be woodland creatures and a fairy godmother. Then I'd know I was living in a cartoon.

I squeezed her hand briefly. "I'll step outside and let you get changed."

She stood frozen for a moment before releasing her grasp on my fingers. I smiled reassuringly, "Hey. I know you're probably nervous about what will happen, but you've got this."

From the other side of the blue curtain, I could sense her movement. When she grew still, I couldn't help but check on her. "You okay in there?"

In answer, she pulled the blue curtain back, revealing her figure in the boxy light blue gown. It swam on her, and my heart clenched as I took in her messy hair and the slipper socks on her feet. So delicate. It was a lie. Melena was tough. She had two brothers and a career as a massage therapist. She could probably break me with her pinky if she applied pressure in the right place. Tonight, a kitten's paw could tip her over. It was sobering to see her stripped of her usual sass, lost in the cotton gown.

I moved in closer, hoping to give comfort. Her arms were crossed over her chest. She

didn't move away, but she didn't seek me out either. "I'm sorry if I overstepped earlier. I'm used to answering the admitting team immediately when we bring a patient in. I should have let you answer for yourself." I had messed up. If she kicked me out, I'd understand, but I still hoped she'd let me stay. "Are you cold? Do you want to snuggle up for warmth?"

Melena's lips twitched, but she sank into my frame, leaning her body against mine as we both perched against the bed. "Thank you. It's okay, you can stay. I'm not above using you for your body heat. It's cold in here, and I can't wear a bra for the testing. The girls are not amused."

Suddenly her earlier posture made sense. "Sorry. It may make me a terrible person but remember, unapologetic boob man." I held up a thumb to point back at myself and put the other arm around her shoulders.

She snorted and slapped my arm with her hand before sinking into my hold. "Well, then I'm gladsomeone is happy. This sucks."

I'm not sure who needed the reassurance of the hug more. Her or me. "Yeah, I know it's not ideal."

"Vast understatement. Not how I hoped to spend our date," she said.

I wiggled my brows. "What? No. We've got a bed right here. See? Curtains for privacy. What more could we ask for?"

She shook her head. "I love the optimism. Is now the time to let you know I'm not an exhibitionist?"

"But...privacy curtain," I teased.

She laughed. Mission accomplished. We settled in to wait in silence. It was getting late. Or early, depending on your perspective. I tried to focus on the faint scent of jasmine wafting off her skin instead of the overwhelming antiseptic smell of the hospital. The odor still brought back bad memories, but I pushed them aside. Melena had to be my priority, and she was probably freaking out without adding my drama to the mix. It felt like forever before an aide came to show her back for an electrocardiogram. Melena was quiet in my arms, almost like she'd fallen asleep against me.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:50 am

“I’m ready,” she said, pushing away from the bed and out of my arms.

My arms felt empty. I missed her warm weight. The aide smiled at me. “You can come too if it’s okay with Ms. Nemitz.”

I followed Melena and the aide down the hall, around a corner, and through a set of doors to another part of the building. It was confusing; hopefully, there wouldn’t be a test later. As a trained observer, I should be able to find my way, but honestly all the hospital halls looked the same. Too many work calls had led to these neutral corridors. Memories swamped me, but I locked them away to focus on Melena. The aide pushed into a small room with an exam table and asked Melena to sit down. An Asian woman with dark hair entered the room. She smiled briefly at me before focusing on Melena.

“Hi, I’m Van, I’ll be your sonographer tonight.” She moved to the table of equipment and picked up a set of small patches attached to wires. “I need to place these electrodes on your chest, then we’ll get started.”

“Will it hurt?” Melena asked. Her eyes were wide, and I moved closer to the opposite side of the exam table and reached for her hand, stroking the soft skin on her wrist.

Van shook her head. “No. If anything, it tickles. I’ll have you lay on your back and get comfortable. When we’re done with the electrocardiogram, I’ll use my magic wand here for the echocardiogram.”

I averted my gaze while Melena got into position. With the gown open in front, it took a moment to get her at least partially covered. “You can look,” she said.

After the electrocardiogram readings were done, I watched as the technician applied a thin layer of gel to her wand before running it over Melena's skin. The fast beat of Melena's heart pounded over the Doppler. Van took readings and pictures of her heart before having her change positions and starting the process all over again. I bit my lip to hold back my questions for the sonographer. Melena didn't need me butting into her medical care more than I already had.

I couldn't make heads or tails of the pictures on the screen, but Van seemed to know what she was doing. She clicked away, making recordings. "There. All done," she said. "Traci will show you back to the procedure room while I have the doctor review these. She should be out shortly."

Melena smiled and thanked her. She used a small towel to wipe the goop from her chest and winced.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"Yes. It's just slimy. It feels weird."

"What are 'things you don't want to hear on a second date,' Alex."

She groaned. "That joke's got to be older than I am."

My grin was unrepentant. "Probably. But, come on, Jeopardy! is a classic. If you don't watch Jeopardy!, I'm not sure we can hang out."

She snorted. "So that's where you draw the line, huh? I pass out in your arms, no big deal, but I don't watch your favorite game show, and we're done?"

I blew out the most dramatic sigh in my arsenal. "I suppose I could make an exception, this once."

“So magnanimous of you, Torres.”

“Ouch. Last names, huh? I guess I’d really be toast if you used my first, middle, and last.”

“James Adrian Torres, don’t test me.”

“Damn. I thought I was the trained observer. How did you learn my middle name?”

“I’ve seen you flash your ID at the gym attendant.”

She’d done a masterful job of playing it cool if that was the case. I thought I’d noticed her first at the gym where we both worked out. It was nice to know the interest was mutual.

Traci returned to escort us back to the first procedure room. A few turns and she directed us behind a blue curtain. I tried to find my earlier levity, but Melena had sobered on the trip back. She twisted her hands together, and I reached out my own to still them.

“Hey.” She didn’t look at me. “Hey, it’s going to be okay.” I injected every ounce of confidence into my words. But I didn’t know that. She called my bluff.

“Jimmy, you’re so sweet for staying with me tonight, but this all has me freaked out. Best case, it’s nothing, and I’m going to have a whopper of an emergency bill I can’t afford. Worst case, it’s something big, and I’m still going to have a whopper of an emergency bill I can’t afford.”

My gaze met hers. Her face was tight and pinched. “You’re worried about the financial side? Don’t you have insurance?”

She grumbled. “Yes. Crappy insurance for the self-employed. Up until now I’ve been healthy, so I carry the bare minimum. It’s been all I could afford as I get my business off the ground.”

I scrubbed my hands over my head as if the stubble were a Magic 8-Ball that would provide answers. Insurance sucked. Being sick sucked. None of it was ideal. I was lucky to have a good plan through work. It was one of the few perks of my profession. Public servant pay wasn’t so hot for the inherent risk, but the benefits helped make up for it.

Melena shook herself. “Never mind.” She met my gaze. “It’s not your problem. You just met me. And who knows? Maybe this is nothing.”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:50 am

I grabbed her palm and squeezed, feeling the strength of her capable hand in my own. “Hey. Let’s wait and hear what the doctor has to say. Modern medicine has come a long way.”

I wanted to believe my own reassurances, but the tightness in my chest and shoulders didn’t lie. Losing her was not an option. Even if we didn’t work out, I wanted her whole, healthy, and happy, not nervous and broken.

I dated. I dated a lot. Women liked a man in uniform. Or out of it. Firefighter calendars for the win. But Melena was the first woman in a long time who didn’t make me feel lonely when I was with her. Who didn’t see a pretty, but empty package; a good-time guy with nothing more to offer. She let me in on the joke, instead of making me the butt of it. Objectification: not just for the ladies anymore. I didn’t need one more patronizing smile and comment about my fire hose. Anyone who thought you had to be an idiot to run into a burning building didn’t know the science involved. Women saw the beefcake calendars, not the minds behind the muscles. It was only when they got closer that the danger scared them away. Melena’s independence reminded me of my grandmother who exuded the same buck up energy from every pore. If she was fierce enough to start her own business from scratch, she was fierce enough to handle her medical issues and the hazards of dating a firefighter.

“Knock, knock,” a feminine voice called around the blue curtain.

I glanced quickly at Melena as she called, “Come in.”

A short woman in scrubs and a white lab coat rounded the edge of the curtain. “I

always feel like I should follow with a joke, but I'm terrible at them," she said with a hint of Britain in her pronunciation.

She smiled and introduced herself to Melena as Dr. Rai. Her white smile was bright against her light brown skin. My attempts to read the subtext beneath her bedside manner were stymied by her energy. She made it impossible to tell if she carried good news or bad. It was late, and she gave off vibes like she'd just finished a triple-shot espresso.

"I've had a chance to review your labs and tests. You told us earlier you have no history of heart issues in your family?"

Melena shook her head. "Not that I know of. Both of my parents are alive and well. I lost one of my grandfathers young, but I'm not sure what illnesses he had."

Dr. Rai nodded. "Well, from the echocardiogram, it appears you've got a heart arrhythmia. Your heart is beating faster than it should."

I opened my mouth before I could think better of it. "I thought that was just because I'm so handsome."

Dr. Rai was generous with her side-eye, but at least Melena gave me a weak smile. I was an asshole for interrupting, but it broke the tension.

"Jimmy's handsomeness aside, what does that mean? Why would my heart beating faster cause me to pass out?"

I squeezed her hand while we waited for the doctor's response. The list of potential reasons to faint was long. Everything from heart problems and low blood sugar to anemia. I'd hoped for anemia. Iron supplements were cheap and easy.

“Heart arrhythmias are fairly common. Effectively the electrical system in your heart is malfunctioning.” She cast me a glance. “Not due to any eye candy nearby, but likely because of stress, diabetes, drug or alcohol use, heart disease, high blood pressure, hyperthyroidism, or another underlying health issue.”

Melena looked mystified and scared. “I don’t think I have any of those. Can it be treated?”

Dr. Rai listed a lot of confusing options. I was only capable of catching ‘medication’ and ‘surgery.’ Judging by Melena’s crestfallen expression, she wasn’t excited about any of her advice. The doctor referred her to a cardiologist for further evaluation and sent in a prescription to the pharmacy.

“Please be sure to use the referral and take your medication. I don’t want to see you back here. Someone will be by with your release paperwork shortly. Before that happens, do you have any additional questions?” Dr. Rai asked.

Melena shook her head and thanked the doctor before she ducked back behind the curtain, leaving us to our pretense of privacy.

“Hey,” I said, tugging gently on her hand clasped in mine. “Are you okay?”

She looked anything but okay. Instead of admitting it, Melena turned to me with a brave face before releasing my hand. “Sure. I appreciate you coming with me tonight. I’m sorry we’ve had to wait so long.”

I sighed. Those walls had gone up fast. “Melena. I’m glad to be here. Also, if we’re being brutally honest, I’m thankful you didn’t pass out because of something I did. I have a reputation to maintain.”

Her smile may have been more of a grimace, but I’d take it.

“There’s my girl. Let’s go get your prescription filled.”

“I’m not, you know. You didn’t have to be here tonight.”

“Not what?” I asked.

“Your girl.”

I gripped my chest, pulling on every ounce of acting ability I’d garnered in my sixth-grade school play. “You wound me. You could be my girl. Or your own girl. Or someone else’s girl. But for tonight, I’m glad I was there with you.”

See? I could be cool. She was freaked out enough with her medical diagnosis. Melena didn’t need me mooning over her beautiful face too. If she wanted to be strong, I’d support her in being strong. But if she needed a cuddle, I was there for it. Any excuse for touching was A-OK with me.

Melena took a few moments to change into her street clothes while I waited outside the cubicle. An aide escorted us to the pharmacy with the prescription, and we waited for the late-night pharmacist to fill the order. I tried to give Melena her privacy as she spoke with the pharmacist, but she visibly stiffened when the man told her the amount.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:50 am

“It’s how much?” she said.

I couldn’t hear what the pharmacist said, but Melena’s body language was clear. She scowled as she dug in her purse for a credit card before handing it to the pharmacist and picking up her pill container.

“Worth their weight in gold?”

Her nose scrunched. “Apparently. I may need a second job to pay my medical bills.”

“When would you find the time? Don’t you already work whenever you can?”

“Yep. The glamorous life of a massage therapist.” She shrugged. “Don’t worry, I’ll figure it out.”

There were enough news articles on medical debt and bankruptcy that I had some clue how catastrophic the bills could be, even with insurance. Melena was quiet as we made our way to the front of the hospital and waited for my car. She didn’t speak as I drove back to her place either. I kept sneaking glances at her, but she just stared out the windows, seeming to focus on nothing. Possibly seeing her dreams of expanding her business washed away in a deluge of debt.

I got out with her after parking in front of her apartment complex. “You don’t have to come up,” she said.

“It’s okay. Safety first. I want to make sure you get upstairs. I’ll leave you at your door. You’re probably tired.”

She scrubbed a hand across her face before smiling at me. “Yeah, I am. But I appreciate you coming with me tonight. It would have been scary being there alone. I appreciate having a friend.”

“Ouch. Demoted.”

“What?”

“I’ve been demoted. And here I thought I made a good fiancé. Kicked down the ladder to friend.”

“Are you sure you weren’t promoted? I don’t have a lot of people I call friend,” she said.

“Ah, who knows? Maybe someday I’ll go for the hat trick.”

“Hat trick?”

“Friend, fiancé, and...” I wiggled my eyebrows as obnoxiously as possible, deepening my voice when I added, “lovers?”

That got a smile out of her. She smacked my arm lightly as we went up the stairs to her floor. “You goof.”

She dropped her purse by her front door and kicked off her flip-flops before turning to me. “Thanks again for everything tonight.”

I winked. “Rain check on a goodnight kiss?”

“What? I’m not sexy now you’ve seen me in a hospital gown?”

Leaning into the lie that a boxy cotton johnny could contain her sex appeal was a lot easier now that she was joking with me. My mock offense was peak SNL church lady. “Why, I never. Here I was trying to be chivalrous; you haven’t had those shockingly expensive meds yet. I don’t want you passing out if things get steamy.”

“You wish,” she said.

“Yeah, I do. But I’ll wait for a better time. Get some rest and call me if you need anything?”

She gave me one last rueful smile as I backed out the door, and she shut it behind me. I waited until the locks tumbled before turning and heading toward my car.

I couldn’t stop thinking about Melena as I drove home. I lived frugally. Check the older Honda sedan I drove. My paycheck covered the basics and gave me room for fun. I also saved as much as I could. Budgeting for the mortgage and down payment on a house had been my major goal the last few years.

A place to make my own. No more base housing. No more apartments with damage deposits and strict no painting rules. I wanted a space I could overhaul to my heart’s content. Demo down to the studs and craft a masterpiece. The minor projects I’d managed in my apartment gave me a taste of that sweet decorating drug. Unconventional or not, I dreamed of bitching with my crew about my latest DIY dilemma and pretending to take the advice of the old salts who’d done it all before. Of course, I didn’t envision living alone. Which brought me back to Melena and her dilemma. I didn’t think she should have to choose between paying her rent and getting her medication. My insurance benefits were solid, if only I could share them with her.

Somehow, I thought the department would frown on sharing, confident that was also called insurance fraud. But what if I went about it more legally? As in legally wed.

Dependents could be added to medical, no fuss, no muss. My mind raced at the possibility. That would be perfect. It might even cover the emergency room visit.

I drummed my fingers on the steering wheel. I couldn't protect her from her heart condition, but maybe I could help her out. Fighting my protective instincts was a losing battle. She might not want help, but it didn't stop me from feeling driven to offer it.

Would it even work? I grabbed my phone and navigated to my text messages. I had my own expert.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:50 am

Jimmy: Hey sister, dear. Do I remember you saying (complaining) that benefits changes for babies and marriage got backdated to the beginning of the month? Something about it screwing with payroll?

As soon as I hit send on the message, I regretted it. It was late. Too late to text. My sister was going to bust my balls over this. Due to her job in human resources at a local candy manufacturer, I knew more than I wanted to about insurance from dinners where she railed about the broken system. But I should have realized my text would fire her up if she was still awake.

Andi: Wait. What? Why are you asking?

Andi: Did you knock someone up?

Andi: Did you meet someone?

Jimmy: No, just asking. It came up on trivia tonight. I wanted to rub it in that I was right.

Andi: Where were you playing trivia?

Andi: Who were you playing trivia with?

Andi: You're lying about the trivia, aren't you?

Andi: On the off chance I'm getting a niece or nephew out of this question, yes, qualifying changes usually begin the first of the month of the event. Depends on your

contract.

Jimmy: The event? Is that HR speak? Am I speaking with HR now, not my sister?

Andi: Watch it, bud. I'll write you up.

Jimmy: Ha! Thanks anyways, sis.

Before I could think it through, I popped up a new message, this one to Melena.

Jimmy: Will you marry me?

Chapter 2

Melena – Proposal Gone Bad

What a hell-a-long day. First, seeing clients and being on my feet all day for massages wore me out, but nothing out of the norm. After five years as a licensed therapist, I was used to the physical demands, but days like today still made my feet hurt. Happy hour drinks with Jimmy were my silver lining before the kiss of death. The slush of fear and anxiety ticking off every second in the ER, adding to the hypothetical expense in my head, had pushed me past my limit. Sleep sounded heavenly. Escape from my problems. I didn't want to think about Dr. Rai's diagnosis. I doubly didn't want to think about the ginormous medical bills coming my way.

I'd worked hard to establish my own life away from the small town where I grew up. My family was wonderful but tended toward smothering. Being my own woman, out from under the spotlight of the family business and my brothers' high school sports fame meant moving away. My parents had the freedom of their own construction company, doing remodels and some new residential builds. I wanted that same freedom. To set my own hours. Take my own clients. I didn't realize freedom came

with a side of terror and uncertainty. I had put in long hours with my clients to build loyalty. But everything I had was built with my own two hands, and those hands had to work. I made time for the gym because my body was the primary tool of my trade. Jimmy was the first man I'd dated in months. I'd learned the hard way relationships came with expectations I didn't want to fulfill. No appointments after 5:30. No work on Saturdays or Sundays. My last serious relationship crashed and burned on the banks of stubbornness. I wanted to build my clientele. Dylan wanted to see me. It should have been a sign when I wasn't as eager to see him. Destruction ahead. So, no big relationships. Not at this stage of my career. I was better off alone until I was more established and paid off my school loans. My dreams depended on it. So many sacrifices left at the altar of success. And now my body was betraying me.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:50 am

I took a deep breath and trudged toward my bedroom. Even my night owl neighbors upstairs were quiet, it must be beyond late. I shucked my leggings and pulled my top off, tossing them in the basket in the corner before grabbing my pj's from beneath my pillow and slipping them on. The soft lavender pants and shirt felt like silk compared to the stiff hospital gown.

I shuddered. Not thinking about it.

Heart arrhythmia.

Nope.

ER bills.

Nope, not thinking about that either.

Possible bankruptcy coming my way.

Hard no.

First kiss with Jimmy.

Now, his kiss I could focus on.

Kissing Jimmy had been full of tingly goodness. His rough hands had cupped my face, and he watched for any signs of reluctance before moving in. Spoiler alert: there were none. I'd pushed up on my toes to get closer, and he tugged my hips forward

until his thigh could push between mine. Jimmy's lips and tongue knew their way around a quality make-out session. At least, aside from the passing out part. That sucked. But Jimmy hadn't. He'd been darn sweet all night. He didn't have to stay. He didn't have to try to make me laugh. In the crap sandwich of this day, he'd been the highlight.

My eyelids felt like they had five-pound weights attached. Whether it was fatigue from my arrhythmia, or plain dog tiredness, I didn't know. I stumbled into the bathroom and took one of the pills from the pharmacy with a sip of water. My grimace as I swallowed was part disgust at pill swallowing and part stomach-churning anxiety over the cost of my meds. I had nearly choked when the pharmacist quoted me eight-hundred dollars at the counter. There was no way in hell I could afford to live on this medication for the rest of my life without better insurance. With the new year and the reset of my high deductible right around the corner, I was going to be flat broke by March. Not thinking about it.

Bright light filtered into my room, which for fall in Tacoma, meant it was late. Very late. Early mornings were usually murky with clouds. Direct sunlight meant the low clouds had time to burn off to reveal crisp blue skies. Luckily, it was Sunday, and I had no clients scheduled. I could roll over and go back to bed. Unfortunately, my bladder had other ideas. Everything felt normal as I took care of my morning routine. Steady heart rate. Normal color in my cheeks. Maybe last night had been a fluke. The orange pill bottle on the counter said differently. Take daily. Ugh.

Drat. Calling my parents was going to have to wait. My phone was a dark brick on the bathroom counter. I hated it when I forgot to charge it, and it was beyond dead. Taking my pill had thrown off my nighttime routine. After washing my hands, I moved it back to the charger by my bed and went to the kitchen to brew coffee.

I gave the linoleum a dirty look as I crossed the threshold. Scene of the crime. Stupid floor. Stupid heart. I was too young to have health issues; what twenty-nine-year-old had a heart arrhythmia? Those were supposed to be reserved for old age. After I'd lived my life. I'd barely gotten started. While it was true I'd achieved one of my goals, getting my massage therapy license and business off the ground, I hadn't done any of the other things in my plans.

I wanted to grow my business into a full spa and be successful in my own right. My own building and staff, luxury scrubs and baths that took my business beyond massage. A place for women to come to recharge from daily life. My own little haven.

And what about the other things I wanted to do with my life? Was it too late to tour Europe? What if my meds weren't enough, and I collapsed abroad, surrounded by strangers? How many languages could you get a medical alert bracelet in? And not that I was anywhere near ready for a husband and kids yet, but would my body even be strong enough to have children?

Stupid heart. Stupid body.

I relied on my body for my business. I had to stay healthy. Massage therapy was not for the weak. My income relied on me working. One of the harsher realities of self-employment was no paid sick time. Paying off school debt didn't leave much left for savings, and most of what I'd accumulated would probably go to medical bills. The doctor hadn't said I couldn't work but passing out on top of a client would be a bad look. My very expensive medication had better do the trick.

Coffee in hand, I wandered back to my room and picked up my phone. Lisa would understand my dilemma. She rented the room next to me at the spa where we worked and still talked about her T-rex days reaching around her giant belly to do massage while nine months pregnant. Her daughter turned nineteen in May.

My phone had charged enough that I could see my text notifications. My pulse pinged as I realized I had messages from my dad, Lisa, and Jimmy.

Dad: Hi honey. We miss you.

My dad was a big softie. I'd moved to the Puget Sound from our small town on the other side of Washington state for my massage therapy program and stayed in Tacoma. My parents and brothers were settled in Colville and they were usually too busy to check on me.

Melena: Miss you too. Will call you later today.

What was I going to tell my parents? They loved me and would help if they could, but I didn't want to be a burden. I was well beyond the age where I could go on their insurance. They'd give me money, but it would come with strings attached. Massive strings, encouraging me to move back home. I couldn't go back. Colville wasn't bad. It just wasn't for me. Their good intentions would smother me if I moved home. Nemitz Construction would pull me back into its orbit, and I'd end up working part-time in the office to make ends meet. Colville wasn't big enough to support another massage therapist or a spa.

Lisa: How was your date with Smokey Bear?

I chuckled. Lisa enjoyed living vicariously through my dating efforts. She said it made her appreciate her husband more.

Melena: Good, except the passing out part.

I didn't wait for her response, and instead toggled to Jimmy's message.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:50 am

Jimmy: Will you marry me?

I choked and spit my coffee across my bedspread. WTF Jimmy? I did. Not. Expect. That.

He couldn't be serious. Sure, he'd called himself my fiancé last night, but really? It was too much, too soon. He may be worthy of my heart with his humor and sincerity, and he came wrapped in a muscular package that made my mouth water, but I didn't need to dunk my head in the fountain when I could sip at the stream first. Case in point, overdo it and you could choke. I coughed a few more times to clear my airway. My comforter was toast. That answered the question of what I'd do today; laundry was on the agenda now. I pulled the comforter off my bed as I processed Jimmy's text.

Marriage was not in my plans anytime soon. I had too much to do. There were school loans to repay and a clientele to build before I could get serious about someone. Dating was fine, but marriage? I shivered. I'd thought Jimmy would be okay keeping things casual. Once you watched a guy lip synching to Shoop while he lifted, mouth forming lyrics about feeling it in his hips with enthusiasm, it was hard to take him too seriously. He was fun to hang out with. Low-key happy hour and a coffee date kept things casual. He didn't scream 'marry me and stay home to have my babies' and that's one of the things I liked about him. I wasn't ready for more. Maybe this was his idea of funny? If so, I didn't feel the urge to laugh.

Terrible proposal aside, it was kind of sweet, even if it was an awful idea. He wasn't professing undying love. Not just because we didn't know each other well, but because—text message? Not the way a girl dreams of being asked. In my dreams, I

was a successful spa owner first. I'd meet someone, we'd date for a few months or maybe even years until I was sure we'd last in the lovers-and-partners-until-the-day-we-die way my parents had. Then, he'd propose to me while we watched the sun set from our lanai on vacation in Hawaii, or maybe walking home from our favorite restaurant on date night. Three dates followed by a text message proposal never entered the equation.

I tried not to trip as I carried the bulky comforter to my washer and crammed it in, adding soap and setting the cycle. I was afraid to look at my phone again. But I was also curious. What had possessed Jimmy?

I flipped back to his message. His awkward proposal had been sent not long after he dropped me off. He'd waited another thirty minutes before clarifying.

Jimmy: I handled that badly. Let's talk before you say no. I think I could help you out.

At least he realized I was going to say no. I mean, I probably was going to say no. I chewed my lip. Thoughts I'd been consciously avoiding came crashing through. Expensive medication. Crummy insurance. Inadequate savings. Possible bankruptcy. Moving home. Losing my clients. No dream spa.

I wanted to stand on my own. I didn't want to take advantage of my parents; they'd worked too hard for too long to wind up supporting a grown daughter. I didn't want to take advantage of Jimmy either, and his proposal felt awfully like pity. But I also didn't want to jeopardize my long-term goals with a mountain of debt.

Melena: I'm not sure talking is going to improve this situation, but I'm home today.

Jimmy: Great. Can I come over? Will bring donuts.

My stomach growled. The world would probably look rosier with a few donuts.

Melena: Sure, sounds good.

Before I could set my phone down, it rang with an incoming call from Lisa, and I flopped on the couch before answering.

She didn't even give me a chance to say hello. "What do you mean you passed out? He's that good? Details!" Lisa's excited chatter rang in my ear.

I groaned. "Not that good."

"Wait. That bad? I'm sorry, Melena. I thought he was worthy."

"Oh, he might be worthy. It wasn't his fault I passed out. That was all me."

"What happened? Are you okay? I thought you were joking," Lisa said.

"I wish. No, I really passed out. Then he took me to the ER. I'm now the not-so-proud owner of life-saving heart medication worth about my monthly rent."

"Ouch."

"Yeah, exactly. And it gets weirder."

"Gets weirderhow?" Lisa asked.

"Jimmy proposed. I think," I added.

"How do you not know? It seems like the kind of thing that should be clear."

“He texted ‘will you marry me’ last night after we got home from the hospital.”

Silence met my admission. After a few more beats, Lisa responded. “You’re right. It did get weirder. You’ve known him how long? Hasn’t it only been a week or two since you met him at the gym?”

I sighed. “Yes. Last night was our third date. Don’t get me wrong, they were wonderful dates, minus the medical issues, but I’m not ready to say I do.”

“And I don’t blame you. Ninety-nine percent of the population wouldn’t blame you. The other one percent are hopeless romantics. Is he a hopeless romantic?”

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:50 am

“I don’t think so? I’m pretty sure he was swept up by my need for better medical insurance, not dreams of a happily ever after, but I’ll know more soon. He’s coming over.”

“Do you need me to chaperone?” Lisa asked.

I snorted. I could picture her perched on a chair in my kitchen, eyes agog as Jimmy and I talked. Knowing her, she’d bring popcorn. “I don’t think so. He’s the kind of trouble you shave your legs for, not the kind you need protection from.”

“You say thatnow. Are you sure? I can slip you a different kind of protection if you’re shaving your legs. Discreet packaging and everything. Safety first.”

I laughed, picturing her dropping off a brown paper care package of condoms. “I’m sure. And I’m covered. But thanks for offering, Lisa. It means a lot that you have my back.”

“Remember that next time I have a code naked.”

“Yeah, if that happens again, I’m making new signage for your room.”

“Good luck with Smokey Bear. I want to be matron of honor in your wedding. I’m calling dibs now.”

“Hah! If I marry Jimmy, it’s a deal, but somehow, I think you’re safe,” I said.

“You say thatnow. Are you sure?”

Lisa's words echoed in my mind after we hung up. I glanced at the clock. Jimmy would be here any moment. I was going to refuse his proposal. Wasn't I?

Chapter 3

Jimmy – Proposal Part Deux

What was I thinking? Proposing via text? If my mom were here, she'd slap me upside the head for being foolish. Not that my mom ever slapped me upside the head, but there was always a first time, and this would totally be it. She had standards. We had to look sharp when we left the house, no sloppy kids for my mom. It came from a place of love, but as a kid I hated it. We had to appear more than respectable, always. Military perfect. Only in private could we slouch around in jeans and sweats. In public it was button-down shirts, slacks, and a tie for me. She took me to the barber every two weeks to keep my hair regulation short. Every move, every test score, reflected on her and my dad. Other kids looked at me weird. Especially off base. They thought I thought I was fancy. What I wouldn't have given for their T-shirts and jeans.

If by some miracle Melena accepted, I was going to have to rewrite history to satisfy my family. Proposal via text message would not appease my mother. She couldn't tell that story proudly at social events. Maybe it was better not to tell her. My sister Andi was the only one who might understand, and she'd still tease me mercilessly.

I picked up a dozen donuts before approaching Melena's door. I figured bringing sweet, unhealthy goodness might help me get inside. I'd stewed and cussed myself out after sending my ill-fated 'will you marry me' text. Then I spent a few hours researching arrhythmia treatments and reviewing my insurance summary of benefits. You know, the sexy stuff that sells a woman on marriage. Today I wanted to make things right.

Melena answered my knock, which I took as a good first step. I smiled as I surveyed her quickly. Her color was good, and I was happy to note her normal golden glow was back. Her dark brown hair was piled up on top of her head in a messy ponytail and she was dressed casually in a loose gray T-shirt and leggings. It shouldn't have been sexy, but she looked fresh and comfortable. Projecting a confidence I didn't feel I told her, "I come bearing breakfast. And an apology for my text last night."

She hesitated a moment before stepping aside and opening her door wide enough for me to enter. "It's a good thing you brought the donuts."

I followed her into the kitchen, where she poured me a cup of coffee. "I didn't know what you wanted, so I bought one of everything. Do you have a favorite?"

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:50 am

“They’re all my favorite this morning. Bad news makes me hungry. Thanks.”

I watched as she chose a coconut-covered chocolate cake donut. The rich sting of the roasted coffee fumes was its own wake-up call. Melena didn’t screw around with a low-quality brew. I helped myself to a maple bar and took a sip of my coffee before trying again.

“How are you feeling? Any more dizziness or fainting spells?”

She shook her head. “No, nothing yet. I’ve been taking the meds, though I’m not sure how fast they work. It’s going to be a pain to remember.”

I nodded and took another gulp from my mug, stalling for time. Donuts were my duct tape. Surely, they could help me fix everything?

“I know my text came out of nowhere, but I was thinking, maybe we can help each other out.”

Both of her brows went up. “Help each other out? Are we back to your suggestion? How would I be helping you out?” she asked.

“Companionship and pooling of resources,” I said. “I want to buy a house.”

My argument wasn’t quite as strong as her coffee, but I still had a chance. Her brown eyes met mine. “For you? Companionship for you? I find it hard to believe you need me for that.”

I grabbed the back of my neck to cover the flush I could feel creeping up to my hairline “Maybe not, but we get along well.”

She chose not to pursue that argument, instead pouncing on my other reason for proposing. “What do you mean by pooling of resources? If you need help with a down payment for a house, you should know I’m nearly broke. Soon to be totally broke once the ER bills roll in.”

“That’s what makes my plan so genius. You’d have my insurance. And we’d both have companionship. I don’t know about you, but sometimes I get lonely when I’m off duty. I can only put in so much time at the gym before the desk attendant looks at me with pity.” I rubbed my chest. Too much truth there. I needed more hobbies. How pathetic did Melena think I was? I searched her soft brown eyes. Probably more pitiful now than a few minutes ago. It was a good thing I’d seen her in a hospital gown, stripped down to her insecurities, because I was flying mine proudly. I rushed on, hoping to gloss over my admission. “And you’d have someone nearby in case of another emergency. I know you probably don’t have much financially, I’ve got the down payment together. You could help with the monthly mortgage payments if you want, it’s more you I need as a resource to buy a house.”

“Why would I matter?” she asked.

“Do you think it’s easy to get a house offer accepted when you’re competing against other couples and young families? The housing market here is brutal. It’s all personal letters and sob stories or above asking offers.”

She scoffed. “What do you mean? You’ve got a solid job; you should be able to get a house.”

“Yes. I should be able to. But so far, I haven’t even come close. Sellers hear I’m a single man and tend to look elsewhere for their buyers. I’m cursed,” I added with a

self-deprecating smile.

“You think being married would change that?” she asked. Her lips twitched. “Remove the stigma?”

I shrugged. “It can’t hurt. Being a newlywed should have some cachet.”

“That’s a pretty thin reason to marry someone. What if we’re not compatible, or you meet someone else?”

“We’ll have time to figure out if we’re compatible. No rush. No expectations.”

She paced in front of me. “Well, I would definitely have some expectations. I want to keep working.” I nodded and she continued. “I have goals. Ones I want to achieve before I’m thirty-five, and the clock is ticking. They don’t include marriage.”

“I’m not asking you to change your goals. I’ll still be working so obviously I wouldn’t ask you to stop either. Maybe we agree to try marriage for a year, and if it doesn’t work out, your financial situation changes, or you meet someone else, we can dissolve it. No drama.”

I was worried her brows were going to be permanently stuck up at her hairline if her expression didn’t change soon. My efforts to reassure Melena didn’t seem to be gaining ground. I was pushing too hard.

“Just think about it. I have great insurance, low drug co-pays, and a deductible that’s less than the price of a couple’s spa day. I’ll email you the details on my benefits package from work. I reached out to my sister and she confirmed if we did it before the end of this month, your hospital bills from last night would go on my insurance.”

Melena’s eyes rounded, and a smudge of chocolate highlighted her mouth as it fell

open. “You talked to your sister about this already?”

I rubbed my hand over the back of my neck. “Eh. I texted her. She’s in HR and knows medical insurance. I wanted to make sure I was right about how adding a spouse worked.”

I finished the last of my coffee and got up with a stretch, putting my mug in the dishwasher. Model husband material. That was me. I glanced at Melena to see if she noticed, but she was still staring at the spot I’d vacated. I’d have to figure out how to highlight my model husband qualities later. She shook herself and focused back on me. “Jimmy, I’m floored by your suggestion. It’s so sweet, and at the same time, I’m not sure it’d work.”

“Let me send you the information I promised and give you some time to think. We’ve got a few days before the end of the month. We don’t have to rush into this.”

She focused back on me, and I was glad to see her mouth form a small smile.

“Pretty sure a few days is still the definition of rushing into this,” she said. “I’d like to see what you’d call taking it slow.”

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:50 am

Was I being an asshole by pressing this? Maybe. Probably. But I had the best of intentions. If she said no after reviewing the options, it was a no. I didn't need to buy a house now. It seemed serendipitous that we could help each other out. Was I oversimplifying my solution? Maybe. Probably. Okay, definitely. But it sounded idyllic. I wouldn't be going home to an empty apartment. I hadn't realized how lonely I was, bouncing between haunting the gym and my place, but the thought of going home to Melena instead was tantalizing. Staying with her today was equally appealing.

"Do you feel like hanging out today? We could hold down the couch and binge some TV?" I asked.

Going back to my empty apartment meant I'd sit around worrying she'd relapse. It'd be impossible to settle if I was thinking of her. Spending more time with her was the only cure. But I couldn't tell her that. It wasn't the most creative date idea, but I hoped Melena would take pity on me. She smiled. "Sure, if we can agree on something good."

It was my turn to show surprise. "Challenge accepted. What's something good for you?"

She squinted. "How would you feel about a classic?"

"I'm listening. What kind of classic are we talking about?"

"Battlestar Galactica, circa 2004?"

My smile slowly took over my face. “You’re proving me right, you know? We’re very compatible.”

She arched a brow but said nothing.

“I love Battlestar. So say we all.”

She shook her head but smiled at my quote. “So say we all.”

We moved into the living room and settled on her couch while Melena fired up her TV. I hadn’t seen Battlestar in years, but it truly was a favorite. As we wrapped up the first episode, I snuck a quick glance at Melena. She was curled up with her legs beneath her at her end of the couch. Her ponytail fell softly down her back, and a fuzzy blanket covered her lap. Cute and cozy. Soft and rosy in all the right places. I wished she were closer, but maybe she needed some time to process after the drama of last night.

She caught me looking and smiled sheepishly. “One more episode?”

“Yeah. Keep ‘em coming.”

I didn’t bring up marriage again, but it didn’t stop me from thinking about it. I could picture lazy Sundays like this one, curled up on a couch. Maybe with some extended naked ‘commercial’ breaks. Hopefully, Melena was interested in the same.

Chapter 4

Melena – It’s in the Details

I half expected Jimmy to withdraw his hare-brained proposal after we finished our Battlestar marathon. We’d spent a quiet day on the couch, and it was what I needed

after my hospital adventure. I couldn't shake the awareness of him beside me. He'd come over in dark jeans and a blue button-down shirt, and the warmth and mass of his body taunted me from the other side of the couch. Feet up and muscular thighs weighing down the cushion next to mine, tilting my body toward his, he was the perfect couch companion on a drizzly Sunday. Every time I leaned forward to grab a handful of pretzels, I got a good whiff of his aftershave. It could be called Sage and Sighs for the impact it had on my hormones.

Jimmy was handsome. Tall, broad shoulders packed with muscle from daily workouts filled out his crisp shirt. His tanned skin made his white smile that much more spectacular. That smile. It hinted at the shy boy he must have been. It was at odds with the confident man he portrayed, but still full of mischief. He was a charmer when he smiled. And he did it often. It was hard to imagine him as a serious firefighter, though I'd gotten a glimpse of that persona when he was convincing me to let him take me to the ER.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:50 am

I thought Jimmy might forget to send me the details on his benefits package, but when I checked my email on Monday as I sipped my coffee before work, I realized I had severely underestimated him. My pulse raced at the proof of his sincerity. Insurance information. It was such a weird thing to send someone you were dating. Summary of benefits said it all. It felt more like a merger than a marriage proposal. I was almost afraid to look. Was I seriously thinking of marrying him for medical benefits and a house? I suppose people married for worse reasons, but it wasn't something I'd envisioned for myself. I wanted the real deal. A romantic proposal, a man who loved me. Eventually.

I didn't want to settle. Love mattered. What my parents had, that was the dream.

Admittedly, Jimmy was legit great. He was thoughtful and caring through my hospital visit. Someday, I'd hope for someone just as supportive as a spouse.

Our first kiss made my blood fizz with glitter and effervescent bubbles before my heart kicked back, but he didn't so much as lift a finger to touch me during our day together yesterday. Sitting next to him and not touching had been torture. Had I scared him off with my medical issues? Maybe someone in the ER pulled him aside and told him to ease up on the glitter kisses and I'd be fine. If only it were that easy.

He did still want me...didn't he? I wanted Jimmy's kisses, his touches—the ones that made me sparkle from the inside. We hadn't discussed if we'd be sharing a bed in this hypothetical marriage. Women have needs. I'd never make it more than a few months without dying of frustration. And it would bother me if either of us were having our needs met elsewhere. I couldn't do it. If we didn't sleep together, I'd have to invest in Duracell stock.

I opened the document outlining his benefits. Damn. They were good. Really good. The difference between bankruptcy and solvency good. To torture myself, I checked my bank balance. Then I read my deductible. One was definitely higher than the other, and the math didn't go in my favor. My finances would be tight once the ER bills arrived, but I could probably make it. The medication costs would tip me over the edge. One bad hit I could take, but if I had to pay for the prescription every month? Jimmy's pharmacy benefits were white glove concierge medicine in comparison to mine.

I did my best to focus on my clients throughout the day and push thoughts of medical bills out of my mind. I needed to listen to what the fascia in my clients' bodies was telling me about where to apply pressure, not obsess and exert my anxiety onto my clients. My lunch break aligned with Lisa's, and I was grateful to have someone to talk to.

"How are you feeling?" she asked as I moved to the fridge to grab my lunch.

Her forehead wrinkled as she examined me. Lisa was older than me but took good care of herself. She had a wiry strength in her small frame. Her dark hair was cut in a shiny bob around her shoulders, and her expression shone with sincerity.

"I'm okay."

Her brows went up. "Really? You're not just saying that? You look pale to me."

I shrugged. "I feel normal. Maybe more tired between clients. I've been trying to take it easy."

"So, spill. Am I going to be a matron of honor?" she asked when I pulled up a chair in the small kitchen that served as our break room.

Our spa was a house converted into various therapy rooms, and the small kitchen featured a scuffed linoleum floor and some truly hideous green cabinets. Luckily, the table and chairs were well-worn and comfortable. It wasn't much, but it was better than eating in the reception area or in our rooms. I didn't like to stink up my space with the smell of my leftovers. Spaghetti was delicious, but the garlicky odor wasn't very relaxing. It clashed with the lavender infused oil I liked to use for clients.

"Ah, no. I don't think so. I'm still thinking about it," I said.

"What is there to think about? Smokey Bear is, well, hot. And single. And asked you to marry him to help you with your medical debt. He seems like a keeper."

Lisa and my id were clearly in cahoots. "How did you and Randy meet again? Weren't you high school sweethearts who'd known each other forever?"

"Yes. I'm living vicariously through you. Go for it. What's the worst that could happen?"

"The death of my dreams. Heartbreak. Divorce. The usual."

"Oh, ye of little faith." She examined me more closely. "You like him that much? Or you're not that mercenary?"

"Both. If I wouldn't ask my parents for money, why would I ask a relative stranger? It feels like I'm taking advantage of him," I said. "I moved out here to be independent. Leaning on Jimmy at the first sign of trouble doesn't feel like autonomy."

Lisa held up a finger. "One: he asked you. He volunteered. Two: didn't he say he'd get something out of it, too?"

I shrugged. “He says it would help him get into a house.”

“Sounds like you both get something out of the deal. What’s wrong with that?”

“Absolutely nothing. I’m not sure my contribution would be equal to his. Plus, what about the complications?”

Lisa’s brows raised. “Complications? Like what? The potential for steamy bedroom games? I don’t see the problem there. Sounds more like a benefit than a complication.”

“He’s only proposing we stay married for a year. In theory, it should be everything I’ve ever wanted. A short-term fix to avoid derailing my business plans. I’m not sure about a relationship with a built-in expiration date. What if it’s too good to give up? What if it changes me? What if I want more than a one-year arrangement?”

“Did he really say that?”

“He claimed to want something drama-free. He said we could dissolve after a year if either of us met someone else.”

“Do you think he’d be looking?”

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:50 am

Jimmy's offer seemed too good to be true. Maybe because he was someone I could see myself with. Like, long-term with. Forever. His wicked sense of humor spurred me to be on the lookout for the next shared joke. Jimmy's rock-solid support at the hospital tempered my anxiety and made me feel less alone. Even hanging out on the couch with him was imbued with a certain sweetness. Companionship was too bland a word, but he balanced soothing and sexy. I could forgive him the distraction of his body, because being with him felt natural.

Every time I gave him an out, he doubled down and stepped up even more. He was not what I expected from the hot guy at the gym who looked like he could bench a car. And I wasn't ready for husband material. Not yet. It was too early. Which made agreeing to only a year seem cheap. Or false. Or like I was kidding myself and headed for heartbreak. What if he wanted out after a year and I didn't? I didn't want to think about him on the prowl for someone else while we were together. I'd seen the way other women acted the fool around him, myself included. He was a flirtation magnet with his easy smile.

"What if he does find someone else?" I asked.

"Then you've avoided bankruptcy and had a year to get your feet under you," she answered pragmatically.

If only I could be that cool.

"Let's try this a different way," she said. "What if you don't take him up on it. What happens then? How are things different? Do you keep dating him?"

I nodded my head slowly. Nothing about this made me want to give up on Jimmy. He'd been sweet and supportive, even if I didn't necessarily agree with his plans. Plus, he made my girl parts tingle. No batteries required.

"So, if you help him out and he helps you out, is that a bad thing? It sounds like you already care about each other."

"Yeah, but what if it doesn't work out?"

What if I cared too much and got in too deep?

I had a hard time distancing myself. I'd been ready to give up everything for my high school boyfriend. Until he dumped me. The specter of distraction from my goals hung over my shoulder. I didn't want to give up on Jimmy. And I didn't want to give up on myself. But would one necessitate the other? Jimmy had been nothing but flexible about managing our dates around my schedule.

She shrugged. "But what if it does work out?"

I didn't have an answer. No one did. That was the problem. She let the subject drop, and I finished my salad, trying to savor the crunch of the lettuce. As unexciting as the greens were, they were still better than ramen, which is what I'd be living on once the medical bills rolled in.

Chapter 5

Jimmy – Letting Our Hair Down

It was a normal shift. It was normal in that the city of Tacoma let its hair down. It let its hair down a lot. Back-to-back calls, each one more ridiculous than the last. The final dispatch was for a possible DOA. We arrived to find an artfully posed dummy

on the front porch in full horror makeup. The resident was mortified when they realized their mistake. I had to wonder what the silver-haired man had done to his neighborhood teenagers to earn that kind of retribution.

I had beer stories for days. Some I couldn't tell due to confidentiality. Some I couldn't tell because they were too sad. I wouldn't make it to retirement if I focused on the sad stories. It was another reason marriage to Melena made sense. The gym was my only outlet for the frustrations and fears of my job. I'd lived alone too long. The guys I'd grown up with went from semi-regular game nights to hanging with their girlfriends.

Going out on my own held little appeal. My list of single wing men or women had shrunk until it contained only my sister Andi. She would happily go with me to the bar. Andi would smile wide and introduce me to a gorgeous woman with a rack that could feed a small county's worth of newborns. Andi would finesse a setup, then jokingly tell them to "stay sexy and don't get murdered" while making obnoxious eyebrow motions in my direction. Ask me how I know. The local fish house bar still had skid marks from one poor woman's heels. It took more than a few beers to forgive my sister. And I still went home alone.

The isolation only added to my growing dissatisfaction. Mark, my mentor in my company, had noticed and commented on my growing weariness. He'd told me point blank—I needed more than the job to keep me grounded if I wanted to work for the long haul.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:50 am

Having a wife would make me more stable in the eyes of the fire chief. The brass liked their personnel in committed relationships. Mark had told me they thought it gave us something more to live for, extra incentive to be careful. I could see the logic. Some days I needed a reminder of what we were protecting and comfort after a long day. My empty apartment was currently short on answers, but just the prospect of coming home to Melena snuggled up on the couch would be all the normalcy I needed. Even having someone to listen at the end of a long day would make a difference.

After my shift I met with Chase at the gym. He was a reformed workaholic, so I was no longer surprised when he remembered to meet me on time. He was dressed in shorts and a shirt that stretched across his chest. His dark blond hair was in need of a trim, and he hadn't shaved, but it was nice to see he wasn't bleary-eyed with fatigue or pale from too much time indoors. Meeting Tamra had worked wonders for his ability to distinguish day from night and wrangle his writing habits into some semblance of a balanced life. I didn't have to worry about him skipping meals anymore, but I missed our pizza and game nights. We'd been friends since we were skinny kids. Playing soccer together had formed a bond his awkwardness and my competitiveness hadn't broken, though some days it felt like we tried.

"Hey," he said with a nod.

"Hey, how's the beautiful Tamra?" I asked with a grin. I was curious how his girlfriend was handling sharing space with Chase since they had moved in together full-time. He could be a genius in the kitchen, as I knew from afternoons at my grandma's learning under her watchful eye, but Chase occasionally forgot to eat when he was on a deadline. He'd conquered a lot of his bad habits, but I had a feeling

they still cropped up from time to time. I'd be climbing the walls by now if I lived with him.

Chase's face split into a grin at the mention of his lady-love. "She's hanging in there. How about you, didn't you have a third date this weekend?" he asked. "How'd it go?"

"It ended in the emergency room," I admitted as we started up our treadmills and began an easy jog.

Total Chase bait. He gave me a second glance before focusing back on his feet so he wouldn't trip. "You look okay. You didn't become one of the cautionary tales shared by ER nurses, did you?" He shuddered. "What did you do to the poor woman? Scratch that. If it has anything to do with orifices, I don't want to know. Just tell me, is she okay?"

I nodded. "Nothing kinky. She passed out, but she's okay now. Undiagnosed heart issue."

I worried he was going to eat it any minute if he kept his gaze on me instead of the belt in front of him. "Yikes. Are you going to see her again?"

I rubbed a hand over the back of my neck, focusing on my breathing for a moment. If I had my way, I'd more than see her again. Did I dare admit I'd proposed? And I'd managed to do it so badly? Of any of my friends or family, he was the most likely to understand.

"Ah, yes. I actually asked her to marry me."

Chase's eyes bugged out, and he tripped and caught himself before hitting the stop button. He ran both hands through his dark blond hair, causing it to stand on end.

“Wow. You sure you want to do that?”

I kept my pace steady and avoided looking at him. “Gee, Chase. I thought you were the romantic one.”

“Just because I’m a writer doesn’t mean I jump into things with no thought for the consequences. Why would you want to marry a practical stranger?”

I snorted. “First of all, you, and not thinking of the consequences? It’s practically your brand. Second, she’s not a stranger. She’s Melena.”

His brows raised. “Melena, who you’ve known for all of...”

“Two weeks,” I admitted.

His brows didn’t lower. “Practical stranger. Why would you go there?”

If I couldn’t explain myself to Chase, my sister was going to annihilate me when I finally had the guts to tell her. Gathering my thoughts, I focused on my feet pounding on the treadmill while Chase stood there, boring a hole into my skull.

“Still here,” he said.

“I know. I’m still thinking.”

“It doesn’t usually take this long for you to come up with something glib. What did this woman do to you?”

“Nothing.” I gave up and hit the stop button on my own treadmill, slowing to a walk as it decelerated. I finally looked at Chase. “I can’t explain it.”

“Try.”

I shrugged. “She’s fiercely independent. Strong. Takes no bullshit and she’s funny.”

“So, she’s the female version of you?”

“Ha, ha. She’s going through a tough time right now. Financially, her diagnosis is a big deal for her. If we’re married, I can help by adding her to my insurance. In return, she helps me.”

“Helps you with what? You have other friends who would gladly be there for you and wouldn’t expect marriage in return. Maybe try one of us first?”

“Can you marry me so I can buy a house and impress my boss with my maturity and stability?”

He held up a finger. “Technically, yes. But I really hope Tamra would object. What makes you think you need to be married to find a house or schmooze your boss? Haven’t you been working with a realtor?”

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:50 am

“Yes. I’ve made five offers, all of which have been rejected.”

“You think that’s because you’re single?”

I nodded. “I don’t think single men are their preferred homeowners. At least not when they have equal offers from other buyers.”

Chase’s eyes narrowed. “What you need is a good friend who can write a personal letter for you, detailing your many stellar qualities as a homeowner.”

“Such as?”

“Your Martha Stewart side. A few pictures of your current place would alleviate any concerns about a single man trashing the house and their reputation with the neighborhood.”

“I don’t have a Martha Stewart side.”

He snorted. “Jimmy. You have freaking placemats and cloth napkins. That you actually use and wash. Daily. As a bachelor, I had paper plates and an unhealthy relationship with a single kitchen towel. You underestimate yourself.”

I shook my head. “Chase. No one wants to hear about your kitchen towel. You knew my grandmother. Between her and my mother, my napkin habit isn’t shocking. That doesn’t help the other issues, like the whole firefighter thing.”

“Firefighter thing?” Chase frowned. “That Honda of yours does you no favors. If you

parked a fire engine at home, I'd bet the neighborhood would love it. You'd be every toddler's favorite person." He smiled. "Then again, you'd be every parent's worst nightmare and spectacularly unpopular if you can't resist the tykes and run your siren." His grin turned mischievous. "I know how little willpower you have in the face of a sad toddler. An engine at home would turn you into the neighborhood menace."

I laughed. He wasn't wrong. The only time I'd been reprimanded was when I'd gotten carried away with the siren after a call, trying to soothe a demanding three-year-old girl with puppy dog eyes. The kid had been too cute for her own good. Or mine.

"My job is a conversation killer with more people than you can imagine. Relationship killer too. Either being a firefighter is too dangerous or I'm not around enough because of my work schedule. I've been trying to keep that bit of information hidden from potential sellers, but then I'm stereotyped as a messy single guy. Sellers prefer to leave their house in the hands of a couple expecting their first baby or retirees sizing down."

Chase looked me up and down, before waving his hands vaguely. "I suppose it doesn't help you look like that."

I pretended offense. "Look like what?"

"All built and shit. Intimidating. Maybe less time at the gym? It would leave us more time for video games."

I snorted. "Nice try. My life depends on my ability to run up several flights of stairs wearing fifty pounds of gear. I don't think I'm giving up the gym anytime soon. Getting married seems like a safer choice."

“Marriage as the safe choice, huh?” Chase shook his head. “I don’t give you enough credit for your optimism. What brought this on? I thought you were content to date around. Not in a rush.”

I focused on his words for a few beats. If I said jealousy, it’d be admitting the quiet part out loud. And Chase deserved his happiness. He’d fought hard for Tamra’s heart. Was it wrong if the glimmer of something similar with Melena had me rethinking my plans to keep things casual?

I swallowed and ignored his question, pushing forward with something to distract him.

“If she says yes, will you be a witness and best man for me?”

His smile slowly overtook his face. “Yes, I’d be honored.” His grin faded. “Wait. Are you going to tell Andi?”

“After the deed is done.”

He shook his head. “That’s a mistake, man. You know better. You won’t live it down if you don’t include her.”

Chase knew my sister well. He’d been on the receiving end of her tirades more than once. I groaned. “You’re right. I’ll find a way to break it to her.”

Chase smiled. “It’s for the best. You know it.”

That was debatable. My sister was a handful. She claimed it was why people had two hands. I tried to imagine my opinionated and polished sister and Melena together. Melena wasn’t a fading flower, but Andi was extra tough on women interested in me. She couldn’t let go of the idea I needed protection. I’d been more than a little upset

when I found out she was spreading rumors about me wetting the bed in high school to turn off potential girlfriends. She said they were scamming on me and wanted to use me for my body. But I was a healthy teenage guy. That was my ideal relationship. One-hundred percent physical. I didn't need Andi trying to talk Melena out of marrying me. I was already struggling to talk Melena into it. Andi would be convinced it was a mistake.

Mistake or not, it was one I was eager to make. Melena was perfect. Independent enough not to mind my oddball shifts or worry over every little thing. Funny and easy to be with. It didn't hurt that I still thought about our kisses in the shower. And in the kitchen. Also, while on shift. Brief but fiery, they left me wanting more. We had the kind of chemistry that made good partners. Everything I wanted was within my grasp; a home of my own and someone to come home to. If anything was going to help battle the day-to-day grind and stress of work, it would be that. I regretted offering Melena an out at one year. I had a sneaking suspicion it would be the last thing I wanted.

Chapter 6

Melena – All About the Benefits

I stared at the original proposal message from Jimmy a few hundred times throughout the day. ‘Will you marry me?’ Would I? The stress of not knowing how big a hospital bill I’d be getting was weighing on me. I didn’t need any financial surprises. The holidays were around the corner and always took a toll on my bank account; I sold a lot of gift certificates, which helped my cash flow, but clients slowed way down. I’d called the hospital billing office in between clients and the total made me choke. I’d been in the hospital for only a few hours and had racked up a five-figure bill. With my deductible, I needed to scrape together more than five thousand dollars. I spoke with them about financial aid, which was helpful. But it didn’t solve my pharmacy problem. If I needed medication every month that cost more than my rent, how would I survive? It’s not like insurance ran in perpetuity. Deductibles reset every calendar year. January was fast-approaching, and I’d need another five thousand dollars to get me through the next year. And the year after. I’d researched other medical plans for the new year, but either the premium or deductible blew my budget out of the water.

I could find another job outside of massage, one with better benefits. But I loved massage therapy, and I was good at it, dammit. It’d taken me a few false starts before I found my path. I’d done my time in retail and food service, and I didn’t want to go back. I shuddered. I still couldn’t look at a Black Friday ad without wanting to break out in hives. I loved working for myself and enjoyed the freedom of making my own schedule.

I stared again at Jimmy’s text before my fingers started to type.

Melena: Let's talk more tonight if you're off work? Dinner at my place?

He didn't respond before my next client arrived. I tried to focus on Meredith, the woman I was massaging, and not on the night ahead. My stomach churned. I hoped Jimmy would be available.

"Ow," the older woman complained, the sound muffled by the head rest on the massage table.

"I'm so sorry. I'll reduce the pressure." Crap. Meredith was a regular who didn't like deep tissue massage, but I didn't realize how deep I was pushing, trying to relieve my own tension. If only it worked that way. Lisa and I traded massages to give each other relief, because some days I absorbed my client's knots and pain into my own shoulders, back, and neck. However, I needed to back off or risk losing Meredith as a client.

We chattered away about inconsequential things, and I focused on our conversation instead of the decisions looming ahead of me. The rest of the hour flew by, and I was thankful to see a response from Jimmy as I checked my phone before my next client.

Jimmy: Why don't I cook for you? You haven't seen my place yet. Does 7 work?

Melena: Sure, sounds great. What can I bring?

Jimmy: Just your appetite.

He texted his address, and I laughed. I was contemplating accepting a proposal from a man whose apartment I hadn't seen. He could have anything in there. Maybe he was a closet taxidermy fan. Dead things would be a dealbreaker. I shook myself. Who was I kidding? For Jimmy, I might be able to put up with the odd set of antlers. On the hot/bad habit scale, his forearms and sexy smile distracted me enough to overlook at

least one oddball hobby. His overall sexual distraction score was a ten if we didn't live together. Downgraded to an eight with proximity. It was a lot easier to ignore dirty socks abandoned in a corner when I couldn't see them.

I dressed with care for our dinner. I generally wore leggings and a tunic-length top at work; it was comfortable and easy to move in. If I was accepting Jimmy's proposal, I wanted to look nice. I chuckled and glanced down at my cleavage as I applied my makeup. If Jimmy was a boob man, I was delivering with a deep V-neck. The freckle on the curve of my left breast was on full display.

Jimmy's complex was off the beaten path, but it wasn't hard to find. His unit was on the second floor, and I minced up the steps carrying the bottle of red wine I'd brought. I double-checked the address on my phone before knocking on his door.

When he opened the door with a smile, I was not prepared for domestic Jimmy. Wearing an apron over a collared shirt, Jimmy stood there, backlit in all his six-foot plus glory, tanned skin gleaming. Mr. Clean was immediately booted from my hot men doing chores fantasies and replaced by Jimmy. The apron had a stylish pattern and the quote: "I'm not saying I'm Martha Stewart. I'm saying no one has seen me and Martha in the same room."

He glanced down at his chest at my surprised laugh and gave a sheepish grin. "Yeah. Inside joke. My friend Chase got me this for Christmas last year. Come in."

He stepped aside and gestured into his entryway. The apartment smelled like roasted chicken, the faint aroma of sage and lemon clinging to his skin as I passed. I focused on his smiling mouth and the full lower lip that begged for a nibble. Even if dinner was a bust, he looked delicious. I debated kissing him in greeting, but he was already moving to shut the door behind me.

"Thanks for coming tonight," he said formally. I watched his Adam's apple bob as he

swallowed.

I smiled. Was he uncomfortable? Worried I'd judge him? It was too cute.

“Thanks for having me. I'll admit, I'm more than a little curious about where you live.”

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:50 am

He shifted his weight, and I was struck again by his uncertainty. “Oh. Well, let me give you the tour. It’s short because this place is small.” He held out his hand, indicating the tiny living room. “Living room.”

He had a comfy looking dark green couch and large TV. Neither of those were surprising for a bachelor, but I hadn’t expected the intricately patterned throw pillows and blanket in a matching motif. The centerpiece of shells and candles on the coffee table was also a surprise.

“Wow. Your place is amazing. Did you decorate yourself?”

He paused. “Ah. Yes.” He flushed. “I really like home improvement shows. Without a home of my own, I’m restricted to small bits of decorating.”

On the bad habit/hotness scale, if a DIY addiction was the worst hobby he could throw at me, then I’d hit the jackpot with Jimmy. He moved closer to gesture me toward the hall, and I inhaled the hints of sage and male skin. I couldn’t help leaning in. It was worth the loss of a little independence for financial security and Jimmy. Lisa’s voice in my head was urging me to marry him, yesterday.

With pink cheeks, he showed me back to the bedroom. Now that he’d prepared me, I was expecting something out of a magazine. The room didn’t disappoint. There was a queen size bed with a fluffy gray comforter you could probably sink into a full foot. No taxidermy here. The bed frame looked like a rustic DIY project, possibly handmade from a stained barn door. By comparison, my apartment was sparse and resembled something decorated by a drunk thrift store shopper.

“Wow. This is beautiful.”

“Thanks. I refurbished the headboard myself.”

It was gorgeous. The dark wood grain gleamed under the soft light filtering in through the gauzy window panels. The bed frame appeared incredibly...sturdy. I swallowed and shifted my gaze to features that wouldn't shoot my temperature up. My gaze caught on Jimmy's large hands. His rough palms had sanded and stained to create the masterpiece in front of me, and I moved on quickly to avoid the images of the two of us flashing through my mind. His body, covering mine, our hands intertwined on that very solid headboard.

As I took in the rest of the room, I noticed more unexpected touches. He had a collection of family photographs on his dresser. One showed a young Jimmy with what I presumed was his family, an older man, woman, and young girl. Jimmy was tall and stringy, downright skinny compared to his build now. I held back my grin at his braces and awkward haircut. He was a brave man for putting that photo on display in his bedroom. The other picture showed Jimmy and another young man in graduation gowns and caps. He'd filled out in the intervening years. The two scrawny men had their arms over each other's shoulders. “Who's this?” I asked.

He smiled. “My buddy Chase. We've known each other a long time. He'll stand up with me at the wedding.” His smile faded and he cast me a sideways glance. “Assuming that's something you're interested in.”

Lisa wouldn't hesitate, and really, my decision had been made when I saw his headboard. If he took half as much care with our relationship as he did with his craftsmanship on that project, I had nothing to fear. The butterflies in my stomach were absolutely not fear. Nope. Excitement. And okay, maybe a smidge of fear. I was right to be nervous. I believed my intentions and Jimmy's were good. We were helping each other out. Companionship and a house for financial support. Testing out

his headboard would be a bonus. I could marry him and give my dreams a boost. Marrying Jimmy didn't have to change my goals.

I took a shaky breath. "It is."

A grin overtook his face, making his brown eyes sparkle with good humor. "Just wait until I feed you. It'll seal the deal."

My stomach growled audibly, and heat spread up my cheeks as his smile widened. I couldn't help but tease him. I quirked a brow and did my best to cover. "I thought agreements were usually struck with more than food."

Jimmy swallowed. "More?"

His gaze traced my lips and slid down toward my cleavage. Yep. Boob man. I twisted my lips before answering. "Yes, more." I tucked my hair behind my ear then let my fingers dance along the edge of my neckline, "Like a hard...handshake." His gaze swung back up to mine, and I watched as color flushed his face. His big body leaned back against his bedroom wall. I wanted to believe he was turned on enough that he needed it for extra support. We stared at each other a moment before he cleared his throat and pushed upright.

"Well, I'm sure that can be arranged. After dinner. Let me show you the rest of the apartment."

His response was cool, but I'd seen the fire in his eyes as I traced the soft swell of my breast. I should be glad he was all business, since we hadn't settled anything yet. But having him push me up against the wall wouldn't have been a bad way to convince me. My hunger pangs were about more than dinner.

He showed me a tiny bathroom. It smelled like lavender. I spotted a small vase over

the toilet with dried lavender poking out. Even if I wasn't planning on marrying him, I'd still be asking him to help me redecorate. Jimmy had created a welcoming home in his apartment. My own space was more of a hodge-podge of styles and he had me itching to do something different.

He walked down the hall to the kitchen, and I followed, pausing to check out the framed photos on his walls. More family photo collages, and more pictures with Chase. They must be close. The ratio of photos of Chase equaled those of Jimmy's family. He and Chase river rafting with a group of other guys. One of the two of them with a peewee soccer team. The team photo was freaking adorable, and not just because most of the tiny players couldn't hold a pose to save their lives. Jimmy and Chase towered over their charges like gentle giants.

The kitchen smelled heavenly, and my mouth watered. Garlic, sage, and lemon scented the air. If he was as good a cook as he was a decorator, I was in for a treat. If he wasn't a good cook, I was choking it down anyway to avoid hurting his feelings.

"Have a seat. Let me pour you a glass of wine, and I'll put the finishing touches on dinner." He looked at me. "You can drink with your medication?"

I nodded. "Yes, I can have a small glass, and I brought wine if you want to open that bottle? I'll go get it, I left it at the door." I wandered back into the kitchen and placed the bottle on the counter. "Corkscrew?"

He grabbed one from the drawer in front of him. "Will you do the honors? I'm trying to keep an eye on these greens."

I removed the cork. "Glasses?" He nodded toward the cupboard next to me, and I pulled two down. Of course, he had beautiful wine glasses. No plastic Dick's BBQ cups for him. By comparison, I was a fraud as an adult. Somehow, I couldn't see my bright yellow plastic cups with their fading lettering in a cupboard next to his fancy

stemware. What was I doing? I barely knew Jimmy. Granted, what I did know, I liked. But was it enough?

“Breathe, Nemitz,” he said. I startled and glanced at him. Of course, he knew my last name from the hospital. “It’s going to be okay. Wine is supposed to help you unwind, not wind you up. What’s wrong?”

I sighed. “I’m not sure we fit.”

He looked at me cautiously. “What makes you say that?”

I gestured to his glasses. “You’re stemware, and I’m plastic.”

His wolfish grin sent tingles to all the right places.

“There’s nothing plastic about you.” His gaze met mine. “All kidding aside, I’m not fancy glasses all the time. Sometimes I’m beer and video games.” My shoulders relaxed. He got it. I wasn’t sure he would, but if he could understand my uncertainty, maybe we weren’t that different. His face got serious. “How do you feel about video games?”

I huffed a quick laugh. “Relieved? You’ve already blown my preconceived notions out of the water. I’m glad to hear there’s something less overachiever in your arsenal.”

He scoffed. “My gaming skills aren’t typical. They’re exceptional. I’m challenging you after dinner to prove it.”

He’d forgotten I grew up with ultra-competitive brothers.

“You’re on,” I said with a grin.

I relaxed and enjoyed sipping my wine as he finished braising the greens, moving with quiet confidence. He’d already mashed the potatoes, and they were steaming gently at the back of the stove. I could get used to this. Especially when he bent over the stove to check on the chicken in the oven, putting his firm glutes on display. I shifted in my seat, suddenly warm. From the open oven. Sure. Ogling Jimmy and eating delicious meals would never get old. He was full of desirable husbandly qualities.

He pulled the chicken from the stove, and my mouth watered. The skin was crisp and brown, and the pan crackled with the juices and aromatic steam as he transferred the bird to a cutting board to rest. I had never roasted a chicken on my own. The closest I'd come was picking one up at the grocery deli. It looked beautiful. My pangs of inadequacy threatened to become loud clangs. Jimmy was gorgeous, kind, and cooked like a dream? I would be getting the deal of the century if I married him. What was he getting?

Every bite of dinner was heavenly. We both seemed reluctant to broach the subject that brought us together. More than dazzled with his culinary skills, I finally blurted out, "How did you learn to do all of this?"

"My grandma watched me and my sister while my parents were deployed, and she had definite opinions on what we should be able to do in the kitchen. What, it's not on brand?" he teased.

I shook my head. If seducing me with good food was part of the master plan, then it was absolutely working. "I can casserole and crock pot like a boss, but this meal is complicated. I'm impressed."

He nodded. "That was the idea."

"You mean you won't cook like this for me every night?" I teased.

He smiled, and I enjoyed the flash of his white teeth and the hint of dimples. "Not most nights, no. My schedule doesn't allow for it."

"Well, color me disappointed. This was delicious." Feeling full and curious, I asked, "You haven't talked much about your job. What's a typical week like for you?" If we did go through with this marriage, how much time would we spend together? How dangerous was his job?

“There is no typical week.”

I could sense his reluctance to speak but I needed additional information. “Tell me more. I know you’re with the Tacoma Fire Department, but that’s about it.”

“I’ve been on the job about five years. It’s a lot of vehicle collisions, nursing home calls, and the occasional fire.”

“Do you like it?”

“Most days it’s the best job. Some days, not so much. Probably like any other job.” His lips twisted. “It’s not like the movies and TV shows.”

“I know that much. What surprised you most?”

“Honestly? The number of EMS calls. I never expected to spend so much time convincing senior citizens to see a doctor.”

I laughed at the image of Jimmy surrounded by stubborn blue-haired ladies. “Not how you envisioned your life as a tough guy firefighter, huh? Being a senior citizen whisperer?”

He smiled. “Not exactly. I expected a lot more heroic fire rescues and a lot fewer building fire inspections.”

“Living the glamorous life.”

He crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair. “What about you, do you like massage therapy? Is it weird to touch people’s naked bodies all the time?”

I let the subject change go. It was my turn to laugh. “You get used to it. It’s no worse

than any other medical profession. They're just bodies."

He flexed his bicep. "Speak for yourself. I like to think mine is a work of art."

I groaned. "Don't tell me you're one of those. You haven't been on one of those firefighter calendars, have you? Deal breaker!"

His mock hurt was perfect. "Hey, those are for charity."

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:50 am

Weight lifting was one hobby I wouldn't be joining him in. Me and weights did not get along. I hated the mirrors and knowing everyone was using the same germy equipment. Yoga—done on my own personal mat—was much more my speed.

He sobered and leaned forward across the table. "All kidding aside, I'm hoping there are no deal breakers here." His deep brown gaze met mine, sparkling with sincerity. "Look, I broke it down." He moved to the counter and returned with a notepad and stack of papers. "With my insurance, your co-pays and medications are reasonable. A marriage would help us both. I'd like for us to get married."

My face softened. He'd done his research. The number he'd circled was the same one I'd arrived at, reviewing the information he'd sent me. It was sweet that he'd worked so hard to pull together his own data to show me. Even if the numbers weren't compelling, his work on my behalf would be. Deciphering medical insurance wasn't anyone's idea of a good time.

I took a sip of wine, letting the tannins roll over my tongue and stalled for time. His gaze didn't leave my face. Screwing up my confidence, I finally answered. "I'd like that too."

A grin took over his face, and the white of his smile was dazzling. "You won't regret it, Melena. I think we'll be good together." The knots in my stomach were slowly unwinding. He seemed certain. "And if it doesn't work out, we've got our drama-free one-year exit clause."

My stomach sank at his words. Of course he was still planning for an exit. It was practical. I should be glad this wouldn't complicate my goals. I should be the one

planning for my exit. A long-term marriage would get in my way. I had to remind myself Jimmy was simply doing me a favor by proposing. This was about my medical care and his home, which I could see now meant a lot to him. It wasn't really about us. But I wanted it to be. Something about his words pricked my balloon of hope. I cleared my throat and forced a smile. "Of course. Speaking of that, should we have a prenup of some kind? I don't want you worried I'm taking advantage."

His expression remained calm. "I'm not. I don't think there's time to meet with an attorney and draft something official if we want to marry in time to get your hospital visit covered. If you feel strongly about it though, we can write something down just the two of us."

I released a breath. As weird as it sounded, writing down something that protected him made me feel better about what we were doing. The scales were too unbalanced. And I would need a concrete reminder of why we were doing this, something to keep me grounded. Something to manage my expectations. One year. Drama-free.

I nodded. He stood from the table, only to return with a piece of paper and a pen. He bit his lip before scrawling at the top, 'Marriage Agreement between Melena Nemitz and Jimmy Torres.' Then he looked up at me. "Okay, so what do we need on here?"

Totes normal to be hammering out a prenup. Totally. I took a shaky breath. "The house is yours, obviously, assuming you buy one while we're married. I won't have any claim on it if we decide things don't work out after a year."

He tilted his head, but then nodded and wrote 'Jimmy retains the house if the marriage ends after one year.' "Okay. What else?"

"I'll pay my portion of the medical expenses and any other expenses like utilities and food while we're married."

“Hmm. You can pay your portion of the out of pocket, but the premiums come out of my check already anyway, so I’ll handle those.”

I frowned. I wasn’t sure that was fair, but Jimmy saw my expression. “No arguments. It’s a small thing.”

I nodded slowly. “Okay. My business remains independent. I need the freedom to work any hours necessary.”

Jimmy was quick to agree. “Same. Sometimes I have to pick up extra shifts. Our schedules are our own.”

“Then the only other thing I can think of, is if either of us is unhappy after one year, or it’s not working out, we get a no-contest divorce.” I looked at him tentatively, unsure if I wanted him to rescind that offer or hold firm. “That’s what you suggested, right?”

He tilted his chin. “Right.” He scrawled down the provisions we’d outlined and signed his name, passing the paper to me for my signature. Somewhere an attorney was probably gnashing their teeth over all the ways this was a bad idea, but so long as Jimmy and I were willing to live with it, other opinions didn’t matter.

“So, how do you want to do this?” I asked after passing the paper back to him.

His brows raised. Then comprehension dawned. “I don’t know. Quickly? We only have five more days before the end of the month and it’s a three-day wait for the license. For your ER visit to be covered by my insurance, we should get the license tomorrow. We could get married at the courthouse before the end of the month.”

“You want to get married at the courthouse?”

For a marriage of convenience, it was a business-like setting. But a secret corner of my heart mourned the idea of a fancy party in my hometown. Full of family and childhood friends—that's how I'd always imagined getting married.

He shrugged. "It seems straightforward that way."

Right. What every woman wants in her marriage. Not romance, straight-forwardness. I was surprised my own Mr. Martha wanted to keep things simple, but this wasn't a real marriage. I didn't know how I felt about a judge marrying us. Maybe keeping things impersonal was a good idea. Things were awkward enough without adding another dose of formality to the mix. Last time I'd seen a judge I was called for jury duty. She didn't inspire celebratory vibes. I didn't want to feel like I was on trial for marrying Jimmy. "What about your friend, Chase, officiating instead?"

Jimmy snorted. "Last time I checked, he wasn't ordained. He judges me regularly, but he doesn't sit the bench. He's an author."

"But he's one of your closest friends. Do you think he'd get ordained online and do it for us this Saturday?"

Jimmy laughed. "He'd love it. You have no idea how much. I'll ask. What about you, who would you like to invite?"

I stared thoughtfully at my empty plate. Only Lisa came to mind. She'd murder me if I didn't invite her. I debated on whether I'd tell my family. It was short notice, and they were always busy back home. They'd be hurt to be left out, but I justified it by reminding myself this wasn't a real wedding. "Just my friend Lisa."

He examined my expression closely. "No family or other friends?"

Lisa was the only one of my co-workers I spent any time with outside of the spa.

Aside from the occasional trip home to see high school friends, I didn't have much of a social life in Tacoma. My clients and the gym made up most of my social contact outside of the occasional date. I shook my head. "Nope."

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:50 am

“Oh.” His voice was soft. My gaze caught his. Was that disappointment in his eyes? Did he want to meet my family? He was a special kind of brave—or stupid, but I didn’t really think that was the case. My family was wonderful, but they’d have questions. So many questions. None I was prepared to answer. It was safer to wait and see if this would stick. If things didn’t work out, they never had to know.

“What about you?” I asked.

His gaze shifted around the room before returning to my face. “Ah, I don’t know. Probably my sister, Andi. She’s local.”

“What about your parents? You haven’t spoken about them much.”

“They’re overseas. Both are career military now. I doubt they can get leave on such short notice.”

His expression didn’t give me any clues about how they’d react to missing the ceremony or his own feelings. My parents were going to skin me alive when they heard, but that was a problem for future Melena. “Are you close?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Andi and I are grown. Our parents have had assignments around the country and overseas for years. We’re used to them being absent. Communication has always been sketchy, and they get wrapped up in work. I understand.”

It was impossible to tell if he was disappointed. His face remained carefully blank. Flat eyes, flat mouth, no twitches giving away his emotions. Jimmy was usually so animated, seeing this other version of him spooked me.

“Are we rushing this? Should we wait until your family can be here?”

He shook his head. “No, it’s okay. I’m used to them missing things. We’ll have a celebration next time they visit.”

Ouch. There was a story there. But his expression wasn’t open to questions. His soft brown gaze met mine again, warming with excitement and turning him back into the Jimmy I’d come to know. “So, Saturday, huh?”

I gulped, then smiled in return. “Saturday.”

We cleaned up our dishes, then I proceeded to show Jimmy who was boss in Super Mario Kart. I sailed into first place easily on our first round, and Jimmy glanced at me with new respect. He clearly hadn’t expected me to win but I shook my head. Brothers. They were good for something. Ivan and Zander would be proud.

Round two, Jimmy refocused on the screen, and I could see his tongue peeking out from between his teeth. If he’d had any plans to let me win, they’d evaporated when I beat him handily in the first round.

“How do you keep beating me? I’m a trained fire engine driver,” he grouched after I won again.

I chortled. “Brothers. I learned to win so I could bend them to my will. I went a full year without unloading the dishwasher.”

Once I’d trounced him thoroughly, Jimmy finally threw down his controller in mock defeat. “I can’t take it anymore. Are you ready for dessert?”

I glanced at him quickly. He’d been hands off all evening, I wondered if he meant it the way I hoped. I’d been admiring his nimble fingers on the controllers. Dexterity

and finger speed were both highly underrated life skills as far as I was concerned. Alas, his expression exuded earnest. I glanced again at his capable fingers with their short nails and blunt tips before meeting his gaze. Given his earlier kitchen expertise, I bet he'd really made me dessert.

"Sure, what do we have?"

"I made brownies. A new recipe. They're chili chocolate."

My stomach growled. I didn't think it was possible after the meal he fed us earlier. "Those sound amazing."

I followed him into the kitchen and got out the ice cream while he dished out squares of chocolatey goodness and warmed them in the microwave. I plopped a scoop of vanilla on each, and we settled back on the couch to eat. There was the slightest edge of heat in the air drifting from the warmed brownies. If my eyes were already stinging, maybe not a good sign. I could handle most spicy foods, but I wasn't expecting heat from my dessert.

Gamely, I tried a big bite. Spice from the chiles flooded my mouth, instantly burning my tongue. My eyes watered and every mucous membrane in my body rebelled at the same time. I tried to catch Jimmy's reaction through my tears, but my eyes blurred, trying to alleviate the overwhelming heat. I shoveled a bite of ice cream in my mouth quickly to disperse the burn.

Swiping a napkin under my eyes, I caught sight of Jimmy sweating but doing his best to maintain his cool. He managed to chew and swallow without flinching. Then he ruined it by grimacing. "Sorry. I might have gone a little heavy on the chiles."

"You definitely know how to bring the heat." I grinned. "I usually appreciate that in a man, but for the sake of my heart, I'm going to stick with the ice cream."

His face blanched, and I felt terrible for teasing him. “Are you okay? Do you need your medicine? Do we need to go to the ER?”

I hadn’t meant to trigger this kind of response. “No, no. I’m joking. Sorry, it was in poor taste. I’m fine, I promise.”

He didn’t seem convinced. He kept checking me over, watching me like a hawk after abandoning his own fiery brownie. I finished the last few bites of my ice cream.

“Jimmy, I’m fine,” I insisted.

He was never going to kiss me again now. I could sense it. He examined me like he expected me to pass out at any moment. We’d been having a nice evening, technically gotten engaged, and I had nothing to show for it. Any hopes for more of his kisses were fading fast.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:50 am

It seemed gauche to suggest testing out that headboard now. Sex had been the last thing on my mind when I walked up the stairs to his apartment, but tonight I'd gotten more glimpses of the real Jimmy. He'd been sexy before, but now it was all I could do not to climb him and cling. Let his tongue stroke the remaining heat from my mouth and send new trickles of fire down every nerve ending. Thanks to my ill-timed joke, he appeared scared to so much as breathe on me. I hoped we could get past this, or it'd be a long year. A long, Costco-size battery package kind of year if all I had to ease my frustration were my own devices.

Chapter 7

Jimmy – Flying Spaghetti Monster

Iached to kiss her. Melena's lips were lush and full, and I loved her cupid's bow. I could trace it with my tongue for days. But at this rate, if I tried to kiss her, she'd accuse me of attempted murder. I'd messed up with the brownies. I wondered if she needed a special diet. I'd have to research it online. At a minimum, avoiding spicy foods was in our future. If we had a future. She'd taken the brownie in stride, but I still felt bad.

She made short work of her dessert and left the sad brownie piece in a puddle of melting ice cream as she excused herself to go home. "I know you're off tomorrow, but I have a full day of clients." She checked her phone before glancing at me. "I have a break at four. Shall I meet you at the licensing office?"

I nodded. All was not lost. "Sure, and I'll reach out to Chase to see if he can get a quickie ordainment." Was that even a thing?

She smiled. “A quickie ordainment for our quickie wedding? I’ll confirm Lisa can come on Saturday. Where do we want to do this?”

Nothing about our situation matched up with the Martha Stewart Weddings issue I may or may not have perused at the grocery store. I hadn’t thought beyond the courthouse. But if Chase was doing the honors, we weren’t limited to that venue. “How about the pagoda at the park? We could meet in the morning and have lunch afterward?”

“Sure, that works. I’ll text you.”

She gave a small wave as she grabbed her purse and jacket. Another missed opportunity. When had I become shy? I’d dated enough that kissing one woman who’d agreed to be my wife shouldn’t be so difficult. The attraction was there. But so was the bone-deep fear of hurting her. I was trying to help. I didn’t want to be the reason she had another fainting episode.

It struck me as she closed the door. We’d planned our wedding. I was getting married. Shit. What had I done? I took a deep breath and let it go. We could do this. Melena was amazing. Warm. Funny. Fun to be with. At worst, we’d be friends. I may be the friend who wanted to maul her like a Malayan tiger, but I could survive being Melena’s friend. No matter how much I wanted to be more, maybe a friend was what she needed now. I could do that. For her. My baser instincts could be repressed. There would be more gym time in my future. Lots and lots of reps. Until I was too tired to do anything but fall into bed, head empty. Not aching for her.

My phone buzzed.

Melena: Lisa is available on Saturday. Is Chase able to do the deed?

Crap. I was already falling down on my husbandly duties. I opened my messages with

Chase.

Jimmy: How do you feel about getting ordained and marrying me on Saturday?

Chase: I'm honored, and I love you, but it's brotherly love. It can never be anything more. The only person I want to marry is Tamra.

Jimmy: Smart-ass. That's not what I meant. Officiate for me and Melena?

Chase: I'm still honored. That I can probably do. Let me do some web research on getting ordained. I've always wanted to marry someone. How did you know?

Jimmy: Just let me know if you can do it.

Page 23

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:50 am

A few minutes later he sent me another message.

Chase: Oh, I can do it. How do you feel about being married by someone ordained by the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster?

Jimmy: Is it wrong I'm thinking Italian for lunch after?

Chase: Pretty sure the church allows it. They seem like the progressive types.

Jimmy: Sounds good. Let's not mention to Melena exactly **who** ordained you.

Chase: Pretty sure we're talking about a what in this case. I've got a feeling the Flying Spaghetti Monster is non-human, non-denominational, non-judgmental.

Jimmy: Noted. Thanks for agreeing to do this. Saturday at 11? I'll take us all out to lunch after. Bring Tamra?

Chase: Ha! She wouldn't miss this. You're her favorite, you know.

Jimmy: Don't be offended if she cries at my wedding.

Chase: Because she's so sentimental? Not sure you know my girlfriend. Nerves of steel, that one.

Jimmy: No. Because I'm taken.

I snickered. Let him sit with that one for a while. He knew I was joking. Tamra only

had eyes for Chase. I switched back to my messages with Melena.

Jimmy: We're all set for Saturday. 11 at the Pagoda. See you tomorrow for our licenses.

I rubbed a hand over the back of my neck before making the call I'd been dreading. The conversation was too important for text. I'd have to bring all of my de-escalation skills into play. No matter how much I protested, Andi was going to read this as Melena taking advantage of her only brother. She picked up on the third ring.

"Everything okay, Jimmy? You never call me," my sister said.

It was true. We texted often, but I didn't call. To be fair, neither did she. We were both busy with our own lives. I worked twenty-four-hour shifts on a rotating schedule, and my sister was a big-shot professional, rising fast at work. We grabbed beers together when our schedules allowed, but it'd been a month or more since we'd seen each other.

I'd paused too long.

"Jimmy? You're scaring me."

I cleared my throat. "I, ah, have news. Nothing bad," I rushed to add.

Her snort was audible over the phone. "No conversation that starts with a pause like that can be good either."

"I don't know how to tell you," I admitted.

I could picture her pacing in her apartment, dark curls spiking above her like a halo.

“Nope. Not ominous at all. Spit it out, brother.”

“I’m getting married,” I said. “On Saturday.” It came out all in a rush, like if I said it fast enough, maybe she wouldn’t overreact.

“What shade of stupid do you think I am? Who is this woman? It is a woman, right? Don’t even think about bringing some kind of child bride into our lives. No more strays. You can’t save them all, Jimmy.”

I grimaced before the full meaning of her words sank in. “What the hell, Andi? Child bride? Never.”

I could practically see her shaking her head at me. “I know you. You attract the helpless ones. It’d be just like you to help a pretty young thing out of a bad situation.”

Melena might not be in the best situation, but marrying her wasn’t me being overwhelmed by my desire to help. My desire for her, maybe. I flopped on my couch before responding.

“Melena’s of age. In fact, she’s close to my age. Stop being gross.”

“Okaaaay,” Andi responded. “Then what’s wrong with her?”

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:50 am

Andi clearly smelled something amiss. I didn't want to lie to her, but Melena's medical condition was none of my sister's business.

"Why would you think something's wrong with her?"

I couldn't help the way my volume increased with every word. Andi knew how to get me going and what would make me squirm. Her talent for catching and releasing moths in my room was legendary. I wigged out every time, and she cackled with glee as she rehomed them back outside.

"You're marrying...Melena is it? And I've never met her? Something must be wrong. She's not blackmailing you, is she? You know your crew won't care you slept naked at church camp and everyone saw your dong. No one will give you grief that you and Chase once made your own NSYNC music video. I know I tease you with blackmail about these things but suck it up and deal with the embarrassment. It's not worth shackling yourself to some stranger."

"Ouch. I'm not sure who should be more offended: me or Melena. You're going to love her. She's awesome."

"Not if she's blackmailing you into marriage, I'm not."

I groaned. "Andi, how could you think that? She's just a wonderful woman I'm marrying. On Saturday."

"See, that's where I have the problem. What's the rush?" she asked. "Wouldn't she be as wonderful in six months to a year?"

I shrugged before I remembered she couldn't see me sprawled across my couch. "The time's right."

"How could the time be right? I haven't even met this woman. How can you be ready to marry her?"

"I just am."

Stupid and stubborn, maybe. Didn't mean it was wrong. Melena needed me, and the sliver that recognized Mark was right about finding purpose outside of work exhaled for the first time at the thought of coming home to her. I took a deep breath and stared at the ceiling. I wanted to marry Melena. Against all reason, and beyond my protective instincts, something about it felt right.

"Jimmy, I checked my receipts, and I didn't order any of your bullshit. What's the real deal?"

I sighed. Would she hate the idea of my marriage more or less if she knew what was driving it? I went for a half-truth instead. "Spending time with Melena brings out the best in me. She accepts me, perfectionist quirks and all. There's something about her."

"It'd better not be her broken wings, Jimmy."

Melena may be going through a tough time, but there was nothing broken about her. In her own way, she was competitive. Driven. A lot like Andi actually.

They were going to hate each other.

Chapter 8

Melena – It's a nice day for ... an awkward wedding.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:50 am

I reached for the opposite ends of my bed with my fingertips and toes, enjoying the full-body stretch. It was my wedding day. I'd rescheduled my Saturday clients to make time for the ceremony. I explained to a few regulars why I was moving them. Most had been congratulatory. Only my crotchety client, Michael, teased me about a shotgun wedding. Since he'd told me he married his wife in two days before shipping out before the war, there wasn't much heat to it. I could hear the smile in his voice when he reminded me hasty marriages give you time to repent at leisure.

We'd gotten our license without a hitch, and I could only hope our wedding day went as smoothly. My heart raced at the thought of meeting Jimmy later. "Quiet," I whispered. There would be no time for an ER visit today.

My medication appeared to be working, but I had scheduled a follow-up with a cardiologist for Friday. I hadn't told Jimmy about the appointment yet. Considering he volunteered to marry me to fund my medical care, he'd shown restraint in asking about my follow-up appointment. I'd expected more questions, but his energy seemed to be focused on our upcoming wedding. And only on the wedding. I kept waiting for us to get to the important questions, like where would we live? Did he want to move in together right away or wait until he found a house? How involved would I be in the house hunt? It was simultaneously the fastest and slowest moving relationship I'd ever had.

To be honest, I hadn't brought up any of my questions with Jimmy because I still didn't really know the answers myself. I wanted to be independent, and I wanted to marry Jimmy. Those two things should be mutually exclusive. My mom's sewing and alterations business had slowly withered under the weight of her helping my father. She took on fewer and fewer clients of her own so she could spend more time on

construction permits and billing. I didn't want that to be me. But maybe with Jimmy it didn't have to be. It was all I could do to focus on what was next. And what was next was our wedding. Today. I don't know what fool had decided the ceremony would be at eleven, but it was both too far away and way too close. What was I going to do for four hours? The longest shower my apartment's meager water heater could provide was still only thirty minutes long. Full makeup and the long-sleeved dress I'd chosen for the occasion would take another forty minutes tops. I was too restless to focus on anything else. No book or TV show was going to hold my attention. Even I wasn't Zen enough for yoga today, though maybe that was what I needed. Was it wrong I wanted to text Jimmy to see if he wanted to play video games before our wedding? Dream wife, right? Or delinquent wife. Whatever the distinction, I needed a distraction, stat.

The knock on my door was the answer to my prayers. Or, more accurately, Lisa.

"Come on, I'm taking you out to breakfast," she declared when I cracked the door open. Dressed simply in jeans and a T-shirt, Lisa had a garment bag slung over one shoulder and a large red tote over the other. She dropped both over the back of the couch and turned to take me in.

"I'm not dressed yet," I said, tugging on the oversize T-shirt and boxers I had slept in.

Lisa snarked back. "I see that. Throw on something easy, and we'll go. We can get you glammed up later. Right now, mimosas are in order."

I perked up. That was an idea I could get behind. I smiled. "Have I told you lately you're the best?"

"Aw. You're just saying that because I'm buying. Get ready and we'll go."

I threw on clothes and brushed my teeth in record time before returning to Lisa in the

living room. “Ready.”

We enjoyed a leisurely breakfast at a small café in north Tacoma known for its odd collection of sun themed decorations. They had gone a bit overboard with plaques with suns, photographs of sunrises, and an assortment of sunshine-themed paintings but with a name like The Sunbreak, it had the intended effect. It was warm and cozy, and I couldn’t help but feel the day was off to a good start. The two mimosas I’d had with breakfast may have had something to do with my positive outlook. Lisa’s unending chatter kept the conversation flowing and distracted me from my impending nuptials. When she judged we’d burned enough time, she paid our tab and poured me into her car.

“Come on, bride-to-be. Let’s get you back to shower and change.”

Time with Lisa had calmed me, and I let the bubble of happiness from breakfast carry me through showering and blow drying my hair. It gleamed around my shoulders as Lisa moved in to help me wrangle it into some semblance of a hairstyle. She kept me laughing with suggestions of increasingly outlandish hairstyles before we settled on a simple one that suited my round face. Most of my hair was left hanging straight down to my shoulders, but she gathered a section from either side of my head and twisted it, pulling each section back and braiding it together. She helped me apply my makeup next, contouring and highlighting like a champ. I shouldn’t have been surprised, Lisa was always turned-out, but she’d never used her skills on me. The curves of my face had intriguing hollows, and my dark eyes looked smokey and mysterious. I could have been a bride or a badass. How about both. I straightened my shoulders, standing taller.

A little after ten, Lisa helped me step into my dress. October in Tacoma could be hit or miss, weather-wise. I’d wanted something nice I wouldn’t freeze in. There hadn’t been much time to shop anywhere other than the local mall. My dress was the product of a quick trip on my lunch hour, but I was happy with my choice. It had long sleeves

extending to my wrists. Having previously decided against a traditional white gown, the pale lavender made my deep skin tone glow with good health. The sheath hugged my curves and fell to below my knees. However, its key feature was the neckline. It hugged and accentuated my breasts with a deep sweetheart V. It was both sweet and swanky at the same time. Jimmy's gaze wouldn't make it beyond the girls. I could probably wear a burlap bag from the waist down and he'd never notice. With that in mind, I didn't bother with heels and slipped into a pair of comfortable nude flats instead.

I spun to check out the overall effect in the mirror and smiled.

"You look beautiful," Lisa said.

I beamed at her. "Thanks. I feel beautiful. I appreciate your help getting ready. I like your dress too. I'm impressed you found one on such short notice."

She ran a hand down her long, blue maxi dress. "Oh, this old thing? Thanks. I'm joking; it really is something I've had forever. You know, since someone had to go and get married in a rush and we didn't get a real shopping trip in."

I shrugged. "Sorry, not sorry. I've only been shopping with you once, and it was enough."

"What do you mean?" she crowed with a gamine grin. "I'm a joy and a freaking delight to shop with. Just ask anyone."

I snorted. "Yeah, anyone who doesn't want to be stuck with you for six hours in one store. I love you like a sister, Lisa, but you're torture in retail form. You're the kind of customer I hated in the boutique. You have to try on every damn thing in the store."

She shrugged. “How else do you know what works for you? Isn’t that the joy of shopping in person, trying things on?”

I shook my head. “We’d better go.”

“Do you have everything? What about flowers? Did you get a bouquet?” Lisa asked.

“Jimmy is bringing them,” I said with a soft smile. It was a sweet gesture, and knowing he cared enough to see to those details loosened some of the tension in my gut.

Lisa’s head tilted back. “Jimmy’s bringing them? He didn’t used to date a florist or anything, did he? If your bouquet is full of Oleander,run.”

I laughed. “It’s hard to imagine anyone bearing Jimmy ill-will.”

Lisa nodded knowingly. “Exactly. That’s why you have to watch out. His ex may want him back. You make one wrong move, and boom, he’s a widow, ready for some other woman to comfort.”

I shook my head at her antics and took one last glance at myself in the mirror. The woman looking back at me stood with confidence, chest out, head up. I was skilled at faking it. I took a deep breath. Insurance. Companionship. Jimmy. Not necessarily in that order. I grimaced. One year. I could manage a relationship for one year without losing myself. I wasn’t truly giving up my independence, just changing my address. If my heart raced faster than it should, it was my heart condition. Not the thought of living with Jimmy. Sharing a bed with Jimmy. Making a home with him. I swallowed and forced a smile. I could do this and stay whole.

Chapter 9

Jimmy – Wives > Sisters

It was only 10:20, and I paced the path in front of the pagoda like a madman. If I had anything but a short haircut, my hair would be standing on end from rubbing my hands over it. I was sure a concerned parkgoer would call in and request someone come eject me if I weren't dressed like a man facing matrimony instead of a man facing his inner demons. I'd suited up for my wedding with Melena despite the short notice. I'd managed to pick up a fresh dress shirt but had to make do with the one suit I used when I had to testify for the department on arson cases in court.

I spent most of my morning creating a boutonniere for my suit and a bouquet for Melena. I'd scoured Pinterest for ideas and been sure to ask what color her dress was. My flower options in October were limited, but I did the best with the lavender options my local grocery and craft store had to offer. I was proud of my efforts. I hoped it wasn't weird that I'd taken on that aspect of our wedding planning. She didn't seem to mind when I asked if I could provide her bouquet. But she hadn't seen the results yet.

I glanced down at the flowers in my hand. Jasmine was the scent I most associated with Melena. Unfortunately, jasmine was out of season. I wanted something equally fragrant and delicate and had settled on a white lily. A range of ferns and other greenery to make the lilies pop, and I created a smaller version for the boutonnieres. As an afterthought, I also put together a small bouquet for Lisa. I hadn't met the other woman yet, and flowers couldn't hurt my chances of making a positive first impression.

Chase pulled up after I'd successfully scared away a few gray-haired women speed walking with my deranged pacing and muttering about flowers.

"Jimmy, ready for your big day?" he asked.

I smiled at Tamra as she exited their car. "Ready as I'll ever be. I'm glad you could both make it."

"We wouldn't miss your wedding, Jimmy," she reassured. "I've been waiting a long time for you to find someone special. I'm looking forward to meeting Melena."

My smile got bigger. "I'm sure she's looking forward to it too." Or she would be. If she knew Tamra existed. I wasn't sure I'd mentioned Chase's girlfriend to her. Oops. There were still a lot of gaps in our knowledge of each other. I handed Chase's boutonniere to Tamra and she helped him fix it to his jacket. I'd pricked myself ten times but managed to successfully pin my own on in the mirror at home that morning.

We'd lucked out with the weather. The sun shone on the water and gleamed off the dew in the Point Defiance gardens. The rose gardens were spent for the year, but the flare of reds and golds from the maples in the Japanese garden and the rolling green lawns leading down toward the water still made a magnificent setting for our wedding. It was chilly, but it could have been worse. Since our wedding was on such short notice, I hadn't had time to rent the pagoda building. We were making do with the public access gardens. The pagoda was a beautiful red brick historic building, but large for our needs. The graceful arches and dips of the green tile roof at least provided a nice background for our ceremony.

My stomach dropped like I was lifting off in an airplane as a familiar car rounded into the parking lot. Andi was here. I wasn't sure she'd come. In a perfect world, Gran and our parents would be here too. Our earlier conversation explaining my impending marriage had gone...not great. I was hoping she'd at least be civil to Melena. But it

was Andi. All bets were off.

She stepped from her car wearing a black dress. Uh oh. According to our mother, black was restricted to funerals, never weddings. Andi wearing black was a message. I sighed. I loved my sister, but some days it was easier to love her than others. At least she'd shown up, so that was a win, mourning attire aside. I smiled and hugged her as soon as she drew close enough.

"Hi Andi. Thanks for coming today, sis."

She pushed me away and didn't smile in return. Even her curls seemed subdued. Maybe she was missing Gran too. It used to be the three of us against the world. "You know I wouldn't let you do this without me. Plus, I want to meet the woman who got you to the altar in record time."

"You'll like her, you'll see."

Her expression didn't change. Great. Open-minded, my sister was not. There were certain topics I'd learned to avoid with her, but I didn't want my wife to become one. She hated that I was a firefighter. Hated. It. But she loved me. Therefore, to keep the peace, we didn't talk about my job. I knew it came from a place of love and fear, and I imagined her reaction to my wedding was the same. She wanted the best for me. Andi didn't want to see me hurt. She'd be watching Melena like a hawk, because my sister was always harping on me to be careful. We'd gone through high school together under the loving eye of our grandmother while our parents were deployed. She'd been my rock through the dark days of our grandmother's illness and eventual death. We looked out for each other. I needed to remember she ultimately had my best interests at heart—even if her concern was misplaced—if she went off the rails with Melena.

I didn't recognize the next SUV that pulled up and parked. An Asian woman behind

the wheel got out with a wave in a long blue dress. Brown hair framed her face and fell to the nape of her neck. My gaze drifted to the passenger seat, and my shoulders relaxed as Melena stepped out. She'd come. Until that moment, I hadn't realized how worried I was she'd bail. She didn't have to do this. We didn't have to do this. I tried to tell myself it would be a relief if she no-showed, but I was lying. The possibility of a home, of a future with her, was alluring.

My steps ate up the distance between us. I looked her over from head to toe, before returning my gaze to hers. "You look beautiful," I said.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:50 am

She did. Her silky soft hair had been pulled back to reveal her beautiful eyes. They were dark and liquid. I hoped it was with excitement, not fear. Who was I kidding? It was probably ninety-five percent fear. But I hung on to the five percent I thought was excitement.

She smiled. “Nice flowers. Are we both throwing bouquets?”

I shook myself and glanced down at my hands. I was double-fisting the flower arrangements. If they’d been beers, I’d have taken a sip from each for courage, but instead I thrust the large one out to her. “This one’s for you. You always smell so nice, I wanted something fragrant and beautiful like you.” I held up the spare bouquet in my other hand. “This one’s for your friend.”

Her smile widened. “You brought one for Lisa too? That’s so sweet.” She brought her flowers to her face, inhaling deeply before tracing a finger down the ribbon-wrapped stems. “You made these?”

I forced the acknowledgement out of a too-tight throat. Watching her reaction to the bouquet, the way the dewy white petals caressed her skin, and seeing her delicate fingertip caress the shaft had me shifting uncomfortably. I could watch those fingers and flowers for days. I tried to shake off my erotic train of thought as she responded to my grunt of assent.

“They look and smell amazing. Thank you.”

I soaked up her smile and approval. Basking in them released the knot in my stomach and brought blood flow back to my brain. A feminine throat cleared next to me.

“Is that for me?”

I glanced to my side. “Lisa? Hi, I’m Jimmy.” I held out the hand that didn’t have the bouquet and shook hers awkwardly before passing her the flowers.

“It’s nice to meet you, Jimmy. Thanks for the flowers.” She peered at them carefully before giving Melena an unsubtle nod and mouthing, “All clear.”

Melena’s lips twitched like she was fighting back a smile, and I hoped the joke wasn’t on me. It seemed more like a nod of approval from Lisa, but I didn’t understand their shorthand.

Lisa turned back to me, her expression innocent. “The flowers are lovely. I appreciate you putting safety first by assembling them yourself. You can’t be too careful. Shall we get started?” Lisa glanced over her shoulder. Chase, Tamra, and Andi had hung back, giving me some privacy to greet Melena. They were huddled near the arch of the pagoda, chatting quietly.

I nodded and turned back to Melena, offering her the crook of my arm as we walked up the path toward the others. I murmured, “What was that about?”

“Lisa’s protective, she was worried about someone slipping something into the flowers,” Melena acknowledged with a barely suppressed laugh.

My chuckle was cut off by the realization that Lisa’s caution might have been warranted if Andi got her hands on the flowers. Luckily, Andi didn’t know a carnation from a rose, and as much as she was suspicious of my new bride, she’d never do any real harm.

I took a deep breath. “I’m thankful you’re here today.”

She could have taken one look at Andi dressed in black and run. Or not shown up at all. It wasn't every day you married for convenience and companionship, instead of love. Not exactly what every girl dreams of. Not what I had in mind either. In a more perfect world, I'd be marrying forever, not for now. Offering the one-year exit clause had been the right move at the moment, but the more time I spent with Melena, the more I didn't think a year would be enough.

"Where else would I be?" she asked.

"Far, far away from my bratty sister. I'm sorry in advance for Andi," I murmured quietly. More loudly, I introduced them as we drew near. "Melena, I'd like you to meet my sister, Andi. Andi, this is my fiancée Melena."

The women exchanged greetings and shook hands. The death star didn't implode. Neither did Andi's head. She was perfectly polite. Nothing could have set me on edge more. My sister knew how to get to me.

"Melena, this is one of my oldest friends, Chase, and his girlfriend, Tamra."

Chase held out his hand. "I'm pleased to meet you, Melena, I've heard a lot about you. Me and the Spaghetti Monster are excited to officiate today."

Melena gave him an odd look, and I couldn't blame her. Did she think he was referring to Tamra? Should I explain? That might make it worse. Sometimes there was no explaining Chase. Tamra nudged him gently in the side, and they exchanged a glance before she turned to Melena.

"Hi, I'm Tamra. It's nice to meet you. Please ignore Chase. Sometimes his sense of humor is a little unusual."

I would have disputed her statement in solidarity with Chase, but it was one hundred

percent true. It was better to learn about him now, than for me to prolong the expectation of normal social boundaries and cues.

Chase clapped his hands together. “Let’s do this.” He put his hands on my shoulders, moving me into position. “You, stand over here.” He turned to Melena and gestured to her. “And if you please, over here.” She moved into her spot next to me, and he smiled at her beatifically. “Excellent.”

He looked to Tamra and Andi. “And my beautiful witnesses, if you will, over here.” He turned to Lisa, “You must be Lisa. If you don’t mind, here, next to Melena. There.” He nodded in satisfaction.

Chase snapped his fingers. What now? Chase pointed at Andi. “You have a phone, right? Can you take photos?”

She nodded before shooting me a glance. “I’d love to. For posterity.” Oofta. That had been one of her arguments against me marrying Melena. Posterity. Family. Continuity. She didn’t think I should marry someone I wasn’t head over heels for. She thought I should wait until I wanted children. Andi had seen her share of messy break ups at work, the steady wave of child support orders and direct deposit requests to new individual bank accounts had damaged her optimism. I rubbed my forehead. I didn’t want to rehash our argument. Instead, I turned back to Melena, focusing on her. She looked amazing in her dress. She glowed with good health, and it was hard to believe we were here due to a heart ailment. Some of it was makeup and other trappings, but she really did look good. And that dress. My gaze wandered and it took Chase clearing his throat to bring my attention back up to her face. What? I was allowed to look. She was almost my wife. And I was a very lucky man. Melena caught my gaze and smiled. I wasn’t fooling her at all, but she didn’t seem to mind. We were made for each other.

Chase cleared his throat again and began the simple ceremony. “Do you,

Melena—Wait, I don't know your last name. What's your last name?"

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:51 am

I held back my groan. I should have prepared Melena for Chase. Or asked him to prepare some opening remarks. Andi and I were used to him barreling forward. For a guy who recently bought a Prius, he could go from conversational zero to one-hundred-ten in no time.

Melena's laugh had an uncomfortable edge to it. "Nemitz."

Chase nodded. "Of course, I'm sorry. Do you, Melena Nemitz, take Jimmy Torres, to be your lawfully wedded husband?"

Her voice was soft as she answered. "I do."

I could feel the burn of Chase's gaze on me as he continued, but my focus was stuck on Melena. "Do you, Jimmy Torres, take Melena Nemitz as your lawfully wedded wife?"

I smiled and traced her face with my gaze, enjoying the light blush filtering up her cheeks the more I stared. "I do."

Chase clapped his hands together. "Great. Then by the power invested in me by—" he caught my quick negative head shake, "me, I now pronounce you husband and wife. I invite you to seal your promise with a kiss."

We hadn't talked about this. We hadn't kissed since the episode in Melena's kitchen. Could her heart handle it? My mind raced with pictures of us rushing to the ER instead of celebrating our wedding. She leaned forward, and this time I swear it was me who blacked out. If by blacked out, I mean cruised past her tempting lips and

bussed her on the cheek. At our wedding. She was my wife, not a maiden aunt. I was an idiot. But I was an idiot who feared ending up in the emergency room again. Was her heart okay? I needed to check these things before just going for it. Who was Chase to tell us to kiss, anyway? What kind of reckless invitation was that? I shot him a look of outrage and missed Melena's penetrating gaze.

Andi barely contained her snort, and I immediately regretted my actions. Melena's hopeful expression had fallen when I turned back to see her face. Her dark eyes clouded. The cheek kiss was clearly sub-par. I'd only been a husband for a hot second, and I was failing miserably. I couldn't let our ceremony end that way. I reached for Melena's hands, but she'd already drawn away. Shit. I'd screwed up. I forced words out from my tight throat. "Melena!"

I couldn't stand the disappointment in her expression. "I need a redo," I admitted. She tilted her head. "Are you feeling okay?" She nodded. "Like, rock solid okay?" I asked again. "Heart rate all good?" She gave me a sideways glance but nodded again. "Good."

I scooped her up in my arms, enjoying the curves I'd admired at a distance pressed against me as I dipped her back dramatically. I surprised a laugh out of her. "Don't drop me, you dolt."

I smacked a kiss behind her ear, and she squealed. "That's better," I said, as my lips zeroed in on hers. She relaxed into my embrace, and I enjoyed the soft play of her lips against mine. I took my time, exploring the cupid's bow I loved so much, tracing it with my tongue before returning to kiss her more deeply. We were both out of breath when we broke apart and I set her down gently on her feet. "Still feeling okay?" I asked.

She nodded again. Chase clapped me on the shoulder from behind, reminding me of our audience. "Well done there, Jimmy."

Lisa nodded from Melena's other side. "I thought for sure you were going to botch it, but you recovered. Nice save."

A flush crept under my skin. Not exactly how I wanted the story of today to go, but if I'd gone from botching it to a save, I'd take it. Melena didn't pull away from my hand grasping hers, so I counted it as a win.

"Is everyone ready for lunch? I made reservations down on the pier."

We were close enough to the restaurant that we chose to walk, and I enjoyed the sunlight playing over Melena's hair. I couldn't stop sneaking glances at her walking beside me. My wife.

Andi was subdued, but the rest of our party enjoyed a nice lunch overlooking the waterfront. The light sparkled on the water, like the Sound was smiling with us, sharing in our celebration. Even Andi seemed to have softened somewhat when she ordered a champagne toast for the table.

Her eyes met mine across the table before moving around to gaze at our party. "To my brother, Jimmy, and his new wife, Maleenay," she said before taking a sip.

I scowled. She'd heard me pronounce Melena's name. The slight was intentional. And rude. My hand gripped Melena's under the table. I opened my mouth to respond, but she beat me to it.

"Thanks, Andi. It's Ma-lean-a. You'll be seeing a lot of me, so it's best to get these things squared away right up front," she said.

I was impressed. I couldn't have said it better. I loved my sister. This was her protective vibe on full display, but it was still rude. And Melena was my wife. I owed allegiance to her now too. "Sis, Melena's no fading flower. I'm not a pushover either.

I hope you'll wish us well."

Andi's eyes narrowed on Melena. "Just treat him right and we'll be fine. I only have one brother."

Melena smiled. "Lucky girl. I have two."

Andi, Lisa, Chase, and Tamra excused themselves as we wrapped up the meal. I stood to give Chase a hug and he slapped me on the back. "Enjoy, buddy."

"Thanks for officiating today, Chase." I smiled at him. "Maybe someday I can return the favor?"

He glanced behind him to where Tamra was returning from the restroom. "Absolutely."

Lisa wasn't shy about getting her digs in as she left. "You take care of her, you hear? I want to gossip on Monday about the good kind of legendary kissing. Not the bad kind."

I saluted. I was no fool.

At last we were alone. I smiled at Melena and let the quiet rumble of other conversations roll across us.

“Hello, Ms. Nemitz.”

“Hello, Mr. Torres. Where do we go from here?”

“I see you’ve discovered the flaw in my master plan. We never got past discussing the getting married part, did we?” I asked, watching her face carefully. “Taking your question literally, I noticed you arrived with Lisa. So, I’m guessing at a minimum, you need a ride.”

Melena bit her lip and nodded. “I’m thinking I should keep my apartment.”

I nodded slowly. “For now, that makes sense. Neither apartment has much room. But I’m hoping you’ll move in with me when we find a house.”

She glanced at me from beneath her lashes. “You really want to move in together? I thought this would be more of a marriage-in-name-only kind of situation. You know, I’d get your insurance and you’d get my name on the house offer.”

“While it’s true I mostly need your name on the house offer letter, I’m honestly also just...lonely. I’d like a roommate. Or more. Someone to come home to.”

Her smile was incredulous. “You? Lonely? You’re one of the most outgoing men I’ve ever met.”

I shrugged. “People know who they think I am; they don’t know me. I’m the laughing guy at the gym who works a lot. Someone everyone recognizes but no one knows. Not my favorite color or why I went into firefighting instead of the military, not what I do

when I'm not working out or on the clock."

"I'd like to know you."

"I'd like to know you too. That starts with us living together. I promise; I put the toilet seat down."

Her laugh made me smile. "Are we rewriting our vows now? You'll put down the toilet seat, and I'll move in with you?"

"Sure. Any other requirements you want to add to the list?"

Her lips tilted up. "I'll wipe out the sink and shower drain regularly if you'll keep cooking for me. I had no idea you were skilled in the kitchen."

"It'd be my pleasure."

I squeezed her hand where it lay on the table before paying the check.

We were quiet on the ride back to Melena's apartment. It was early afternoon, and I wasn't sure what to do with myself. Should I invite myself in? We were married now. But we hadn't spoken about what that meant for us as a couple other than our addendum vows. What had started as a simple agreement didn't feel straightforward anymore. I was excruciatingly aware of her in the seat next to me. Her purple dress was draped over her thighs, and the neckline gave me a fabulous view. Melena's soft heat called to me, the hint of jasmine signaling her warm skin. In any other situation, I'd let my trousers tighten in anticipation of an afternoon in bed with my beautiful wife. I swallowed hard and cleared my too-tight throat.

"What do you want to do today?" I asked.

“What, you want more excitement than getting married?”

I grinned and glanced over to see her smiling at me. “Yeah, anything else is probably a letdown.”

Her brows waggled comically. “Well, not everything. I’m sure we could come up with something we haven’t tried before.”

Sure. No pressure. Last time we got hot and heavy she ended up on the floor, but if I was reading her signals right, she was interested in that and more. I glanced back at her velvety lips. Tempting. So tempting. In the close confines of the car, the scent of warm jasmine surrounded me.

She slowly trailed a finger down my forearm where it rested between us. Like she’d struck a tuning fork, waves of desire pulsed through my body, centering on my groin. I wanted to fork her, all right.

I focused back on the road with difficulty. Suddenly it was hard to work the gas and the brake; I had a major obstruction in my path. I willed myself to relax, but it was hard. Thinking about how hard it was didn’t help either. I cleared my throat. “So, are you suggesting we have a nice, relaxing afternoon...” I trailed off.

“In the bedroom? On the couch? Or maybe up against my door? Yes. Really anywhere but the kitchen floor.” I could feel her gaze stroking like a phantom hand toward my dick. “You seem...tense. Maybe we can start with a nice, relaxing massage?”

“Wouldn’t that be work for you?” I choked out.

She nodded, lips tilting up at one corner. “Don’t worry, I’ll take it out in trade later. I want you to play me like a video game.”

Did she want me to win her? It had to be a euphemism, but I wanted to be crystal clear on her meaning. She caught my confusion. “I mean I want you to press my buttons rapidly for hours and hours until you win me over.”

No pressure. Luckily, I’d trained for this. My game controller skills were finally going to come in handy in real life. I parked in record time and followed Melena up the stairs to her apartment, speculating on what kind of underwear she was wearing under her purple skirt. Whatever it was, the globes of her ass were unobstructed as she moved in front of me, and I was damn appreciative.

She paused to unlock her door, and I guiltily readjusted my focus. She turned with a smile as she let me inside. I stepped over the threshold, then closed the door behind me, leaning against it. She set down her purse and turned back to me.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:51 am

I couldn't help staring. She was freaking beautiful. Like a present wrapped just for me. Her dark hair shone, and her dress encased her curves to perfection. I could get lost in her cleavage. She got my attention again with her words. "You know, if we sleep together, it doesn't have to mean anything."

I glanced up from the bounty in front of me. "Our agreement stands."

"One year, drama-free," she said softly.

I nodded. "That's the deal. Can I profess my undying and dramatic desire to get you naked though?"

Her smile was swift. "You may. Before we get there, when were you last tested?"

"I'm packing protection in my suit; not the kind of gear I wear on the job. But I also went and got tested this week and got a clean bill of health."

Her brows raised. "I never should have doubted you. I was beginning to wonder if you even wanted to make our relationship physical."

I grabbed her hand in mine, tugging her close, until every dip and curve slid against my own. The fabric of her dress rubbed against my trousers, and I groaned. "Oh, I want." Her warm eyes beckoned. "I want to kiss you." I placed a soft kiss on her temple, then moved to her neck behind her ear to pause, inhaling. Melena's smelled spicy-sweet, like the jasmine scent she favored. She arched into me as I exhaled, "Everywhere." Her hands reached up to my shoulders, and her fingers tangled at the nape of my neck.

“Hmm...sounds good to me.” She tilted her head to give me easier access to her collarbone as I placed small kisses down her neck and across. She shivered and arched into me farther, rubbing against the tent in my trousers. I could feel her heat against me, and I went painfully hard.

I reached behind her for the zip on her dress, but her hands batted mine away and she slid the zipper down. I helped peel her dress down her shoulders, focusing on the additional cleavage revealed. Heaven. I was in heaven. I scraped my stubble gently against the arch of her breast above the cup of her bra and groaned before returning to sip from her lips.

Melena took our kiss from gentle and seeking to devouring in a heartbeat. She licked and bit at my lips as she ran her own hands down my chest, using them to push my jacket off of my shoulders and onto the floor, then hooking her fingers in my waistband and tugging me a little bit closer. I pushed our bodies into alignment. My take-charge wife wasn't the only one who could get in the game. I unleashed my own rain of kisses down her neck, tracing down to that sweet, sweet, valley between her breasts.

I broke away to focus on sifting her dress to the floor. I sighed as the silky lavender pooled at her feet. Progress. I looked into her eyes; they were round to the point of panic and she swayed, gasping.

“What's wrong?” I asked.

“I feel dizzy.”

“Shit. I'd love to believe that's my manly charms, but it could be your heart. Let's sit down.” I shepherded her to the couch, encouraging her to sit and pulling a throw blanket over her shoulders. I needed to help her calm down. So long as she stayed conscious, it would be fine. My hands only trembled a little as I smoothed them down

her shoulders, trying to convey strength and serenity with my touch. “Take deep breaths. In. Out.” I reached for her wrist and started counting beats. It was fast. Too fast. “Did you take your medication today?” I asked.

She nodded. “I set an alarm to help me remember. I haven’t missed.”

“When did you start feeling off?”

She gave me an arch look. “It hasn’t exactly been a normal Saturday, but I really started to feel dizzy just now.”

I frowned. Shit. As much as I wanted to be a legendary lover, I didn’t want my legend based on knocking my partner unconscious. There was a theme here. Every time we got hot and heavy, she felt like crap. I didn’t want that. If getting her excited made her sick, then I needed to keep her calm. I took a deep breath.

I wanted her heart to race for me, but not to the point of illness.

“Your pulse is still fast. How are you feeling?”

Melena wavered her hand in the air, and it trembled.

“I’m still light-headed,” she admitted.

Her dark eyes gleamed. I wanted it to be disappointment, not fear. I did my best to push past my own dismay.

“I think we should relax today and take it easy. If you’re not feeling well soon, I want to take you to the ER again.”

She frowned but nodded. “I agree with the taking it easy part. But I don’t want to go

to the ER again if I don't have to."

"Why not? It's why you married me." Ouch. The truth pricked at my fantasy. But it was why I'd offered to marry her, and why she accepted. All prospective naked time aside, we didn't need to be married for that.

She scowled. "Still not how I want to spend our Saturday. I'll call my cardiologist's office on Monday and see if I can move up my appointment."

My gaze met hers. "Do you want me to go with you?"

She shrugged, and I wondered if that was a yes. Melena's cheeks flushed and she nodded a moment later. I didn't like the fear in her dark eyes. I squeezed her hand. "You know I'm there. Moral support. It's what husbands do. Just let me know when they reschedule you to."

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:51 am

Her eyes shimmered, and I did my best to change the subject. “Do you want to change while I turn on the TV?”

Her expression cleared and the ghost of a smile turned up her lips. “What, am I too distracting in this outfit?”

She struck a pose, letting the blanket fall from one rounded shoulder, revealing the strap of a lacy bra. I swallowed and did my best to drag my gaze up to hers. Her Hennessy brown eyes shone with mischief, and it sparked my own.

I reached for the remaining buttons on my shirt, slowly undoing them to reveal a hint of my chest. “Well, if you want to go casual...”

She followed every move, daring me to go farther. Damn. I’d forgotten how competitive Melena could be. She’d have me in my skivvies before she broke a sweat. Scratch that. The goal was to calm her down, not rev her up. I was already so hard it was going to be difficult to move. I cleared my throat and paused.

“Eyes up here, Melena. I’m not a piece of meat, you know.”

She tilted her head, eyes still alight as her gaze followed my hands as they pulled my white shirt from the band of my pants. “Here I thought you might be shy, but you’re talking about your meat. Less talk, more action there, buddy.”

I snorted. I did not want to be her buddy. Sarcasm aside, we couldn’t take any more action. Not until she saw a doctor. I rolled my shoulders before admitting defeat and moving to rebutton my shirt. “Alas, I think today needs to be more about sweatpants

than the meat sweats. Why don't you go get comfortable?"

I surprised a laugh out of her and Melena shook her head, mumbling something about "marrying so she didn't have to go vegetarian" as she slipped out of the room.

Watching more Battlestar was not better than sex, but it was better than Melena ending up in the hospital, so I counted the rest of our day as a win. She didn't have any more dizzy spells, and I took it as a sign I needed to keep my distance until she saw her doctor.

I kissed Melena chastely on the cheek before heading home. Or back to my apartment. It wouldn't be home for long; hopefully, Melena and I would find a new one together. I tried to imagine what it would be like, having her to come home to. Would she mind my early mornings? My shift started early, and she was used to working late. Our schedules weren't all that compatible, but I hoped our lives would be.

I couldn't help worrying as I got ready for bed and texted Melena.

Jimmy: Everything okay with you? No more episodes?

Melena: Nope, all good here.

Jimmy: I'm glad. Want to hang out tomorrow? Maybe look at a few listings online?

Melena: Sure, it's why you married me after all.

Jimmy: Ouch.

Jimmy: But not the only reason. You think I'm pretty. And I think you're gorgeous.

Melena: You sweet talker. You just want free massages.

Jimmy: Yes. And to practice my video game skills when you're feeling better. I do love to press those buttons.

Melena: Be still my heart.

Jimmy: Are you okay?

Melena: Joking. Just joking. I'll try to be funnier next time.

Chapter 10

Melena – Social Media Sucks

Itossed and turnedfor a long time before falling asleep. Jimmy’s text message had left me restless. Testing out his skills ranked high on my to-do list. Unfortunately, I had to get my heart under control first. And not just the rapid beating. He was too darn sweet. What had started as a simple quid pro quo was turning into something more. He was killing me with his kindness and understanding. I’d never want to let him go after a year at this point. I rubbed a hand over my misbehaving heart.

Sunday morning, my phone buzzed, and I rolled toward the side of my bed, fighting back the cobwebs of sleep. I grabbed for the phone. My mom. We usually talked on Sunday nights. A morning call meant something dire. Were my brothers okay? My dad?

“Mom, is everything okay?”

“Melly, why would we not be okay? Is there something my only daughter forgot to inform me of?”

Trick question. Where should I start? There were many things I’d failed to inform my mother about. It was kind of our thing. But recently? I gulped.

“Ah, I might have planned some news for our call tonight,” I hedged.

“Melly Nemitz, I think your marriage warrants more than a call after the fact! If that

is even your name anymore? Am I addressing a stranger? Did you take his name?"

Oh. Crap. How did they find out? I'd wondered how to break it to them, but apparently that was no longer an issue. The question was who had told them?

"And who is this Jimmy Torres? He looks handsome in your wedding photos, but why have I not heard of him before?"

Her tone had a strident edge that served as a warning. She already had too many details. I'd have to confess and beg for mercy.

Darn social media. I didn't think to warn Jimmy's sister and friends against tagging me in their photos. Lisa knew the score, but I hadn't thought to ask Chase and Andi to avoid posting. Crap. My mother wouldn't be forgiving me anytime soon. I'd be lucky if my dad and brothers weren't on their way to me now, shotguns in tow. Not to protect my virtue; more to make sure Jimmy treated me right and confirm it wasn't a hostage situation.

"Mom, I was planning to share my happy news with you tonight. It all happened suddenly, and yesterday Jimmy and I were enjoying a little honeymoon."

"Melly, why are we finding out after the wedding? Do you not love your family anymore? Are you ashamed of us? Why?"

I wanted to groan aloud, but I held it in with effort. It would only inflame my mother more. What's worse, I didn't have a great excuse, except it was a marriage made for convenience, not family. Jimmy invited his sister, but I'd been reluctant to inform my folks. I worried they'd try to talk me out of it, or worse, offer to bail me out instead. I loved them, but I didn't want their help. They'd done enough, helping me move and with the first payment on my schooling, and it was time to stand on my own. Stubborn, stupid, my brothers would have a few choice nicknames if they found out.

They were content to work in the family business, but I wanted something of my own. Free of family influence. They couldn't afford the cash, and I couldn't afford the interference.

"Mom, it all happened quickly. I know you're disappointed we eloped, but I thought we could celebrate with you later. I know how busy you and Dad are this time of year with Nemitz Construction."

"Melly, that's no excuse. We would be there for you. We're your family."

They would. They would be there for me, but I couldn't let them do it. They'd taken a second mortgage to float the family business through tough times in the last housing recession. They didn't have a lot of cash reserves, and I was an adult, dammit. I couldn't go running home at every bump in the road.

"Mom. I'm so sorry. I'll talk with Jimmy, and we'll do a family call soon."

"Why not now? Or tonight?" she asked. "Or are you too busy to introduce your new husband to your family?"

I bit my tongue to hold back my groan. I didn't want to admit Jimmy wasn't with me. I should have expected her reaction. But between the fog of my newly discovered illness and planning an unexpected wedding, I wasn't thinking clearly.

"Mom, let's plan on tonight. We'll call you later this evening, around my normal time. Love you, bye."

With a thunk, I set my head down on my nightstand. I was terrible. I also needed to figure out how to spin this with Jimmy. We had to get our cover story straight. In a perfect world, I'd spend more time with Jimmy first. There was no way I was telling my parents I married for insurance. Love, sure. Companionship and family, maybe.

Insurance? Heck, no.

I needed coffee, stat. Before I could move from my bed to brew some, my alarm went off. Time for my meds. I trudged into the bathroom and took a pill from the container. One small white pill, worth approximately twenty-seven dollars. That's what it cost to regulate my heart.

Twenty-seven dollars.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:51 am

Each.

It didn't sound like much, calculated that way. Not when you heard about more expensive drugs on the news, some cost thousands, but when you rolled it into the monthly total? Eight hundred dollars seemed like a lot. That was with my insurance. Which also cost me another five hundred dollars a month. For little to no actual benefit. I scowled. At least I could cancel that expense now I was going on Jimmy's plan. My co-pay for a month's supply was about the cost of a cup of coffee on his insurance. The disparity in what was considered 'insurance' made my head hurt. Someone was still paying the tab. In this case, the city paid most of his bills. Jimmy put his life on the line for the citizens of Tacoma, it was only fair they'd take care of him in return.

I was sipping on my coffee when I got his text.

Jimmy: How are you feeling? Do you want to come over here today? I'll cook dinner tonight.

Melena: I'm good, and YES. What time?

Jimmy: As soon as you're around. I was hoping we could look at listings today if you're up for it.

It was sweet that he wanted to spend the day together, but I bet it had everything to do with my dizzy episode last night. Remembering his almost-striptease made my heart beat faster. Stop it. I rubbed my misbehaving heart. Jimmy was going to have to become less of a heartthrob if I was going to survive our marriage. Maybe continuous

exposure would do the trick. If I oversaturated myself in Jimmy, would his kisses still have the same effect? Somewhere out there, Lisa was cackling at my bullshit.

Jimmy's kisses had drawn me into a marriage I wouldn't have touched four years ago. Then, I wouldn't have wanted to give an ounce of control. Dylan dumping me still stung. I would have drowned in debt rather than give up my pride. Four years of lonely reality had blunted some of those rough edges and marrying Jimmy didn't feel like the compromise of my principles I thought it would be. He was too pure. The man needed to screw up a bit so I remembered he was human. Right now, he was the perfect package: sexy, sweet, and someone I could love. I pushed aside the whisper that he was also someone who could hurt me badly.

I debated what to wear to Jimmy's. What did one wear to see one's husband for the second time? I felt like a Victorian miss; even showing my ankles was out, because the temperature had dropped near freezing. Yesterday's nice weather was gone, and a windy, misty South Sound Sunday had taken its place.

Jimmy smiled as he opened the door to me. He moved in for a kiss, then seemed to think better of it and bussed my cheek instead. Stupid heart. It still beat faster at the contact. However, the rest of me was disappointed at the muted welcome. Mr. Perfect only held the title if he wanted me as much as I wanted him. Maybe I was the only one lusting after a more perfect union.

"Hey. Thanks for coming here. I'm making us a pot roast beef stroganoff, and it has to spend most of the day in the oven if we want it to be tender."

My mouth watered thinking about it as we wandered into the kitchen. It already smelled heavenly. Hints of rosemary and garlic hung in the air. "Is this one of your grandmother's recipes? The meal you made the other night was amazing, and stroganoff sounds complicated."

His smile turned sad. “My Gran was a great cook, but also tough. She didn’t believe in a free ride. I started out with dishes before graduating to cooking my own recipes. This was one of the first things I mastered on my own.”

“Well, all that time paid off. You said ‘was,’ when did she pass away?”

“About five years ago.”

I reached out a hand and placed it on his forearm. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Thanks. She was our rock. My folks were deployed for most of our high school years; we were glad to have Gran to watch us.”

“That must have been tough. Did you get to talk with your parents much while they were gone?”

He shrugged. “When they found the time.”

I didn’t know how to react to his statement. “Have you told your parents about our marriage?”

He shook his head. “No. We don’t speak often. They’re in Korea now, but I expect to talk to them in a few weeks. I’ll tell them then.” He seemed to realize there was subtext to my question. “What about you?”

I cleared my throat and mustered a smile. “Funny story. I got a call from my mom this morning. She was upset to learn via social media that I was married.”

He winced. “Ah. Chase or Andi?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. She was too busy berating me to share her source; I just

know there were wedding photos tagging me.”

“Sorry. I didn’t think to say anything to them.”

“Me neither. But now we’ll have a lot to say to my parents. Mostly me groveling. I told them we’d call tonight,” I admitted.

He nodded and my shoulders relaxed at his easygoing response. I should have known Jimmy wouldn’t be into I-told-you-so’s. “Sure. We’re going to call; we’re not going to visit?”

“They live on the east side of Washington. This time of year, the pass is dicey, even if we did want to make the drive. However, prepare yourself for an intense phone call.”

His gaze searched my face. “What do you want to tell them?”

I sighed. “A slimmed down version of the truth; we’ve been dating and decided to marry suddenly. That we’re searching for a house together.”

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:51 am

“Am I besotted?” he asked playfully.

“I don’t know, are you?”

He had no idea how much I wanted to know. No, really. I was dying to know. Or maybe not, because all kidding aside, I was pretty sure the answer was no. He’d had no trouble holding back after our kisses. The next year was going to be torture if I was the only one mooning around.

“I don’t want to create problems with your family.”

I chose not to comment on his dodge.

“That’s all on me. I should have told them,” I said. “It was a miscalculation on my part.”

Hopefully not the first of many. Jimmy seemed open to playing the enamored spouse for my parents, but it wasn’t part of our original deal. I didn’t want to take advantage of him or lie to my family. Hurting them was not part of the plan. The anxiety clutching at my gut signaled maybe it was me in danger of getting hurt.

“Still, let me know how I can help.”

His warm brown eyes drilled through me, sending flutters along every nerve and heat zinging as I thought about tackling him to the floor and raining kisses along his strong jaw. He could help me out of my pants. Stop it. Jimmy was being supportive. I pushed thoughts of all the other ways he could ‘help’ me aside.

“Thanks.” I smiled. “Have I told you lately that you’re pretty great?”

“Just pretty great? I must be slipping.”

Jimmy sat down at the kitchen table and maneuvered his laptop so I could sit beside him and see it too. I ignored the uptick in my heart rate as his knee brushed mine beneath the table. Instead, I asked, “What do we have here?”

He rubbed his hands together. “House listings. Before I ask my realtor to show us anything, I wanted to get an idea of your parameters.”

Huh. Owning a home was so far out in my future, I hadn’t even considered what I would want in my own space. Getting a mortgage while self-employed was nearly impossible. I feared I wasn’t helping Jimmy as much on the house angle as he might think. If anything, having me attached to a house wouldn’t improve his credit.

“I guess I hadn’t thought about it,” I admitted. “It honestly hasn’t been in my five-year plan. How about you, what’s important to you?”

Bingo. I asked the right question. It was sweet to see his face light up and his smile spread until his eyes wrinkled.

“I want at least two bedrooms, maybe three. I’d love to have enough space for a guest room and a home gym, though maybe that’s a dream. And a well-designed kitchen is a must. Maybe a yard? I never pictured myself as a yard guy, but I could be a yard guy for the right house. Definitely a big shower. I’m big; I need a shower that doesn’t make me feel like I’m brushing up against the walls all the time.”

It was impossible not to smile at his enthusiasm. “That all sounds amazing. I can see the importance of the kitchen; it’s clear you love to cook.”

He turned back to the screen. “Yeah, the only hard part is finding something in my price range.”

“Do I want to know what that is?”

He spouted a number that made my brows raise. “Wow. I’m feeling like a subpar adult right now. I have no idea how much you make, but how would you afford that?”

“Not on my salary,” he admitted. “I have an inheritance from my Gran. When she passed, Andi and I sold her house and split the proceeds. I’ve got a solid down payment to make the mortgage reasonable.”

I was a terrible person for having a pang of envy. He’d lost his beloved grandmother; it was nothing to be jealous of.

“What areas do you want to consider?” I asked.

He stroked his chin. “I’m struggling there. We could get more house and land for our money if we look farther out, but I love the Old Town area. I’d like to be close to the waterfront. What do you think?”

“Maybe I’ll have stronger opinions after we see a few places? It will be your house after all; I’m just your roommate.”

He tilted his head. “But I want you to love where we live too.”

That’s what I was afraid of. What if I loved it too much? I didn’t want to get too attached. But I couldn’t tell Jimmy that.

“I’m sure I’ll love whatever we pick.”

He seemed appeased, and we spent the rest of the afternoon looking at listings. My eyeballs were dry from peering at all the pictures, and it was hard to tell much without visiting in person, but we narrowed it down to a handful to tour. He smiled at me after double-checking our list. “This is great. I’ll call my realtor and set a time for us next weekend. Does that work for you?”

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:51 am

I nodded. “I’ll double-check my appointments. I think I’m booked on Sunday, but Saturday should be okay.”

I held my breath, but Jimmy said nothing about my schedule. No scoffing at working on a Sunday. “Okay, let me know.”

His easy acceptance shouldn’t have surprised me. It was part of our deal. But still, I breathed a small sigh of relief that he was holding up his end of the bargain on my schedule.

One week, I was dating a cute firefighter. Boom. Two weeks later, we were married and looking at houses. Life moved fast.

Jimmy cooked for us, and his kitchen skills had me sending up a silent prayer of thanks to his gran. The perfectly seasoned beef roast melted on my tongue. The noodles and mushrooms in creamy sauce had the faint tang of Dijon mustard to compliment the other flavors. Jimmy went all-out and garnished each plate with fresh chives. Changing my exercise habits was a must if eating this well was going to become routine. I would have eaten more, but the prospect of the call with my parents killed my appetite. I glanced at the clock. T-minus twenty minutes until our normal call time.

“So, what should I know about your family?” he asked, noticing my glance at the clock.

I smiled weakly. “Not much to tell. I have two brothers. They work with my mom and dad in our family business. They do residential construction; mostly remodels

and new houses.”

“You said they live on the east side?”

“Yes. A small town named Colville. Population 4,765.”

“Do you miss it?”

“It was a nice place to grow up, but I’m happy here in Tacoma. What about you? Your gran lived here obviously, but did you grow up here?”

He shook his head. “No, we grew up on bases around the world. My mom only enlisted as we got older, and that’s when we went to live with Gran.”

“You don’t see them much, I gather?”

He frowned. “No. We’ve barely seen them in the last fifteen plus years. They missed out on a lot.”

I reached out my hand to his, and he flipped his hand over, linking his fingers with mine. “I’m sorry,” I said. “Does it bother you? I get annoyed with my family, but I can’t imagine not seeing them regularly.”

He shrugged. “I’d like it if we were closer, but I have Andi, and she has me. Our parents love their lives. They love us too. They’re just driven.”

My phone buzzed with an incoming call and interrupted the moment. Right on time. I swiped to open the video call and held the phone up, so Jimmy and I were both on screen. On the other end, the screen was crowded. My mom and dad I was expecting, but both of my brothers were squeezed into the frame too. It’d be comical if their expressions weren’t so serious.

“Melly!” my mom exclaimed, as if we hadn’t spoken that morning. She’d calmed down considerably. Either that, or she was putting a good face on it in front of Jimmy. Her dark hair shone, and I was thankful for her DNA. We looked a lot alike. My mother had gained the fine lines of experience, but her dark eyes still shone with vitality and energy. My dad glanced at her fondly. He played the stoic card more often than not, but I’d seen him nuzzle her in quiet moments. His dark blond hair and beard were mostly gray, and his tan face was weathered from his time spent out in the elements, but his body still retained the muscle mass of a lifetime of hard work.

I smiled, “Hi, Mom. Hi, everybody. How are you all doing?”

My mom flipped her hand down, waving away any concern. “Oh, we’re fine. We want to hear about you. You’re the one with news.”

Her forced excitement was throwing me. Was this not the same woman I spoke with this morning? What was her deal? I loved my mom, but this wasn’t like her. She was more likely to hold a grudge. Disapproving Matron to the core. Suzy Sunshine wasn’t her gig.

“Well, this is Jimmy,” I said. “We’ve been dating for a while now and decided to get married this weekend.”

We’d been dating for a ‘while’ if a ‘while’ was five minutes, but hey, who was counting?

Jimmy had clearly been waiting for me to introduce him, because he didn’t give any of them time to respond before jumping in with his own narrative. “Hello, Nemitz family. It’s nice to meet you all. My apologies for not meeting with you in person before the big event.” He glanced at me before looking back at the screen. “We were inspired to move quickly.”

I held back my snort. Inspired. That's one word for it. I didn't think passing out was all that inspiring, but if he wanted to spin it, I wouldn't complain. My knucklehead youngest brother, Ivan, wouldn't let it alone. He looked more like our dad with his narrow features and tanned skin. The baby beard he was growing had a way to go before the dark blond silvered like our dad's.

"Smelly Melly, are you knocked up?" he asked.

I closed my eyes. Of course. Nickname hell. I should have anticipated it. At least it was an easy question to answer. "Nope, ding-a-ling. I'm not pregnant." They didn't need to know Jimmy and I hadn't even come close. I felt like a fraud, nurses and family asking if I was pregnant, when it couldn't be further from the truth.

"What's your deal?" my older brother, Zander, asked, clearly directing his question at Jimmy. He and I looked more alike, both darker haired and with complexions like our mother. However, looking alike didn't mean we thought alike. He was content to work inside the family business. He didn't understand why I wanted to leave Colville. He didn't feel the small-town straight-jacket of expectations. Enter the family business. Marry local. Have kids. Repeat.

Jimmy and I made eye contact before looking back at Zander. "What do you mean?" Jimmy asked.

"Why would you marry my sister so fast? Don't get me wrong, she's okay, but why rush into marriage? Is there something wrong with you?" He squinted at me. "Or did he brainwash you? Hypnotize you? He hasn't been slipping you anything in your meals, has he?"

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:51 am

Great. One brother thinks I can't manage birth control, and the other thinks I'm being hypnotized and controlled. What had I done to give them so little confidence in me? Wasn't I managing a career on my own on the other side of the mountains? It's not like I was *cough* living at home and still working with Mom and Dad. I opened my mouth to say that before thinking better of it.

Jimmy held up his hands. "Whoa. No mentalist capabilities here. Melena and I make a good team, and we're choosing to make a life together. Nothing more dramatic than that."

Liar. I was impressed. There was something more dramatic, but maybe not something I needed to worry my family with right away.

My dad finally got in the game. He'd been silently watching but couldn't hold back any longer. "What do you do to support yourself?" he asked.

Jimmy focused in on my dad, giving strong eye contact. "Sir, I'm a firefighter with Tacoma FD."

"Are you an adrenaline junky?" my dad asked.

I winced at the stereotype, but Jimmy shook his head. "No, sir."

My mom chose her moment to go in for the kill, after the rest had softened us up. "So, you're coming home for Christmas to visit, right? We can meet your new husband and spend some quality time with you. We don't want to miss any more special days."

Excuses eluded me. Jimmy smiled back at my mother and said nothing. The traitor. I wrapped up the call as soon as humanly possible.

Jimmy smiled at me. “They seemed...nice.”

Yeah. The pause said it all. They were nice. Usually. I loved my family. I just hadn’t prepared them well. Or at all. They were within rights to have questions and be hurt.

“Still want to be married to me?” I asked.

He smiled. “For sure.”

“Enough to drive to eastern Washington at Christmas?”

“If I can get the time off. Usually I work Christmas.”

“There is a Santa!”

“I can probably get the time off if you want to.”

“No, that excuse works perfectly. Have I told you lately you’re the best?”

His gaze met mine and I smiled. His smile in return made his dark eyes sparkle. My gaze traveled down his body. If Santa looked like Jimmy, there’d be a lot of very good girls over the age of twenty believing in him. More than his handsome exterior, the heart it housed made mine flutter. For someone I’d known for only a few weeks, he’d gone out on a limb for me in so many ways. It was easy to imagine him bursting into a burning building to save the day, ever the hero. My smile faded. I didn’t need someone else to prop me up. I wanted to stand on my own. It wasn’t his job to save me. But maybe I could stand beside him.

Chapter 11

Melena – Stealth Mode

Jimmy and I had been missing each other all week. He'd worked a couple of consecutive shifts to make up for those he missed from our wedding, and I'd been working late, seeing clients until eight or nine hoping to catch up with all the clients I'd had to reschedule. That didn't keep us from texting however. He'd been sending me house listings and a few photos. Last night he'd sent me a picture of his dinner. It was cruel and unusual punishment that I couldn't be there to eat it with him. He was an artist in the kitchen; my meatloaf never looked that good.

It was hard to admit, but I was lonely. Since graduating, I'd been so focused on work I hadn't put much time into friendships and hobbies. Lisa was really it, and she worked as much as I did which meant she understood when I didn't want to go out every weekend. She had her own life. Her own husband. I had a few friendly faces at the gym and my friendship with Lisa, plus a handful of friends from high school I kept up with through social media. It had been enough until Jimmy.

Sharing my day and client stories with Jimmy, and hearing about his calls showed me what I was missing. I could tell he was still holding back stories, but he was eager to tell me about the funnier aspects of his job. Watching him in the kitchen also left me warm and tingling from more than amazing food. Jimmy's capable hands, cutting, chopping, and stirring put me in a trance. He probably thought I was admiring his technique, not imagining it applied elsewhere. Jimmy may be a saint, but I was not. He had me aching to live with him, just so I'd see him more. The bastard. I'd never wanted or needed someone in my life like this. I had been thriving living alone. I

didn't need a husband. But he was making me want one.

Jimmy: Your appointment with Doc Webb is at 3?

Melena: Yep.

Jimmy: And you want me to come?

Melena: Yep.

Jimmy: Liar.

It wasn't so much that I didn't want him to come as it was I didn't want to go. But I needed answers. Cheek kisses weren't going to cut it for much longer, but Jimmy seemed scared to touch me. I'd mostly felt fine. Mostly. I was tired on days where I had back to back appointments with clients. But who wouldn't be? It didn't mean I was too sick to work. I pushed away the thought. I didn't want to think it into existence. I had to work.

Melena: See you there.

Jimmy: House hunting this weekend? I've got my realtor all lined up to show us places Saturday.

Melena: Deal.

I saw clients until it was time to leave for my appointment. I glanced at my phone as I grabbed my purse. I'd make it, but just barely. The dreary day matched my mood; drizzle was making everything damp and gray. Hopefully, it didn't bode ill for my appointment. Consultations with cardiologists were difficult to find; I'd lucked into a last-minute cancellation with Dr. Webb. I couldn't miss it. Waiting until January for

the next schedule opening was not an option.

I turned off of Stadium onto Division and gave my car extra gas. I didn't want to be late. The flash of red and blue lights behind me made me groan. Just my luck. A glance in my rearview mirror confirmed the light show was for me. Drat. I bit my lip. I didn't need a ticket. I pulled over and glanced back at my mirror. The patrol car had pulled off with me, its lights still flashing so traffic would go around.

I kept my hands on the steering wheel and managed to stop myself from banging my head against it. Please don't let Jimmy drive by right now. My eyes flicked to my mirror again. A stern officer stepped from her patrol car. She walked up and tapped on my window, and I rolled it down.

"Hello, Officer."

I mustered a smile, wishing I could sink through my seat and out of sight. I'd been going a little fast. But I didn't think I'd been obnoxious about it.

The blond officer's unsmiling mouth was firm as she said, "License and registration, please."

I pulled the most recent five copies of my registration from the nested mess in my glove box and tried not to fumble as I passed them to the officer. I glanced at her before reaching for my purse on the seat beside me, pulling out my wallet. She watched me steadily. I could feel a bead of sweat collecting at my brow. This was ridiculous. I shouldn't be intimidated. But her stern demeanor was daunting.

She flicked a glance at the license, making sure it matched my registration.

"Melena Nemitz," she asked with a hesitation on the last name.

I nodded and mustered a weak smile. “Yes. That’s me.”

The officer squinted at me. “Unusual name. One of the guys in the ladder company up the street got married to a Melena. Any relation?”

Kill. Me. Now. I should have considered she’d know Jimmy. Did I claim the relationship and maybe get out of a ticket, or deny everything? I swallowed, unsure what to say. I didn’t have extra cash to pay a fine. But I didn’t want to use Jimmy. Or embarrass him. I closed my eyes briefly, weighing my options. Nope. I couldn’t do that to him. He’d given me enough already.

I smiled brightly at the officer. “Funny coincidence. I’ll have to tell my mother I’m not the only one in town.”

The other woman looked like she could scent the lie. Had it been a test? To see if I’d use my husband’s name to get out of a ticket? A bead of sweat trickled down my cheek. Nope. Not suspicious. Not suspicious at all.

The other woman’s stern face didn’t crack, but she tracked the droplet as I sat stock-still. If I didn’t reach up to wipe it away, I wouldn’t have to acknowledge it was there. She could think I was a very sweaty person, not a Liar McLiarpants.

She gave a brief twist of her lips. “Too bad. He and I used to date, and I haven’t had a chance to wish him well on his marriage yet. Well, ma’am, slow down.” She nodded at the block behind me. “You were going fast for a school zone. I know it’s a high school, and they should know better, but I’ve got a nephew that goes there and he’s dumb and entitled enough to think all traffic stops for him. Save yourself some trouble and slow down.”

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:51 am

I nodded as she handed back my documents. Luckily, none of them was a ticket. Doubly lucky I hadn't admitted to marrying Jimmy. Maybe the officer was loads of fun off duty, but I had a feeling 'wish him well on his marriage' would have translated to giving me a ticket. I pushed a response out of my tight throat. "Thanks, Officer. Will do."

She returned to her squad car, turned off her lights, and pulled out, sliding into traffic. I couldn't move. My heart raced, and I focused on my breath to bring it back under control. It wouldn't do to pass out this close to my doctor's office. I closed my eyes and opened them again. I could only hope Jimmy hadn't seen me on the side of the road. He'd married me to improve his reputation; I didn't want him to think I'd make it worse.

When I could breathe easily again, I drove up the hill to the hospital; the practice was on a nearby street of older homes converted into office buildings. Rain lashed the trees planted in the sidewalk islands, and leaves were accumulated in the gutters, creating large puddles. It took forever to find parking on the cramped street, but eventually I squeezed my Subaru in between an aging Toyota and a souped-up red Mazda.

I was walking up to the office's doors when I saw a familiar figure, still in his navy blue uniform. Hot damn. Jimmy looked good. He'd always changed before our dates; I'd never seen him in uniform. The short sleeves showed off his biceps and forearms to perfection. He reached around me for a hug, and the bumps of his utility belt gear and radio smushed awkwardly between us.

"You know you didn't have to come, right? I can do this on my own. You won't get

in trouble at work, will you?”

He smiled as we pulled apart. “I know you can, but I wanted to support my wife. I asked for the time. It’s fine.”

There would be no hiding anything about my condition if he came with me. But he’d probably also think of questions I didn’t. I was independent, dammit. But I wanted him there. I ceded to my softer side. It wasn’t weak. Not weak to want him. Not weak to need him. The bastard. Who wasn’t a bastard at all. I sighed and tried to firm up my smile. He asked to get off early to be here. He didn’t deserve my name calling.

“Sure.” Hah. Sure. A whirlwind of self-doubt and reflection encapsulated in one low-key phrase.

His smile widened, and my knees weakened. Just a little bit. It wasn’t my heart condition. It was my heart. He placed a hand low on my back and held the door open as we stepped inside. The receptionist smiled as she checked me in and collected Jimmy’s insurance information. The difference in the tiny co-pay compared to my cost to see a specialist with my deductible under my old plan would have paid for a lavish dinner on the town. I owed Jimmy so much. “Dr. Webb will be with you shortly. Please take a seat and his nurse will call you.”

I nodded and Jimmy and I found seats together. I glanced around the waiting room. Everyone else was easily over sixty. I was too young to be here. I placed a hand over my heart. Stupid heart. Traitor body.

“Are you having an episode?” Jimmy asked, his brow furrowing.

I shook my head and smoothed my expression. “No. Sorry to worry you.”

He smiled. “It’s pretty much in the job description.”

“Is it though? We’re more a marriage of convenience than anything else.”

I could have kicked myself after I let that slip out of my big, fat mouth. His smile dimmed, but he didn’t say anything. I didn’t need to shoot him down, but the voice inside squawking about independence had to remind him. Mostly so I wouldn’t forget. I didn’t want to need him there. He shouldn’t feel beholden to me. He was already giving me his insurance. I couldn’t ask for more.

The first part of the appointment passed in a blur. The nurse took my blood pressure and oxygen levels, and a tech performed another EKG. Then Dr. Webb arrived. Hoo boy. He belonged on Grey’s Anatomy. Too pretty for real life; he even looked like Preston Burke from the show. Very tall, dark, and handsome in his blue scrubs and white coat. I fiddled with my phone while he was studying my chart on his computer and subtly snapped a picture to show Lisa later. She was a huge fan of the show and wouldn’t believe me without proof.

He listened to my heart and reviewed the EKG they’d completed at the hospital compared to the tests run by his tech. In the end, he confirmed the ER’s diagnosis, tachycardia.

“I’ve had more episodes, even on the medication. Is that normal?” I asked.

Dr. Webb nodded as his gaze scanned my body, “It’s a concern.”

“What happens if the medication doesn’t control my symptoms?”

“The most likely option is a catheter ablation.”

Jimmy blanched and spoke up for the first time. “Why would you need to put in a catheter? She’s not having trouble peeing.” He glanced at me. “You’re not, are you?”

I sighed and shook my head. I didn't have medical training beyond what was needed to get my massage therapy license, but I was pretty sure the doctor wasn't talking about that kind of catheter. If Jimmy were thinking straight, he'd know that too.

Dr. Webb smiled. "It's a short procedure where we use radio frequency, similar to a microwave, to destroy the heart muscle cells causing the abnormality in her heartbeat. We go in through a catheter in a vein in the groin area to access the heart muscle."

"Is it safe?" I asked.

The doctor nodded. "It's a low-risk procedure."

Low-risk wasn't no-risk. It sounded like he was proposing frying me with lasers. Frickin' laser beams. To the heart. Dr. Webb was sounding more and more like Dr. Evil. I needed to remember he was trying to help me. I shook out of my fog and looked at Jimmy. His brow was furrowed in concern.

"When will we know if that's necessary?" I asked.

"If you have any further episodes, call my office. We'll get you scheduled."

"What about sex?" I blurted out. I could feel my face getting hot. Smooth. I was smooth. I didn't know where to look—the hot doctor, or my hot husband?

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:51 am

Dr. Webb smiled, obviously this was not an unusual question from patients. “You can do whatever feels good. Just be prepared to stop if you experience symptoms.”

I relaxed, but Jimmy frowned, and my smile faded. Why wasn’t he smiling? Wasn’t that good news?

Jimmy cleared his throat. “Each time she’s had symptoms, they’ve been when we’re kissing. I’ve been worried about becoming more intimate. Could it trigger something worse?”

“Oh.” The doctor cleared his throat and peered at me more closely. “Is that true?”

I nodded. I half expected Dr. Webb to fist bump Jimmy for having that much effect on me with just a kiss, but he was too professional for that. His face remained impassive as he considered my words.

“In that case, you should avoid sex for now. Or any other intimate activities that elevate your heart rate,” he said. “At least if you want the medication to have a chance to work. Otherwise, I can schedule you for surgery.”

I wrinkled my nose. Dr. Webb went from hot to not. I didn’t see the harm, but I wasn’t ready for surgery. I scowled at Jimmy. He had to overshare.

Jimmy frowned back at me. “I don’t want to be the cause of you getting hurt. Talking about the kiss of death is only funny if it’s not true.”

Stupid, overprotective...husband. Sigh.

“For how long?” I asked.

“One month, then try easing into things. In the meantime, take your meds, get plenty of rest, and make healthy choices. Let’s give your medication time to work.”

I scowled again but nodded. When it was time to leave, Jimmy put his hand at the small of my back and ushered me out the door. It sent tingles radiating down my spine. Stupid tingles. For a stupid husband I couldn’t touch for one month. I sighed again. Who cared enough to want me well and really wasn’t stupid at all.

“Are you done for the day?” Jimmy asked.

I nodded. I’d rescheduled my other clients, unsure how long the appointment would take.

“Do you want to come over for dinner?”

“Yes.” I absolutely did.

He smiled. “Great, see you back at my place?”

I looked at my phone as I got in the car and instantly regretted it.

Mom: Melly, it was so nice to have a call with your husband. We’ll do it again on Sunday, yes?

I groaned. Of course. Another command performance.

Melena: Sure, Mom.

Mom: Wonderful, and we can talk more about the holidays!

Was it wrong if I bribed Jimmy's supervisor to make sure he had to work?

I pulled open my latest message to Lisa and inserted the picture I'd Kinneared of Dr. Webb.

Melena: My cardiologist looks like he belongs on Grey's.

Lisa: Aoooga! Thump! Thump! I think now I have a heart condition.

Melena: You also have a husband.

Lisa: So do you, chicky.

Yes, I had a husband. One I was under doctor's orders not to let elevate my heart rate.

Chapter 12

Jimmy – Kiss the Cook

Melena wasn't subtletaking her stealth photo of Dr. Webb. I didn't know that he noticed, but I sure as hell did. I didn't want to be jealous of another man, especially a hotshot doctor. But I was. It pained me to have him know about our nonexistent sex life, but endangering Melena wasn't an option. At least she seemed as disappointed as I was by his recommendation.

Melena pulled up behind me and got out of her car to follow me upstairs. "What's for dinner?"

"I was thinking pasta. Sound good?"

"Sounds great."

"Come sit with me while I cook. You can tell me about your day."

She was dressed in a bright blue shirt with peacock feathers printed on it, and her dark hair was braided back from her face. She looked healthy and happy sitting on a stool at the counter. I enjoyed the sparkle in her eyes as she told me about her day at her office. She'd battled an insurance company for payment and won. The rush of victory lit her voice.

"What about you? How was your shift?"

I thought back through my day. Some calls were too raw to share, and I didn't like talking about them. What could I tell her? Did I tell her about the motor vehicle collision that sent two to the hospital? The code yellow assisted-living call for a ninety-year-old woman who fell and needed lift assistance her care home wouldn't provide due to liability fears? Or the squirrel fire? I didn't get called out for squirrel fires every day...

"You don't want to hear about that," I said.

She took another sip from her glass and watched as I sliced zucchini and stirred the bacon frying on the stove. The pop and sizzle provided soft background noise in the silence.

"But I do."

"Ah, I guess one call was kind of interesting. Someone called 911 for a squirrel fire. When we arrived, we found the transformer on fire. The little guy had climbed a high voltage wire, bit down, and the arc flash blew the pole transformer. Fried the furry dude good and tripped the power." I glanced up to see how she was taking my story. She watched my hands intently as I chopped onion and garlic for our pasta.

"Then what happened?"

"We contacted the utility to shut off the power and evacuated the area."

"Was it dangerous?"

I shrugged. "Electricity and water don't mix. We followed precautions and got the fire out without loss of life or property."

Melena shook her head. "Except the squirrel. Poor squirrel."

“What brought you into firefighting?”

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:51 am

I didn't want to go there. My story was too sad, and it still hurt too much. Not right for a casual dinner after work. I went for the most watered-down version of the truth I thought she'd accept. "I wanted to make a difference."

She smiled. "That's pretty great."

"Yeah, I am." I laughed when her eyes crossed in response. "Enough shoptalk. Are you ready to do some house hunting this weekend?"

We compared the listings we wanted to see, and I was glad to change the subject to something lighter. I plated the bacon zucchini carbonara and set our dinner down at the kitchen table for Melena and me. We were mostly quiet as we ate, and I was pleased Melena dug into the dish. I loved watching people enjoy my cooking. As she swallowed her last bite, I finally broached the other subject that had been on my mind since the doctor's office. "How do you feel about your appointment today?"

She scowled briefly before her expression smoothed. "I guess it wasn't all bad news; if the medication doesn't work, it sounds like this ablation thing won't be too risky. But I don't want to take time off of work for surgery unless it's strictly necessary."

I reached out a hand to clasp hers where it played with the edge of her plate. "I'll help you through it."

Her expression softened. "Thanks, Jimmy. You've done too much already."

I hadn't. But it wasn't worth an argument. Not now. Something else was eating at me more. I wasn't sure if I should ask her about the picture. The photograph she took of

Dr. Webb was weird. Did she have a crush on her doctor? Did I think she'd admit it if she did? No. But it stung either way. I hated to think she was lusting after someone else already. "Are you scrapbooking your experience or something?" I finally asked.

Melena tilted her head and looked at me oddly. "No, what makes you think that?"

I rubbed my hand over the back of my neck. "I, ah, saw you take a picture of Dr. Webb."

Pink flushed Melena's cheeks. I took a sip of my wine and waited.

"It was for Lisa," she mumbled, as if embarrassed.

My brows rose. "For Lisa? Why would she want a picture of your doctor?"

Melena cleared her throat. "We trade stealth pictures of celebrity look-alikes we see. It's a silly hobby. He looks like a doctor from a show she watches."

My ego demanded to know. "Are there any pictures of me?"

She shrugged and pushed the last few bites of pasta around on her plate. "I may have caught a shot of you at the gym before we met."

"Oh, and who did you compare me to?" I asked with a grin.

Melena could be so cool. It was fun to see her ruffled.

"Matt Bomer," she mumbled again.

My laugh exploded out of my chest. It was impossible not to puff up.

“I like it,” I said. “It’s not Adam Sandler from Chuck and Larry, so I’ll take it.”

She glanced up at me from under her lashes and smiled. I was glad the photo had an explanation other than her crushing on her doctor.

After putting the dishes away together, Melena made her excuses and gathered her things to go home. I hovered over her at the door, watching for the flutter of her pulse in her neck. Her gaze shifted to my mouth before she gave herself a small shake, as if remembering her doctor’s appointment. I wanted to kiss her badly, but I missed my moment. Instead, she gave me a friendly wave. A wave. And left. I sighed. Married life was not all I hoped it would be. Our earlier chemistry had been great, but her doctor’s directive was killing me. I’d thought a quick kiss would be okay.

Jimmy: Is it a good sign if your wife leaves without kissing you goodnight?

Chase: Nope. But you already knew that. You know better than to ask me for relationship advice.

Jimmy: Yeah. What was I thinking? We still on to game next Friday?

Chase: Yep. If your new wife will let you. Matteo should be there. Tamra is shipping out for the evening to visit friends.

I snorted. Melena’s approval wouldn’t be a problem. If anything, Melena might want to join in. Friday couldn’t come soon enough. I needed time to zone out and kill make-believe shit without consequences. Just me, pizza, beer, and the guys.

“Jimmy. You made it!”

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:51 am

“Why the surprise, Chase? Do I ever miss these? That used to be your problem when you got stuck in the writing cave. Not my issue.”

Chase gestured to his chest with his beer. “Yeah, but I’m reformed. All settled down and stable.”

I huffed and pushed the pizza boxes at him. “Yeah, keep telling yourself that, my friend.”

I stepped over the threshold into Chase’s apartment. It’d gone through some subtle changes since Tamra moved in. As a writer and editor, he used to be a hot mess. These days, he was more domestic, or at least pretended to be.

“Matteo still coming tonight?” Unless he was hiding, I was the first to arrive.

Chase nodded, and his dark blond hair fell forward over his forehead. “Yeah. He’s coming straight from work, but traffic’s a bitch on I-5.”

He handed me a beer from the fridge, and we dug into the pizza. Matteo’s loss. We’d met up most Fridays for years, but lately had tapered off to monthly or less. Life had been busy for him and Chase. I loved Matteo like a brother, but not enough to let the pepperoni go cold. We’d save him a slice.

Chase smirked, and I knew what he was going to ask. “So, how’s married life treating you?”

“It’s fine.”

“Fine?” he hooted. “That’s your newlywed phrase? Ouch.”

My lips pursed. In a manly way. “We’re working on finding a place together. I think it’ll be easier then, when we’re sharing space. She’s also got some medical stuff, which is making things slow going.”

“Do you need tips from Mr. Romance?”

I shoved him in the shoulder. “Not necessary, but thanks.”

Chase raised a brow and the right corner of his mouth tilted up. “Really? I have moves.”

I laughed. “Yeah, I remember your moves. They almost got you permanently defriended by Tamra when you were first getting to know each other. I’m doing fine on my own, thanks.”

Both brows hit his forehead. “How’s her cleavage game when you’re together? Is it strong?”

I pushed him again. “Hey now. What are you doing, noticing my wife’s cleavage? Isn’t that against bro code?”

He raised his hands. “I’m not noticing; I’m asking what you’ve noticed. How it’s been as an indication of her interest level. Don’t you remember coaching me after my date with Tamra?” He deepened his voice to mimic mine. “If the boobs are on display and it’s not a natural place for said plumage, for example, a bar, then it’s premeditated boobage. I’m quoting your own advice back at you.” He pointed his beer at me. “Nothing creepy about that... Unless you’re saying past you was wrong.”

I groaned. “I remember now. But hearing you say it, it sounds so wrong.”

Another knock, and Chase let Matteo in. I silently envied his vintage Star Wars tee and jeans his job in IT at Nintendo considered casual Friday appropriate. His hair was long on top and shiny with product that kept it back from his classically handsome face. I'd moved from a household with a strict dress code to a profession with one. I wished I could feel comfortable in something that casual, but after so long, dressing up was habit as much as intention. Matteo scowled when he noticed the pizza box only had a couple of slices left. "Thanks, guys."

"Whatever. You can make up for it with an extra beer."

Matteo grabbed the remaining slices along with a beer and followed us into Chase's game room. Chase spared zero thought for anything but his toys. It used to drive me crazy he had no interest in decorating or letting me help. The room itself had bland white walls and beige carpet but was saved by the huge pool table took up most of the floor space and a dark couch and gaming console setup to one side. The couch was well-worn, and you could practically see the depressions from our weight in the cushions even when the couch was empty.

"What's your pleasure?" Chase asked.

I shrugged and left it to Matteo to choose our game.

"Classic. I'm in the mood to smoke you both at old school Mario Kart."

It was getting late when my phone buzzed. I glanced down and smiled. "Guys, I need a pause."

"You need a pause? For a woman? Who are you, and what have you done with Jimmy?" Matteo asked.

"Yeah, what gives?" asked Chase as he paused the game.

I picked up my phone. “I have a message from Melena. I want to make sure she’s okay.”

“Oooooohhh,” Matteo said in his best middle school girl voice. “Is that the new wife?”

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:51 am

I ignored the jibe and opened her message.

Melena: Still on for house hunting tomorrow? How do you feel about breakfast first?

“That’s the wife,” Chase said. He shook his head. “Jimmy is a changed man.”

Matteo shook his head, as if unsure what to say. At the last minute I’d invited him to the wedding, but he and his wife had been out of town, and he’d seemed more than a little befuddled at how quickly we moved. “Well, congratulations then. You’re happy?” he asked.

I smiled. “It’s complicated, but I think we’ll get there.”

Matteo shot Chase a knowing smile. “How’s Andi taking Prince Charming’s sudden marriage?”

Chase barked a laugh. “About as well as she handled him dating her friend Ginny in high school, but with more machinations and intent. I think Melena’s got a hard road ahead of her there.”

I tilted my head. “Andi’s not that bad.”

Chase shook his head. “Oh, my friend. There are none so blind as brothers. Melena’s going to have it rough.”

I scowled. “I won’t allow it. Andi and I support each other, and I expect her to back me in this.”

Chase clapped a hand on my shoulder. “It’s cute you think she’ll view it as unsupportive to harass your new wife. Pretty sure she’ll view it as exactly the opposite.” He held up his hands. “Before y’all decide to fight me, let’s get another beer and get back to our game. I can only handle so much Dr. Phil talk.”

I snuck in a quick text to Melena before we resumed our game.

Jimmy: Sounds great. Meet at my place at eight and we can walk to the diner nearby?

Chapter 13

Melena – House Hunters Pacific Northwest

I dashed up the steps to Jimmy’s and knocked, bouncing on my toes. It was nice to have something to look forward to, instead of things I wanted to forget. Spending the day touring other people’s houses and how they filled their spaces sounded soothing. Like a window into a life that wasn’t my own. A taste of what could be, full of possibility, and an escape from my reality. I didn’t want to think about my medical issues. I’d been doing okay on the meds, and I hoped I’d continue to stay steady. But at what cost? Part of me wanted the procedure to avoid the expensive medication if or when Jimmy and I separated. I had a year’s reprieve, but afterward, who knew? Stop. I needed to focus on the future, on house hunting, not on a heart I couldn’t control.

Jimmy opened the door with his trademark smile. “Hey.” Probably taking his cues from my awkward wave last time, he leaned in for a chaste kiss on the cheek, and I bungled it. His lips were right there and...I turned in. I turned in. I couldn’t help myself. Dr. Webb’s advice didn’t compute when my hormones were in play. Our lips collided, and it only took him half a beat to smile into my mouth before kissing me quickly but thoroughly and leaning back. He was so slick, he left me like a cartoon stuck in kiss mode, waiting for his lips to return to mine. I shook myself and stepped back.

“Well, hello. You okay?” His smile was wide and happy, but his gaze searched mine for any sign of distress.

“Hello, yourself, and yeah,” I said, trying to get my breathing and buzzing need back under control. Yeah. Intelligent. That was me. Someday I’d work up to full conversations, but I was off to a slow start. I took another deep breath and inventory. I felt fine. Normal, even. Maybe the impact of his kisses was wearing off. Would they become less potent with regular exposure? Not likely.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:51 am

“Are you ready to go?”

I nodded. Yep. Nodding. That’s what he’d reduced me to. So much for zero impact kissing. Instead of addling my heart, he’d addled my brain.

“Great, let me grab my coat.” He reached inside and slid into a leather jacket. I’d seen him in uniform; I was used to him in button downs. He exuded pressed and professional male almost twenty-four seven. I’d never seen him truly mussed in public. Now he was throwing leather into the mix. Mercy. All he needed was the fedora to make the transition to White Collar’s Neal Caffrey complete. Delicious.

He put a hand to the base of my spine, and we walked downstairs together. The warmth of his hand sent pings of sensation zipping through me, and I inhaled the scent of aged leather, holding it in briefly before exhaling. Because that would totally calm my hormones.

“How was the rest of your week?” he asked.

“Fine.”

Yep. My conversational skills rocked. He was too darned distracting with the leather jacket. It shouldn’t have been so hot. Jimmy always looked handsome. But today, the leather turned my hormones up to an eleven.

We walked a few blocks to a hole-in-the-wall diner doing a steady stream of business on the clear and cold Saturday morning. The hostess’ smile was huge as she greeted Jimmy but faded when she saw me. “I’ve got your usual table ready,” she said. “I was

hoping to hear more shift stories on my break.” She glanced at me. “But it looks like you’ve already got company.”

The faint edge in her voice had me straightening my shoulders. I thought about announcing myself as Jimmy’s wife, but bit my lip instead. I’d already won this competition. I doubted Jimmy even knew the hostess was playing, so I smiled sweetly at her and pushed down the green monster. Jealousy was never part of our deal.

“You come here a lot?” I murmured. Yep. Rolled out that old chestnut. Original, baby. Maybe the hostess was in the running for his heart after all.

Jimmy smiled at the hostess who seated us. “Thanks, Carla. We’ll catch up another time.” He slid into the bench across from mine. “Yeah, I treat myself to breakfast almost every weekend when I’m not working. They have great biscuits and gravy here.”

My stomach growled. He laughed. “You like biscuits and gravy?” I nodded, and he continued. “Then I highly recommend these. They’ll shut down our hearts for sure.”

His laughter tapered off as he realized what he’d said. I smiled to let him know it was okay. “Good thing my issue isn’t with cholesterol then, right? I can’t wait to try them.”

I wanted to get through just one day without thinking about my misbehaving heart. Today was not that day. His expression turned sober. “Have you had any more episodes?”

I shook my head and he reached for my hands on the table, examining my expression. “You’d tell me, right?”

“Jimmy, I’d tell you. I want to focus on something fun today. Let’s not talk about it anymore.”

The server came up to take our order. “Hey, Jimmy. Nice jacket. Your usual today?” the twenty-something woman asked with a grin.

He nodded before gesturing to me. Jimmy’s eyes danced. “What about you, Melena? Are you going to have my usual too?”

“If your usual is the biscuits and gravy with a coffee, then sure.”

The server wasn’t nearly so excited to flirt with me. “Yes, ma’am.”

Ma’am. You could tell who had clout here. I didn’t know what it was about Jimmy that made every woman around him territorial. I was struggling to tame my own green monster. First, his sister and now his neighborhood diner staff. He was too charming by half.

After a plate of some of the best biscuits and gravy I’d ever had, we walked back to Jimmy’s and got in his car to meet our realtor.

“How’d you get hooked up with your realtor—what’s his name?”

“Erik. I actually met him at the gym where I met you.”

The blood flowed out of my face and my heart started to race. Crap. Not another episode. I took a slow breath, then exhaled. What are the chances it would be the same Erik? Tacoma had a population of more than two hundred thousand. There were probably more than two hundred named Eric or Erik.

“Are you okay? You’re not feeling sick, are you? You seem pale.”

“No, I’m fine.” I would be fine. I hoped.

We drew up in front of the realty office and got out. Jimmy held open the door as I stepped inside. It was a simple strip mall, nothing fancy. Jimmy smiled at the teen boy sitting at the front counter answering phones. “We’re here to see Erik.”

A few minutes later a familiar figure stepped into the lobby and held his hand out to Jimmy. Crap. Apparently, there weren’t enough men named Erik in Tacoma after all. Both men were tall and fit. Of course, they’d met at the gym. If they started chest bumping, I was out.

Erik was highly competitive. So was I, for that matter. It’s part of why we hadn’t worked out. Where Jimmy took me beating him at video games in stride, Erik couldn’t stand to lose. Everything was a competition he had to win. He wanted it all. The best restaurants, to win every game of pool, and a hot girlfriend. The full package. He’d been a pissy jerk when I beat him at pool on our third date, and it had been the last straw. I hadn’t returned his calls, and I hadn’t seen him since.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:51 am

Jimmy turned to me. “Erik, I’d like you to meet my wife, Melena.”

I watched Erik’s smile die as he heard Jimmy and caught sight of me. “Melena? Your new wife is Melena?”

Jimmy glanced from Erik to me. “You know each other?”

I nodded reluctantly. Was Jimmy going to lose it? From what I knew about Erik, if their roles were reversed, he’d be unbearable. “Erik and I dated briefly.”

Erik cleared his throat. “Veryrecently. You weren’t married then, were you? I don’t date married women.” He shifted his glance to Jimmy, trying to gauge his reaction. Jimmy kept his smooth professional face in play, calm and composed. If anything, Jimmy’s lack of response riled Erik more. His face flushed with angry color, like me marrying Jimmy was a personal slight. A game he lost.

Kill me now. Erik and I had gone out only a couple of times but had no real chemistry. Our few kisses had left me cold. His dominating attitude had left me colder. Competition was fun sometimes. But I wanted to be with someone who’d ultimately support me. Jimmy beat out Erik in five minutes flat on that front. Erik would have leaned into the drama of me passing out on a date and called an ambulance, dining on the story for days. He would never listen to my wishes to take me quietly and sit with me through it all.

I did my best to smooth over the awkwardness. “Jimmy and I are newlyweds. Things happened fast. I hadn’t met Jimmy yet when you and I went out.”

The awkward refused to be smoothed. Erik's laugh had an edge. "Shotgun wedding or love at first sight?"

I could tell my quick marriage grated on him. He probably viewed it as me winning after I ghosted him. Though he might not view it as me beating him to the altar if he was informed why I'd married Jimmy. I couldn't even be vague about the timeline because he knew, dammit. "Hey, when it's right, it's right." I glanced at Jimmy with a smile. "I don't know about you, but I'm ready to see some houses."

It was forced as hell, but I made it work. Erik still looked dubious, but he took the hint and dropped the subject of our marriage.

"Great. I'll drive. I've set up appointments at all of the properties you requested, and I've got one more you might like given your change in circumstances."

Jimmy squeezed my hand as we followed Erik outside, and I debated asking him if we could drive ourselves. I hoped Erik's desire to 'win' by selling Jimmy a house had overridden his desire to best me. Male pride was hard to predict. I glanced at Jimmy, but his expression was smooth. He didn't seem to be bothered at all that Erik and I had dated. I waffled between relief and disappointment. He wasn't in competition with Erik, but part of me wanted to know he cared at least a little.

Erik showed us out to a big black SUV. Jimmy ushered me toward the front seat next to Erik, and I hung back before taking a reluctant step forward.

Erik couldn't let it go. He kept peppering us with questions under the guise of small talk, as if he were trying to catch us in a lie. Jimmy maintained his calm with short, affable answers, but I quit trying. I didn't need to tell Erik details about our wedding ceremony or if we were living together now. It was none of his business. What was going to be a fun adventure had turned into one of the circles of Hell. Hopefully, we'd get past our bumpy start and enjoy the day.

The first three properties were duds, but Eric gave us room to explore. Jimmy and I walked through each hand in hand. The first house was newer, built in the last ten years, and it had nice finishes.

“I like the dark cabinets and tile floors,” I told Jimmy.

“Yeah, but the kitchen looked much bigger online.”

I nodded, sharing his disappointment. In person, it was a two-butt kitchen at most, built with two long counters and cabinets above. There was no prep island or seating counter. Jimmy was big enough that I’d be constantly underfoot, and there was no way I was getting in the way of his cooking genius.

“It’s a no?” I asked.

He nodded and squeezed my hand. “It’s a no for me unless you love it.”

Something turned to mush inside, and I squeezed his hand back before shaking my head. No way was I letting him buy a house with a kitchen he didn’t love to satisfy me. That wasn’t what our partnership was about. We didn’t bother with exploring the rest of the house and instead Erik drove us to the next property.

The second house was over a hundred years old. The owners had knocked down walls to enlarge the kitchen, and it was beautiful. They’d preserved the character of the room by keeping the tin molding on the ceiling. It was shiny and intricate but cold. It gave the room an industrial feel, and the rest of the house was shabby and cramped in comparison. Jimmy had wrinkled his nose in every room. As much as I admired the owners’ dedication to the kitchen space, the rest of the house didn’t do it for me either.

The third house had elegant bones but needed a lot of work. The kitchen was dated,

with older appliances and cabinets covered in olive green paint chipped at the contact points. It was an eyesore. I winced at the color and Jimmy laughed.

“Yeah, it’s that bad,” he agreed.

“We could fix it up,” I offered tentatively.

He shook his head. “A kitchen remodel puts this one outside of our budget with the other repairs it would need. Online this house looked like a lot less work.”

I nodded. I wasn’t contributing anything to the budget, and I knew from my work with my parents it was easily a fifty-thousand-dollar remodel. If Jimmy didn’t have that kind of cash, I was the last one to argue. Jimmy and I were on the same page; he was the money man behind the purchase, and his cooking was art. He needed a worthy studio to practice.

Erik gave us space to walk each house, only commenting on features he thought we missed. It was refreshing because I’d worried about a hard sell from him. He still watched us like a hawk, as if waiting for me to screw up and reveal something that would tell him he’d won our virtual competition.

The fourth place had potential. Situated on one of the quieter streets in north Tacoma, it was small, but had a lot of character. The craftsman style home had three levels. The downstairs basement was unfinished, and the attic room was tiny, but the main floor had two bedrooms, a bathroom, living room, and a refurbished kitchen. It wasn’t large, but it was still an improvement over the apartment Jimmy lived in. The white farm style cabinets and quartz countertops exuded casual warmth. A window over the sink let in a lot of light, and the overall effect was airy and cozy. I could envision a kitchen table where I could do my books and insurance billing while Jimmy made dinner.

“What do you think?” I asked.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:51 am

He opened and closed the kitchen cabinets and drawers. “It’s nice. What do you think?”

I smiled. “I like it. The location would be convenient for both of us; it seems like a quiet neighborhood. The yard and distance between neighbors gives it a lot of privacy.”

He nodded. “Let’s tour the rest before we decide.”

The next house was Erik’s late addition. I tried not to side-eye Erik for showing it to us. It wasn’t on our original property list and didn’t meet our criteria. It was a newer two-story in a cookie cutter close-set development. The awkwardly laid out kitchen had none of the features we were searching for, no gas stove, builder finishes, and minimal cabinets. It was a kitchen for people who hated to cook. A quick glance at Jimmy told me we were on the same page. Soon it became clear why he was presenting it. Maybe Erik’s intentions were pure, but after the first few houses, I would have expected he could read us better.

“I thought this might be a good fit given your newlywed status. It’s next to a strong school and all the neighbors are really friendly. It’d be a great place to raise your children. There’s a park right there across the street. The bedrooms are all up here, and look—there are four. Plenty of room for you as your family grows. Isn’t this one cute? The previous owners redid it as a nursery. It’s all ready for you to move in.” He stared at my stomach meaningfully.

Of course, he’d draw his own conclusions about why I married Jimmy. He probably thought I was the loser if I married because I had to. I ate a big breakfast, okay? I was

not freaking pregnant. My hands clenched. The words to confront him were on the tip of my tongue, but Jimmy beat me to it. “Enough, Erik. Let’s get back on the same page here. We’re looking for a nice house with room for two and a wonderful kitchen. If you don’t think you can deliver, I’m happy to work with someone else.”

Erik held up his hands. “Hey. No harm meant. I wanted you to see the full range of your options, before you jump into something hasty and regret it.”

Asshole. Was he implying I’d dumped him for Jimmy and made a bad decision? Or that Jimmy had made the bad call in marrying me? Everything he said reaffirmed my choice.

Jimmy’s smile was tight, and his jaw clenched. “Erik, I think we’re done here. Let’s move on to the last place.”

It took effort to relax my clenched fists. Maybe I should have nixed the idea of Erik as our realtor as soon as I realized the connection, but I didn’t know how close he and Jimmy might be. I didn’t need to get in between him and his friends. We were temporary. Erik had been a blip on my radar.

We were silent as we got back into the SUV. I debated climbing in the back with Jimmy. It seemed childish, but I didn’t like the dynamic with him riding alone in the back either. He was being chivalrous, but if anything, he was the client. Erik was his realtor. He sure as heck wasn’t mine.

Everything about the day had served to highlight why Erik and I hadn’t worked. He didn’t listen. So competitive, he had to get in digs at me and risk losing us as clients. He couldn’t shut it off and just be. Jimmy and I enjoyed playing together, but he didn’t pout into oblivion when he lost. He regrouped and kept trying. The same had happened with me fainting. He regrouped and helped me get what I needed. He was persistent, but he listened, and it made all the difference. I glanced at him in the back,

his big body splayed across the seat like a royal sovereign being driven by a lowly subject. And it was true. Jimmy wasn't threatened by Erik. His first instinct was to protect me. Support me. My shoulders relaxed. Maybe being visited by the ghosts of relationships past wasn't a disaster. Where Erik and I had been competitors in our brief relationship, Jimmy and I were a team.

It was a quiet ride to the last place on our list. From the outside, it was bland and unassuming. A 1950s rambler painted dark green. The peeling paint obscured by the overgrown vegetation around the house gave it an abandoned air. The arborvitae and other evergreen shrubs had reached so high they obstructed most of the windows. I itched for a chain saw, but the yard had potential.

My jaw dropped as we stepped over the threshold. It was the Jekyll and Hyde of houses. The inside had been gutted and updated. Newer laminate flooring, fresh trim, the works. It felt open and inviting, and I crossed my fingers that the kitchen would be as nice as the front rooms. We stepped through the entryway and Jimmy stopped dead. Yes. Way better than the pictures. Tall cabinets provided ample space with pull-out shelves, and the countertops gleamed. It had a gas range and a massive island with bar stools.

"I could absolutely see myself sipping on morning coffee while you putter around creating. It's beautiful."

I glanced at Jimmy; the gleam in his eyes said it all. The kitchen was it. So long as the bedrooms weren't dismal, this was the house.

Erik showed us through the two full baths and three bedrooms. There was enough space for each of us to have our own room if we wanted, plus an additional home office or workout space. The walls were freshly painted white and the carpet was bland, but those were things easily changed. It was nearly perfect. I was afraid to know how much it cost.

“What do you think?” I asked. Jimmy looked like he was trying not to smile, but his calm face was shot. He lost impassive back at the kitchen.

He grasped my hands in his own. “Could you live here? With me?”

His brown gaze searched mine, and I enjoyed the heat of his hands surrounding my own. He finally let the grin he’d been flirting with take over his face, tugging me closer. I felt the pull his body was exerting on mine. He made me think of comfort, shelter, and, I inhaled, sex. His eyes lit with fire, and I leaned in further.

“Ahem.”

Darn Erik. I didn’t want to look at him, but Jimmy was more polite. He glanced over at where the other man was propped against the kitchen wall. “We want to make an offer on this one.”

Erik’s wooden smile looked like it might crack. “Wonderful. Let’s discuss details, and I’ll get it written up for the sellers.”

He and Jimmy talked through the finances, and I tuned out, wandering the empty space. It was move-in ready, and I tried to envision my furniture in the living room. I didn’t know if he even wanted my stuff cluttering up his tastefully decorated home. We hadn’t talked about it. I was going to be a glorified roommate. Did glorified roommates bring furniture outside of their bedroom sets? I was one hundred percent confident everything in his kitchen was better than my stuff. But I didn’t want to give up my things; I needed to be ready to live on my own if we didn’t work out. Maybe my stuff could stay in boxes in the garage. My stomach clenched. It would give me one foot out the door. I’d be move-out ready.

Today had been fun, even with Erik overseeing the process. Jimmy had grabbed my hand and walked through each house with me, like we were a unit. A team. He was

the kind of guy you wanted on your side. But I wasn't much of a team player. I liked the solo sports. I couldn't afford distractions from my goals, and Jimmy was a distraction. Scheduling clients was less attractive when I could be with Jimmy instead. I'd integrated his shift schedule with my calendar and avoiding appointments on his free days was a constant temptation. However, he was also a huge help. His medical care meant I wasn't in debt. I could afford a little distraction.

Seeing him next to Erik emphasized how real Jimmy's strength was. They were both handsome, but Erik was gym-slick. All for show. Jimmy's muscle was built for work. For helping others. My pulse picked up and I tried to calm myself. He didn't even have to kiss me to get my heart racing. I wasn't sure how I was going to handle living with him full-time if walking through houses had me reacting.

That night over dinner, we wrote our personal letter to accompany our offer and sent it off to Erik. As we were wrapping up, I finally broached the topic that had been on my mind. "So. How is this all going to work? "

"How's what going to work?"

I wagged my finger between us. "This. Us. Living together."

He shrugged. "However you want it to."

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:51 am

“Do I bring my furniture? Are we just roommates? Are we exclusively dating? Will we share a room?”

“We’re married. In my book, that means we’re exclusive.” He looked at me carefully, and I nodded in agreement. His shoulders slumped slightly, and I wondered if he thought I’d fight him on exclusivity. Confrontation with Erik aside, my dating life was nearly nonexistent. Jimmy had nothing to worry about. He was the one with diner waitresses throwing themselves at him every other weekend. Heat washed through me at the implication of his words. Maybe I wasn’t the only one struggling with our forced celibacy. My stomach hollowed as a second wave washed through me, this time more fear than desire. He wanted me now, but what about a year from now? And what did I want? A tiny voice whispered that a year would be too short. Even if it was the right thing, to free him and pursue my own dreams, leaving Jimmy might leave me with more heart trouble, if fewer medical bills. Broken hearts weren’t usually healed with a trip to the doctor. I pushed the growing ache aside and focused back on Jimmy.

His expression was earnest as he answered my question. “You can bring any furniture you want. If we’re going to live together, I want it to feel like our place. There should be room for everything.”

I raised a brow. “Even my extensive sheet collection?”

He winced. “Even your extensive sheet collection. Why do you have an extensive sheet collection? Do I want to know?”

I shrugged. “Hazard of the therapy trade. Most sets I keep at my office, but I do a lot

of laundry at home too. What about rent?" I asked. "I think I should pay expenses. You're already contributing to my medical care."

He shrugged. "I won't argue with that. We can share expenses."

"Am I going to have my own room?" I couldn't decide if I should have phrased it as a demand, not a question. Sleeping next to him sounded too tempting. I trusted Jimmy to respect me and the doctor's orders. He was too protective not to. "Or will we sleep together?"

His slow smile overtook his face, lighting it with mischief. "You just want to find out if I snore," he accused.

I laughed. "Busted. Do you?" Trust Jimmy to take the sting out of the conversation and inject some fun.

"Maybe. I don't know. I've never had any complaints before. Do you?"

"Maybe. You'll have to wait and see." I grinned.

"What do you wear to bed?"

I tilted my head. "Sweats usually; I'm always cold. Why? What do you wear?"

"Boxers. I'm an inferno between the sheets. I'm happy to share my heat."

"Yeah, I just bet you are, buddy. I'm not planning to ditch my sweatpants anytime soon."

His brows wiggled. "A guy can dream though, right?"

“Keep dreaming.”

We talked more about the logistics of the move. Assuming we even got the house, it'd be a few weeks before the deal closed, and we were able to move in. I had to investigate breaking or running out my lease; Jimmy was already month-to-month in anticipation of moving. I hadn't planned on consolidating households so quickly.

Jimmy's phone buzzed with an incoming text. He read it before glancing at me. “That was Erik. He's submitted our offer. We should find out in a couple of days if we got it. Speaking of Erik, you seemed to have history there. Anything more I should know?”

His tone belied his calm expression. Ugh. Erik. The gift that kept on giving. Was Jimmy jealous? He'd masked it well in our time together.

“Nope. Just someone I went out with a couple of times. What about you? Any hidden paramours I should know about? The hostess or waitress from this morning for instance?”

I couldn't resist asking, even though I had a feeling I knew the answer. His grin stretched across his handsome face at my question as he realized he wasn't the only one feeling a little green. “Carla and Janice? No, and nope. I haven't been dating much; too busy studying for my fire investigator exam and house hunting.”

My ears perked up. “Fire investigator exam? Do you have plans to take it soon?”

“Next time there's an opportunity.”

“You don't like being with a ladder company?”

He shrugged. “I want to do more. I got a degree in chemistry before joining the

department. Arson investigation is something I've always been interested in, and I think I'm ready."

"You never said; what drew you to firefighting?"

He sobered and stared down at the table, drawing circles across the dark wood. "My cousin Dante."

"He was a firefighter?"

“No. He was killed in a fire.”

I placed my hand over his. A world of hurt weighed down in his words. His somber tone made it clear that even if it had been a long time ago, he was still deeply affected.

“I’m so sorry. Can I ask what happened?”

He blew out a sigh. “Dante was in the wrong place at the wrong time. He was sleeping at his girlfriend’s apartment and the building went up. She got out, but he didn’t make it. He was trying to help one of her neighbors. It was arson, but the firebug was never caught.”

“Jimmy, I’m sorry.”

I didn’t know what else to say. What he didn’t say was that they were close, but it was obvious from the way he talked about Dante how much he cared.

“There was an investigation, but it went nowhere.” He shrugged. “I was able to use a favor to review the case file as a courtesy after I joined the department here. It was thin. No surveillance video in the area. No witnesses. Limited evidence of accelerants. Nothing that could be traced to a suspect. There wasn’t much more the investigator could do. My aunt and uncle can’t accept that. This is how I make a difference; become an investigator and hopefully prevent some other family’s tragedy by catching arsonists before they escalate and kill.”

“What about your parents and sister? Are they supportive?”

“My parents were disappointed I didn’t join the Army like them, but they didn’t disown me for going into fire protection instead.” He smiled wryly. “If I’d joined the Navy, it might have been an issue. The rivalry is fierce, and not just in football. My sister has issues with my career. She’s worried she’s going to lose her brother along with her cousin. In a lot of ways, we’re all each other has left.”

We were silent for a few minutes. I didn’t know what to say. Growing up, accidents happened, but I hadn’t lost anyone close to me. Colville was small, and there wasn’t much crime, but fire danger in the national forest was a constant threat in the drier months. Fighting wildfires was dangerous; it hit the news every year. I was borderline ignorant about the dangers of urban firefighting. I watched Jimmy, still lost in thought, his face solemn. That was a conversation for another day. Google was free, and temporary wives had no room to complain about a career that was paying for their medical insurance.

Jimmy cleared his throat. “Enough deep conversation for one night. Can I interest you in another glass of wine to celebrate putting our offer in?” he asked as he tilted the wine bottle toward me.

I looked down at my glass; I’d already had a couple. “One more, and I don’t think I can drive home.”

“Do you want to get a lift, or find out if I snore?”

“What, you’re not going to offer the couch?”

“Nope. Of course, you’re welcome to it if you want, but it seems silly when we’re planning to move in together anyway.”

“No funny business?” I asked jokingly.

I wanted all his business. But I figured Jimmy would be a stickler for following medical advice. It was easier to joke about it than tell him I wanted to slide down him like a fire pole.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about; I’m hilarious. But I’m fully prepared to follow doctor’s orders.”

I met his gaze before taking another sip of my drink. “I guess I’m putting you to the test.”

His Adam’s apple bobbed. “I wish you meant that differently, but I’ve probably got some sweats for you to borrow.”

We relaxed in front of the TV for a while, my feet in Jimmy’s lap. I was feeling relaxed and the tiniest bit fuzzy. After the stress of the last few weeks, spending a quiet night with Jimmy was what the doctor ordered. If only my stupid heart would cooperate with something more. His big hand on my foot shouldn’t have been turning me on, but the slow stroke of his fingers along my instep were mesmerizing. I shifted, pressing my legs together to ease the ache. I focused on my breath and rubbed my chest, and Jimmy followed the gesture.

“Everything okay?” he asked.

I smiled. “Yeah, no need to panic, Nurse Jimmy. I’m good. Just getting tired. Do you mind if I turn in? You don’t have to go to bed if you don’t want to.”

Alone time might do me good. Take the edge off.

He yawned and stretched. “No, I’m ready too. Come on, I’ll grab those sweats for you.”

I bit my lip as I watched his lean hips sway with every step down the hall toward his room. I flushed, feeling the heat trickle through my body. Maybe I didn't need the extra warmth of heavy knit tonight.

Jimmy pulled a pair of gray sweatpants and a faded Oregon State sweatshirt from one of his drawers and gave them to me. "They won't fit, but they'll be warm. I think I've got an extra toothbrush in the cabinet above the sink."

I pressed my lips together to avoid asking for a fresh towel instead. A cold shower would do me better than feeling the soft rasp of fabric that had also touched his body against my skin. I shut the door to the bathroom and shook myself. Down, girl.

I slipped out of my clothes and folded them neatly before tugging on his sweats. I resisted the pull to snoop through his cabinets—the new toothbrush was front and center. I had to laugh at my reflection when I closed the cabinet. My hair was sticking up in an arc, thanks to the static from pulling on his sweatshirt. It swam on me. Makeup mostly gone, I looked like someone's five-year-old playing dress-up. The only one having sexy thoughts tonight was me. One glance at my outfit and Jimmy was going to pinch my cheek and ask how I liked first grade. I made a face at myself in the mirror, then got with the business of my nightly routine.

I opened the door to an erotic vision laid out before me. Jimmy was stretched out on top of the covers, his hands resting behind his head, biceps bulging. In nothing but a pair of boxers. I laughed when at what was on them—flames. The phrase, 'too hot to handle' was emblazoned across the front. "Let me guess. You either have a sense of humor about your underwear or your sister does."

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:51 am

His smile spread slowly across his face. “What? You think I can’t shop for my own underwear? Though you’re right, Andi got them for me for Christmas last year. Brat may not like that I’m a firefighter, but it doesn’t stop her from teasing me about it.”

He pushed up from the bed, standing to his full height, and I couldn’t move. His smooth skin and the ripple of well-defined muscles short-circuited my brain. My fingers ached to run over his body, exploring. I clenched them instead and stood still as he brushed past me on his way to the bathroom. Was it my imagination, or did he pass closer than he needed to? Surely the doorway was broad enough he didn’t have to rub his body along mine, scorching me with his heat. He shut the door and I shook myself, ignoring the uptick in my heart rate. I returned from the kitchen with a glass of water in time to see Jimmy lean forward to pull back the covers on his side of the bed. Even the ridges of his shoulder blades were sexy, darn it. How was I supposed to get any rest sleeping next to male perfection? Heat blazed and prickled beneath my skin.

Jimmy yawned. Bastard. Clearly, he was going to have no trouble resisting me in the two-sizes-too-big sweats. “Is this okay?” he asked, gesturing to my side of the bed.

I nodded. “Sure. I’m not picky.” I sat down on the left side of the bed, and swung my legs up, laying down as stiff as a toddler resisting naptime.

“Comfortable?” his deep voice rumbled.

Darn. Jimmy’s base vocals stroked down my body until the reverberations reached my toes and I scrunched them into the soft sheets.

“Totally,” I lied.

Like a lying Liar McLiarpants.

Pretty soon his sweats, which were too big on me, were going to start smoking, and he was going to have to put them out. Was I comfortable? In theory? Sure. In reality, I was drenched in Jimmy. The queen-sized bed was large for one, but cozy for two. I could feel his body heat radiating toward me, though we weren’t touching. The subtle scent of Jimmy’s soap and laundry products were in the sheets and in the sweats I’d borrowed. I was wrapped in his essence, but not touching him at all. Torture.

He reached out a pinky to caress my wrist where it lay next to his. “Okay for me to turn my light off? Need anything?”

Boy did I. But nothing I could have. His voice had slipped into a deeper register with every word. The rough sound swept along every nerve, leaving goose bumps behind. I wanted to believe the extra rumble was because he was struggling to quiet the current of desire flowing between us as much as I was. Stupid doctors with their stupid instructions for stupid misbehaving hearts. “Goodnight,” I said as I rubbed my chest.

Jimmy leaned over to turn off his bedside light and the room plunged into darkness. I could hear everything. At home I slept with a fan for white noise. Here there was nothing to distract me from the sounds of the apartment and Jimmy’s neighbors moving around upstairs.

I focused on listening for his breathing. It slowly evened out. He was asleep. Then the show started upstairs. And by show, I mean vigorous bouncing accompanied by rhythmic squeaking. I’d thought Jimmy was asleep, but he lifted his pillow and pulled it across his face.

“Kill me now,” he groaned, his deep voice muffled by the pillow.

I laughed and his body relaxed next to mine, breaking the tension. “Groan much louder, and we’ll give them a run for their money. Do you have a fan or something we can turn on?”

“Sorry, yes. I’ll turn on the bathroom fan; it might help.”

The bed shifted as he left it, then the low hum of the bathroom fan started.

“Thank you.”

“First time I’m ashamed to have a woman thank me in the bedroom,” he admitted with a laugh. His deep bass wrapped around me in the dark, sliding like phantom fingers down my skin. Goose bumps pebbled my arms again, and I couldn’t blame it on the temperature. I was more than warm enough.

I wanted to groan. He had nothing to feel bad about. I was crankier about our forced celibacy than he seemed to be. Or he was hiding it. I really hoped he was hiding it well, because otherwise I was alone in my feelings.

I focused on my breath to calm my racing heart. I was used to relying on my body. But I couldn’t fix this with extra cardio at the gym or a few sessions of physical therapy or massage. I scowled up at the ceiling. My stupid heart was going rogue, and there was nothing I could do to stop it but rely on meds and my doctor. Giving up control felt unnatural. If I wanted to cede control, I’d work for someone else. If I wanted to go with the flow, I would still live at home with my parents and work for the family business. None of that felt like me, and not going after what I wanted with Jimmy felt equally wrong. I rubbed my chest. Stupid heart.

Chapter 14

Jimmy – Big Moves

Waking up with Melenain my arms did not suck. What did, was knowing I couldn't do a damn thing about it. She smelled faintly of jasmine, and I inhaled deeply before gently rolling away and sitting up on the edge of the bed. I looked down at my lap. Yeah, that was a problem. Luckily one I could take care of with a morning shower. I glanced back at Melena.

Her dark hair spread around her like a halo. I reached out and let a few strands slip gently between my fingers. Silky and soft. I sighed as I glanced back at my lap. Torturing myself wasn't going to make spending time with her any easier. But I couldn't look away for long. Watching her and not touching was a sweet torture I'd endure, if it meant I could have her in my life.

Her face was relaxed in sleep, all soft curves. She looked peaceful, and I blew out a quiet breath. She was safe. Protected. She was also fiercely independent and might want to kick my ass for thinking that way. I couldn't help the Neanderthal corner of my brain that mirrored her emotions. Her happiness had become tied to my own happiness so quickly. I'd only had her for a span of five minutes in the scope of my overall life, but something about her presence made my chest expand. I rubbed my sternum. Maybe she wasn't the only one with heart problems.

I took care of business and got dressed for the day, moving quietly so I didn't wake Melena. I was sipping coffee in the kitchen when she shuffled out. My gray sweatpants pooled at her ankles, and the shirt collar played peekaboo with one

rounded shoulder. “Hey,” she said as she moved to the coffee maker and poured herself a cup.

I smiled at her over my coffee mug as she sat down. “You sleep okay?”

She wrinkled her nose. “After the neighbors wrapped up their fun, yes. The joys of apartment life. Hard to believe we might not be sharing walls in a few weeks.”

My smile widened. “About that. I had a text from Erik. Our offer was accepted.”

I couldn’t help the pride in my tone. It was finally happening. And I had Melena to thank for making it possible. Erik told me the competition was fierce and our letter helped. The sellers remembered being newlyweds themselves.

Melena’s face broke into a grin. “Already? That’s amazing news. I can’t believe you bought a house!”

“We bought a house. Want to hear the other good news?”

“What, did you do something else amazing before breakfast?”

I chuckled. “I would have liked to, but your doctor says no for now.” More pink flushed Melena’s cheeks, and I couldn’t help the way my smile grew wider. “No, the sellers want to move up the closing date since the house is vacant and we’re not contingent buyers. We can move in two weeks.”

“Wow. So fast.”

I held back my laugh. Fast for Melena, but it was months in the making for me. Years if you counted the time I’d been saving. Everything I wanted was finally within reach. No more moving around. A place to call my own, and Melena to share it with.

I nodded. “Yes, a little unusual, but they were motivated to get out of their mortgage before the holidays and my loan was pre-approved.”

We discussed going out to dinner to celebrate and the moving details while I made us a simple breakfast of scrambled eggs and toast. Melena made an attentive audience, peppering me with questions about cooking and my gran after we’d exhausted our plans for moving day. The quiet pressed in on me after she went home to change. Rationally, I knew we didn’t have any of her things here, and I didn’t expect her to hang out all day. Still, my tiny apartment echoed when she was gone.

My drive to help her had grown like fire to something entirely different. Andi might not believe me, but Melena wasn’t another example of my protective instincts in overdrive. I just wasn’t sure she felt the same. I loved that we could laugh and joke together, but it made sensing when she was serious difficult. Turning off the charm to let her get close was hard. The man behind the humor didn’t always get rave reviews in relationships. It was easier to lead with the exterior and keep everything on the surface with other women. No drama. Just a pretty package and a good time. Nothing deeper, but Melena’s struggles made me want to share more of myself. From the first kiss when she passed out, I couldn’t let her face fear alone. Andi would scoff at my savior complex, but it was more for me. The question was how did Melena feel? I didn’t want to pressure her.

The controlled burn of affection crackled and jumped to an entirely new fuel. Flames licked at the pillars of my preconceptions. Everything I learned about her made me warmer and added to the blaze. Would she push me away if I shared my feelings? Would it be the dose of cold water I needed to control the fire, or would it seethe below the surface, slowly gaining ground regardless of her response? She claimed she needed to be independent. I thought having a partner’s support could only make her stronger. I didn’t need to challenge her independence. I wanted to burn with her, not just for her.

The next few weeks flew by in a rush of packing, mortgage paperwork, and evenings on my days off spent with Melena. I didn't broach my growing feelings. It should have been easy, but I couldn't make myself do it. My fear was the only thing holding me back. If I didn't tell her, she wouldn't have to let me down gently. I wouldn't see the pity in her eyes as she confirmed my worst fears; I was just a friend. Maybe one she wanted to kiss, but not someone she saw herself with long-term. If I didn't tell her, I wouldn't be tortured by every moment with her. I committed to helping Melena through her treatment. I wouldn't go back on my promise, even if my growing feelings weren't reciprocated. But living together was going to be torture if she pitied me. My department's good opinion wasn't worth that kind of disappointment.

She didn't stay over again, and I couldn't make myself ask. Not when we were moving in together in a matter of days. I could wait. It would be considerably less awkward without any neighborly acoustics.

I rallied Chase, Matteo, and a few coworkers to help us on moving day. My company was supportive of the house but surprised by my marriage.

"Congratulations, Jimmy. She must be a special woman if she snapped you up so quickly. You know what they say, real women marry firefighters..."

I didn't even need to think to finish his sentence. I'd heard this one before. Many times. "Everyone else marries cops."

Mark laughed at his own joke. "Seriously, though. I'll have Brenda come help with the move so they can meet and exchange numbers. You want her to have a support system."

Mark was my lieutenant, and I viewed the veteran as a mentor. If he said Melena

needed a support system, then I wanted to introduce her to Brenda. She and Mark had been married forever; if anyone had wisdom to share on marrying a firefighter, she was a solid candidate. Melena hadn't commented about my work schedule. I couldn't help but wonder if that would change when we were living together.

I bounced on the balls of my feet as I waited for Melena to open her door. We'd be ten minutes early to get the keys to our new house, but I didn't care. My hands itched for those keys. Somewhere, Gran was smiling down. If she were alive, she'd be ready with a casserole and raft of advice. Most of it about how to keep Melena happy. She always said, "The recipe for a happy home starts with someone special to share it with." She claimed that's why she upended her retirement years to care for Andi and me. After living alone for decades after my grandfather passed and missing out on our babyhood because we lived with our parents overseas, she'd been eager to get to know her grandkids. She'd taught me everything she could about how to make a place home, and I was more than ready to make mine with Melena.

Melena was dressed in athletic gear—yoga pants, a T-shirt, and a hoodie. Her dark hair was caught back in a ponytail and her cheeks were flushed and pink with health. Gran would have approved of Melena. Not of her nonexistent cooking skills, but Melena's work ethic. She was ready to do some heavy lifting, even though I had no plans to let her overdo it. I was slowly getting to know my competitive wife. If she had her way, she'd lift a box for every one any of our volunteers hefted.

"You ready for this?" I asked.

She smiled. "I've been counting down. I'm all packed."

It only took a few minutes to navigate the streets to the new house. Erik was outside, his SUV parked at the curb. "Congratulations, guys," he said.

I shook his hand and he handed me the keys. I hadn't been giddy like this since Christmas when I was ten. My dad had been home for the holiday, and everything felt magical. Melena and I walked up to the door, and I slid the key in the lock, enjoying the snick of the mechanism before I pushed it slowly open. I looked down at Melena, who waved goodbye to Erik. "Don't mind me, it's tradition," I said as I bent, putting my shoulder at her middle and lifting her up into a fireman's carry.

"Jimmy!" she squealed, laughing.

I stepped over the threshold and bent my knees slowly, placing her feet down gently. The slip of her curves in the soft pants and T-shirt scraped along my forearm as I let her go, and I struggled to focus on her brown eyes. "What? It's a thing, right? Newlyweds and carrying your wife over the threshold the first time you enter your house?"

She laughed and smacked me on the chest. "It's less romantic in a fireman's carry. Then it looks like an excuse to ogle my ass."

I wiggled my brows at her. "That too. Bonus for me." She laughed, and I shrugged. "Hey, what can I say? I'm still a guy. And you've got a great ass."

She shook her head at me, but the quirk of her lips told me she wasn't upset. I grabbed her hand, and we walked slowly through the house, talking about where things would go. We unloaded the boxes in my car before heading back to my apartment to meet the others.

Chase and Tamra pulled up a few moments after we arrived. He'd picked up the rental truck for me, and together we started loading the large furniture. Matteo, Mark, and Brenda showed up not long after, and my apartment was cleared in record time. I tried to keep an eye on Melena to make sure she wasn't overdoing it.

“Hey, Loverboy. Eyes on the lift,” Chase said.

Matteo laughed. “Yeah. You guys are cute and all, but that won’t make me feel better if you crush my toes with this couch.”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m paying attention.”

When we finished loading the truck, we paused, and I texted everyone the new house address. Melena and I hopped back in the car to join the procession.

“I didn’t have the chance to formally introduce Mark and Brenda. Did you figure out who’s who?” I asked.

She nodded. “Brenda and I exchanged numbers. She seems nice. I had no idea there was such a spouse network in the department.”

“Honestly, I didn’t either, but I’m glad she’s reached out. Mark was helpful when I was learning the ropes. Maybe we can have them over once we’re settled.”

“I’d like that.”

Me too. I was getting everything I wanted, all at once. The perfect life was in reach, or nearly. Just a few minor wrinkles. “How are you feeling?”

Melena scrunched her nose. “Fine, Mr. Worrywart.”

“Can’t blame me for worrying. Moving is a lot of work; don’t overdo it.”

“Yes, doctor.”

I chuckled. “Is that an invitation for later? Are we playing doctor?”

“T-minus twelve days and counting,” she said.

“Wow, I had no idea you were keeping track.”

She gave me a meaningful glance. “Better start limbering up. Maybe take some extra vitamins. Hydrate. I have plans for you.”

I laughed, and she smiled. I couldn’t control the width of my grin. At least I wasn’t the only one suffering. Maybe I wasn’t alone in my growing feelings.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:51 am

“Noted. I’m glad I’m the brave type. The buildup is intimidating.”

“Hah. Tell me about it. I’m a firm believer in going after what you want. Patience isn’t my strong suit.”

We pulled up to the house, and everyone piled out of their vehicles. “Why don’t you direct traffic?” I suggested.

“You just don’t want me to overdo it.”

“Guilty. But I also want things to end up where they should go, and we talked about where we wanted everything. Think of yourself as the project manager today. Goodness knows I’m better suited to be the muscle.”

She gave me a once-over, and I tried to be subtle with my flex. “Yeah, you are,” she said with a wink.

Great. Even that was enough to make my blood rush. I pretended to search for something in the car while I waited for my body to cool down. Twelve days was going to be an eternity with a constant hard-on.

Andi’s sharp voice effectively cut through my fog of desire as she appeared out of seemingly thin air for a hug. “Bro. You did good.” I tried to conceal my surprise at the sincerity in her words. “Congratulations on the house.”

“Thanks, Andi. I appreciate you coming out to help.”

She snorted. “You think I’m here to help? That’s cute.”

“Yeah, whatever. You can go help Melena supervise if that’s more your speed.”

She nodded. “How’s the wifey?”

I groaned. “Probably feeling murderous if she heard you use the term ‘wifey.’”

“What?”

I shook my head. “I’m hardly enlightened, and even I cringed. Melena’s good people. Try to pretend like you want her in the family.”

“She’s not family yet.”

My gaze met hers, and I sobered. “She is to me. Knock it off and give her a fair chance.” Her eyes narrowed, but she didn’t comment. “Come on, let’s get to work. That’s what you’re here for, right?”

She shook her head with a twist of her lips. “So cute. It’s a good thing you’re pretty.”

By four we’d made two trips to my place and two to Melena’s, and our assorted friends had helped cart everything into the new house and stage it in the appropriate rooms. Melena ordered pizza, and we cracked open the beer in the fridge to toast the new house with our friends.

By the end of the day, we’d accumulated all the usual suspects, my old neighborhood friends, Andi, my coworkers, and Lisa from Melena’s office with her husband. I could never have fit this many people at my apartment. Having friends and family help us move cemented what I hoped this would be: a welcoming home, full of love and laughter. “Thank you all for coming and helping today. Melena and I couldn’t

have done it without you.”

“We could,” she corrected. “It would have taken forever and not been nearly so fun. Thank you all for coming.”

Mark smiled at her. “We’re glad to get to meet you and help Jimmy out. It’s nice to see him settled.”

Andi muttered into her bottle. “So long as you don’t drag him under.”

I wanted to reach out and pinch her. Hard. But I wasn’t twelve anymore. I had noticed her checking out my co-worker, Steve. He had a Captain America thing going for him, and if I knew Andi, she was both interested and repulsed, so my revenge took a different direction.

“Steve, have you met my sister, Andi? She loves to hear about our work. Will you tell her about the job you caught a few weeks ago? The vehicle accident between the semi-truck and the Cooper Mini?”

Steve blanched. He was a genuinely nice guy. “Really?”

I nodded. “Sure. Be specific. She can take it.”

There was no way she could take it. Maybe that would teach her not to speak up out of turn. Melena tapped me on the shoulder. I turned to her and murmured, “Hey, what’s up?”

“I got a text from my mom. They’re dying to see the house. Now they’re talking about everyone coming here for Christmas or sooner.”

I searched her gaze, trying to get a clue as to what my response should be. Did I want

a bunch of strangers in our space? Of course not. But it was Melena's family, and I was beyond curious to meet them. "Okay. Maybe we can talk about it tonight while we're unpacking?"

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:51 am

She nodded. I spent the next few minutes circulating and thanking everyone else who'd come out to help while we devoured the last of the pizza. When the last slice was just a greasy reminder of heartburn to come, people started clearing out. It was after five by the time the last person left, and Melena shut the door with a sigh before rotating so her back was against it. She was adorably disheveled. Her dark hair was mostly out of the ponytail it had started in, hanging in strands around her face. Melena's T-shirt and pants were smudged and rumpled.

"What a day, huh?" I asked.

"And then some," she said, as she glanced around at the stacks of boxes. It made me feel like I was living in a game of Tetris. Stacks in different configurations were scattered throughout the house. "Shall we get started in here, so we have one place we can relax? Or in the bedroom, so we have somewhere to sleep?"

"My vote is always to start in the bedroom," I answered with a wolfish grin.

She snorted. "Sure, Romeo. It would be."

I shook my head as she followed me into our new room. "Nah. I don't like that comparison. I like you alive. I likemealive. I'm hoping both families will be supportive. I don't want a tragic ending."

She cast me a sideways look as she ripped the tape off one of her boxes and started loading clothing into dresser drawers. "If Andi's any indication, that may be an uphill battle. How did your parents take the news—you never said."

I looked up from my own box. “I haven’t told them yet.”

She paused with a handful of lacy underwear to watch me. “What do you mean, you haven’t told them yet? Do you plan to tell them, or is it a secret?”

It took everything I had to focus on her question instead of the bits of lace spilling from her fingers. I cleared my throat. “I haven’t spoken with them. But of course, I plan to tell them. It’s not a secret.”

Melena shoved her handfuls into a drawer, and I bit my lip to keep myself from asking to fold them. Not an excuse to get my hands on her panties, just good organization. Perfectionist, not perv. My lips twitched. Sure. And I streamed porn for the plot lines. Melena brought me back to the less sexy topic of my parents with her next words.

“Jimmy, it’s been weeks. You haven’t spoken with your folks in that long?”

I shrugged. We didn’t speak often. I was an adult. They were adults. We didn’t share every minute of our lives with each other. “Andi knows. She’s the only one I really see. I’ll tell them next time we talk. You’ll see, they’ll be happy for me, but they won’t care about the late notice.”

We were on our own schedule. I was used to that aspect of military family life. Mission first. We celebrated when we could, and milestones became the times you were together, not arbitrary dates on a calendar. Melena shot me a glance that looked like pity or maybe outrage, but I had long reconciled my relationship with my parents. We loved each other. We just weren’t close. They were doing their duty, and I couldn’t fault them for wanting to keep us safe. I’d felt differently in my teens, but I’d survived. If Andi and I never missed a birthday together, it was our secret rebellion.

Melena finally cleared her throat. “Are you planning to tell them it’s a fake marriage; is that why you think they won’t care?”

Was that hurt in her eyes? I hadn’t been planning on telling my parents anything of the sort. For me, our marriage was becoming more real every day. Is that what she wanted to hear?

“I know we said we’d dissolve drama-free if we weren’t working after a year, but I’m not going into this planning on an exit,” I admitted.

I watched carefully as her shoulders relaxed. “Oh,” she said. “Then why won’t your parents care? Won’t they want to meet me? Make sure I measure up for their son?”

“I know Andi has probably scarred you with her prickly opinions, but my parents would care more if we were living together outside of marriage.” My lips turned down. “Appearances matter.”

“Well, my parents are dying to meet you. They’re threatening to descend on us en masse around the holidays.” Her gaze met mine. “That means both brothers, not just Mom and Dad. I feel like I should apologize now.”

I smiled. “It’s fine, Melena. They’re your family. It’ll be tight, but we can make it work if your brothers don’t mind sleeping in the living room. They can each have a couch.”

“Just be ready for them to claim it’s not a sleepover unless I’m out there with them. My parents may be happy for me, but my brothers will never stop seeing me as an eight-year-old.”

I laughed. “That’s okay. Andi is still about ten, so I can relate.”

She shook her head. “Brothers.”

We spent the next few hours unloading boxes in the bedroom, bathroom, and living room. I was too tired to tackle the kitchen. Melena had already ceded that project to me. “Let’s face it, I’m an okay cook, but the kitchen is your dream. I’ll leave the setup there to you.”

When we were too tired to move anymore, we settled down on the couch and Melena started a video call to her mother.

“There you are. Finally. We’ve been waiting for forever. Show me the house!”

Melena smiled at her mom. “Hold your horses, I just sat down. We’ve been moving all day.”

Her mom shook her head. “I could have sent your brothers to help you.”

“Yeah, but then we would have been stuck with them here. Jimmy and I are enjoying the quiet after having people around all day.”

“Hi, Jimmy.”

“Hi, Mrs. Nemitz.”

“Jimmy, you can call me Mom, or Silvia, whatever you prefer. Nobody I’m related to calls me Mrs. Nemitz.”

“Noted.”

Melena waited until her dad and brothers were on screen, then got up to show them around the house. I stayed on the couch and listened. Their patter was soothing. It was clear Melena loved her family, even though they exasperated her at times. When she came back and settled next to me on the couch, their attention turned to me.

“Jimmy, it’s a beautiful house. Congratulations. We hope you’ll both be very happy there.”

“Thanks.”

“We’d love to come see it in person if that’s okay. Is there a weekend you’re off work we can visit? Melena already said you usually work holidays, but we can celebrate whenever. I’m hoping you’ll let a guest cook in your kitchen or at least let me bake with you. Melena says you’re an amazing cook, but there are a few Nemitz family traditions I can’t do without.”

I smiled. It was sweet of her to ask. “Sure, Silvia, I’d love to learn Melena’s favorites. It’s a date.”

Her mom tittered to Melena's dad off screen. "Look at that, Andrik, I have a date with a handsome man. Better watch out."

Melena groaned. "Mom, don't make it weird."

"What? I have a kitchen date with a handsome man. I'm going to show him how I make my famous sweet and spicy nuts. Maybe roll some Christmas balls."

The Nemitz siblings all groaned in unison, "Mom!"

I laughed, and Silvia subsided with a smile. We discussed dates and I confirmed a weekend near the holiday I wasn't scheduled to work. After the call ended, Melena apologized for her mom. "I'm sorry. Her sense of humor is a little weird at times. I promise she won't sexually harass you in your own kitchen."

I barked a laugh. "I think she's funny. She reminds me of you."

"No. Don't say that."

I shrugged. "What? It's the truth."

She shook her head. "Either way, I promise she'll behave. I appreciate you being up for hosting this year."

"We're hosting. It's kind of magical. It's been a long time since I've really celebrated. Andi and I usually exchange a gift, but that's it. I'm always working and usually picking up extra shifts to cover for vacations."

"Well, I still appreciate it. And to show my appreciation, I want to work on that shoulder you're favoring."

“What?”

“I see you. You didn’t tell me you tweaked it, but you’re guarding it. Let’s go, big guy. Into the bedroom and take off your shirt.”

What kind of sorcery was this? She was right. My left shoulder and upper back had been growing progressively tighter over the course of the evening. I’d overdone it. But I didn’t say anything. Still, she’d noticed.

“You just want to get me shirtless and in the bedroom.”

“Damn straight.”

She followed behind me, and I started unbuttoning my shirt. When we reached the bedroom, I made eye contact with her as I rolled it down one shoulder, then the other. I was wearing a T-shirt underneath, but I still did my best to make it dramatic.

She shook her head. “You goof. Enough with the striptease, this is business. We’ve got about a hundred more boxes to unload tomorrow and I need you fully capable.”

“Oh, I’m fully capable.”

“Jimmy.” Her voice had a warning note, but I could see the twinkle in her eyes.

I untucked my T-shirt from my slacks, and slowly inched it up my abdomen. She watched each increment of skin appear. She wasn’t exactly licking her lips, but she didn’t look away. I tugged it higher, revealing my pecs before stripping it off over my head. Her gaze ran up and down my body. “Eyes up here, Ms. Business.”

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:51 am

“Get on the bed, face down.” Her tone exuded command. “Unfortunately, I don’t have a table at home.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I climbed onto my side of the bed, winging out my elbows and resting my head on my hands. I couldn’t see Melena behind me, but the bed shifted when her weight as she joined me on the bed. “Sorry if my oil is cold,” she said, and a few seconds later the cool liquid dripped on my back.

Next her warm hands skimmed my skin, and I bit my lip. This was a bad idea. Her warmth and weight next to me were too tempting. She firmed up the pressure and dug into the knots in my back, and I didn’t bother holding back my groan. She was trying to be helpful, but every second was torture. Would it be creepy to remind her how many days were left in her doctor’s instructions? I couldn’t concentrate on anything but her hands on my body. The firm strokes. Deep pressure. Blood rushed to my groin, and the overall effect was more arousing than relaxing. Not the intended effect.

She tortured me for a few more minutes before tracing her fingers lightly down my back and murmuring, “There. That should do it. Let me know tomorrow if you still hurt. I want to give you relief if I can.”

Oh, I hurt all right. Just not in my shoulders. I was rock hard, and there was no relief in sight. I groaned before forcing myself to thank her.

“I’m going to get ready for bed,” she said. Was her voice throatier than normal? Or was it my imagination?

I considered moving, but my condition would be obvious, and I didn't want to be that creep during a massage. Unfortunately, I was that creep. "I'm going to lay here a few minutes and let your work do its magic. I'll follow you in the bathroom. Take your time."

Please. I needed every second to calm my erection.

I eventually took my turn in the bathroom. I ignored Melena in the other room for the sake of my sanity and focused on enjoying the firsts. First time brushing my teeth in our new bathroom. First night sleeping in our new house. First time sharing a closet and dresser. I glanced at Melena settled on the bed, reading something on her phone, my old sweatshirt falling off one shoulder. She glanced up and our gazes connected across the room, heat flaring to life in hers as she traced my bare chest. There'd be a lot of firsts in this house.

Chapter 15

Melena – Kiss, Kiss, Bang, Bang

Itossed and turned. The amount of unpacking we still needed to do was monumental, and my mind kept racing with all the things we needed to do to finish the move. I was spinning. And it had nothing to do with the lingering buzz of running my hands across Jimmy's bare back. Nothing at all. Totally professional. Nothing to see here.

Who was I kidding? No one could work on that bare, muscled back and not get contact tingles. I was married, not dead. And I was married to him. Tingles were allowed.

I was very aware of my husband breathing softly beside me. At least there were no neighborhood sex sounds to remind me of what I was missing. My brain was doing the heavy lifting tonight, picturing all the ways my massage could have led to sexy

times. He could have flipped beneath me, grabbing my wrists as he tugged my body down to his. Hot. He could have rolled, pushing up with those strong arms, until we were face to face for a kiss. One quick flip, and he could have pushed me to my back, following me down until my body cradled his on the bed. I ached thinking about his warm weight.

I shifted restlessly, then held my breath as Jimmy rolled to his side. Was he awake? His even breathing resumed. Drat. Sleeping with him and not sleeping with him was torture. I only had a few days of restrictions left. What would happen if I ran a hand down Jimmy's arm and woke him up? Would he turn to me? Make some of my earlier fantasies a reality? My heart raced, and I rubbed my chest as the faster rhythm faltered. I sighed and tried to think calming thoughts. Stupid cute puppies. Stupid flowers in spring, dipped in dew, nodding in the breeze. Stupid waves crashing against the shore with hypnotic calm. My heart rate slowed, and I sighed again. Stupid heart. The irony was if I liked Jimmy less, was less invested in him, we'd probably be having sex right now. Because my heart wouldn't be involved.

Instead, I tossed and turned, visions of Jimmy keeping me awake. Jimmy lifting me over his shoulder with a smile, carrying me over the threshold. Jimmy listening intently as Mark shared a story about his and Brenda's first house. Jimmy's smile at me over his coffee, that potent enough to melt me into a lusty puddle in my chair.

The remembered reaction made me squirm. I was adapting too quickly to his role in my life. My husband. The forced wait to take our relationship to the next level physically had me leapfrogging it emotionally. Staying independent no longer held appeal after I'd had a taste of him. It had been only a taste, but I was hungry for more.

I flipped again, searching in the dark. Searching my heart. Did sharing mine with him make me less me? Less independent? He hadn't asked me to change. He hadn't asked me to modify my schedule to match his or done anything to compromise my work. But still, he was changing me. I'd started scheduling clients around his shifts. I didn't

want to miss my evenings with Jimmy. I couldn't afford to be rigid about my schedule and keep clients, but I found myself searching for excuses to spend more time with him.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:51 am

The sheets next to me were cold when I woke, and I could hear Jimmy in the shower. I was more than a little sad I'd missed him exiting the bed. All that beautiful skin on display, and I missed it. If I couldn't touch or do, you'd think I could at least look. I had a very pretty husband, and it had to be some kind of crime not to enjoy him. I stared at the ceiling, contemplating the various charges. Failure to yield to a hot body. Attempting to elude sexy times. Aggravated assault on my panties. Hijacking my hormones. I sighed. Listing his offenses wouldn't get me any closer to enjoying the crimes.

I made coffee and smiled as he joined me in the kitchen. Button-down plaid shirt, tan slacks, and a baseball hat. It was a look. He was carrying a camo bag I didn't recognize. Earmuff style hearing protection was clipped around the handle.

“What's that?”

“My firearm. Today's range day. I practice every week. I have to qualify with a firearm if I make it into an investigation role. You up for coming with me?”

I controlled my expression with an effort. “To the gun range? Not my thing.”

“Have you ever tried?”

I shook my head. “No. My dad and brothers own them, but I've never been interested.”

“Do you know basic safety?”

I paused, then shook my head. “Honestly, no. I want nothing to do with guns.”

I’d seen too many headlines about unintended consequences. Or intended ones. Nothing about them appealed.

“You realize I may need to carry a firearm for work, and I need to store them here at home in my lockbox.”

I nodded. “I accept that, and I’m glad you’re responsible. Doesn’t mean I need or want to use one.”

“No, but I want you to know the safety basics. I secure them, but you should be able to safely handle them. I don’t want you to be intimidated by them. Or me.” He searched my face. “Come with me today. I’ll give you a crash course.”

There was a mountain of paperwork I could be doing, wrapping up my client insurance billing for the month. Since some insurance companies took forever to pay claims, staying on top of billing them was key. Then I thought of spending more time with Jimmy. I didn’t want to admit he had a point. My family’s hunting rifles weren’t the same as a gun used in a professional capacity. I didn’t want to be nervous every time I saw the lockbox in our closet. I nodded. “Let me get dressed.”

I showered and slipped into jeans and a dark T-shirt before applying some quick makeup. The sooner I got this over with, the sooner I’d never have to do it again. I glanced at the stacks of boxes as I met Jimmy in the living room. Those boxes weren’t unpacking themselves, and my insurance billing couldn’t generate income until I finished it.

“Ready?” he asked.

“As I’ll ever be.”

It was a short ride to the range, and I was relieved the appearance didn't match my preconceived picture. It was a clean, modern building. A steady stream of mostly men came into the building while I filled out the range's waivers. This close to the military base, the range was busy.

I watched a safety video and signed my life away before Jimmy took me into a training room with inert weapons. He went over the basic rules of range safety, then helped me practice ejecting the clip and clearing the chamber to ensure a gun was unloaded and safe. His fingers wrapped around mine, and he showed me the basics of a secure grip before walking with me to the target and using a mock laser gun to practice my aim.

"Very good," he said, as I showed I could sight and hit what I was aiming at.

"Am I done now?" I asked as I stepped back from the practice line.

He laughed. "We haven't even made it out to the range with the real thing."

"And I'm totally fine with that. This laser gun thingy is more my speed. You were able to show me the safety basics, right? I don't need to actually shoot."

He watched me carefully. "If that's really how you feel, that's fine. You don't have to shoot, but I still need to get some practice in. It might make you feel better to practice a few times with the real thing."

Or not. Still, he needed to practice for work. His life might depend on it. "I'll come watch you."

We slipped on our ear and eye protection, and he grabbed his gear and target before we walked through the double doors to the range area. We paused in the middle to let the outer door close, and when he pushed open the inner door, I was accosted by the

sharp report of gunfire.

Three of the eight practice bays were already occupied. Jimmy walked us to an empty bay and stapled up his target before sending it out onto the range with the controls. He removed his ammo and set it on the table, following it with his gun, muzzle pointing down range, clip ejected, and chamber open. I could see the gleam of a real bullet loaded in his clip, and my stomach churned. Something about it looked more sinister than the plastic ones I'd practiced with in the training room.

When he was all set, he turned to me. "You sure you don't want to try?"

I shook my head. No, thank you. The laser gun had been okay, but the real thing didn't appeal.

"Okay, I'll get my rounds in, then we can go. You're welcome to stay here with me, or if you want to watch the others too, there's a stool back there." He gestured over his shoulder.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:51 am

I was nervous about being at his shoulder while he was shooting. The bangs around us were intense, and the bullet casings flying around after each shot startled me. I didn't want to be that close. I nodded and moved back to settle on the stool.

I watched as Jimmy's strong hands reassembled his gun with a full clip. He assumed his shooting stance and fired into the target. I tried not to jump at each report. Jimmy was unfazed, intent on watching each shot. When he finished his clip, he pushed the button to bring the target back, and I got up to look at it with him. He'd punctured a tight grouping of shots in the areas he'd targeted. He was skilled. Of course, he was. It was his job. I stared down at the gun on the table.

"Would you like to try?"

I swallowed and nodded. Once. I could try this once. He smiled and stapled a fresh target to the cardboard before sending it out fifteen feet. He stood with me and reviewed the things we'd practiced before loading one bullet in the clip and stepping back. "Now, you try. I'll be right here. Just always keep the gun pointed down range."

I nodded. I could do this. Slowly, I reached for Jimmy's gun, gripping it in my right hand how he'd shown me. With my left hand, I loaded the clip, then pulled back the slide to load the bullet in the chamber. I applied my left hand to the other side of the grip, laying my thumbs next to each other.

"Good," he said at my shoulder. "Now, remember the stance. Feet out, knees bent, butt out."

He tapped my feet farther apart as I got into position, widening my base. “Now, your right hand needs to be higher up for support. When you’re ready, put your finger on the trigger and press. Don’t squeeze, don’t pull, press. It takes very little pressure.”

Was I ready? No. Not really. But I wanted to do this. Once. Jimmy had to be prepared to shoot. With real targets. I could hit a piece of paper. Without making a mistake. I shivered. The thought of Jimmy in a real-life situation sent another tremor through my frame. The calm, orderly gun range was nothing like reality. Outside these doors, when people used guns, they got hurt. Badly. Accidents or intentional, the threat of damage was concrete. Every day the news was full of stories. I never imagined myself touching a gun, much less firing one. I took a deep breath and brought my hands up to my body as he’d shown me, then extended my arms and sighted the center mass of the target. My finger wasn’t on the trigger yet, and I was already shaking.

“Breathe, Melena. It’ll be fine. Inhale, exhale, then press when you’re ready.”

I let the air expand my lungs before exhaling slowly. I slipped my finger over the trigger. Here goes nothing. With a press, I could see the puff of powder and heard the thunder of the shot. A dot appeared on the target. At least I’d hit it. It was high and to the left of where I had been sighting, but I’d hit the target. And, I was done. I set the gun on the table and stepped back.

Jimmy smiled with approval. “You did it. See? That wasn’t so hard, was it? Let’s look at your shot.”

He brought the target in and smiled at me as he showed me my hit. He was proud. I was terrified. That hadn’t been terrible. I could hit what I aimed at. But it was loud. And messy. And that was in a fully controlled environment. I tried to imagine using a gun in a real situation, and I couldn’t. I still trembled from the adrenaline, and my heart started to race. Jimmy faced danger every day. Not just as a firefighter, but as a

potential target if he moved into arson investigation. What if an arsonist figured out where we lived? I shivered and my trembling intensified.

Jimmy was called into all kinds of emergencies as a first responder. He had to stay calm and push through any fear. I couldn't face my fear of guns for five minutes. His job put him in danger all the time. This was nothing by comparison. I could lose him. My knees started to shake, and the range swam in front of me.

"Melena? Melena!"

Jimmy's shouts grew increasingly frantic, but I couldn't respond. A shot rang out nearby as my knees collapsed and I fell toward the floor. His strong hands caught my shoulders as I pitched forward.

"Melena!" Jimmy called again as I lost consciousness.

I came to and saw a hazy Jimmy pacing nearby. He was muttering to himself, but I couldn't hear what he was saying.

"Jimmy?"

He flipped around and rushed to my side, gripping my hand. I was horizontal, but not lying on the floor. Hospital bed maybe?

"What happened?"

"Melena, I'm so sorry."

"What happened?"

“We were at the range, and you collapsed. We’re at Tacoma General now. They’ve paged for Dr. Webb. I was scared. I’m sorry. I never should have taken you today. It was stupid.”

I was shaky, but the world was becoming clearer, and as I focused, I could see worry in Jimmy’s expression. His grip on my hand had tightened with every word, as if he could keep me with him if he pressed hard enough.

“It’s okay. I’m okay.”

“No, you’re not. Your heart and my heart can’t take that kind of scare. Your medication is not equal to the challenge that is you.”

I chuckled weakly. “What can I say? I’m a badass.”

“Well, badass, you’ve gotten out of ever going to the range again.”

“They scared to let me back?”

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:51 am

“I’m scared to let you back,” he said. “It’s not worth losing you.”

A familiar face pulled back the blue curtain behind Jimmy, and Dr. Webb stepped into the room. “Mrs. Nemitz. I’m sorry to see you again so soon. What happened?”

I asked Jimmy to walk him through my collapse while Dr. Webb examined me and read my chart. Eventually, he turned back to me from his notes. He wasn’t smiling. The sober-faced doctor said, “Melena, I think we’ve exhausted the benefit you can get from medication. Let’s talk next steps.”

I swallowed, my mouth dry. “Surgery?”

He nodded. “I can do the ablation this week. My usual surgery day is Thursday, and I’ll make room for you on the schedule. I’ll get the nurse to send you home with prep instructions; mostly no eating or drinking before the anesthesia.” He smiled at me. “We’ll get you fixed up later this week and get that ticker back in shape, okay?”

“I understand.”

Understood, yes. I needed the surgery. It wouldn’t destroy my bank account now that I had Jimmy’s health insurance behind me. But hearing the words still felt like the death of a dream. Taking time off was not going to help me build my business. I needed to schedule and see clients, not keep putting them off. Financially, I’d be fine. Jimmy had assured it. But work-wise, it was a major setback.

“What does recovery look like?” I asked.

I held my breath, waiting for Dr. Webb's reply. He glanced up from his charting notes, and I tried to read the answer from his kind eyes. "It'll take about eight weeks to fully recover."

My mouth was dry, but I forced the words out. "Eight weeks without working?"

Jimmy's left hand on my shoulder provided silent support, but it couldn't change the doctor's words. All of my clients would leave me. There were enough other therapists, I'd be done if I had to reschedule eight weeks' worth of clients. It would take months if not years to rebuild.

Dr. Webb smiled. "No, eight weeks on your medication while the heart muscle heals. You should be able to return to work after a week."

My shoulders slumped, and my heart raced, making me feel dizzy. Proof I needed the darn surgery. Still, relief coursed through me. Jimmy's heat at my side reminded me I wasn't alone, and I breathed slowly, trying to get my stupid heart under control.

Jimmy squeezed my right hand harder. He'd been quiet, but he looked like he was about to burst. "You can't do it now?" Jimmy asked. "What if she passes out again? Is it safe for her to go home?"

Dr. Webb glanced at Jimmy, and his stern face relaxed at Jimmy's obvious distress. "She's fine. Lots of rest today, and no excitement this week. I'll see her on Thursday." He smiled reassuringly. The handsome bleeding out of every pore would be a problem if it were a vital fluid. Luckily, he didn't make my heart race, unlike another certain someone. "Follow doctor's orders, and you'll be fine. I'll see you in a couple of days."

The nurse came in next and gave us instructions for release and information to prepare for surgery. Eventually they discharged me, and Jimmy took me home. He

tried to convince me to let him carry me into the house, but I resisted. Once was enough, and I didn't want to mar my memories of the first time. I was fully capable of walking.

"Can I get you anything?" Jimmy asked after settling me on the couch.

"Lunch?" I asked to give him something to do. I wasn't hungry, but I could tell he was restless.

"Sure, what do you want?"

"Grilled cheese."

"Done and done. Let me turn on a show for you while I make it. You stay on the couch, and I'll bring it to you when it's ready."

It was wonderful that he wanted to care for me, but exhausting. Every time I twitched, Jimmy sprang to attention and asked what I needed. I could tell he was dying for action, and the forced calm was driving him nuts. Therefore, he was driving me nuts.

"Jimmy, why don't you go to the gym? Get a workout in?" I finally suggested after the fifth time he asked if I needed anything. I was content to hold down the couch and watch a show. He clearly wasn't.

"I can't leave you."

"Sure, you can."

"Well, I don't want to, then."

I levelled with him. “Jimmy, you’re driving me batty with all the hyper attentiveness. At this point, what I want is some peaceful time. Alone. Maybe I’ll start rescheduling clients. Please, go to the gym. You need it.”

His shoulders dropped, and I regretted my blunt words. He didn’t see I was trying to take care of him like he was taking care of me.

His voice was stiff. “If that’s what you really want. I know living together can be a lot. I’ll try to give you some space.”

“Jimmy, I didn’t mean it like that.”

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:51 am

“No, I get it. I’ll clear out for a while and give you some time to rest.”

A few minutes later he had grabbed his gym bag and wished me goodbye. I shifted listlessly on the couch. My honesty had hurt his feelings. All I’d wanted was to help. He needed a break. Everything I did ramped up his tension instead of relieving it. As partnerships went, my attempts to support him were a bust. When did our marriage become another thing I didn’t want to fail at? I took a shaky breath and blew it out. Jimmy would forgive me. He was generous like that. But I’d replay my thoughtless words over and over until I could make it up to him.

Calling my clients to reschedule was painful. But not as difficult as rescheduling eight weeks’ worth, I tried to console myself. The last thing I wanted to do was talk about my surgery or why I was rescheduling, but I had to let each person know I wasn’t flaking on them. They trusted me with their stress and pain and relied on me to help them manage. That meant regular appointments. Most were sympathetic and understanding, but I referred one older woman who didn’t want to wait to Lisa.

I stared around the living room. Boxes were still piled to one side. We’d set up the TV and couch, but that was it. I fought the temptation to unpack more. How upset would Jimmy be? Instead, I flipped through suggestions for shows to stream and settled into a movie. See. I could follow doctor’s orders. But I couldn’t tactfully tell my new husband to go blow off steam. I’d hurt him. I rubbed over my heart. It was aching for different reasons now. Resolve washed away the regret. I’d make it up to him. Somehow.

Jimmy – Stress Reps

Ittexted Chase to meetme at the gym. He probably needed the workout, and I needed the company. Melena was right. I hovered. I couldn't help it. She'd collapsed in front of me. Again. And it always seemed to be my fault. I wanted to be the source of her happiness, not her health scares.

I'd already reached out to my commander about getting the time off for Melena's surgery and recovery. There was no way in hell I'd be able to focus on work with Dr. Webb manipulating her heart. I was a mess. Melena had been right to kick me out of the house until I could get my shit together. At the range, I'd panicked. Not a proud moment. I'd fallen to my knees beside her when she collapsed. She couldn't hear me begging her to come back to consciousness, but one of the other shooters had. It'd been him that called the paramedics. Hotshot firefighter couldn't pull it together for his own wife. I hung my head and took a breath, trying to calm my racing heart. Loss was part of life. I'd had it drilled into me time and time again, call after call. But the thought of losing her was terrifying. She'd become part of my happiness. The cream to my coffee. The Princess Peach to my Mario. The oxygen to my fire. The beat to my heart. Chase would give me no end of shit if I admitted as much to him. A month ago, she was the yoga hottie at the gym. Melena had so quickly become more.

My hands trembled on the steering wheel as I pulled up to the gym and parked. They were every bit as shaky as they'd been when I was following the ambulance. With a clearer head, I wouldn't have let myself drive. With a clearer head, it wouldn't have been an issue.

I was getting used to sharing the small moments with her. A shared smile as we brushed our teeth in the morning. Her watching as I pattered around the kitchen. I wanted more of those moments. Maybe a lifetime of those moments.

I pushed into the gym, scanned my card, and went to the locker room to change. My

mom's rules ran deep; even in times of crisis, I didn't leave the house in less than my best. I changed into my workout gear and was glad to see Chase moving toward one of the treadmills near the back.

"Hey," I said.

He glanced at me. "Hey. You okay? Isn't today range day?"

I blew out a breath. "Yeah. Don't remind me."

"What happened?"

"I took Melena to the range this morning, and it didn't go well."

"What do you mean, was she scared? Everything okay?"

"She's not the scared one. That honor belongs to me. She collapsed at the range. After I forced her to shoot."

Chase glanced over from his treadmill. "What do you mean, you forced her to shoot? That doesn't sound like you."

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:51 am

I went over the full story with him, including her reluctance to go with me, and my insistence.

“Oh. An overabundance of personal responsibility. That sounds like you. Jimmy, you know it’s not your fault. She has a medical condition. You can’t control it. She can’t control it. It just is.”

I grunted. I needed to hear it, but that didn’t mean I believed it.

“I’m surprised you wanted to work out, given what happened.”

I scowled. “I didn’t. I got booted from the house.”

Chase glanced at me again before returning his focus to his steps. “What do you mean, you got booted?”

“Melena told me to get lost,” I said woodenly, trying to keep the self-disgust out of my voice.

“Really?”

I shrugged before realizing he was focusing too hard on his treadmill to see me. “That wasn’t exactly what she said,” I admitted. “But it’s what she meant.”

“Sounds like you’re reading a lot into it.”

I grunted. “Maybe.”

“I don’t think you should feel guilty, but if you are, what are you doing to make it up to her?”

Action. I could do something to make her life easier or better. Food was my go-to. “I guess I could put together a special dinner tonight,” I acknowledged.

“There you go. Word to the wise, quiche can convey many messages. Veggies in a pattern make a killer ‘I’m sorry’ quiche.”

“I don’t think I want to kill her with my quiche.”

He shrugged. “Your loss, buddy. Some of my best memories occurred after quiche.”

I shook my head and glanced around. “I hope none of the other guys can hear us discussing quiche right now.”

Chase pretended mock offense. “What? I make a manly quiche. Lots of manly meat.”

I groaned. “I don’t want anyone to overhear about your manly meat either. I don’t want to hear about your manly meat.”

He wiggled his brows at me. “Yeah, but I bet Melena wants to hear about yours.”

I laughed. Chase was a goof, but he had a point. I’d make a nice dinner for Melena and relax with her tonight. We’d keep things low-key this week, and on Thursday Dr. Webb would fix her. Please let him fix her. My heart couldn’t take her heart acting up like this.

I succumbed to the power of suggestion and put together a quiche for dinner. I loaded

it with bacon to prove I was still a dude at heart. No one needed to see my apron or the fluted edges on my crust. Martha would be proud of my fluted edges. Each curve of pastry was an apology for being an ass. If food was love, then I was going to bury Melena in delicacies until she got the message.

Melena groaned after her first bite. “This is amazing. Thanks for making dinner.”

“Of course. It’s the least I could do after badgering you into going shooting today. I’m still kicking myself.”

She met my gaze over her plate with what looked like forgiveness in her expression. “Jimmy, you’re not responsible. This is between me and my heart. I’m glad to be getting the surgery Thursday. I want to put this whole thing behind me.”

My stomach dropped. What did she mean by ‘this whole thing’? Did she count our marriage in that? We’d barely gotten started; was she looking forward to the end? If the surgery resolved her arrhythmia, would she need me or my medical insurance anymore?

It was a shitty thing to wish for your wife to have continued medical needs. And yet, that’s where I was. Nothing life-threatening, mind you. Just something to encourage her to stick with me. Maybe a recurring ingrown toenail? That sounded innocent enough. I was terrible.

I glanced at her across the table. Even after our morning adventures, Melena looked beautiful in fuzzy sweatpants and a slouchy shirt. There wasn’t even any cleavage on display, and yet I was entranced. Her dark hair hung to her shoulders and shone under the low light in the kitchen. Her eyes were warm and liquid when they met mine. She looked at home in her own skin.

Maybe I could convince her to stay, even if she didn’t need to anymore. She seemed

to like me well enough. I hadn't been able to show her any of my special skills in the bedroom, but there was hope for the future. If I kept her in orgasms and quiche, would she succumb to my manly charms? A guy could hope.

I didn't even bother to pretend I was unaffected by the stress of the day and fears of losing her as we got ready for bed. "Will you let me hold you tonight?" I asked.

Her face softened as she looked at me in the lamp light. "Jimmy. I'm sorry I scared you today."

I shrugged before turning out the light and gathering her in my arms. I spoke softly into her hair. "I'm sorry I pushed." I inhaled, searching for the hint of jasmine.

Melena scooted around, nestling further into my arms before running a finger down my forearm where it crossed her body. "I'm glad you took me with you. You know, you scare me too."

"I scare you? Why?" I asked. I'd done everything possible to be gentle with her. What had I done wrong?

"It's more accurate to say I'm scared for you," she admitted softly.

Oh. My job. I was silent a few moments. "All jobs have their risks. You might think the biggest risk I'd face would be fires or the people we try to help, but it's heart attacks."

Her hair caressed my bicep at the shake of her head. "Heart attacks? Really?"

My lips twisted at the irony. "Exertion injuries and heart attacks are a thing. It's one

of the reasons for my excellent medical insurance. Still, clients on calls present their own safety risks. There's no room for arguments. Did I tell you I got sued once? Had to pop a guy in the chin to get him and his daughter out safely. He was high and thought the flames were pretty. It was a last-ditch effort to get them out. For the record, he swung first."

"It's not right. You're one of the sweetest men I know."

I nuzzled closer. "Shh. The case was dismissed due to the circumstances, and that's a deep, dark secret. Keep it between us."

Her sigh gusted heavily. "As much as I always want to keep your secrets, this shouldn't be one of them. People stink."

I chuckled at her complaint "Some do. I meet more than my fair share."

"Yeah, well, I'm tired of people and the world in general sucking."

I'd bet anything her beautiful face was contorted in a scowl. I ran a palm from her shoulder to her hand, clasping hers in mine with a squeeze. "I hear you, but the only thing we have control of is us."

"So, you're saying I should work on not sucking?"

I laughed, letting the timbre deepen until a shiver ran down her spine. Her reaction sparked an answering one in me, and I shifted my hips back slightly before clearing my throat. "I know you don't mean it that way, but someday I would very much like you to do some sucking."

She groaned at my suggestive tone. "Jimmy. Mind out of the gutter. We're talking about the state of humanity. Big, lofty stuff here."

“Guilty. Suffice it to say, I don’t think you suck at all.”

She snuggled deeper into my embrace, not realizing every wiggle was torture. “You don’t suck either. And on that positive note,” she yawned. “Let’s get some sleep.”

I whispered my final words. Unable to resist. If I had to suffer, the least I could do was share. “Sweet dreams of a little pleasurable sucking at a future date.”

She giggled softly but didn’t say anything, letting the silence linger. A few minutes later, her breathing evened, and she relaxed into my hold. I ran through the different combustion chemical reactions to distract myself from the heat she inspired in my shorts. Then had to start all over again when thoughts of my boxers and their proximity to her warmth derailed my equations. When you were hard, so was math. True story.

Chapter 17

Melena – Paging Dr. McDreamy

I managed not to think about my upcoming surgery. Dr. Webb had asked me to continue my medication, and I felt okay. It was easy to forget I'd passed out again. Denial was a talent. One I embraced, as I focused on each client and avoided any future plans except those for my business. My dream of owning my own spa was on track, thanks to Jimmy. The ER visit hadn't been the financial nightmare I feared with his insurance. Living together was also a boon to my savings. I recalculated my budget based on the changes and was shocked that marrying Jimmy might help my dreams come through faster than I realized. Even one year of marriage would move my timeline up two.

I lived my life as normally as possible in the days leading up to my surgery. Yoga at the gym. Clients at the spa. Evenings with Jimmy, eating fabulous meals and playing video games or watching TV when he wasn't at work. I wandered the house, picking away at a few random boxes, unable to settle on the nights he was on shift at the station. Wash, rinse, repeat. I still waited for him to complain about my weird hours or long days, but other than giving me a long, assessing look after I came home late and asking how I felt, he stayed quiet.

I'd even managed a lunch date with Tamra. Chase's girlfriend was a nurse at the local hospital. She had a naturally contained and calm demeanor. It made her easy to talk to. Over our soups and salads at a café, our conversation turned naturally to my diagnosis.

“You know why Jimmy and I married?” I asked after we’d exchanged pleasantries about work and Chase and Jimmy.

She nodded. She’d come dressed for her work shift, in blue scrubs. Her dark curls were caught back in a low ponytail. Where I’d look like a founding father in that hairstyle, her perky features were cute in comparison, and it was sleek on her. She looked like a Disney princess nurse to me; wide smile and big eyes.

“Who are you seeing?” she asked.

“Dr. Webb.”

She nodded. “You’re in good hands there.”

My grin was too wide. “Tell me about it.”

I surprised a laugh out of Tamra and counted it as a win. “Yeah, his nurses have a proposal board going among the surgeons, and he’s in the lead.”

I tilted my head. “Proposal board?”

Her lips twisted in a smile. “It happens more than you’d think. In obstetrics, it’s usually the anesthesiologists who get the offers from laboring patients. But the surgeons get their fair share. It only inflates their big heads. We’re a competitive bunch.”

I shook my head. “He’s a handsome doctor, there’s no denying that, but I’m all tapped out on proposals for the year.”

She grinned at me and winked. “Still, he’s worth Kinnearing a photo of, for sure.”

I groaned. “Jimmy told you?”

She shook her head. “Chase told me.” She gave me a long-suffering look. “Get used to it. They’re as close as brothers. Not a lot happens the other doesn’t know about.”

I shifted in my seat. I didn’t know how to feel. I wasn’t used to someone being privy to my secrets.

“If it levels the playing field, I can tell you something embarrassing about me,” Tamra offered with a shrug.

I liked her sense of balance. She returned my smile, and my shoulders relaxed. My smile faded. I’d met Tamra because of my relationship with Jimmy. If our marriage ended after the year, would she still be my friend?

The night before my procedure, Jimmy made a special meal. He appeared at home in our new kitchen, a black T-shirt stretched across his chest. He moved with quiet confidence and his lips turned up in a smile when he caught me watching from the table. He palmed two plates and walked toward me with a quirk of his lips.

My stomach growled as he set down my plate of pot roast, mashed potatoes, and roasted vegetables. “You’re spoiling me,” I said.

Jimmy smiled and took his own seat. “You haven’t even gotten the best of my treatment yet. But I hope you enjoy everything.”

“Not bad, for a last meal.”

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:51 am

A week off loomed in front of me after surgery. Assuming things went well. I gulped, thinking about rescheduling more clients. I couldn't afford for things to go badly.

He pointed a finger at me. "Hey. You stop. No negative talk. I'm doing my best to pretend calm for your sake. I don't need you riling me up. I'm going to be a wreck tomorrow in the waiting room."

I shrugged and smiled at him. "What? It's true. This is my last meal before anesthesia. I'm going to be cranky tomorrow with nothing in my stomach."

"I'll make it up to you when you can eat again. Any requests?"

He was right. I was spoiled. And not above using my illness to get more kitchen favors. "I've been craving scones."

"Done. Any other requests?"

So many. Not kitchen related, I acknowledged as I admired his forearms as he lifted a forkful of vegetables from his plate. I shook myself before meeting his gaze. I kept my face innocent as I said, "Nope."

We watched TV to relax after dinner. I'd done my best to find something gripping to keep us occupied, but I could tell from Jimmy's fidgeting that neither of us were as focused as I'd hoped. My ability to think of anything but surgery had smashed against the reality that tomorrow was the big day. What if I didn't wake up from the anesthesia? It happened. I was trusting Dr. Webb to fry my heart without going too far. Frickin' laser beams. Sci-fi couldn't compete with reality. I rubbed my chest,

trying to ease the phantom ache. “Come on, let’s go to bed.”

His smile was wry, but it still drew my gaze to his full bottom lip. The plump one I’d like to nibble on. “You have no idea how much I want to hear those words after you’re healed.”

My heartrate picked up, and my lips twitched at his fervent tone. “You think I’m going to roll out that old chestnut?”

His brows wiggled. “That’s what married couples do.”

“You make it sound like we’ve been married fifty years instead of five minutes. I like to think we can do better.”

“Yeah? Like what?” he asked, amused.

He was distracting me on purpose, trying to help me relax, but it was proof he had no clue how much I wanted him. Even now, I pictured him fifty shades of graying me into oblivion. A girl could dream. The pause stretched, and Jimmy’s face cracked into an expression of glee. He thought he’d won. Jimmy had asked a question, and I’d been thinking of sex. I shook myself as he prompted me.

“How you doing there, angel? Head in the clouds? I thought you were going to proposition me.”

“You wish.”

I narrowly avoided slapping myself in the forehead. My comebacks were—wait for it—legend-ary. Legendarily bad, in this case.

He held up his hands. “Guilty. Come on, give it your best shot.”

I cleared my throat. He was playing with me. That was sexier than my fantasy. I couldn't let him down. "We're like cocoa and marshmallows. You're hot, and I want to be on top of you, melting."

Jimmy's expression went from stunned to appreciative in two beats. His slow clap made me laugh self-consciously. It was a stupid pickup line. Jimmy's dark eyes danced as he responded.

"You must be a banana, because I find you a-peeling,"

I groaned. "Forget it. Game over. I can't believe you're bad at this."

Jimmy chuckled, and the deep timbre washed over me, belying my protest. He was still sexy, dorky pickup lines and all.

"Someday I'll show you how good I am."

I couldn't tell if it was confidence or competitiveness in his tone, but either way my nipples were there for it. Their hardened peaks pushed against my bra. "Promises, promises..."

All humor fled his expression as his gaze met mine, replaced with something darker, needier. I cleared my throat, trying to loosen some of the tension tightening it. No funny business. Not tonight. I squirmed, letting my mind wander. But soon.

"Is it wrong I'm excited for tomorrow now?"

Jimmy shook his head. "Nope. Sleeping with you every night and not being able to touch you is torture." He forced a grin. "And now that I've made it awkward, let's get ready for bed."

In our room, I slid into one of Jimmy's T-shirts. Our bedtime routine had evolved. I'd started out in full sweats as promised, but with every night spent wrapped in Jimmy's arms, I burned. He was too hot. His body surrounded mine like a personal furnace. I'd succumbed to the inevitable and started leaving off layers when he was home. If Jimmy's slow gaze from the shoulder playing peek-a-boo with the shirt's neckline to where it ended at my thighs said anything, he appreciated the change.

He turned out the light and pulled me close, and I enjoyed the torture that was our habit. Some nights we talked softly before one of us dropped off. Other nights, I was too aware of his body behind mine. Each ridge of muscle and bulge was ingrained on my sensory memory. He was always a perfect gentleman, darn him.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:51 am

Tonight, he lay quietly as he inhaled into my hair.

“Are you worried about tomorrow?” I asked.

“Isn’t that my line?”

I walked a finger up his arm where it wrapped around me. “If anything, I’m excited. I’m ready to get this over with.”

He stiffened behind me. He sounded stiff as he asked, “The surgery?”

I laughed. “Yeah, the surgery. What did you think I meant?”

He cleared his throat. “Nothing.”

“I’m ready to be fixed. No more tiptoeing around my body. These past few weeks, it hasn’t felt like my own.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s a traitor.”

“We have the illusion of control over our bodies, but it’s just that: illusion,” he said. “At any moment something can happen. I’ve been lucky to be healthy.”

I scowled. “I took my luck for granted. I can’t help being pissed off it ran out.”

“You’re sure you don’t want me to call your parents and tell them about your surgery?”

“I’m sure.”

“I still don’t understand why,” he said.

I could sense his discontent. It was the only thing we’d argued about in our short marriage. Jimmy wanted me to tell my parents and brothers about my condition and surgery. I didn’t. They’d hover. I loved my family, but every illness became a dramatic event with my mother. I couldn’t stand the guilt of pulling her and maybe my dad away from the business that supported them all. They couldn’t afford it, and I was more than old enough to stand on my own. I wasn’t a kid anymore, and I didn’t want them to have to shoulder the consequences. Jimmy’s insistence that I tell them was ironic given his own relationship with his parents. Ultimately, he acknowledged it was my family and my decision, but he was still grumpy about it.

He didn’t have the experience with my family I did. I wanted to fly under the radar a little longer. When I was ten, my older brother had fallen off his bike and ended up with a broken arm and concussion for his wannabe stuntman attempt. My mother dropped everything to care for him. I didn’t want her to feel she needed to do that for me. I was an adult. Besides, I was fine. I had Jimmy to look after me.

Jimmy. I smiled into the darkness. His big hand rested along my rib cage. I’d come to rely on him. I sighed. That should have been a bad thing. Something to avoid. So why did I feel like I was rushing headlong into something I didn’t want to name and couldn’t resist?

Chapter 18

Jimmy – Waiting Room Hell

I paced the waitingroom. Noon. Only two minutes had passed since the last time I checked. My gaze continued to rove, searching for the figure I most wanted to see; Dr. Webb, coming to tell me Melena's catheter ablation was successful and complete. The procedure was supposed to deaden the part of her heart muscle causing the irregularity. If all went well, her heart wouldn't kick into an abnormal rhythm anymore. Which meant hopefully she would be able to resume more...physical activities soon. The door opened, but it wasn't the face I wanted to see. The dirty blond head was familiar though.

"Chase. What are you doing here?"

He gave me a steady look. "My best friend's wife is in surgery. What do you think I'm doing here? I came to sit with you and wait." He gestured to an insulated cooler. "Tamra and I also made a few easy dishes for you to eat while Melena's recovering. We figured you might not want to cook tonight."

I reached out for a quick hug. "Thanks, man."

He sat beside me, and I stared at the wall before glancing at the clock again. What was taking so long? Three minutes past. I glanced down at my hands where they clenched on my thighs.

"Have you figured it out yet?"

"Figured out what?" I asked, focusing on his face. Chase peered at me intently,

searching my expression.

“That you’re in love with your wife.”

I opened my mouth to respond to his matter-of-fact pronouncement but had to close it when no defense came to mind. Of course. I was in love with my wife. She wasn’t a random stranger; she was my wife. My fears weren’t irrational. I was in love. With my wife. Whom I loved. It was more than desire. More than friendship. It was all of those things and a thousand others. She’d captured my heart.

I shook my head. Then I nodded, realizing he’d misinterpret my response.

“Good. Glad we got that cleared up. I was beginning to wonder if you were slow.”

I snorted. “Not all of us have your instincts for this kind of thing, Mr. Romance. When did you know I was in love with Melena?”

He smiled. “When you made me meet you at the gym after her last attack. You were awfully guilty and wound up. I could tell it came out of a place of caring.”

“You couldn’t clue a brother in?”

“You weren’t ready.”

“And I am now?” I asked. I rubbed my chest. I wasn’t so sure about that.

“Ah, you’re never really ready for life to change on that scale. I was worried you’d fuck it up if you didn’t figure it out soon.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“What are friends for?”

We settled in to wait together, and the minutes ticked by slowly. Love and fear swirled, fighting for supremacy in my sour stomach. Melena had to be okay. I glanced up every time the waiting room door opened, but it was never Dr. Webb. Melena was patient 234, and the hospital had a status screen for surgeries. Which I appreciated. Except her status stayed the same. ‘In surgery’ told me a whole hell of a lot of nothing. I was counting the minutes until she flashed to ‘In recovery.’ Then I could relax.

The door opened, and I glanced up. Another familiar face. Still not the one I wanted.

“Hey, big brother. How are you doing?”

I swallowed hard, pushing down the bile, and decided to be straight with Andi. “I love my wife. And the waiting room sucks.”

She shook her head at me. “I know. I’m sorry.”

“Sorry I’m in love with my wife?”

“No, goober. Sorry that the waiting is so hard. How long has she been in for?”

I sighed and scrubbed my hands across the stubble on my head. “The longest four hours of my life.”

“What’s taking so long? Isn’t this a short procedure, only a couple of hours? Minimal risk?”

“How do you know?” I asked.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:51 am

“I looked it up. I wanted enough information to keep your ass calm.”

“Why wouldn’t I be calm? I’m a calm guy.”

“Yeah, but as previously stated, you’re also just figuring out you’re in love with your wife. That’s enough to make anyone unstable.”

I debated fighting with her, but she was right. I also realized what she was doing. I reached out to squeeze her hand. “Thanks.”

“For what?”

“Being here. I know Melena isn’t your favorite.”

She met my gaze, her brown eyes soft with love. “No, but you are. And I’m warming up to Melena. Anyone you love can’t be too terrible. You love me,” she said as she broke into a grin.

“Gee, thanks,” I grumbled.

“That’s what sisters are for. Speaking of which, where’s Melena’s family? Shouldn’t they be here, wearing out carpets with you?”

Andi gestured to the nearly empty waiting room.

I grunted. “Melena didn’t want to tell them.”

“Why not? Are they estranged?” she asked with a frown.

My frustration leaked into each word. “No, she’s that damn independent. Doesn’t want them to worry and miss work.”

Andi shook her head. “I wouldn’t want to be her when she finally tells her mother.”

“Exactly. She thinks she’s going to play it off like it was no big deal, but I’m pretty sure her mom has Google.”

Andi laughed. “Is she counting on her mom being a bad speller?”

“I don’t know. Autocorrect knows all. Pretty sure her mom will still be able to figure out everything about her medical condition.”

“Are you going to rat her out?” Chase asked.

“Do I look stupid to you? Not if I don’t have to.” I glanced again at the screen, a smile overtaking my face. ‘In recovery.’ Thank God.

A few minutes later Dr. Webb joined us in his scrubs. “Your wife’s procedure went well. They’ve moved her to recovery, and you can join her there in a few minutes. A nurse will come get you. Once she’s lucid again, and we’ve had a few hours to monitor her, you can take her home. Please note that due to the anesthesia, she won’t remember the next few minutes. We gave her the good stuff.”

I shook his hand. “Thanks, Doctor. We appreciate everything you’ve done.”

He smiled back. “That’s the job, Mr. Nemitz. Enjoy your wife; I’ll see her for a follow up next week.”

I took the first full breath in the last five hours. Melena was done. She was okay. She may be high as a kite, but I'd see her soon. I thanked Chase and Andi for sitting with me, and Chase left me with the cooler when they said their goodbyes.

A few minutes later, a petite nurse in surgical scrubs came for me. "Mr. Nemitz? Your wife is ready for you now."

I laughed softly at the name, still giddy with relief. Mr. Nemitz. Melena hadn't changed her name, nor did I expect her to. I'd be her Mr. Nemitz for as long as she'd have me. Hopefully, the rest of our lives. The nurse escorted me down winding halls and pushed a door ajar. Melena's eyes were open, but she looked loopy. The hospital gown swam on her, and she was still hooked up to the IV and monitors, but her color was good.

"Hey there, angel. How are you feeling?"

"Good. Sogood. I think they fixed me," she finished on a giggle.

Yep. Next she'd be asking me for a drive-through run to satisfy the munchies. She was adorable and I couldn't hold it back anymore. The words burst from me like a toddler kept from the playground too long.

"I love you."

I said it. She might not remember, but I did it. I wasn't sure where the bravery came from, but it felt good.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:51 am

She giggled. “You lo-ve me, you want to marry me,” she singsonged.

I laughed. Telling her hadn’t been as hard as I feared. She was never going to remember, but maybe it was for the best. I didn’t want her to feel beholden to me. Telling her was more about what I needed, than it was about whatsheneeded. She needed me steady.

“You’re so pre-tty,” she singsonged. “I’m fixed now. You know what that means,” she said with a suggestive wiggle of her brows.

“Yes, my beautiful wife. It means I get to take you home to rest and heal. You’re not ready for any.” I paused to wiggle my own brows. “Yet.”

She pouted. “Spoilsport. I can wiggle my brows all I want. You can’t stop me.”

“You’re right. But I don’t have to participate. Sober up, and we’ll go home in a few hours. Maybe take a nap.”

She scoffed. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I don’t need to sleep. I’m totally sober.”

“Sure, you are, angel. I’ll ask your nurse for your clothes, and as soon as they say so, we’ll go home.”

She smiled. “I like our home. Martha Stewart for the win!”

Good. At least I was doing something right. I was tempted to ask how she felt about

me. So. Tempted. But she was wasted; it wouldn't be fair to ask her now.

I smiled. "I'll check with the nurse about taking you home then. Try to get some rest."

I was a chickenshit, afraid of what she'd say if I stayed. If she admitted to loving her cardiologist instead of me, I'd lose it. Even if she didn't really mean it. I stepped outside and found the nurse's station. "When will it be okay for me to take my wife home?"

The nurse who'd shown me from the waiting room looked up from her notes. "Mr. Nemitz, she can go home in a couple of hours if she has no nausea and can dress herself. I'll show you to her clothes and we can go over her release instructions."

The nurse was thorough with her directions, and by the time I returned to Melena she was fast asleep. I sat next to her bed for the next few hours, watching the rise and fall of her chest, her soft hand in mine. More time. I needed more time with her. A year would never be enough.

I startled from my reverie beside her when Melena called my name. "Jimmy? There you are. I'm ready to go home. How do I get out of here?"

My face softened as I focused on her in the hospital bed. Like I'd be anywhere else when she needed me. "I've got your things. I'll go let the nurse know you're awake and step outside so you can get dressed. If they okay it and you feel up to it, we'll get you sprung from this joint."

"Deal." She smiled.

A few minutes and a stop at the pharmacy later, Melena stepped out of the wheelchair at the valet stand and I helped her into my Honda. When she was settled, I drove us

home.

Melena stepped tenderly as I escorted her up the steps. “You okay?”

She nodded. “Just sore at the incision point. I should be fine once I’m on the couch.”

“One couch, coming up.”

I got her settled and watched her carefully, but her color was good.

“Can I have the blanket? I’m pretty tired. I’m going to take a nap.”

I grabbed a throw from the back of the couch and spread it over her. She’d dressed for comfort at the hospital, and I was glad she wasn’t in anything restrictive now.

“Get some rest, and I’ll heat up dinner when you’re ready. Chase and Tamra brought us a casserole.”

“That’s kind of them. I hope you thanked them for me.” Her gaze met mine, eyes soft. “You’ve taken such good care of me. Thank you.”

“I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else,” I promised.

I settled on the couch, her socked feet in my lap and watched as her eyelids drifted close. Then I let my own head tilt back until it hit the back of the couch and blew out a sigh. My heart couldn’t take more days like today. I scrubbed a hand over the stubble on my head before glancing back at Melena. She appeared peaceful. Would she still rest easy if she knew how I felt? Part of me was convinced she’d be looking for the exit. She might not need me anymore, but would she want me? If she was better medically, I couldn’t hold her to our agreement. Technically, I had my house; we’d both fulfilled our parts of the bargain. She valued her independence. If I told her

I loved her, would she think I was trying to take that away from her or see it as pressure to stay married? I wanted her love, not her pity.

Chapter 19

Melena – Fixed It

Jimmy hovered and looked after my every need the day after my surgery. I was still sore, but otherwise felt normal. I rubbed my chest. It was weird to think damaging my heart muscle was what fixed me.

He had to work on Saturday, covering for the crew mate who'd switched shifts with him so he could be at my procedure. As much as I loved having him with me, I was thankful for a little space.

Lisa texted near lunchtime.

Lisa: Up for some company?

Melena: Sure. Jimmy didn't put you up to coming over, did he?

Lisa: Maybe. But I would have still wanted to come see you. I can bring lunch.

Melena: Sold. I never turn down a free lunch.

Lisa: Who said it'd be free?

Melena: Hah.

She arrived a few minutes later, and true to her word, brought us subs for lunch. I'd

only been out a few days, but it already felt like too long. The full week to recover was going to be a stretch if I was restless already. As we munched away, she caught me up on the office drama I'd missed while I was out. One of the other therapists left her soiled sheets in the laundry room instead of sharing laundry duties.

"If she keeps it up, she's going to be a strange smell in the attic."

Lisa surprised a laugh out of me, and she smiled in return. "Dealing with Karen is like trying to nail Jell-O to a wall. I'm waiting for Nguyet to realize it and end her room rental contract. We don't need her entitled self making more work for the rest of us."

I shook my head. Lisa was a stickler for office etiquette. Her bluntness about expectations kept the rest of us in line.

"You're back on Friday?"

I nodded. "I can't afford to take more time off."

"I'm surprised that sweet husband of yours is letting you go back so soon."

My brows raised. "Lettingme?"

Lisa waved her hand at me. "You know what I mean. The man's protective, and he cares about you. I imagine it wasn't his first choice to have you back at work so soon."

"Yeah, it wasn't his choice at all. Which is what I told him and what he accepted."

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:51 am

I'd breathed a sigh of relief when Jimmy dropped the subject. I needed to make my own decisions. I'd already adapted more than I wanted to admit to having him in my life.

Lisa shrugged. "That's what you get for marrying an evolved man."

"What do you mean, evolved?"

She snorted. "My husband might have agreed in similar circumstances, but there would have been a hundred percent chance of pouting."

"Really? Randy? I can't imagine him pouting."

"Imagine it. He used to be a pro. Youngest sibling. Took me forever to break him of the habit, but he's mostly reformed now."

My phone interrupted us, and I glanced at the screen. The day of the move, Brenda, Mark, and I had exchanged numbers, and I was surprised to see Mark's name on my caller ID. Why was Mark calling me during the day? Was he off and trying to set up a date night? I shot Lisa an apologetic glance.

"Hello, Mark?"

His tone sent a shiver down my spine. "Melena. Glad I could reach you. First of all, Jimmy's been in an accident, but he's alive."

"What's second of all?" I couldn't control the alarm in my voice. Lisa glanced at me

quickly.

“He’s at Tacoma General, and they’ve admitted him.”

“What happened?”

“Vehicle accident with their fire engine. Possible broken bones and concussion; I don’t have a lot of information yet. He was on the way to a call when it happened. I’m coming to pick you up. Jimmy said you were at home. Are you there now?”

I shivered. Mark said he was fine. But if he wasn’t calling me himself, Jimmy wasn’t fine. “Yes. I’m home. Thanks, I’ll be ready.”

I hung up the phone and rubbed my hands down my shoulders.

“What happened?” Lisa asked.

My voice tremored. “I don’t really know yet. Jimmy was in an accident at work. His lieutenant is picking me up to take me to the hospital.” I glanced at her distractedly. “I think you met Mark on moving day.”

She reached out and squeezed my hand. “I’m coming with you.”

“You don’t have to.”

“I know, but I want to. Come on, let’s get your purse and phone charger. I’ll follow you in my car, so we have a way home later.”

I went through the motions of getting my purse, and at Lisa’s urging, unplugged my phone charger and packed an apple for a snack.

“You don’t know how long you’ll be there,” she said.

I didn’t want to be there at all. That sounded wrong. I didn’t want Jimmy there at all. He was such a force of nature. I couldn’t comprehend a world where he was injured. Hurt. My life would never be the same without him. I’d kept almost everyone at a distance after my move from Colville, too focused on showing my family I could build something on my own. Jimmy had burrowed into the cracks, seeping into every moment. It should have made me weaker. But having him in my corner made me stronger. He’d fused perfectly, like gold leaf kintsugi, filling in the cracks and broken places. I couldn’t imagine waking up without him.

I looked around the kitchen. It was our house. Our home. We had plans. Painting over the ugly hall color that shaded to sickly green under the lights next weekend. And Jimmy wanted to rehab a section out back into a firepit so we could enjoy crisp northwest evenings together. My hands clenched. Jimmy. Vibrant, funny, healthy. He had to be okay.

I waited at the window for Mark, standing on my tiptoes to see over the overgrown bushes. When he pulled up in a department SUV, Lisa got in her car, and I locked up the house with shaking hands and followed Mark to his vehicle.

Mark reached out to grasp my hand briefly after I got inside. His fingers were warm and dry in contrast to his worried expression.

“He’ll be okay,” Mark said.

“Do you have more news? Do you know for sure?” I asked with a catch in my voice.

He shook his head. Mark didn’t run his lights or sirens on our way to the hospital, but he drove faster than the posted speed limit. He was quiet, and I was afraid to ask questions I didn’t want the answers to.

He dropped me off up front when we arrived so he could go park. I walked up to the front desk I'd visited not long ago, but under very different circumstances. I remembered Jimmy claiming to be my fiancé and my lips trembled on a smile.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:51 am

The gray-haired receptionist smiled at me. “Can I help you?”

I took a shaky breath. “I hope so. My husband was brought in earlier. Jimmy Torres? I’d like to be with him, please.”

“Sure. Let me look him up.” He hummed and looked back at me. “Do you have any identification? I have to verify you’re family.”

I fumbled with my wallet. I hadn’t changed my name, and I had no identification matching his last name. Did I have anything to prove we were married? I hadn’t even changed my driver’s license address yet, and neither of us wore rings. Staring at my bare finger, it suddenly struck me as important. To the outside world, we might not be married at all.

The double doors whooshed open as Mark and Lisa made their way toward me. Mark walked up next to me in his Tacoma fire uniform, and the receptionist relaxed. “She’s the wife, and she’s with you?”

Mark nodded, and the receptionist said, “Okay then, Mr. Torres is in emergency surgery. He hasn’t been assigned a room yet, but you can go to the surgical waiting room. He’s patient 123 today. Give me your wrist, and I’ll give you an ID band for his patient number.”

My stomach dropped. Emergency surgery sounded ominous. I turned to Mark. “I thought you said he was okay?”

Was my voice normally that shrill? Lisa grabbed my hand and squeezed.

“I’m sure Mark is sharing everything he knows, Melena. Let’s go to the waiting room and we can find out more.”

I trailed like a meek lamb through the halls, blindly following Lisa, Mark, and the signs until we reached the right room.

I laughed humorlessly. Jimmy had waited here only two days ago. Now it was me. I hated it. I stared up at the monitor, where ‘In surgery’ displayed for patient 123. We’d signed in with the volunteer at the desk and asked for an update when the doctor was available, but the gray-haired woman had said it would probably be awhile. “They held the OR schedule for him and rescheduled elective surgeries to make room.”

“Do you have any more news about his condition?” Mark asked.

The older woman shook her head. “Our information is limited. I have him listed in serious condition, undergoing surgery for a leg fracture and undetermined other internal injuries. I’ll be sure to have the surgeon come speak with you when she finishes, but it looks like it will be a while.”

We settled in chairs around a table and waited quietly. Time lost all meaning for me as I stared at the wood grain pattern stamped into the table. I tried to urge Mark and Lisa to go home, but neither wanted to leave me alone. Lisa’s words sparked a new thought. “Andi!” I looked at Mark. “Did you call her?”

Mark scrubbed a hand over his balding head. “No, I’m sorry. I should have. My first thought was for you. Do you have her number?”

I nodded and started navigating through my phone to her contact, my fingers shaking. I finally found the right entry and pressed the button. She picked up immediately. “Melena? Is everything okay?”

She knew. Of course, she knew. I didn't call her up for casual chats. We weren't friends. I cleared my throat. "It's Jimmy," I whispered. "He was in a car accident at work. He's in surgery."

"Where?" she asked.

"Tacoma General."

"How bad?"

"I don't really know. He's in surgery now and they've listed him in serious condition. Mark thought broken bones, maybe a concussion."

"I'll be there as soon as I can," she said, her voice husky.

"Thanks, Andi." I couldn't control the waver in my voice.

"Hang in there, Melena. Don't worry, Jimmy's too hardheaded to die easily."

She said the 'd' word. I couldn't think about it, much less say it. Andi sounded confident enough for both of us, but the edge in her voice hinted at blind bravado, not true belief.

Mark slid an arm across my shoulders and gave me a squeeze. "I'm sorry I didn't think of it earlier. My focus was on getting you here. I knew he'd want you when he wakes."

I nodded before meeting Mark's tired gaze. "I'm glad."

We took turns pacing and drinking bad coffee. I was only part way through my first bitter cup when Andi bustled in. She'd clearly come straight from work and was

dressed in black slacks and a sweater, her dark curls caught back in a loose bun. She searched the room before making a beeline for me.

“Melena. Any news?”

I shook my head. Nothing. We had checked with the volunteer every few minutes. I’m sure she was getting annoyed, but I couldn’t help myself. Every time I checked, I was sure that time she’d have more information. Andi tried her hand at wheedling with the volunteer, but the older woman couldn’t give information she didn’t have.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:51 am

“He’s still in surgery for his leg and possible internal injuries.”

Andi joined the vigil, and the afternoon wore on. After my fifteenth visit to the volunteer desk, Lisa gestured to Andi. The other woman didn’t look good. Each hour seemed to drain more of her belief, like air draining out of a camping mattress, as her shoulders slumped further. I sat down beside her. She continued to stare straight ahead as she whispered. “I can’t take this anymore. It’s too much like when we lost Gran. Or Dante. He’s all I have left.” She clenched her hands in her lap. “This is why I didn’t want him to become a firefighter. It’s too risky.”

I reached for her hand. “Jimmy’s strong, and he loves what he does.” I took a deep breath and tried to think like Jimmy. “Pretty soon he’ll be out of surgery and cracking jokes. Probably at your expense. Let’s not get ahead of ourselves.”

“Fake wives can stay calm. Real sisters don’t have that luxury.”

Ouch. I reached up to rub my chest. If she thought I was calm, then I deserved an Oscar. Terror gripped me. Jimmy’s job was dangerous, but he was such a force of nature he seemed invincible. He’d been my hero, and I wanted his good deeds to make him safe. Injury proof.

Adrenaline from waiting kept me dangling over emotional spikes, razor-sharp, and ready to impale me if I breathed too deeply. Knowing I could lose him made it impossible to relax, impossible to focus on Andi’s words. They slid off me; she could hate me all she wanted. I could only focus on my fears for Jimmy. I could lose him. Not to time or disinterest, but from my world. He was too good a man for that to happen. Too unselfish. Too caring.

Lisa overheard what Andi said about me being a fake wife and rushed to defend me. “Don’t be a bitch because your brother’s in surgery. Melena’s hurting too. Don’t make it harder on her.”

Andi doubled down. “Sure. She’s worried she’s going to lose her meal ticket. Jimmy always was a sucker for the ones who needed saving. Pretty sure he switched shifts today for her— he wouldn’t have even been on that engine today if it weren’t for Melena.”

Her words stung. And I hated that they might be true. Lisa made a move to push out of her chair next to me, but I put out a hand to hold her back. We didn’t need to be that family in the waiting room. “No, Lisa. She’s entitled to her opinion.”

“Even though it’s wrong?”

I shrugged listlessly. “What does it matter? All that matters is Jimmy gets well. We’ve been here for hours. Why are they not telling us anything?”

I pushed out of my chair and stalked to the windows. The waiting room was on the fourth floor, and I could see the people and cars moving on the street below. I tried to imagine the dramas driving each person. That one was having an affair. That one was trying to get pregnant. That family was visiting a sick aunt. I went on and on, naming a secret shame or misery for each of the people I saw.

I shook myself. What was I doing? Jimmy would never sink into self-pity. I needed to channel his hope and optimism and remind myself of the good in the world. The good he saw around him. I started again. That one was in love. That one was donating a kidney. That one was helping a friend after surgery. That one was meeting a friend’s baby. Then I glanced around the waiting room. That one desperately loved her brother. That one was a good mentor and friend. That one was a good friend to me.

I crossed the room back to where Lisa, Mark, and Andi were sitting and mustered a smile. It may have been shaky around the edges, but it was a smile. I glanced up at the monitor, in time to see patient 123's status change to 'In recovery.' I tilted my head back, trying to keep the tears from falling. "Thank you," I murmured. Fine trembles shook me. I tilted my head down and smiled as a few stray drips dropped down my face. "He's in recovery."

"What?" Andi said, glancing up at the screen to check for herself.

Mark smiled, and it multiplied the creases in his weathered face. "About time. He's a tough one. Don't you worry."

He'd clearly been worried, but I didn't call him on it. Lisa stood and gave me a hug more like a straitjacket than a brief squeeze. "I hate to do this, but now that he's out of the woods, I need to head home." She looked between Andi and Mark. "One of you will make sure she gets home tonight? She's only a couple of days out from her own surgery."

Andi and Mark nodded, and Lisa took her leave. I watched the door anxiously, hoping a doctor would come talk to us soon. My butt was numb from all the sitting by the time a figure in scrubs and a loose surgical mask entered the room.

"Mrs. Torres?"

I nodded and stood. She glanced down at my ID bracelet. "Very good. Your husband is in recovery now. I'll send someone to show you to his room as soon as he's ready to be moved."

"You're going to keep him overnight?" I asked.

She nodded. "We need to monitor him tonight. We'll reevaluate tomorrow. You can

stay with him if you like.”

I nodded. “Thanks, Doctor. When I first heard about the accident, the extent of his injuries was unclear. Can you tell me more about his injuries?”

“Report was of a vehicle accident. He presented with a mild concussion, broken ribs, and a broken leg.”

“What did you need to operate on?”

“His left leg,” she answered. “He needed a pin and some hardware due to the nature of the fracture.”

“But he’ll be okay?”

She smiled. “He’s going to have a hell of a headache. We can walk through concussion protocols later, but he’s okay.”

I thanked the doctor. I was still antsy, but not so anxious after her update. Andi and Mark insisted on waiting to see Jimmy themselves, and we haunted the waiting room a while longer. Thirty minutes later a nurse arrived to show me to his room. “Mrs. Torres? I’ll take you to your husband.”

I’d been called ‘Mrs. Torres’ more in the last few hours than I had in the last few weeks. To the world I was Jimmy’s wife. I may always be a Nemitz on paper, but in my heart, I could be Mrs. Torres too. Not a fake wife, not a temporary wife, but his, to have and to hold. And I wanted to hold him. The nurse’s shoes squeaked ahead of us down the hall, and I did my best to keep up. The emotional stress was taking a physical toll on my still-healing body. Mark put a supportive hand under my elbow. “Steady there, Melena. A few more minutes for you to visit Jimmy, then I’m taking you home to rest.”

“I’m staying with him.”

Mark did me the courtesy of not snorting audibly. “We’ll see what Jimmy has to say about that.”

“If he’s awake, I’ll be glad to hear him say anything.”

The nurse held open the door for us, and I thanked her. “He’ll be groggy for a bit, then probably sleep the rest of tonight. Don’t tire him out too much,” she admonished.

I nodded and approached the bed. Jimmy was usually a force to be reckoned with. Today, he looked more like a loopy little boy than an authority figure. “Melena,” he mumbled. “You came.”

“Of course, I did. You stayed with me through my hospital visits, why wouldn’t I do the same for you?”

He smiled back, and his eyes crossed. His loopy grin warned me not to take anything he said too seriously. Andi and Mark stepped up to the bed beside me.

“What have I told you about getting hurt?” his sister asked.

“That it’s not allowed,” he slurred.

“Damn right. Knock that shit off.” She moved in to give him a hug. He winced and she apologized. “Shit, I’m sorry. I forgot about the ribs.”

He grunted, and Andi's eyes narrowed. "We're not supposed to annoy you, so I'll hold the lecture for next time. But it's coming. Buckle up. It's going to be long."

Jimmy's eyelids fluttered. "Wouldn't miss it."

"Now, get some rest. I'll be back to check on you in the morning," she said with a final squeeze to his hand.

Jimmy focused on Mark as he stepped forward. "Mark. Hey. How's it going?"

"Better than you, buddy. Get plenty of rest and heal quick, okay? You know I can't stand Smith without you on shift as buffer."

Mark turned to me. "I'm going to give you a few minutes together, but then you're going home." I opened my mouth to argue, but he beat me to the punch. "You and I both know Jimmy wouldn't want you sleeping here when you're still healing. That chair is not going to cut it tonight. No arguments."

I glanced around the room. He was right. The plastic molded chair looked like a torture device from a prior century. Short of climbing into bed with Jimmy, I didn't have many options. His big frame took up all the available space on the mattress. The only place for me to sleep was on top of him. Under other conditions, it might appeal, but not with broken ribs and a concussion. Andi gave me a small nod before saying goodnight. Mark followed her out the door. I was surprised hospital security didn't have to tackle and drag her out, but maybe seeing Jimmy had calmed her nerves. The Amazon who fought me earlier had been replaced with a hunched shadow. I wasn't the only one who'd lived a few lifetimes in the waiting room.

I turned back to Jimmy. He'd been staring at me; or trying to. His eyes kept crossing, and I wondered what he was seeing. His lids fluttered, the drugs dragging him into sleep.

I took a deep breath and forced the words through my tight throat. “Jimmy, you scared me.”

He focused on me briefly. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to.”

My throat ached like I’d been sucking on a sourhead candy, and it took me a few moments to respond. “No, I don’t suppose you did. What happened?”

He shrugged, then winced. “Collision on the way to a call.”

“How does something like that happen? Weren’t you being careful?” I tried to keep the censure out of my voice, to stay calm. Seeing him awake was a huge relief, but I couldn’t shake the fears of the last few hours. In all the dangers he faced, I never seriously considered the rush to jobs as one of them, but I should have.

His brown eyes were soulful as he watched my face. “We’re always careful driving to calls. Other drivers, not so much,” he grimaced.

My mind raced with the possibilities. “You say that like it’s not the first time.”

“It’s my first time.” My shoulders relaxed. “But it’s been known to happen.”

I closed my eyes briefly. Did I want to know more? I did not. I needed to maintain the illusion of his safety. He was here. It was all that mattered.

I shook my head. “With those injuries, instead of calls, the only thing you’ll be catching for a while is naps.”

He grinned. “I like naps. Especially if you’ll take them with me.” He wiggled his brows at me, and I shook my head. I was impressed with his level of coordination, given the medications coursing through his system.

“You big talker, you. You realize this puts any naptime for the two of us back, right? At this rate, we’re going to be old and gray before we get any ‘naps’ together.”

He sobered. “Sorry, Melena.”

“Me too, but I’m glad you’re okay. Let’s make a pact to stay out of the hospital for a while, okay? My heart can’t take it.”

“I thought they fixed your heart?” he asked, confused. I wondered how concussed he was. He blinked again.

“They did. But you had me worried.”

“Don’t worry about me, I’m strong. Like an ox. Or a woman giving birth. I might even let you try to get me pregnant later,” he said with a grin.

I shook my head at him, and his eyes did their slow blink again. He didn’t know what he was saying.

“Let’s hold our horses on the babies.”

“I’d like to have your babies,” he said softly.

The goof. He’d like to have my babies. That, I’d like to see. His lids closed, and his breath puffed softly.

I leaned in and whispered, “You’d better heal fast, Jimmy. Otherwise my heart really will be broken, and I don’t think Dr. Webb will be able to put me back together again.”

I kissed his cheek. Light stubble scraped my lips, and I sighed as I leaned back to take him in. His bulk overwhelmed the hospital bed. It was his turn in the boxy gowns, but I had to admit he wore it better than I had. Jimmy couldn't look fragile if he tried. But with his natural energy on pause, he didn't look like himself. He'd been part of my life for a short time, but now I couldn't imagine it without him. Was this love? Did I love my husband?

I stared at him as he slept, watching the shallow rise and fall of his chest. Seeing his chest constrict had the same effect on my own. I didn't want to lose him. His energy, his hope, his caring. But what if it wasn't up to me? He could still decide our arrangement didn't suit. Suddenly a year didn't seem nearly long enough to convince him we belonged together.

Mark tapped on the door and interrupted my musing. "Time to go, Melena."

I opened my mouth to argue, but he shook his head. "We talked about this. You know Jimmy wouldn't want you to miss out on rest. Let me take you home."

I leaned in one last time, placing a kiss on Jimmy's cheek. His eyelids fluttered, and I debated fighting Mark to stay. I didn't want Jimmy waking up alone, and I wasn't sure I could sleep without him. His big body next to mine was addictive, even when all we did was sleep.

Chapter 20

Jimmy – Wake Up Call

It must have been onehell of a bender. I couldn't imagine why I'd gotten so drunk. Had something happened with Melena? I was pretty good about knowing my limits. I groaned as I reached for my pounding head.

“Jimmy?”

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:51 am

Melena. She was here. I squinted, realizing my eyes had been closed. The room was well lit, and I squeezed them closed again as the light sent fresh shards of pain into my head. Her hand gripped mine.

“Ow.”

“Jimmy? I’ll get the doctor.”

“No, wait. I’m okay. I just have a splitting headache. What happened? Is this the hangover from hell?”

“No, you were in an accident.”

“I was? Were you there? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. I wasn’t there. It happened at work, and you’re okay too.” I shifted and groaned again as a stab of pain lanced through my ribs. “Except for some broken bones. And a concussion,” she added.

Her words sparked the memory, and my shoulders relaxed against the bed. She was fine.

Everything hurt and my vision kept blurring. Did I break every bone in my body, or just the important ones? My head was messed up for sure. My neck and shoulders twinged at the slightest move, like I’d had my body rocked, and not in the good way. Given teenage soccer injuries, and the tightness in my chest, I was betting on a broken rib or three. I wiggled my toes, and both bumps under the covers wiggled

back, but I winced at the bone-deep ache along my left leg.

“Was anyone else injured?”

She shook her head. “Everyone else’s injuries were minor. They were treated and released.”

I reached up a hand to feel my head. I had a bit of a lump on my temple, but it was small.

“Where am I?”

“Tacoma General.”

“We keep coming back to this place, huh?”

“Yeah. I’d like them to revoke our frequent flyer privileges. Twice in one week is too much.”

I grunted. Every word I spoke sent a serrated spike of pain through my temple. I tried to move and realized my leg was immobilized. “What fresh hell is this?”

I could hear the grimace in Melena’s voice. It hurt too much to open my eyes and look at her. “You’ve got a broken leg. They had to put some hardware in. And let’s not forget the fractured ribs.”

I rubbed my chest. “So, you won’t be giving me any aggressive hugs today?”

“Not anytime soon.”

“Too bad. I love hugs,” I said glumly.

“I’ll be glad to hug you silly once you’re healed.”

“Promise?” I asked, cracking my lids again to see her.

She smiled at me, her expression alight with something more than teasing. “Promise.”

“When can I get out of here?”

“When your doctor says.”

“And when will that be?” I wheedled.

“Not soon enough for me. Our room was lonely without you last night. I’m ready for you to come home.”

I focused on her face. Melena looked tired, her hair caught back in a ponytail and makeup nonexistent. Too pale. “Are you okay? It’s not long ago you were in this joint.”

She wrapped her arms around herself, running her hands up and down her forearms. “I’m fine. It’s you I’m worried about.”

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:51 am

I smiled. “You missed me, huh?”

She nodded solemnly. “You know it.”

She was too serious. I couldn’t have that. “You just want me for my body heat,” I accused. “I bet you had to wear sweats again last night to stay warm enough.”

The corner of her mouth twitched as she fought a smile “Your shirts smell like you.”

She’d lost me. “So, no sweatshirt?”

She shook her head. “I went for five of your shirts instead.”

My chest tightened. It wasn’t the ribs, it was the feelings. She really had missed me. I let the moment linger too long before clearing my throat. “What? Are you going to do my laundry too? How am I going to have anything to wear?”

Her eyes lit, joining me in my game. “I needed to be warm, and you weren’t there to do the job. I had to manage without you.” She sobered, and I didn’t like the way the sparkle faded from her expression. “I didn’t like managing without you.”

I abandoned my teasing tone. “I’m sorry, you shouldn’t have to.”

“What? You can control everything now?,” she scoffed gently. “You don’t need to apologize; just focus on getting healthy, so you can come home.”

Home. The word suddenly loomed big. It used to mean a cold and empty apartment.

Nothing special. The word had taken on new meaning since Melena and I moved into our house. Home was holding her as we slept. Home was lazy mornings with multiple cups of coffee. Home was watching TV, cuddled together on the couch. Home was Melena.

My gaze met hers. “I want to be home with you more than anything.”

She smiled, her face relaxing. “Good. Let’s see what we can do about making that happen. I’m going to go find your doctor and see when we can spring you.”

She left, and I took a deep breath, wincing as my ribs twinged. Melena was home. She may not realize it yet, but she was more than home to me. She was everything. But how to tell her? And would she stay once I did? Our agreement was for one year. Not for all the years. But that’s what I wanted. All of her years.

Chapter 21

Melena – Mom Knows Best

Mom called as I was getting Jimmy settled on the couch. We’d only been home five minutes, and I couldn’t keep the peace. I hit ‘ignore’ on the call and went to get him a drink of water to take his meds.

“Here. The doctor said I could only take you home if you stayed on schedule. Swallow this.”

Jimmy had never been ill-tempered with me. Until now. I was learning to manage him the hard way. I knew he was going to test my patience when he tried to convince me he could still drive us home from the hospital. Not. Gonna. Happen. I could understand wanting to pretend things were as normal as possible, but ignoring his injury wouldn’t heal him any faster. I wouldn’t let him hurt himself further.

Page 76

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:51 am

“I don’t like the pills. They make me wonky,” he complained with a scowl as I handed him the cup.

I stared him down. “I. Don’t. Care. The doctor said taking these was a condition of going home. I want you home. Ipso facto, you take the pills. Swallow.”

He grudgingly accepted them from me, took a sip, and swallowed. “There, nurse. See? I follow orders.”

My phone buzzed again, and he looked over with interest. “Who is it?”

I sighed. “My mother.”

“What does she want?”

“I don’t know. I’ve been ignoring her calls,” I admitted.

“Mel-e-na.”

“Jim-my.”

I blew out a breath. “Fine.” I swiped to accept the call. “Hi, Mom. How are you?”

“Fine, fine. Just trying to nail down details for our visit. Next weekend still works for you and Jimmy?”

“Actually,” I started, and Jimmy interrupted, “It’s great, Mrs. Nemitz.”

“Call me, Silvia,” she reminded.

“Silvia. We can’t wait to see you,” Jimmy enthused loudly from his prone position on the couch.

I gave him my best death glare. Except I wanted him healthy. Darn him. First time I’d really been conflicted about my death glare. He shrugged and I sighed.

“Mom, we’re excited to have you. Heads up, Jimmy’s had a bit of an accident at work, so he’ll be on crutches when you’re here. He may not be able to cook as much as he planned.”

“I can still cook,” Jimmy claimed.

Simultaneously, my mom exclaimed, “I’d love to get my hands on that kitchen. Tell him not to worry.”

He groaned softly, and I smiled in victory. He had no idea what he was in for.

“Thanks, Mom. We’ll see you next weekend.”

I ended the call, and he gave me a look. “What? We’ll probably need her help in the kitchen.”

“I’m perfectly capable of cooking for us.”

My brows raised. “Under normal circumstances, sure. However, these are not normal circumstances.” I tapped his leg cast. “You need to stay off your feet. Doctor’s orders.”

He frowned. “I can still move around the kitchen enough to cook for the holidays.”

I frowned back. “Occasionally only. Again, doctor’s orders. Quit being a pain.”

He gasped and brought a hand to his chest. “I never!”

I gasped right back. “You always!”

He muttered into his glass of water as he took another sip. “Are you my wife, or my jailer?”

I wiggled my brows at him. “Both have possibilities. Keep it up, my miscreant.”

“Miscreant? Who are you calling a miscreant? Who even says that?”

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:51 am

I scowled. “Don’t test me. Otherwise, I’ll make sure your sponge bath water is cold.”

“Yes,ma’am.”

“You’re learning.”

The lines of pain around his eyes melted away. The medication was having its desired effect. He was having a harder time focusing on my face. He yawned, and his eyes closed. “Learning what?” he asked sleepily.

“That I’m in charge.”

He yawned again. “You’re just now figuring that out? Amateur.”

I glanced at him, but Jimmy was asleep. What did that mean? Was he trying to tell me I was bossy? I already knew that.

Jimmy meekly took hispain meds when he woke from his nap, and I settled on the other couch to watch TV before his serial yawns signaled it was time to maneuver him into our bedroom.

“Ready for bed, big guy?”

Oh, how I wished I was saying those words under different circumstances. My energy levels were steadily rebounding from my surgery, and with it my hornier tendencies.

Jimmy's broad shoulders stretched the T-shirt he'd come home in. I'd massacred a pair of his sweatpants to fit them over his cast. His rumpled appearance peeled away the façade of professionalism he wore like armor outside the house. The real Jimmy was on display, gooey sweet center and all.

He smiled back sleepily. "Probably for the best."

I reached out a hand. "Up you go, then."

He grunted as he levered himself into a sitting position, then used my arm to brace himself standing up. I handed Jimmy his crutches and followed behind as he wobbled like a milk-drunk toddler toward our bedroom.

We both breathed a sigh of relief when Jimmy made it safely to our bed after a pit stop in the bathroom to brush his teeth. I'd paced outside the door, listening for any signs of falling the entire time he'd been inside on his own. The way our luck had been, he'd fall and break the rest of the bones in his body.

He cleared his throat before giving me a heavy-lidded smile. "You're going to have to help me out here, angel."

Any angelic qualities had left the building. Jimmy's light stubble and rakish grin were firing impulses that had nothing to do with inciting virtue. My mouth was dry as I responded hoarsely. "With what?"

Hah. Innocent. Angelic. Not really. Try horny.

Jimmy's gaze roved over my body in his T-shirt. His shirt was large enough to hide most of my figure, but the soft gray fabric still rustled against my skin like a butterfly caress when I moved. I couldn't help but shift from side to side, tightening my thighs to ease the sudden ache.

Jimmy reached to the hem of his own shirt, slowly stripping it over his head. I bit my lip to hold back a moan that turned into a sigh. I couldn't help visually tracing the line of fine hair from the waist of his sweatpants up over his firm chest. Jimmy's quirked lip let me know he'd caught me. Busted.

I cleared my throat. "You look fine to me."

Truer words. More than fine. I wanted to ride him like a carousel, tracing the fine chiseled chest. Up and down and round and round until I found that brass ring. My hands itched to touch him.

"Well, I'd be more comfortable if I could get these sweats off. It's going to be too hot if I sleep in them."

I'd be too hot if he took them off. Fanning myself would be a dead giveaway. Instead, I rolled my shoulders back to stretch out the sudden tension.

"Sure, I can help with that."

And a whole heck of a lot more. All he needed to do was ask. I moved in closer, leaning over his prone body and reaching for the waistband of his sweatpants. The soft nubs of the fabric were in direct contrast to his hot skin, and I made the mistake of looking up into his face. Jimmy's hungry expression as he adjusted his gaze from my gaping T-shirt to my mouth was not lost on me. He was right there. So close. I only had to lean forward an inch and our lips would connect.

Jimmy reached up to grasp my hips, and I held back the plea for him to kiss me with effort. The firm brand of his fingers wrapping around my hipbones made it impossible to focus. Jimmy's eyes crinkled as a slow smile spread across his face.

"I thought of something else you can help me with," he said.

His strong hands urged my hips forward until I was seated against his groin, and I could no longer hold back the moan that followed. He'd notched our bodies together so I could feel how hard he was. Ready. He leaned forward, grazing his lips across my collarbone, sending goose bumps to battle with the heat growing between us. He reached for my face, cupping my cheeks to bring my mouth to his. Heavenly. His kiss started out with a gentle sweep across mine, but we quickly lost any regard for gentle. Hard. Driving. Consuming.

I ground my hips against his, enjoying the friction as our kisses deepened and grew more urgent. I leaned back slightly to reach for the waistband of his pants again, and Jimmy groaned. Not pleasure. Pain.

Page 78

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:51 am

I immediately lifted up, taking pressure off of his injured leg. His face had paled. I'd done that. Hurt him. When all I wanted was to relieve the ache we both felt.

"I'm so sorry, Jimmy."

He breathed deeply through his clenched jaw, his nostrils flaring. His white face was my fault. I scrambled off of the bed, pacing a few steps away.

"I got carried away. Do you need anything? Do you want more painkillers?"

He shook his head quickly to the negative. He breathed for a few more moments and my shoulders relaxed as his color returned.

"I'm okay."

I held back the eyeroll with effort. Right. It used to be me who worried about passing out, but Jimmy's leg and ribs were introducing their own challenges to horny times. My own ardor had cooled as soon as I realized Jimmy was hurting. We were supposed to be about pleasure, not pain.

"Are you sure you don't need anything?"

His eyes lit at my words, full of longing as his gaze took in my stiff nipples beneath his shirt. They still announced the desire I shouldn't feel. Slutty nipples. Read the room. I shook my head at the suggestion in his expression. "No, we don't. Not until you're feeling better."

Jimmy nodded reluctantly, and I willed my body to behave. My husband needed me. But he needed me to take care of him first. We still had months to do every wicked thing we could imagine. Months. My stomach sank, throat tightening as I turned out the lights. It wouldn't be enough.

I ached to be held in Jimmy's arms, or to hold him in mine. But we couldn't. He needed more time to heal. I couldn't set him back again. You shouldn't hurt the ones you love.

The next few days were the toughest test our short marriage had faced. Jimmy was not an easygoing patient. He was usually so amiable, I hadn't anticipated how difficult being incapacitated would be for him. Immobility with a side of frustrated desire was not a good look on anyone.

He was grumpy. I didn't know what to do with a grumpy Jimmy. I didn't think such an animal existed. Not being able to work, go to the gym, or cook in our kitchen left him with nothing to do but play video games, watch TV, and complain. I'd even let him win a few games to try to improve his mood, but nothing worked. He took his injuries personally, and grouched that he wanted to make me dinner and take care of me, that I should be the one convalescing.

"What do you want for dinner?" I asked.

"I don't care," he answered listlessly.

He cared. I'd never met a man more interested in food. He had opinions to spare about the local restaurants. "Where shall I get takeout from?" He shrugged. "Okay, I can heat up some of the leftovers from Chase and Tamra. How about the chicken and rice casserole?"

“I don’t want that,” he said.

“I’ll make you a grilled cheese then.”

“No, thank you.”

“What do you want?”

He scowled. We’d been going around and round on our dinner choice.

“I’ll go get anything you want,” I offered.

He shrugged again. “I don’t know what I want.”

“You know what you don’t want,” I said through gritted teeth.

“Yeah. But I don’t know what I do want.”

Kill me now. Maybe cannibalism would appeal? I know, I know. Gross. Still. If he didn’t pick something soon, I was putting it on the table.

“Italian,” I suggested.

“Too salty.”

“Mexican?”

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:51 am

“Too spicy.”

“I’ll order you something bland.”

He took the opportunity to act offended. “What? You’re the one who didn’t like the chili brownies. I can handle spicy.”

I raised my brows again. They were getting a workout. “Really? Because if the food doesn’t kick your ass, I might.”

“What?” His injured act was getting old.

“Jimmy. I know it sucks you can’t do everything you want. I know you don’t like the pills and forced inactivity. But your body needs to heal. Deal with it.”

“Ouch. Time for tough love?”

I nodded. “Beyond time.”

His face softened, then turned mischievous. “You just said you loved me.”

He said it like a naughty fourth grader, not like he was laying my feelings bare. Was now the time to tell the asshole he was right? My eyes narrowed. Not when he was joking.

I still didn’t know how he felt. He’d been in such a foul mood since his injury. I didn’t want to share my feelings with him without a better sense of his. I needed to

protect myself. I had to be able to walk away if he was truly only interested in our original deal. No drama. It was becoming a harder promise to keep.

I'd believed the difficulty would be holding onto my dreams during our marriage. Not letting Jimmy change me. Maybe marrying someone else wouldn't have had an impact, but my heart hadn't planned on Jimmy. My clients understood when I rescheduled, explaining my husband's accident and need for extra help. Not a peep. Between my recovery and his, I wasn't going to make rent on my room for the first time in years. And I didn't care. It shook me to realize it, but my savings living with Jimmy gave me a small cushion, and I didn't give a second thought to using it. Jimmy had taken such good care of me, there was no way I could focus on work when I could be with him. Showing him my love, even if I couldn't say it yet.

Chapter 22

Jimmy – Killing Me Softly

Melena was killing me. Not on purpose, but still, the effect was the same. She had to help me with almost everything. Her warm hands were everywhere, skimming my ribs, rubbing my shoulders, torturing me. I hurt all the time, and it was sixty percent blue balls. I wanted to push past the pain in my ribs and leg and ask her to climb aboard the J-train, but I couldn't. There was no way I could do her justice. She was healed, and I was broken. It'd be funny if laughing didn't make my ribs hurt.

We were joking about her loving me, but I was dying to know if she meant it. I'd been an impossible asshole the last couple of days. She'd taken more time off work to help me, and I was an ungrateful jerk. In my defense, I couldn't help it. I was in pain. Being helpless sucked. The meds sucked. What didn't suck was spending time with Melena. I milked it for as much as I could, given the mobility issues.

Her parents and brothers were arriving soon. Like tomorrow soon. I was toast. I

couldn't even stand for more than a few moments to meet them. Her brothers were going to annihilate me in my weakened state if her dad didn't destroy me first. Something about his quiet on the family calls pinged my danger meter.

I had also failed at the first rule of newlywed Christmas. I hadn't been able to leave the house to get Melena anything. True, I could shop online, but what I wanted to get her was best purchased in person. I'd been texting with Chase, and he'd agreed to help.

Chase: Pick you up at 4?

Page 80

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:51 am

Jimmy: Yes, please.

Chase: What excuse are you going to give Melena for leaving?

Jimmy: I don't think she'll care as long as I'm out of her hair.

Chase: Jimmy.

Jimmy: What?

Chase: Do better.

Jimmy: OK, OK. I'll tell her you need my help with your present for Tamra.

Chase: Believable.

Jimmy: I know, right? She'll never suspect.

Chase knocked on the door. "I'll get it!"

Melena scowled at me on the couch. "You will not. Stay right there."

She opened the door. "Chase, I wasn't expecting you. What brings you here today?"

"I'm here to spring Jimmy."

"Spring Jimmy? Spring Jimmy how?" she asked.

“He’s coming with me. I need his help with something.”

“What could you use his help with? The man has crutches. He’s not helping move furniture, is he?”

Chase snorted. “I leave all furniture moving to the professionals. This is a manly mission of mercy.”

“Whose mercy?”

“Mine,” Chase acknowledged. “Come on, Melena, even prisoners get parole. Set my brother free.”

“For what? Good behavior? I haven’t seen any.”

Ouch. “I’ll be on my best behavior after I get out of the house. Being cooped up is driving me to drink,” I said.

“The only thing I’ve let you drink is water and orange juice. You’re not supposed to mix alcohol with your meds.”

“Exactly. That’s why I need to get out. So I’m not tempted to go against doctor’s orders. We’ll be fine, Melena.”

She looked at me severely. “Don’t set back your recovery. Between my health issues and your injury, we haven’t had any time for ‘naps.’ I want you to get better. Soon,” she emphasized.

Chase’s eyes widened as he caught her meaning. “I didn’t hear any of that.”

I was second-guessing my choice of Christmas gift. Maybe I needed to get Melena

something to take the edge off. I was still a way out from capable thanks to my injuries.

“I’m sorry. I’ll put all my considerable effort into healing. As soon as I get back from my errand with Chase,” I modified.

She didn’t seem mollified. “See that you do.”

Chase seized his opportunity and helped me to his car.

“Melena seems more...intense then I remember.”

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:51 am

“I think the frustration is getting to her,” I acknowledged.

Chase clucked. “You’ve always been a rotten patient. It must be frustrating, caring for an invalid.”

“Yeah, that.”

Our disrupted make out session from a few nights ago hung like a specter between us. I wanted to believe it wasn’t my grumpy ass frustrating Melena. Horny was better than unhappy. Horny, I could fix. Eventually. I wanted to believe it was something more than sexual desire between us. Frustrated feelings, maybe? I had them. But there was no way I was telling her I loved her while I depended on her for everything. If she stayed, it had to be for the right reasons. Not pity. Not lust. Love.

Chase pulled up to the store I’d requested and glanced at the marquee. “You sure you want to go in there?”

I gulped. I’d never been before. But it was time. “I’m sure.”

Chase helped me into the store, where an eager salesperson approached. He wore a slick suit and had a well-trimmed gray beard and kind blue eyes set in a round face. His size and jolly smile made me think his sleigh was parked outside. “Sirs, can I help you find something special?”

Special. I absolutely needed something special. The case in front of me was full of

rings. Plenty of bling and sparkle. But what would Melena like? I should have found a way to get Lisa's number. She would know. I felt like a faulty husband for not knowing. Still, I was trying. It had to count for something. Hopefully, it was enough.

"We're just browsing for the moment," Chase said.

The other man smiled. "Very good. The men's bands are over here," he said gesturing to the other wall. "Unless you prefer these settings; they're also beautiful on a male hand and we can size them appropriately." He looked between Chase and me, trying to gauge our tastes.

I shook my head and bit back a smile. I appreciated the salesperson's efforts to make us comfortable, though it wasn't what we were after. "I'm in the market for one ladies' band, but thank you."

Chase stifled his laugh until the other man moved away. "I've always thought we'd make a beautiful couple."

I shoved his shoulder before turning back to their selection. "Yes, but that's because you think I'm pretty."

Chase couldn't leave it alone. "So pretty," he whispered. His shoulders shook, and he made himself scarce while I reviewed the display. Chase kept sneaking glances at the bands too, but every time I caught him, he shifted focus.

I searched the case and asked to see a range of rings before making my selection. Each one glittered. I wasn't sure Melena could wear a ring while she worked, but something low-profile might be most comfortable. I chose a delicate band, simple and smooth with channel set stones. The white gold gleamed in the recessed lighting of the store like a promise. An unending circle. Unending was the key; my feelings for

Melena were no longer a mystery to me. A year wasn't going to be enough. But I hadn't told her. Couldn't. Not yet. Soon.

I wanted to give her the ring as a symbol of my devotion. Such a weird word, devotion. Love. Loyalty. Enthusiasm. I had them all for her. And she acted like she had no clue. She'd been treating me more like one of her brothers than a husband during my recovery. Someone to indulge and care for. She kept her distance after our failed make out attempt. And I couldn't help but wonder if she'd decided my job was too dangerous. That I was too dangerous to love. Was she biding her time until I was healed to leave me?

I ran my fingers over the smooth metal, feeling it warm beneath my fingertips. I could only hope Melena would warm to the idea of staying married as easily. Maybe with enough time, her feelings would match mine.

Chapter 23

Melena – All I Want for Christmas

My parents' arrival was a relief. My brothers less so. They'd each play a part in breaking the tension between Jimmy and me. It had been all I could do to keep my hands off Jimmy while he was home convalescing. The cast didn't make him less sexy. Except for the times he was being an asshole. Then it was easy to ignore the attraction. My cooking efforts were not up to his standards. I was happy to make him a sandwich when he couldn't get around the kitchen easily, but when he told me I used too much mustard as tactlessly as possible, he was lucky I didn't sabotage his next meal with chili powder. I could always claim it was a secret family recipe. And it was. For torture. My brothers and I had played kitchen pranks on each other more times than I could count. I still shuddered, thinking of the sauerkraut Zander introduced to my peanut butter and jelly when I was a pesky eight-year-old.

I'd had a successful post-surgical follow up with Dr. Webb; from his perspective, I was healed. And it was true I felt better. No more racing pulse or weakness. My faulty organ was whole. But my heart wouldn't truly be whole for a while. Maybe never. That depended on Jimmy and what happened next. His feelings were a mystery.

We'd bumped along with him at home. I'd taken as much time off as I could afford, but eventually I had to go back to work. I counted myself lucky many of my clients were willing to reschedule. The next few weeks would be a hell of back-to-back appointments, but I'd make it work. Leaving Jimmy home alone wasn't an option when he got out of the hospital. He'd been there for me at every step of my illness, and I couldn't imagine not doing the same.

At the beginning of our relationship, I feared he'd change me. And I was right. But so wrong. It wasn't that my dreams mattered less, it was that my life with Jimmy had become about so much more. He supported my goals and made them easier to achieve, not harder. It was one thing I hadn't counted on...having a partner who wanted me to succeed. Yes, sometimes taking care of him trumped a day at work, but in the long run, he'd made my dreams his own. As we talked about the plans for our house, the projects to make it a home, he'd casually offered to help me fix up my spa building when I found one. If I didn't love him before, that would have sealed the deal. Jimmy was the best. Also, the worst. If I thought he was cranky with me home, it paled in comparison to his attitude once I went back to work. He was clearly bored. Video games and TV couldn't hold his attention, but he enjoyed sniping with me.

At times, the air was ripe with things left unsaid. I didn't try to tell him I loved him after the hospital. But I wanted to. I sensed he had something to say to me, but I was afraid. Afraid it would be goodbye. Especially once I healed from my surgery. Was he done with me, but not sure how to break the news? It would be my luck to realize I loved a husband who no longer wanted me. We had almost nine months left in our agreement. Would it be enough for him to develop feelings of his own?

My parents were sure to break the ice. Or break us. Time would tell.

"Melly, I forgot my salt. You have salt, don't you?"

"Yes, Mom. We have salt. News flash: they also carry salt at the grocery stores here."

"Melly. You know I like my ingredients just so. When I heard Jimmy was laid up with his injury, I thought, this is the perfect time to share all of our family recipes with him!"

I did not share my mother's enthusiasm. She was a competent cook. Most of the time. Other times, she got distracted and bullied forward and pretended things were fine.

Like the time she used sugar instead of salt in her cheddar broccoli soup. Or the time she'd over-spiced the taco meat. I'd gotten a glass of milk to avoid a complete meltdown. My dad had pushed through, but I'd caught the twinkle of tears at the corner of his eyes. They were mouth burning. But we pretended, for her sake.

"What are you planning to make, Mom?"

"All of your favorites. You told me he likes to cook, so I brought all of your most-loved recipes from childhood."

Was now the time to tell her my tastes had changed somewhat since I thought noodles doused in ketchup was a good idea? I took one look at her excited face. Nope.

"Gee, that sounds great."

My dad couldn't care less about the kitchen, but he was like a bloodhound on Jimmy's trail. "Where is this husband of yours?"

I fluttered my hands. "He's out running an errand with his friend, Chase."

My mom gave me the look. "He really exists right?"

I deadpanned. "Sure, Mom. I can totally afford this beautiful house on my own. The husband you met via video chat is a myth. Yes, Mom. Jimmy exists. And I put a ring on it."

She glanced at my left hand. "Are you sure about that?"

"Figuratively speaking, yes. We don't need rings to be married."

My brothers chose that moment to draw up behind them with their bags. “What? Your husband doesn’t exist, Melly? You making up stories again?” asked Zander. His dark head tilted to the side as he considered my expression.

“Come inside, you brats. Let me give you the tour before Jimmy gets home.”

I walked them through the house, and my mom admired the kitchen before turning to my dad. “Andrik, we should remodel our kitchen like this. It’s so nice!”

My dad’s expression remained stoic, but I was sure his eyes crossed for a moment. My mom was a serial remodeler—hazard of the trade when they could do it themselves.

“Thanks, Mom. We like it.”

My brother Ivan snorted. “What, Melly. It’s not like you had anything to do with the kitchen. You guys just moved in; it already looked like this, didn’t it?”

“Yes, Ivan, it was already like this.”

I got my parents settled in the guest room on my old bed. I tried not to reflect on what the bed had seen or might see in future. It was now the guest bed, and my parents were guests. My brothers were stuck with the couches even though the one from my old apartment was too short for either of them. I let them battle for who got what. My money was usually on Zander since he was older, but Ivan was crafty.

I glanced at the clock. Jimmy had been gone for hours. My parents were going to think he was fictional if he didn’t get home soon.

Page 83

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:51 am

Melena: ETA? My folks and brothers are here.

Jimmy: Shit.

Jimmy: Not that your parents arrived, but that I'm late. Sorry.

Melena: No problem. ETA?

Jimmy: I'm wrapping up with Chase. Back in thirty.

Melena: Send proof of life? My parents could use a little extra convincing that you exist.

My phone buzzed with an incoming message and I smiled.

The picture showed Jimmy with an arm thrown around Chase's shoulders, mugging for the camera. I didn't recognize the setting. I flashed my phone at my mom and brothers. "See? Jimmy is out with his friend Chase, but he'll be home soon."

"I dunno, Melly. Looks like a deep fake to me. I'll only believe it when I meet him in person."

"Gee, thanks. Your belief in me is inspiring."

Ivan shrugged and smirked. "You forget I remember the Christmas you told me Santa's elves kept stealing my socks because they stank so bad, they were worried it would scare Santa away."

I glanced at him innocently. “Your foot odor at that age was frightening. I maintain it’s entirely possible you could have scared Santa away.”

We bickered quietly as my mom took over the kitchen and my dad settled on an island stool with his phone and a beer from the fridge. The joys of family life.

I heard the front door close and took off for the entryway. Chase was already gone, but Jimmy was making his way inside on his crutches. He looked up from navigating around the door with a smile. “Hey. Sorry that took so long. Let me duck into the bedroom, and then I’ll be right there.”

My face fell. What was so important that he couldn’t meet my parents first? I bit my lip and nodded as Jimmy clumped away. I wandered into the kitchen without him. I’d hoped to show a united front and introduce him at the same time, but he had other ideas.

I settled back in with my family, and a few minutes later Jimmy appeared at the door. He was dressed in his going out clothes—a dark blue button-down shirt and navy slacks. I wasn’t sure if he was consciously mimicking his uniform because he missed work, but his outfit had a similar effect. His broad body filled the doorway, and I stood to meet him.

“Mom, Dad, this is Jimmy.”

My dad was mannered enough to stand and move toward Jimmy to shake his hand.

“Good to meet you in person, sir.”

Jimmy was laying it on thick. He turned to my mom. “Silvia, you look more like Melena’s sister than her mother. It’s a pleasure to have you visit us.”

Real thick. Still, my mom smiled, and her face lit at the compliment. “Thank you, Jimmy. That’s so sweet of you to say.”

“So sweet,” my brother echoed, elbowing Zander.

“But so true,” Zander said. “We say that all the time, don’t we, Ivan?”

I shook my head. Now who was laying it on thick?

My brothers and dad spent the time before dinner grilling Jimmy while they drank our beer. Nothing was sacred. Jimmy responded with a smile to most questions, but it faltered when my dad asked how he proposed. I could tell he didn’t want to admit it was via text message. I jumped in to help. “Dad, you old romantic.” I looked at him fondly. “It just happened naturally. We were talking about marriage.”

“How did you and Melly meet?” Zander asked.

I glanced at Jimmy to see if he needed saving, but he had things under control this time. He met Zander’s gaze. “I noticed her at the gym first. She was talking with someone else, and I heard her laugh from across the room. It was magnetic. Melena has a great laugh. The kind that made me want to hear her laugh all the time.”

His gaze met mine across the room. “It took me a while to find an excuse to meet her. I joined her yoga class. One day I set down my mat next to hers, and the rest is history.”

Jimmy was many things, but a yogi wasn’t one of them. He’d spent the first few classes facing opposite the class almost constantly. On the day he’d moved his mat close to mine, I’d done my best to get him turned in the right direction, but when it came to yoga, he was a lost cause. Our classmate’s moaning had been too much distraction. “At the end of class, he invited me for a smoothie to thank me for helping

him through class.”

Zander gave Jimmy an assessing look. “Did you stick with the yoga? Or was it an excuse to meet chicks?”

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:51 am

I smacked him on the shoulder. “Zander!”

Jimmy smiled into his beer before sneaking a glance at me. “I retired my yoga mat after that. It had served its purpose.”

I gasped in mock horror. “What? Yoga as a ruse to meet women?No.”

“Woman,” he corrected. “Just you.”

“Awww,” Ivan cooed. “You newlyweds are so cute. I promise to cover Zander’s innocent eyes if you need to follow that story up with a public display of affection.”

“Zander hasn’t been innocent since he left the womb,” I said. “Pretty sure he came out knowing what channels the naughty movies were on. There were too many times growing up when he didn’t change the channel fast enough.”

“Hey, now. Quit talking about my baby boy like that,” my mom admonished.

“Thanks, Mom,” Zander said.

“He may be slow with the remote, but he’s handy with an excuse,” she said. “I still remember the time he told me the cat sat on the remote and changed it to the naked station. Since I could see the cat out the front window in the yard, it wasn’t the bulletproof defense he thought it was.”

I laughed. My mom didn’t tease often, but when she did it was gold.

My dad had been mostly silent, which was his way. He stared hard at Jimmy before grunting. “Treat her right, and we’ll have no problems. If she wants to do yoga, you do yoga.” He turned to me. “You too, Melly. Treat him right. He seems okay. So far.”

That was as close to acceptance as we’d get from my dad, but I’d take it.

I’d just slid beneath the sheets after making sure my family was settled when Jimmy propped himself in the bathroom door, toothbrush in his mouth. One hand braced on the door frame above him to take weight off his leg, and I enjoyed the play of muscles in his torso.

“Ey wike woar famulee,” he said.

I smiled. “I think they like you too.”

He turned back to the sink to spit and rinse before making his way slowly to the bed. “It’s fun to see you with them. You’re usually self-contained. I like watching them tease you.”

“Glad someone’s having fun.”

He gave me an arch look, and I relented. “I love them. It is nice having them here. I hadn’t realized how much I missed them. Phone calls aren’t quite the same.”

“Do you think your mom is going to forgive us for not inviting them to the wedding?”

“You caught the ongoing digs, huh? I don’t know. It was the right decision at the time, though. I didn’t want to worry them.”

“What about now?” he asked as he moved onto the bed beside me.

“Now what?”

“Why aren’t you telling them about your surgery? I thought you’d want to tell them in person.”

I frowned. “They don’t need to know.”

Jimmy frowned back. “Why would you keep it from them?”

I tried to smooth my face, but I knew it looked mulish. “They don’t need to know. It serves no purpose. They’ll just be upset about it. I’m fixed now.”

“Yes, but they love you. They’ll understand.”

I shook my head and stared up at the ceiling. “It’s taken care of. They’re hurt enough about missing the wedding.”

“Melena, I think you should tell them. What if it’s a genetic issue? Shouldn’t they know?”

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:51 am

“This, from the man who hasn’t told his parents he’s married. I don’t think this is the hill you want to die on, sport.”

“I told them,” he said quietly.

I glanced over to where he was propped up on pillows against the headboard. “How did they take it?” I asked, examining his dark eyes for any clues. “And why didn’t you tell me?”

He shrugged, his expression impassive. “We’ve been busy, and I’ve been distracted. They wished me well. Said they’d try to make it home to meet you next year.”

I tried not to be hurt by his offhand response. “That’s it?”

He nodded. “That’s it.”

“Huh.”

“You get along with your family, and they care about you. You should let them know about your heart condition.”

I examined his sober face. “Just because your parents didn’t have a big reaction to the wedding, doesn’t mean they don’t care.”

“I know. It’s not their way. But it’s kind of fun to see parents excited about stuff for once. Your mom doesn’t exactly have a stiff upper lip. It’s nice.”

I snorted. “You’ll think differently after a few years of exposure to the drama.”

Jimmy’s wide grin took over his face. “I look forward to it.”

Huh. I’d spoken about the future. Years in the future. And he’d said, ‘he looked forward to it.’ Maybe I wasn’t the only one who’d had an epiphany about our marriage. I took a deep breath. “What do you mean?”

Jimmy’s warm brown eyes twinkled at me. “I mean, I look forward to your family drama. I hope it’ll be my family drama.”

“Andi doesn’t give you enough excitement all on her own?”

Jimmy scrubbed his hands over his head. “Andi’s enough drama for anyone, but there’s room in my heart for more. I want you in my life. I want your family in my life.”

“For years to come?”

He nodded. “For years. Decades. Maybe a century if we’re lucky.”

It wasn’t a direct admission of his feelings, but it gave me hope. Hope I was too chicken to act on. Our prenup had specified a year. We’d put it in writing, and my sense of honor would hold me to it, no matter how much it hurt. I needed more time to see if he meant it. He hadn’t mentioned abandoning our agreement. Fear of failure was a helluva drug. Instead of sharing my heart, I turned it into a joke.

“Are we really lucky at that point? That sounds super-duper old. You’d be over 130. Probably hairless. Toothless.” I shuddered in mock horror. It was a lie. Jimmy was going to age well. He’d probably still be built at 130.

“If the medical science is good enough, sure. I can envision us racing around in our space chair pods. ‘Cause wheelchairs will be a thing of the past, but we’ll be so decrepit, our legs won’t work anymore.”

“Gee, you know how to give a girl something to look forward to, don’t you?”

“Speaking of things to look forward to,” his voice trailed off, but he stared steadily at me.

I shivered under his gaze.

“Yes?” Did I dare hope? His tone was serious.

“I’m looking forward to some privacy once your family leaves.”

Oh. Sex. Not feelings. Still, it was somewhere to start. I gave him my best skeptical expression. “Yeah? What are we going to do then? Watch more TV together without interruptions?”

He smiled, and I enjoyed the wicked light in his eyes. “Not exactly. Though we could check out some of those naked stations your brother’s so fond of, if you’re interested.”

“Nah, I like the real thing better,” I said with a grin.

He tilted his head, his expression warming with approval. “I can make that happen too.”

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:51 am

“Can you?”

“You doubt me? My pain is more manageable; I don’t think I’d reinjure myself playing bedroom games. Dr. Webb gave you the all-clear?” he asked.

I nodded and his smile widened. “Then I look forward to continuing this conversation at a later date.”

“Why not continue it now?” I asked playfully.

I was a maniac. A bold one. This is what Jimmy had done to me; driven me to lusty thoughts that refused to be squelched with my parents in the same house.

“I need to reinforce the locks in our room before that happens. If only one brother were here, I wouldn’t worry, but with both and your dad here, it’s a bit much. I don’t want them asking uncomfortable questions tomorrow if we get loud. Or worse, trying to break down the door to get to you, convinced I’m hurting you.”

My brows raised. “You wish. Rest assured, I’m a quiet one.”

His smile turned wicked. “Okay, then. If you think you’re so quiet, let’s play a game. It’s a grown-up version of The Quiet Game.”

My pulse raced as I stared at him steadily. I took a deep breath, reveling in the steady but fast beat of my heart. “How do we play?”

He scooted closer, whispering in my ear. “You’re very...very...quiet. No noise, in

fact. If you make a sound, I win.”

I shivered at the soft puff of his breath against my neck before whispering back. “Any sound? That doesn’t seem fair. What’s the forfeit?”

His bass rumbled softly, sending licks of fire down my spine. “Tonight? Unfortunately, that I stop. Once your family leaves, we can be as loud as we want. Until then, if you want to play, it’s got to be inaudible. Sound good?”

I nodded, and he skimmed his nose down my neck and back up to my ear. “Starting...now.”

He propped himself more comfortably on his side, his injured leg on top. His left hand traced down my body, skimming my curves before coming back up to my head, tucking my hair behind my ear with one callused finger. His gaze followed his hand, and I could feel my skin warming beneath his perusal. Heat flashed across my breasts, tightening my nipples to points. He was hardly touching me, but I shifted restlessly on the bed, ready for more. I scowled. I couldn’t tell him what I liked; not if I wanted him to continue. The ‘quiet’ part of The Quiet Game wasn’t my favorite. Luckily touching him was silent. I reached out, grabbing his wrist, and scraped his hand down my body, running it along my neck until it cupped my breast.

Jimmy took the hint. He leaned in, lifting my left breast, and stroking the nipple through my T-shirt. The warmth of his skin through the cotton teased, but it wasn’t enough. I urged his head down, and he laved my nipple through the shirt. The thin fabric slowly became transparent, revealing my dark peak beneath the material. I breathed out a short huff of breath as he nipped the tip and watched me with wicked intent. He put a finger to his lips. “Shh.”

I wanted to shush him all right. As the damp fabric cooled, I arched beneath his touch, hungry for his talented mouth. My thighs shifted under the sheets, pressing

together, and the fabric slithered against my skin, raising goose bumps. I ached to hook my leg across Jimmy's waist and pull him on top of me. I wanted the weight of his body, but I didn't want to injure him further in the process. Instead, I arched again, trying to communicate my frustration wordlessly.

He turned his attention to my other breast, and I reached for his hand again. He let his palm go lax, allowing it to be guided by my own. I dragged it slowly from my diaphragm, scraping over my ribs, to my hip bone. He smiled and used the hand as leverage to push up from my chest, returning to sip from my lips before whispering in my ear. "I want to taste you for real when I'm mobile again."

Lucky for Jimmy, that could be arranged. A rush of sticky-sweet warmth trickled to my center at the husky timbre of his words. Deep. Dark. Addictive. I maneuvered his wrist, pulling him to the juncture between my thighs, and encouraged him to press. I needed the firm weight. I did my best to give him silent tuition, and Jimmy was an excellent student. He took over the rhythm, watching me carefully for my response. My breathing quickened, and I tensed. As his speed picked up, I bit my lip and arched away from the bed. His hands were talented, but I wanted all of him. He was steadfast on his side, and it killed me not to have his weight and body moving against mine. I wanted his heat. But I didn't want him in pain.

Jimmy seemed to sense I was thinking about something other than how good his hand felt. "Pretend this is a study date," he whispered. "We have to be quiet. We only have a few minutes before someone tattles your bedroom door is closed. I don't want you to get grounded. Then we can't go out on Saturday."

I tried to picture it. Jimmy would have been a dream at seventeen. Lanky and handsome with a quick smile. I could imagine staring at him over my calculus book, losing my train of thought every time he grinned. He picked up speed as my mind traveled through the mists of time, imagining a teen version of us making out in my bedroom, exploring each other. Every forbidden stroke sent another sweet ache of

desire to my center.

His mouth lingered on mine, kissing me with teeth and tongue, exploring my mouth. The slight scrape of his stubble along my neck sent fresh shivers through me. Every muscle tightened, poised on the sharp edge of possibility. He maintained a steady rhythm, and I spared a thought for the strength and dexterity of his fingers. Video games for the win.

With a last rotation of the heel of his hand against my clit, my orgasm crashed, sending waves of release through my taut body. I couldn't hold back. I whimpered softly in relief. Jimmy kissed me thoroughly, smiling into my lips before leaning back to meet my heavy-lidded gaze. "I win."

I sank into the bed, breathing hard. I twisted my head on the pillow, seeking Jimmy in the gloom as I caught my breath. "That's debatable. I'm pretty sure I got the prize."

His deep chuckle sent fresh shivers down my spine, but when he spoke his tone was serious. "How do you feel?"

"Freaking fantastic," I reassured.

"I meant your heart."

I took a moment to breathe and assess. He was asking about my physical heart, not my emotional one. Was he ready to hear that I loved him? More time. We needed more time. I focused on my body. "Fast, but steady. I think I like this game."

His voice was deeper than usual as he responded. "Me too. I'm ready to play anytime you like."

I reached out to kiss him before running a hand down his chest toward the waistband

of his boxers. “Really?”

He clasped my fingers in his, tugging them back to his heart before they could creep lower. “Anytime but tonight,” he admitted.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:51 am

I smoothed my face to hide my disappointment. Did he not want me as much as I wanted him?

“You’re too sexy. There’s no way I can be quiet,” he said softly.

I smiled beneath his lips as he kissed me goodnight before gathering me in his arms.

Chapter 24

Melena – Family Togetherness

Mom finally managed to get me alone. I knew it was coming, and I’d been dreading it. Ever since our first call after I married Jimmy, I anticipated the reckoning. In the whirlwind of their visit, we hadn’t had any real time by ourselves. First, Mom was cooking, and everyone was meeting Jimmy yesterday. Most of today we spent exploring breweries and cideries south of Seattle. It was one hobby the whole family could enjoy when they came to visit me, and we’d debated the merits of different varieties, swapping tastes.

The men settled down in front of a college game when we got back, and I suspected my dad was asleep on the couch. The others might not be far behind. My mom had other plans for me; she’d pulled me into the kitchen and started throwing ingredients from her bag out on the counter.

“I thought we could make your great-grandmother’s oatmeal cookies this afternoon.”

I debated arguing for our own naps, but one glance at her expression ended my

protest before it began. “Sure, Mom. Sounds great.”

“You put together the wet ingredients, and I’ll do the dry. You have eggs, right?”

I nodded and worked on my assignment, creaming the eggs, oil, brown sugar, and white sugar into a soupy paste in the bowl before adding the flavoring. My great-grandmother’s recipe included a rainbow of artificial flavors; everything from almond and vanilla to orange and lemon. I measured them each carefully before dumping them in. The combination sounded weird but tasted delicious. I was looking forward to Jimmy’s face when he first bit into them.

“Jimmy seems lovely,” my mom said without glancing up from her bowl.

Opening salvo. I took a deep breath and blew it out slowly before responding. “He is.”

“At first I thought you couldn’t really be married; that it was all some kind of joke on your poor mom. But after seeing you two together, I can tell you’re in love.”

I’d barely admitted to myself that I loved Jimmy. I was not ready to admit it to anyone else. My mother believed we’d married for love. She was half right. What else could I say?

“My feelings for him grew a lot in a short amount of time.”

My mom’s eyes narrowed. “How short a time? We talk almost every week. I’d never heard of Jimmy before you married him.” Her lips turned down and she stared into the bowl of flour and oats. “Were you ashamed of your relationship with him? Or ashamed of us? Did you think we wouldn’t accept him? Why wouldn’t you tell me about him? I thought we were close.”

My stomach knotted, twisting tighter with every word. I'd screwed up. I didn't want my family believing I was ashamed of them or Jimmy. I had feared they wouldn't accept him if they knew the truth; not because of anything about Jimmy, but because they'd want to be the ones to come to my rescue. They were family, and they wouldn't see my desire for independence as anything but a rejection. Taking financial advantage of them didn't feel right, and I didn't want to move home, but it was selfish to keep my condition to myself. No one had anything to be ashamed of but me; I'd chosen secrets over love and honesty. Jimmy was right. They loved me enough to support my independence.

“Mom, I didn't marry Jimmy for love.”

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:51 am

“But I can see it in your face; you love him. He’s adorable with you. It’s clear he feels the same way.”

I wished for her confidence. I met her gaze. “I love Jimmy,” I admitted. Saying it aloud loosened something inside. My chest expanded and I breathed easier. “I love Jimmy,” I reiterated. Damn. Still felt good. “But we didn’t marry for love. I married him for his medical insurance. It’s only supposed to last a year.”

“I thought you had medical insurance. You told me you had a policy. I wouldn’t have dropped you from ours if you didn’t.”

I could hear the scold in her voice and rushed to defend myself. “I did. I do. But it’s a crappy policy. The deductible is high; too high for me to manage financially if something happens.” Her brown eyes watched me carefully as I cleared my throat and continued. “I had an episode not long after Jimmy and I met.”

“What kind of episode?” she asked carefully.

“An arrhythmia. The medication I needed was very expensive, and Jimmy offered to step in and help.”

“How are you feeling? Are you still taking the medication?”

She’d stopped to examine me, her dark eyes wrinkled in concern and a frown overtaking the usual uptilt to her lips.

“I’m fine, Mom.” I bit my lip. “I’m still taking the medication.” Technically, not a

lie. Just not the full truth. With luck, I'd discontinue the meds next month. "Jimmy's insurance has been a huge help."

My mom's expression was shrewd. "What did he get out of the deal?"

I shrugged. "Honestly? Not much. He wanted a wife to be more attractive to prospective home sellers. The housing market here is brutal. He said he would make a better candidate for promotion if his bosses thought he was settled and had a steady home life. He also wanted someone to come home to. I think he gets lonely."

Mom's smile was small, but it softened her face, deepening the fine lines around her eyes. "He's a sweet boy. You can tell he needs people around. He saw a kindred spirit in you."

"Well, his insurance was a financial lifesaver." I looked at her to see how she was taking my news. She hadn't disowned me or spit in the cookie dough, which I took as a good sign. I continued, "It was even more beneficial when I needed surgery."

"You needed surgery? And you didn't tell me?" her voice came out on a squawk and I winced.

"I'm sorry, Mom. I didn't want to worry you and Dad."

"Worry? You didn't want to worry us? Do you even know what parenting is, Melly? It's unending worry. From the moment you were conceived, we worried about you. We'll worry about you until you're dead or we are. It never stops. Did Melly get enough protein today, eating toast and mac and cheese? Will Melly ever learn to walk, or is she going to scoot around on her chubby diapered butt her entire life? Will Melly find a job she enjoys? Will Melly find someone nice to make a life with who will treat her right? We always worry. You don't save us from worry by excluding us from your life."

I held my hands up, covered in sugar grit. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I know you worry. I didn’t want to make it worse.”

“Didn’t want to make it worse? Like ‘your only daughter not telling you important news’ worse? Like ‘your only daughter could have died in a hospital without her family’ worse?”

Her eyes glistened. While I had a right to my own life, this was something I should have shared. “The surgery was a minor procedure, and successful. I’m fine now. I’m sorry, Mom.”

“And you’ll remember to tell us the important things? Just because we don’t live nearby doesn’t mean we don’t care and want to know. We want to be able to tell you we love and support you, even if there’s nothing we can do about it.”

I’d been approaching my relationship with my parents like a kid, not an adult. Just because I wanted to solve my own problems, didn’t mean I couldn’t tell them about them. I had to trust them not to take over. Their reaction to Jimmy, to my surgery, showed they were ready for the new phase of our relationship.

“I didn’t want to worry you. I’ll do better next time.”

It was her turn to hold her hands up. “Someday, maybe you’ll understand. For now, take my word for it. I’m worrying no matter what.”

I moved in for a quick hug, sugar hands and all. “I love you, Mom.”

She smiled as I pulled back, “Yeah, you do. And we love you too. How about that big, handsome husband of yours? Does he know he’s loved?”

I shrugged, unsure what to say. “It’s only supposed to be for a year. Now that I’m

better, I'm not sure how to tell him." I laughed without humor. "I told him I needed my independence. He doesn't think I need him."

"Independence means you want the freedom to choose. It doesn't mean you have to choose to be alone."

Her words struck me hard. Jimmy respected my choices. Even when he didn't agree with them. I'd been worrying he impacted my decisions. And he did. But was it a bad thing? My choices had brought me to him. To our life together. I could choose a version of independence where I was alone. But would I be happier? Having one dream didn't mean I couldn't have more. I could work toward growing my business and having a life outside it. I had the freedom to choose. Loving Jimmy didn't change that; it didn't change me. Yes, some of my choices might be driven by my desire for him, but they were my desires. Was it really freedom to avoid something I desperately wanted out of fear?

"Melly, most people don't read silence well. You've got to tell the ones you love that you love them. Doubt and confusion are not your friend. They amplify in the dark and tell you lies."

Doubt and confusion were definitely not my friends. Then why did I hang out with them so often? I loved Jimmy but doubted he felt the same for me. I was confused by his motives for marrying me, and even more confused by his motives for staying married. Maybe it was time to ask. Maybe it was time to tell him. I could keep stumbling in the dark, or flip on the light and see clearly. We were married. It was more than time for clarity. But could my heart take it if I didn't get the answers I wanted? It was time to find out.

Chapter 25

Jimmy – It's Complicated

As soon as Melena and her mother disappeared into the kitchen, I was toast. I tried to accept my fate manfully, but part of me still wanted to find an excuse to be anywhere else. We turned on the game for background, but the only one pretending to watch it was Melena's dad.

Zander landed the first question like a punch. "You didn't really sweep Melly off her feet...did you?"

Oof. We should have strategized this visit more. I didn't want to reveal anything Melena was uncomfortable with, but I also couldn't lie to my new in-laws. I planned for the long haul with Melena. Was it better to lie to her family to make her happy or come clean and preserve our long-term relationship with them? Seeing her with her family convinced me they would want to know about her medical issues, but it wasn't my story to tell.

"You don't think I could sweep a woman off her feet? Marriage is complicated, and there are lots of reasons to get married," I admitted.

Vague was a strategy, right?

Ivan gave me a sideways look from his sprawl on the couch, "You're light on facts and heavy on bullshit."

And here we go. The insults have started. I gave him my public relations smile: polite and friendly, but not reaching my eyes. “I care about your sister. I’ll protect her and keep my vows. Everything else is between us.”

The subtext was clear—they needed to butt out of Melena’s business. Zander rolled his shoulders and tried to stare me down from his position on the couch. It didn’t work. I had that shit on lock. Petty power games were part of my day-to-day world. I had to be the authority, even when I didn’t feel confident about how things would go down. Anything less could lead to innocent people getting killed. Zander and Ivan were amateurs.

I softened slightly. They were amateurs that loved their sister. This wasn’t life or death; it was love. This time I let my smile reach my eyes. “I appreciate that you’re here for Melena. I’m glad you came with your parents, even if it was just to check me out. I may not convince you today or tomorrow that I’m good enough for your sister, but I’ll grow on you.”

Melena’s dad snorted from his spot in the recliner. His gaze remained fixed on the TV, but he’d been paying attention. “We’ll see.”

I tried to focus on the game, and the other men did too. I wondered if Melena was getting similar treatment from her mother in the kitchen. “Who wants a beer?” I offered.

When I had a count, I wandered into the kitchen and paused on the threshold. Melena and her mother stood side-by-side at the island, and it was like watching a time-lapse photo. Present and future. Melena’s mother was softer and rounder, with fine lines and wrinkles from a lifetime spent outdoors and laughing. Her skin was a shade darker than Melena’s, but they shared the same hair color. She was beautiful. I wanted that lifetime with Melena. I wanted to see her gain the lines and wrinkles of a life well-lived. I smiled at them as they spooned batter onto cookie sheets.

“What are you making?”

Melena smiled up at me. “My great-grandmother’s cookies. We’ll bring some out when they’re done.”

I walked up behind her, leaning into her neck, and inhaling the scent that was uniquely Melena, combined with sugar, flour, and flavorings. “Mmm. Smells good.”

I caught the small shiver rippling down her spine and smiled. I wasn’t the only one affected. Melena leaned back against me, her hands still a sticky mess, and held them up in front of my face. “Watch it, mister. Come any closer, and I’ll cover you in cookie dough.”

“Promise?” I laughed and watched her expression light up in response as she turned to me. “I always loved the raw dough. It’s so tasty. I love to lick the spoon.”

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:51 am

Silvia turned to me and scolded, “Get out of here, you kitchen delinquent. No uncooked dough. I don’t want your first family gathering to include food poisoning. Quit copping a feel of the cook, or no cookies for you.”

I held up my hands and stepped back. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Aw, Mom. Haven’t you always said cookies taste better with a little love? He was helping me add the secret ingredient,” Melena said.

She shook her head. “You keep your sex germs off those cookies. This is Great-Grandma’s recipe. Save your sex germs for something chocolate.”

Melena laughed. “Our sex germs? Pretty sure we don’t have those.”

I wanted to groan aloud. No kidding. I really wanted some though. I tried to read her expression, see if she was thinking the same thing, but she turned back to her bowl and kept lumping dough on the pan.

Zander called from the other room. “Did you get lost in there, bro-in-law? Where’s our beer?”

Melena’s mom smiled at me. “Go back to the other boys. I promise, I don’t bite, and I won’t be too hard on her. Melena is safe with me.”

I backed away and turned to the fridge, pulling out bottles. Melena’s mom was plenty feisty. I was pretty sure she was lying about not biting. I paused at the threshold and glanced back at Melena. “You alright?”

She nodded. “We’re fine. Just having a heart-to-heart.”

I raised my brows. Did that mean what I thought it meant? She nodded and I smiled. “Good, I’m glad you’re clearing things up.”

The rest of Melena’s family visit passed with a maximum of teasing and a minimum of real conflict. After Melena told her mom about her medical condition, I worried there’d be fallout, but Silvia managed the family dynamics masterfully. I caught a few long looks from her father, but nothing more.

I wasn’t sure I’d won anyone over by the time they left. Melena’s dad remained a mystery. He’d only said about twenty words to me all weekend. I half expected him to make threats about knowing where to bury a body so it wouldn’t be found. Her brothers continued to tease Melena, and by extension me, but it wasn’t mean-spirited. I was slowly finding my way with them. Nothing was sacred, but luckily, I had Andi to prepare me for blunt siblings.

As she closed the door on her family, Melena turned her back to it and melted against the wood. “We made it.”

“They seemed nice.”

“They are nice. Most of the time. I love them dearly, and it was wonderful to visit, but I also love them dearly when they’re at home and I’m here.”

“I get that.”

Alone. We were finally alone. I looked for any sign Melena was compelled to strip naked and do unspeakable things with me, but she just smiled and suggested we

watch TV. We settled onto the couch, her feet in my lap, and I tortured myself with visions of her naked. Soft skin gleaming, breasts round and full, her panting my name as I made her climax. We were alone. Why wasn't I making a move? I looked over as she laughed at something on the screen, her face relaxed. Content. I believed she was happy, but part of me was afraid to ask and find out for sure. When had I become a coward?

On screen, ships blew up and people kissed, but it was all a blur. My leg ached, and I shifted on the couch, but it was my own thoughts that left me unsettled. I kept sneaking glances at Melena when she wasn't looking. She'd been amazing through my injury and recovery, but was that love, or duty? I couldn't handle telling her I loved her, only to have her avoid me. Or move out. Or tell me my career was too dangerous to make a long-term commitment. Sticking with the status quo beat risking what we had. I didn't want to go back to my life pre-Melena, but the more I felt alone with my feelings, the harder it was to be with her. I couldn't help wishing for more.

I stayed vigilant for any sign from Melena as we got ready for bed. We were alone. She had the all-clear from her doctor. My cast was awkward as hell, but I could manage. Her brow wrinkled, and she stared at her hands twisted in her lap. My relaxed Melena of earlier was gone, but it didn't look like it was sexual tension tying her in knots. My gut clenched. Had she realized my usefulness was over? Was she ready to reassert her independence? I thought we had more time. Was she ready to call it off after only a few months?

"Jimmy, why did you marry me? Was it truly to buy a house?" Melena asked as I maneuvered myself into bed.

I glanced at her propped up against the headboard, one golden shoulder peeking out from my shirt. Reason number 999 why I was glad I'd married her. She looked great

in my shirt. I cleared my throat. She'd given me the perfect opening. Was she feeling the strain of our marriage-not-marriage like I was? The drive for more? Or was she searching for her exit?

My gaze connected with hers. Melena's face was calm but sober. I cleared my throat again. Now or never. "It didn't hurt with the house," I acknowledged, stalling for more time. Loving her was so easy. Why was telling her so hard?

"And I was lonely," I admitted. "I didn't realize how lonely until I spent more time with you. Being with you makes me feel complete. Happy."

Her lips tilted up at the corners, "So, you wanted a roommate? Maybe one with benefits?"

She was testing me. I'd admitted she made me complete, made me happy, and she was asking if it was for the promise of sex. Sex we weren't having. Hadn't had. But I hoped to have.

"While I'm excited about the benefits, I look forward to benefits," I stressed, "I'm more excited about sharing my life with you. When we first met there was a spark, and something about you made it impossible to let you struggle if I could help. Soon I realized I wanted to do more than help; it was because I cared."

She was silent a beat. "Cared, huh. Like a puppy you rescued at the side of the road? You've got a big heart, Jimmy, are you sure you didn't just want to help?" she asked. The light dimmed in her eyes, and she made a move to turn off her bedside light. I stalled her with a hand to her shoulder.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:51 am

“Melena, no. You are not a puppy. My feelings for you are intense. Passionate. Fiery. More than a little scary. You scare me.”

She turned back toward me, her dark eyes searching. “I scare you? My big, strong firefighter with the dangerous job?”

I swallowed hard before forging ahead. “My job doesn’t endanger my heart.”

Her expression softened. “What’s scary about me?”

I laughed, running a hand over the short bristles of my hair.

“Everything.” I watched her carefully for a response. “Before I met you, I was content with my life. I looked forward to house projects and dating and moving up the ladder at work. I didn’t want or need to be more settled. I planned to live vicariously through Chase and Tamra. You changed that for me.”

Melena rubbed her chest and watched my face. “Pity isn’t a strong foundation for a relationship. Andi alluded more than once to your tendency to want to be a savior.” Her brown gaze met mine. “I don’t want to be someone you feel you have to take care of.”

I exhaled forcefully as I held up my hands. “You’re not. Everyone needs help from time to time, me included. I’ve been a royal pain through my entire recovery, and you’ve stuck with me, making every day better just by being here. Unless I’m misreading horribly, it’s not pity, is it?”

“No,” she answered softly.

“Andi’s theories are based on me dating a woman whose tire I changed and helping a friend get out of an abusive relationship who crashed on my couch for a while. I may have a track record of helping, but I didn’t ask either one to marry me.”

A small smile flirted with her lips. “You sure? You didn’t have a slip of the text message? It’s not predictive text that fills in automatically for you? I could be forgiven for thinking you throw those invitations around like confetti.”

I shook my head and asked one of the questions that had been bothering me. “How do you feel about being married to me, knowing I come with my career?”

Melena’s face sobered. “I’m not going to lie and say I haven’t thought about it. Your accident was a wake-up call.” Every word made my stomach roil. She shivered and her eyes shadowed. “The hospital is officially my least favorite place in the world.”

I nodded, even as my heart sank. “I can relate.”

The job was going to be a deal-breaker. Too much danger. Too much uncertainty. I’d have second thoughts about marrying me, and I couldn’t blame her if she wanted to end our agreement early.

I swallowed hard before forcing the words out. “I’ll understand if you want to dissolve our marriage now.”

Her hand moved to cover mine, and I looked up.

“Jimmy, that’s not what I meant.” She glanced up at the ceiling and groaned before looking back at me. “You’re going to make me say it.” She squirmed beneath the covers before her expression smoothed and her gaze met mine. Her expression

beamed sincerity. “Jimmy Torres, the waiting room was a wake-up call. Not because your job is dangerous, and you were hurt. I already knew that.”

The side of her mouth quirked up. “More than anyone, I understand that sometimes life happens and there are no guarantees. You think I wanted heart problems before thirty? If I’d had a serious episode living alone, I might have died.” Her gaze met mine. “Every moment is precious. And I want to spend mine with you.” She smiled tremulously at me. “That was the realization I had in the hospital. That I loved you. Time with you is precious. And I want all of yours. Not just a year, but all of your years.” She took a deep breath before continuing. “I wasn’t ready for a real relationship when we met. I’ve been focused on future goals and what I want to accomplish.”

“You don’t have to give that up,” I broke in. “I wouldn’t ask that of you.”

She smiled softly. “I know. I thought doing it without any help gave me an extra badge of honor, but sitting in the waiting room, you know what I realized?”

I shook my head.

“No one cares.”

I gave my head another quick shake to the negative. “That’s not true.”

She rushed on. “No, I don’t mean that no one cares about me, I mean no one cares how much I struggle on my way. It doesn’t make me any more worthy of achieving my goals. I can be strong and be in love. I can be stronger because I’m in love. More resilient. More centered. If I deprive myself of the good things in life, it won’t enhance the things I accomplish, I’ll only enjoy them less.”

I took a deep breath. She wasn’t pushing me away. Not trying to end things after my

accident.

“I love you,” she finished softly.

I couldn’t control my grin. “Even though I’ll never drive over the speed limit, and we’ll always have to leave ten minutes earlier than you want so we’re on time?”

Her lips quirked and she nodded.

“Even though your dad is half-convinced I’m going to do something terrible, and he’ll have to show up with his band saw and industrial garbage bags to take care of the evidence?”

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:51 am

Melena's giggle made my grin widen. What? I knew he was thinking it. Guys know these things. Her dad would be a stone-cold killer and clean-up man if he thought his little girl was in peril.

She scooted closer on the bed and brought her hands to my shoulders to lean in for a brief kiss. The short sweep of her lips against mine made me hungry for more, but we weren't done talking. As she broke away, she smiled reassuringly. "Jimmy, you're one of the most honorable and caring men I know. We make a good team, and I love you."

I leaned down to kiss her before leaning back when we were both breathless. My turn. I took a deep breath. Melena had been brave; I could be brave too. I'd offered her an out, and she hadn't taken it. She smiled as I pulled back far enough to watch her face.

"Melena Nemitz, you've been my light these last few weeks. You make everything better. Everything. And I love you."

She arched a dark brow. "Even sandwiches, I make sandwiches better?" she asked.

My nod was firm. "Everything."

"But you hate how much mustard I put on them."

I nodded. "Yes, but I love you."

Her smile made me want to capture it and keep it. Twenty years from now, I wanted

to remember that smile. The hope. The happiness. It mirrored my own.

Relief rushed through me. We were alone. Married. In love. Did I mention alone? Blood raced to my groin at the thought of all the ways we could get loud. Our desire wasn't a danger to Melena's health any longer. The ache in my leg retreated as endorphins flooded my system. We'd held back so long, relief and love were a heady cocktail, leaving only desire in their wake.

Melena was mine. From the top of her shiny dark head to the tips of her painted toes and all of the curves in between. My gaze met hers before hers traveled down my body. Clad in only my boxer shorts for bed, there was plenty to see. I ached to explore her soft skin. Every lush inch called to me. The hint of jasmine made my nostrils flare. Blood rushed south in tandem with her gaze, and my boxers tented before I put on a show and my erection popped out. I looked down and scratched my head before looking back into Melena's brown eyes. "Well. This is awkward."

She didn't laugh. Instead, she pushed to her knees and crawled across our bed, throwing a knee over me. Melena settled back until my erection hit the V between her thighs. Mercy. I swallowed. She maintained eye contact as she grabbed the hem of her shirt, slowly inching it up her rounded thighs, exposing golden skin that made my heart pound. The beat was answered in my dick, throbbing in time. Melena kept going, sliding her shirt higher, exposing her softly rounded belly before pulling it off overhead, and exposing the heavy breasts I loved so much. Each one tipped dark pink and soft to the touch. I wanted to touch. I'd been sitting mesmerized, watching the show. I reached out, dragging my fingers softly from the creases at her hips, to her waist, reveling in her silky softness. The dark scrap of lavender silk she still wore the only thing between us.

Melena leaned in, sliding more firmly against my erection, and I groaned as her lips captured mine. She undulated her hips, moving against me as our kiss deepened, and it was her turn to groan. My hands continued their exploration, moving up to cup her

breasts. I enjoyed the weight of each one, testing them in my hands before brushing her nipples with my fingers. Melena broke our kiss and leaned back, giving me more room to explore.

She kept up the slow rotation of her hips as I worshipped at her neck before skating my lips down her collarbone. Damn cast. I wanted to thrust against her heat, but my leg kept me immobile. Torture. I happily let Melena use me for her pleasure, thrusting to maintain steady contact. Her panties grew damp against my cock, and I reached between us, tugging the leg of her panties aside to reach her clit. I applied gentle pressure to the knot of nerve endings and watched her face carefully.

“Faster,” she murmured, before leaning in to kiss me.

Yes, ma’am. I kept up tempo as our kisses deepened, enjoying the slow slide of her tongue. Her mouth left mine as she trailed kisses down my neck, and it was all I could do to contain the throbbing and hold on at the scrape of her teeth. I rubbed faster against her slick folds until the pulse of her contractions hit, and Melena arched back before slowly relaxing forward against me. I kissed her damp forehead, and she leaned back to look at me.

“That was...”

“A small display of my video game finger dexterity and ability to rapid fire.”

Melena let out a small laugh before placing a quick kiss on my lips. “Then it’s time for me to show you my joystick skills. Flight simulators used to be my jam.”

I groaned and laughed at her pun, but her words sent a fresh rush of blood to my ‘joystick.’

“Yes, ma’am.”

She laughed and stood to strip off her panties before digging in the nightstand. She climbed back over my hips and leaned in for a kiss as she handed me the condom. “If you think I’m a great driver, wait until I make you fly,” she whispered.

Epilogue

Jimmy – Let There be Socks

I could hardly maintain my façade of calm. I'd pretended cool all through making coffee and breakfast. I'd prepared a feast: chilaquiles with homemade salsa verde. Not exactly Christmassy, but delicious. Melena and I both inhaled our breakfast after a night spent exploring each other's bodies. We'd more than worked up an appetite.

"That was amazing," Melena said as she pushed back from the table. She looked cute, long dark hair down around her shoulders and still mussed from our night together. She'd thrown on a fuzzy robe over the T-shirt she'd mostly slept in.

"Do you want to get dressed before we open presents?"

She nodded and hopped in the shower while I cleaned up our dishes. She was just stepping out in her towel when I entered our room. I traced a drop of water as it ran from her hairline, down her neck, and disappeared into towel-covered cleavage. I wanted to be that waterdrop. Tracing it with my tongue sounded like a Merry Christmas to me.

"Eyes up here, buddy."

"What? I was enjoying the view."

"I'll give you a better one." She unwrapped the towel and dropped it to the floor, and I grinned.

“Merry Christmas to me.”

Unwrapping other gifts was delayed indefinitely.

With a final groan I turned to glance at the clock. Shit. We needed to get going if we wanted to be dressed by the time Andi, Chase, and Tamra arrived. I kissed Melena’s shoulder. “Let’s get ready. I want you to open your present before the others arrive.”

Melena cracked one eye open and smiled. “I could be convinced to leave my nest for treasure.”

We slipped into clothes and Melena attacked her hair with a brush, trying to smooth the long strands. Before long we were presentable. I made us both tea and we settled on our couch in front of our little tree. Now that I could touch Melena, it was impossible to stop. I pushed a lock of hair behind her shoulder and enjoyed the warmth in her eyes that was all for me. Andi was going to roast my balls for being such a sap. Hopefully, Melena would be more forgiving. I cleared my throat. “I uh, hope you like it.”

It wasn’t like the future of our relationship depended on her response to what was in my package. Heh. Package. Maybe it was good I hadn’t said that aloud.

I moved to the hall closet and reached up to the top shelf where I’d stashed my gift. I pulled it down and turned to her with a smile. Like a genie, she’d conjured her own gift while my back was turned.

I handed her the small, wrapped box. The midnight blue paper flecked with silver and tied with a fluffy silver bow looked so delicate in her hands. “I wish I could take credit for the wrapping; they helped me at the store. I couldn’t risk you finding this

before I wrapped it.”

The temptation to keep babbling beckoned, but I held the words back, instead watching her face as she pulled the ends of the bow and ripped the paper away to reveal the white box inside. She pried the top off with her fingernails to expose my gift. Her face remained serious, and my heart tanked. She hated it. Of course, she did. It’s the kind of thing a woman wants to pick out herself. I’d fucked up, thinking Chase was a reasonable substitute. She stared at it a moment longer before looking up at me, her expression impassive.

“I think you should open yours now.”

I gulped. She hated it. She hadn’t said thank you or anything. She probably hadn’t even noticed the confetti at the bottom. Was she going to pretend it didn’t exist? I’d served my heart up in a white box, and she was going to give me socks. I knew it. I’d overshot the first married gift mark by a mile, and I was getting socks. They’d probably be novelty socks. Life was cruel like that.

The package she handed me was the right size for socks. I glanced back at Melena to see the box I’d given her lying dormant in her lap. Not. Good. Instead, I focused on the package in front of me.

She’d wrapped it in bright red paper with snowflakes. The snowflake tag had my name on it. I guess it could be worse. She could be giving me socks she’d bought for someone else. I peeled open the paper to find a blue velvet drawstring bag. So, not footwear. I must be doing something right. I loosened the strings and tipped the contents out in my hand. Oh. I looked up at Melena and smiled. It took over my face until my cheeks hurt.

“Would you like to do the honors, Mrs. Nemitz?” I held out my right hand, the gold band nestled in my palm, while I offered my left, fingers spread.

“Only if you’ll do mine, Mr. Torres.”

She reached out trembling fingers, pinching the gold band, and maneuvering it onto my ring finger. I flexed my hand, enjoying the way the band hugged my finger.

I reached my right hand into the box in her lap, plucking her ring from it. The stones sparkled and gleamed like the promise of something new. I reached for her left hand, holding it in mine for a moment as I looked at it. Melena had long, delicate fingers made strong by her work. She tried to tug them from my grasp, but I held firm.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:51 am

“Mrs. Nemitz. Will you stay married to me?” I asked, the ring poised over her finger.

She smiled. “I will.”

“Did you notice the confetti at the bottom?” I asked. “Don’t be mad. I may have been impulsive. I smuggled it out of the house to use as wrapping.”

She reached back for the box, dumping the slips of paper out and picking one up to read it. She looked up from the scraps. “Our prenup?”

I nodded and she laughed. She leaned in and kissed me, and I was lost. Relief coursed through me. Followed swiftly by joy. So much better than socks.

We broke apart and she laughed up at me, making my face hurt again from grinning wide. “I’ve got to text my mom. And Lisa.”

I glanced at the clock. “You’re going to see her in twenty minutes.”

She laughed again. “I don’t care! Plus, my mom will never forgive me if she misses out on major news again. We’re barely out of the doghouse from last time.”

I nodded. She absolutely had a point about Silvia. “Please call your mom first. We don’t need that drama.”

She laughed and got out her phone, posing her hand with my larger one to snap a picture. I leaned in to kiss her and she squealed. “Enough.”

“I can never get enough.”

Truer words. Our doorbell rang and I looked again at the clock with a groan.
“They’re early.”

Melena glanced up from her phone. “Will you let everyone in? I still need to text my mom a picture of my ring, then I can help you in the kitchen.”

I let a mock shudder loose. “Please. Don’t. If you’ll keep the beverages flowing for our guests, that’s kitchen help enough for me.”

I moved to welcome Chase and Tamra. Behind me, Melena laughed and showed me a picture her family had sent in response to hers. Her brothers and dad were clustered around a wall calendar, all pointing at circled dates. Her mom’s caption said it all.

Mom: About time. For the record, I won.

The End