



The Christmas Bet

Author: *Lynn Rhys*

Category: Erotic, Romance, New Adult

Description: Allison: This is my favorite time of year. The holiday season is upon us, and I can't wait to celebrate it. After a recent breakup with yet another guy that I just couldn't see my forever with, I plan on just focusing on getting through the holiday with those around me. Well that was the plan, until a cocky yet very handsome man came into the picture. Conner is arrogant and pushy. He cornered me into a date with him, even convincing my best friend, Lacy, that it was a good idea. But behind his very egotistical attitude, is actually a very sweet guy. There's something different about him. Something I didn't see in the other men I dated, a future. Could Conner be my forever? Is he 'the one'?

Conner: Some call me a bachelor, and some call me a playboy, but really, my life is just too complicated to be tied down. Then I walked into the bar and saw her sitting there. The beautiful blonde captivated me. But I don't do relationships and I don't fall in love. I'd never be able to give her the attention she'd deserve. I'm not the settling down type. Well, until my friends bet me that I couldn't get a woman to fall in love with me before Christmas. Of course, I had to prove them wrong. So now I have to get her to fall in love with me—and never find out about the bet.

Total Pages (Source): 34

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

Chapter 1

Allison

“What’s the body count at now?” Lacy asks as she turns in her chair away from her laptop to face me. It’s the Tuesday after Thanksgiving, the last day before December is upon us. Right before the reason for the season is in full swing.

“Body count? Really?” I cross my arms over my chest and narrow my eyes at her. I lean my hip on the frame of her office door.

Lacy Boyd has been my best friend since high school. We’re inseparable. We even made sure that we went to the same college and had the same major: Hospitality Administration. Now, we work for the same event services company, Kincaid Events.

“How fast did you run out of the restaurant this time, Allie?” she asks as she folds her arms in front of her on her desk.

I sigh, “The minute they brought dessert and I saw Dan reach into his pocket.” I run my hand through my hair. “How did you know?”

“He asked me what I thought of the ring. I told him if he wanted to continue a relationship with you then he should return it, that it wasn’t the right time. Obviously, he didn’t take my advice.”

“No, he didn’t. And it’s not that it wasn’t the right time; it never would be. I didn’t want to marry him,” I say as I walk over to the armchair in front of her desk and fall

into it. “I don’t want to just marry anybody. I want to marry the one.”

“The one. You keep bringing that up, but none of these men end up meeting your standards.” She swivels in her chair.

“Well, I would think I’d have to kiss a lot of frogs to find my prince.”

“Um, hello? Dan, Thomas, Michael—they all were great guys. They could’ve been your prince.” She pulls her brow together.

She might be on to something with the body count. The three guys she named were only a couple in the handful that have wanted more. Whether it was kids or marriage, they always wanted more. And that’s not something I want to give to just anyone.

Love is magical; love should be like a dream. There should be sparks and flames, an undying need for each other. My soul should need his, my body reacting to his very presence, and my heart should beat for no one but him. I should know without a doubt that the man I marry is the one I want to spend the rest of my life with.

None of these men made me feel anything but just happy for a moment in time.

Lacy makes fun of my body count, but I know that I have to go through all the wrong ones until I get to the right one. Hopefully, sooner rather than later. A lot sooner, because I’m on my way to becoming a cat lady at the ripe old age of thirty-two.

And I know my outlook on love is made up of magic and fairy tales, but it’s what my parents had when they were alive. They loved each other so much, and the only thing they loved more than each other was me. They had their moments, they fought, they cried, but they loved with such passion. Love always won. No matter the situation, they shook it off and love fixed it all. I want that magical love. Sure, I’m being cynical now by throwing out men left and right that see a future with me, but I can’t

see one with them. I refuse to settle.

“I want kids, and I want marriage, but only with the right man. These guys were not the right one, they were only for right now,” I say softly.

“Then why bother dating at all?” Lacy stands up from her desk bending over it, her eyes narrowing.

“Because you have to go through the ones that aren’t right so you can find Mr. Right,” I retort with a shrug.

“That seems like a lot of unneeded work. Look, just hook up with guys, give them a fake ass number, and move on to the next. It’s so much easier.” She laughs.

“Why don’t I just charge them a fee to be with me for the night?” I deadpan.

“Hmm. Yeah, I think prostitution is illegal in New York, but feel free if that’s your prerogative. Just don’t get caught. I can’t afford the bail.” Her lips curl upwards.

“Shut up!” I throw a pad of sticky notes at her, and we both break out into laughter.

“You want to go shopping? I need to get out of this office for lunch, and I still have some Christmas shopping to get done.” She bends down to her desk drawer, fishing out her purse.

I stand up and cross my arms over my chest, making my way towards the door. “Christmas is like four weeks away. You have time.”

“Listen, Scrooge, some of us like to get things done early, not wait until the last minute,” she says as we walk out the door, grabbing her coat before we leave her office.

“First, you know damn well this is my favorite time of year. Second, shopping at last minute with the rush of last-minute shoppers makes it fun!” I smile and head towards my office to grab my jacket and purse.

“You really are crazy, you know that?” Lacy laughs.

“Yeah, I’m your bestie. I have to be.” I stick my tongue out at her as I walk out from my office to meet her.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

We head out our plaza on 6th and 45th street in New York City and head down 45th to shop.

The air is crisp, and temperatures are still mild right now as we start to dip into the forties for our daily high. As we start to close out November, with Thanksgiving just being last weekend, the streets are filled with holiday shoppers. Decorations are quickly coming out of their storage containers and are now strewn about everywhere.

Christmas lights wrap around windows, and displays are adorned with ornaments and trees. Some shops even stack menorahs and dreidel alongside their products. I can smell the chestnuts being roasted by street vendors and hear the holiday music coming from stores as doors open.

This truly is my favorite time of year.

“Where we headed?” I turn my head to Lacy as we walk down the sidewalk.

“The Disney Store up ahead. I need to get my niece Becca a Frozen doll or something.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Or something?”

“Yeah, she’s into this princess thing these days. My sister said that the Frozen movie has been playing nonstop in her house for months now.” She smiles. “So, why not add to it?”

“You truly are evil. Wait until you have kids; you know she’ll get you back.” I

chuckle.

Her lip curls up as her eyes narrow. “Hm, if I have kids. That’s still up in the air. I want you to go through it first so I can make sure it’s what I want.”

“Oh, thanks! Except there’s a small problem with your logic on that one,” I say as we head into the store.

“Yeah? What’s the flaw?” We head towards the Frozen section of the store. From the minute you walk through the front doors of the store, you are transported into a Disney Wonderland. Televisions are placed along every wall, playing the Disney movie of the hour. Walls are stuffed full of toys and memorabilia from movies and shows. Clothes on tables and racks are spread throughout. Kids are running from wall to wall with huge smiles on their faces as they try and get their parents to buy whatever it is that they found.

I stop and turn towards her, my smile widening. “I would need to find Mr. Right and get married first. And it doesn’t look like that’s happening anytime soon.”

Chapter 2

Conner

“Dude, are we on for drinks tonight?” My best friend Roland Thompson calls out from his office as I walk by.

I stop and head backwards towards his office. “Yeah, we are. The usual place?”

“Yup. I texted Tommy and Jack to let them know too.” Roland points to his phone sitting on his desk.

Roland and I have been best friends since middle school. We met Tommy and Jack in high school when they both moved to New York during their sophomore year. All four of us have been close and like brothers to each other.

I was Roland's best man at his wedding and stood beside Jack when he married his wife a couple years ago. Tommy is engaged to get married sometime next year. He hasn't asked any of us to be groomsmen, but it's pretty much a given.

Me? Single as they come. My life is too complicated for me to be tied down to someone. I would never be able to give them the attention they need. My job keeps me busy, and my work hours are insane. I'm essentially married to my job.

My one-night stands work much better for everyone around. I can focus on a woman for the night, and then we go our separate ways. No commitment, no ties, no worry about letting someone down.

I'm a lawyer here in New York City, and I live and breathe my job. Roland and I went to Harvard Law and came out with offers from the same firm. We worked hard to get where we are now, and I am so close to making partner at the firm. Everything I do is one step closer to that goal of making partner here.

Again, I have life goals, and being married or tied down just proves too problematic in my scenario.

"So, six?" I pull out my phone and see it's already past two. "Shit, I have a meeting at the courthouse in an hour."

"With Judge Withers?" Roland asks.

"Yeah, had some issues in court the other day with some things that came up over the medical malpractice suit. Good thing this doctor is paying top dollar for his attorney

because with the bullshit he's pulled, I'm going to rake him over the coals." I shake my head.

"That bad?"

"This guy cuts corners at every turn. Got so many people sick and injured. I'd never want him as a doctor and hopefully when I'm done, he won't ever work on a single person ever again in this lifetime." I grin.

Roland groans, "You need some more pro-bono work to offset these asshole cases."

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

I chuckle. “If I take on any more pro-bono work, I won’t sleep. Besides, all the pro-bono work really won’t get me partner here. I want my name on that door, on the wall when you walk into this office. Benson, Goldberg and Dawson Law Office. Assholes like our good friend Dr. Martin will get me on that wall.” I turn on my heel and head back towards my office. I need to get myself over to the courthouse and see what problems have arisen for my client now.

* * *

Late as usual, I stroll up to the Legends Ale House on 26th Street. ’Tis the season of lights and shit, with people hustling everywhere to find the “it” toy or that gift that they hope will get them back in someone’s good graces. The holiday is no longer about just being with the ones you love and helping those less fortunate. It’s about greed. Things have changed so much since I was a kid. I never cared about the hot new toy or opening gifts on Christmas Day. It was about family, being with those that I loved. Baking cookies together, helping to put up the decorations and the tree. I remember when my mom would read me a story by the fireplace as we drank hot chocolate. I let out a sigh and shake my head as I watch people walk right past me as I stride up to the doors. Greed.

Legends is our go-to. We’re here at least a couple times a week. It has copper ceiling accents, a very sleek granite bar, and the ambiance is very relaxing. And of course, they’ve already started dressing the bar up for the upcoming holidays with small Christmas trees in the corners on the room.

As I make my way over to our usual table in the corner of the bar, I suddenly come to a stop when I notice two women sitting at the bar. The blonde woman is absolutely

beautiful. Her long hair is swept to the side. Her makeup is light, her natural beauty showing through. Her sweater hangs off her shoulder, letting me see her beautiful neck. She has a hint of color on her lips that I want to kiss off. Damn, she's mesmerizing.

Fuck. I try to ignore the fact that I'm now sporting a semi. Shifting and trying to adjust myself without the use of my hands, I quickly turn away and focus on my destination. The guys at the table.

"Hey, you okay there?" Jack says to me, giving my back a slight slap once I walk up.

"Yeah, I, uh, just thought I saw someone I knew. I was wrong." I frown, taking the stool against the wall next to Tommy and across from Roland.

"What took you so long?" Roland takes a pull from his beer.

"Work. You should try it sometime," I tease him.

His mouth forms an "O" as he acts all offended. "Dude, I do work. But I have what's called 'work-life balance'. You should try it sometime. It might help you remove the stick from your ass." Roland laughs.

I take a beer from the bucket and twist off the top. "Yeah, whatever." I put the cold brew to my lips and take a long swig, letting the hoppy goodness quench my thirst.

"When are you going to settle down? It's about time, don't you think?" Tommy turns his head towards me.

"It's time when I say it is. And it's not time." I lift my shoulders and scope out the bar, spotting the blonde beauty again. My stomach does little flips as I watch her. I look away before anyone catches me staring for too long.

Roland shakes his head, “What are you scared of? Spending time with someone longer than a night? Getting to know that person and falling in love?”

“Did you ladies want to go get some pedicures? Go purse shopping? I have these new shoes I want to wear tonight,” I taunt, shaking my head. “You’re all pussy-whipped. And jealous that I can get different pussy when I want.”

“No, bro. We can actually hold onto good pussy.” Jack laughs.

“I can keep a woman if I want to. I just don’t want to.”

Jack shakes his head, snorting. “No, you can’t.”

“Betcha I can.”

“Oh, are we turning this into a bet? I’m down. What’s the wager?” Tommy shifts excitedly in his seat. I groan internally. Great. Me and my big mouth. But here we go.

“First, we need to know the bet.” I motion for him to calm down.

Roland taps the beer bottle in front of him as he thinks. “Okay, got it.” Everyone leans towards him on pins and needles. “Get a woman to fall in love with you by Christmas—”

“I can get any woman to fall in love with me. Most do just after one night,” I deadpan.

Roland pulls his brows together. “Let me finish. Make her fall in love with you and get her to marry you or want to marry you.”

I can hear the blood pumping through my ears. Love is one thing, but marriage? “I

don't know about this. That ... that wouldn't be a nice thing to do. That's not right. Someone will get hurt. That's using someone. I don't know if I can do that."

"The lawyer with a conscience? Wow, never thought I would see the day." Jack slaps the table and laughs out loud. "You don't have to actually marry her. You can call it off down the road. Go your separate ways." I shoot Jack a 'shut the fuck up' look.

"What are you afraid of, Conner? Actually falling in love?" Roland taunts.

"I wouldn't fall in love," I sigh. I run my hand over my face. In every part of me, I feel like this is going to end in disaster. My stomach tightens; this is such a bad fucking idea. But I never back down from a bet. Never. "Fine. What's the wager?"

"My 1969 Mustang Mach 1." Roland tips back his beer and takes a long swig. Fuck, I love that car. That machine. It's in fucking pristine condition. It's been in his family from the time that they bought it all those years ago. It's his most prized possession. One I have always wanted.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

“And if I don’t get her to say yes?”

“You move to the cubical farm and your office becomes the intern of the month’s office.” Roland laughs.

I nearly cringe. “So, I would be working with the interns.”

“Or you could win and have my treasured Mustang and keep your office. I mean, none of this is a issue because, as you said, women fall in love with you no problem.” Roland shrugs.

The other two are completely silent, waiting to see if I take this bet or not. I look over at the bar, back to the blonde beauty. “Fine, but I get to pick the woman.”

“Absolutely,” Roland agrees.

“Deal,” I choke out, and the guys cheer. I groan and run my hand through my hair. Pushing back from the table, I get up out of my seat and start to leave.

“Where are you going?” Tommy asks.

“To go get my lucky lady.” With that I ignore any other comments from them. Heading towards the bar, I find where the blonde is sitting and make my way over. As I get closer, I can feel the twisting in my gut telling me to back out. This will not end well. I’m using someone for my own gain. This really has fucked up written all over it. I can’t believe I’m agreeing to this.

What if things just happen to not work out after we “fall in love”? I mean, I’ve parted with women before. I’m a pro at talking myself out of situations. My head is starting to pound against my skull. Our bets have never been this brazen, and I don’t know why they are now. No one has ever turned down a bet, and I won’t be the first to do so. Fuck.

I come up behind her, and she smells like a bouquet of flowers. My dick stirs in my pants, obviously turned on by her scent. Sensing my presence, she turns towards me and looks up at me with the most beautiful sky-blue eyes.

I take a deep breath and center myself.

“Hello.”

Chapter 3

Allison

“Hello,” the man who snuck up behind me says.

For a moment, I stare at him. He’s really handsome. His dark hair slicked back, and he has a clean-shaven face that shows off his sharp jawline. The man has broad shoulders and is very nicely dressed in a grey suit with a black button-down shirt underneath. He looks like Wall Street.

I stare at him and reach for my bloody Mary. I take a sip as we just hold each other’s gazes. He clears his throat.

“So, usually when someone says hello, the other person follows it up with a greeting of their own.” The man leans his hip against the bar.

“Oh? Is that how that works?” I turn my stool to face him and cross my hands over my chest, now giving him my full attention.

“Yes, actually, it is. I say hello, you say something along the lines of, ‘Why hello, handsome. What’s your name?’”

I bust out laughing at his reply. “Handsome? So, I introduce myself while stroking your ego?” I can hear Lacy snickering behind me.

“Well, if you wanted, you could be nice and stroke my—”

“Oh my god!” I throw my hands up in front of me. “Don’t even say what you’re gonna say!”

“What? Say that you could be nice and stroke my ego by telling me your name? What did you think I was going to say?” His lips curl up, and there’s a mischievous glint in his eyes.

“Fine. Hi. How are you? My name is Allison. Have a nice day,” I say in a robotic tone.

He holds out his hand for me to shake. “Nice to meet you, Allison. I’m Conner.”

I roll my eyes at the gesture, but I reach out and put my hand in his anyway. The minute I touch his skin, every nerve ending in my body comes alive from the surge of electricity between us. I gasp and look up at him. If he felt it too, he is really good at hiding it. I drop his hand as if it’s on fire and I rub my hand slowly on my legs.

“So, can I buy you a drink?” Conner pulls up the chair next to me and sits down. Our knees touch, and I try to ignore the heat from our contact. Why do I feel like I’m going to combust whenever he touches me?

“Well, I sort of have one.” I hold up my glass, trying to focus on the objective and not my nerves. Objective: get this man away from me. “And I’m here with my friend Lacy.” I lean back, and Lacy leans forward, giving him a polite smile and wave.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

“Actually, I wasn’t talking about now. I was hoping I could buy you a drink Friday night. Take you out.” Conner’s lip curls up in a slight smile.

Before I can answer, Lacy butts in, “She would love to.”

I swivel in my chair to face her. “Lacy—”

“Nope. Shush. The grownups are talking.” Lacy shoots me a look that has me zipping my lips. Though, when this is over, she and I are going to have words. “Where shall she meet you?” Shall? Who the hell is this woman, and what happened to Lacy? I widen my eyes and look at her like she has two heads.

I mouth to her, “What are you doing?” My chair suddenly turns and I’m facing Conner again. His hand is on the back of my chair as he leans slightly towards me. Oh my god, he smells good. Like a fucking goddamn forest. I try not to let it show that I’m practically drawn to him just by scent alone. Let’s not bring up how hot I was from simply touching him. Shit, I just brought it up.

“The Bar inside the Baccarat Hotel. Seven,” he says, interrupting my thoughts while looking straight at me.

I shake my head. “Wait, no, I didn’t—”

“See you there, Allison.” Conner places a hand on my arm, causing me to lose all logical thought. With my mouth wide open and my heart beating out of my chest, I watch him walk away before gathering myself and turning to my supposed best friend.

“What the hell was that, Lacy?” I throw my hand up dramatically because that’s all I can do at this moment while my entire brain restarts. Yeah, the man shut my entire brain down with his manly man scent and his good looks. Damn him.

She shrugs. “What? He was hot.” She’s not wrong. He was. But still, agreeing for me to go on a date with a complete stranger was wrong.

“Lace, I don’t know him. He could be like a serial killer or something. I mean, to just come up to me and ask me out? Who the hell knows who you just set me up with!”

She nods. “You’re right. How creepy for a guy to come up to a beautiful woman at a bar and ask her out. Never in the history of dating has that been done, and he’s totally a serial killer type just for that reason.” She shakes her head and knocks back the shot of tequila in front of her. “Sometimes, you just need some dirty sex with a stud muffin. And that man is not only the stud of all stud muffins, he looks like he’s all sorts of dirty in the bedroom. He looks like he knows his way around the vagina without a compass.”

I immediately shoot her a look, my eyes wide open and my mouth agape. “Lace! Oh my god. We’re in public!”

She just shrugs at me like she could care less that she just said that out loud. But she’s not wrong, I do need some good dirty sex. Just sex. A drink and sex. And if it happens to be with an Adonis like Conner, that might not be such a bad thing. He was a bit cocky, but again, just a drink and some good dick. It’s been a while since I had a good time in bed. Dan was pretty lack luster in the bedroom. Nice looking guy, total sweetheart, but really nothing to write home about with the sex.

“Yeah, dirty sex doesn’t sound so bad. But looks can be deceiving. He might be hot as fuck, but he could completely suck in the sack.” I pick up my drink and take a sip.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand up, and I feel like I'm being watched. I glance up from my drink and my eyes meet his. A chill runs down my spine when I notice the intense look he gives me. Dirty sex. The look in his eyes is primal, like he wants to eat me from the inside out. Not that I would mind.

I force my gaze away and back to my drink.

"Well, he's taking you to The Bar. That's a really nice place." Lacy turns to me and takes my hand. I look up and stare at her. "You deserve a nice, simple date with no expectation of a future. Like you said, sometimes you have to date the Mr. Wrongs to find your Mr. Right. Well, drink with that Mr. Wrong and get one step closer to your Mr. Right."

Over my head, Michael Bublé plays above me. The notes of "It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas" start to come over the speakers. I look around the bar and see the lights and decor that signal the beginning of the season hang around me. It softens me a bit.

"All right, one drink won't hurt. He's attractive and a bit cocky but very nice to look at, nonetheless. So, I guess one little drink won't hurt. That's all it's going to be. Nothing more."

What I don't tell her is how I felt from his touch. How different that was, the hot feel of his skin on mine. I look back over at the table and see that him and his friends are gone. A small part inside of me is a little disappointed that I don't have his eyes locked on me anymore. Another part of me is relieved that I can breathe without feeling the heat from his attention burning into me.

Something inside me is telling me that this won't end like I expect it to. And I don't know if that's good or bad.

Chapter 4

Allison

As I stand in front of the full-length mirror of my very awesome apartment, I do a once over just to make sure I look presentable enough for a good night of drinks and dirty sex. That's all this is, nothing more. I head back into the living area of my home to put on the final touches to my look.

I love this place. It was a total score, and it's right outside Central Park. It's not giant by any means, but it is six hundred square feet of space that I call my own. It's a studio apartment that has a full-size kitchen, full bathroom, and plenty of space for not only a bed but also a couch and a table for me to eat at. Oh, and did I mention it has three closets? Yeah, three giant closets all for me. That alone is worth my rent.

There were probably a hundred outfit changes before I finally settled on my outfit for tonight. The little black dress can never be wrong. Though, this one is very conservative for the occasion, and I'm wearing it for that reason. While the skirt comes a few inches above my knees and flares just a tiny bit, the top of the dress has a round neckline, and the sleeves are sheer lace that give the dress some drama. This dress shows no cleavage, there's no clinging to every curve; this is simply a dress that will look nice and not have him ogling me the entire night.

Drinks and sex, that's it. I don't need him hanging all over me, trying to butter me up. He's going to get laid, so there is nothing else he needs to do other than buy me that drink. Then it's a wham, bam, and get out. Simple and to the point, and we'll see if he knows his way around a vagina, as Lacy put it. I shake my head and chuckle at her words.

I throw on my black heels and grab my purse off the couch, checking to make sure I have everything I need. My stomach twists with nerves, and I have no idea why I'm

feeling this way. Maybe it's because somehow, I was talked into going on this date with him by not only him but my best friend. I need to make a note that she gets coal in her stocking this year. A lot of coal.

The Baccarat Hotel isn't far from my apartment, and I'm honestly thankful he chose that as the location to try and sweep me off my feet. If things go south, it's a hop, skip and jump away from home. I make my way out of the lobby area in my apartment building and head outside to flag down a taxi.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

When a taxi pulls up, I give him the hotel name and pull out my phone. Shit. It's already seven. Nothing like being late for a 'date'. Of course, I never even got his number. I'm just taking the chance and actually meeting him at the hotel. For all I know, he could stand me up, and I wouldn't even be angry over it.

Once outside the hotel, I pay the driver and scoot out of the back seat. As the cool air hits my skin, I smooth out the skirt of my dress and look at the time. Quarter past seven. Okay, not too late.

As I make my way through the public spaces of the hotel, White Christmas by Nat King Cole plays, giving my heart a little flutter for the love I have for this season. I'm not ashamed to admit I have the Christmas stations playing on my satellite radio at the office or that the Hallmark Channel is always on at my apartment when I'm home. I'm a sucker for a good romance story. Add it the Christmas element and you have my full attention.

I smile and hum along with the song as I find my way to The Bar, which is adjacent to the Grand Saloon. This place is absolutely stunning.

The Bar is a long narrow bar that has French flair with plush red velvet walls. Large chandeliers hang high above the tables and chairs, and a checkerboard black and white floor add to the opulence of the space.

I spot Conner along the wall across from the bar sitting at a small table. Well, he stayed and waited, even though I was late. He sits across from a bench along the wall in a white leather chair. Walking over, I take slow deep breaths and just hope that this will be over fast. Drinks, dirty sex.

Part of me feels really guilty for thinking that. The other part of me is wildly excited about it. Internally, I groan. I really am a confusing person.

When I come up next to him, he looks up and immediately stands up. “Hi, Conner. Sorry I’m late.” I clutch my purse and give him a soft smile.

“Allison.” He places both hands in his pockets, his lips turn up slightly. “No worries. I’m just glad you’re here. Please sit.” He takes his hand out and gestures to the bench, then lets me get settled before shifting his chair closer to me around the table and sitting down.

“Thank you,” I say softly.

“What would you like to drink?” Conner asks as he motions one of the servers over.

“A merlot, please.”

He nods. Once the server makes his way over, Conner gives him my order. “She will have a glass of your merlot, Chateau Pabus, and I will take another Baccarat G and T please.”

“Absolutely, sir. I’ll be right back with those.” The server smiles and takes off towards the bar.

Conner turns back to me. “So, Allison, how have you been?”

I clear my throat. “What, you mean since you and my best friend ganged up on me to get me here tonight? Just fine, thank you.” Was I a bit snarky? Yeah. Just a little.

He lets out a chuckle. “You didn’t have to show, you know. You could’ve gone about your Friday night while I sat here drinking alone.”

“Well, that’s not who I am. So, I’m here. Tell me, why me? Why not anyone else in the bar?”

Conner shrugs. “Honestly, you caught my attention the minute I stepped foot into that bar. Your smile, your beauty, it stopped me dead in my tracks.”

“There were plenty of beautiful women in that bar,” I counter.

“None that I saw. All I could see was your radiance. Just you. So, I had to take a shot. I had to at least try.”

I bite my lip and look down at my hands. That was actually sweet. He was laying it on thick, but it was sweet nonetheless. And now I feel even worse for being a bit of a bitch. “Look, I think we may have started off on the wrong foot. Can we start over?” I look up at him, and my eyes meet his.

“Actually, I would really like that,” he replies as our drinks are set in front of us.

When the server leaves, I pick up my glass and hold it in front of me. “To do-overs.”

“To do-overs.”

We clink glasses and each take a sip. The velvety wine hits my tongue. Intense notes of cherry, pepper, and oak hit me all at once. I close my eyes and savor the taste. I open them to see Conner studying me.

“This merlot is good.” I place the glass down in front of me. Then I lean back and cross my legs together. Conner is tilted forward with his arms on the table, his drink in one hand as he continues to stare at me.

“So, Allison, what is it that you do for a living?” He sits back in his chair.

“Well, I’m an event planner here in the city. Conventions, trade shows, meetings, things like that. What about you?”

He smiles. “Lawyer. Currently working to become a partner with the firm I work for.”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

My eyebrows shoot upwards. “Lawyer. That explains the Wall Street look. Impressive. So, you must be pretty busy.” I lean forward, picking up my glass and taking another sip of the wine.

“Yeah, at times I am.”

A silence falls over our table, and neither of us seem sure where to take the conversation from there. The air feels thicker, making it almost hard to breathe. The once nicely sized bar suddenly feels smaller. I can’t do this. This wasn’t my idea, I’m just not comfortable being here. My nerves start to get the better of me, and I tip back the rest of my wine in my glass. Conner looks at me confused, his mouth slightly agape.

I quickly stand up. “You know, this was nice and thank you. But I really should go.” Before he can respond, I make a beeline for the exit.

When I finally reach the street, I take a deep breath try to calm myself. Placing my hand over my heart, I will it to slow down. This was just too weird. The whole thing just seems off. Not him. He seems like a nice guy, but all of this just was too much for me to deal with.

At least I can say I came, I saw, and I left. I didn’t get laid, but that’s why I have a vibrator. Well, a few vibrators. Still, I can handle my own vajayjay.

I turn and look back at the hotel and sigh. Being around Conner did things to me that I have never experienced before. My body felt warm in his presence, my stomach twisted, and even my brain didn’t want to get on board and come up with words for

conversation. I can't function like that.

He's an attractive man that could spell trouble for me. Look at what he has already done just to get me to come here tonight. I'm sure he's a nice guy on a normal day, but today is not the day I find out.

I walk down the sidewalk and start to flag down a taxi when I hear someone come up behind me.

"Allison, please wait."

Shit.

Chapter 5

Conner

Well, I fucked that up royally. Under all that sass is a sweetheart. I tip my head back and stare up at the ceiling. What the hell do I do now? I went about this all wrong. I was pushy and arrogant; I fucking steam rolled her into this date. I run my hands over my face and let out a sigh. She didn't deserve this. If I'm being honest with myself, she doesn't deserve the end result of all this either. Fuck, I'm an asshole.

I need to fix this.

I push up from the table and drop a couple hundred bucks to cover our bill before heading out the bar. Quickly, I push past people and run out the front door of the hotel. I see her starting to walk towards a taxi, and I take off running towards her. I slow once I get close.

"Allison, please wait." I see her body freeze, her shoulders stiffen. Slowly, she turns,

her beautiful blue eyes widening at the sight of me. “Look, I need to apologize.”

She looks down before saying softly, “For?”

“Hey, lady, are ya gonna to get in or what?” the cab driver yells from the front seat window. I wave him off and face her again.

“For being pushy.” She looks up at me, waiting on whatever I have to say next. So, I need to make sure it’s good. “I’m sorry. The way I got you to come out here tonight, I ... it was wrong of me. I kind of forced you into this date. I’m so sorry.”

Allison nods. “Okay, well, thank you for apologizing.”

“Let me make it up to you. A do-over of a do-over.” I waggle my eyebrows and then smile at her.

“Is that a thing? A do-over of a do-over? Plus, I don’t really want to go back in there for a drink.” She wraps her arms around herself and looks around.

“Yup, I just made it a thing. This is a do-over of a do-over. So, no drinks.” I pause to think for a moment. “How about we go for a walk? It’s a nice night. We could just take a stroll.”

“Um, well, I live right across from Central Park a few blocks from here. How about a compromise. We can take a stroll as long as it’s you walking me home?”

That’s not exactly what I envisioned, but it’s an inch. I’ll take that inch. “Sure. Let me be a gentleman and walk you home.”

I hold out my arm, and she hesitates before reaching up and hooking her arm in mine. The wind blows some of her hair towards me, and I catch the scent of her floral

perfume. I make a mental note to figure out what it is because holy hell does she smell amazing. I swallow and try to keep my composure.

She starts to lead us west down 53rd Street. It's packed with cars, taxi horns blaring and drivers yelling out their windows. I focus on the sound of her shoes clicking along the pavement.

“So, tell me about yourself. What is it that you like to do in your spare time?” I ask, wondering if I will get anything out of her tonight after such an awkward date.

She laughs. “Why don't you just ask me what my favorite color is?”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

“Well, that was actually my next question, so feel free to answer it anyway.”

Her eyebrows shoot up. “Wow, so smooth. You always have an answer for anything, don’t you.” She smiles up at me.

I shrug. “Comes with the territory. Lawyer and all. But I do believe I asked you a question.”

“Wow, still can’t stop being pushy. Seems you are an excellent lawyer.” She looks at me, then back at the path in front of us. We turn and cross onto 6th Avenue, making our way towards Central Park. “Well, let’s see. In my spare time, I like to hang out with friends and go to karaoke bars. But when I’m not doing that, I love to read.”

“Oh, so a reader? What kind of books do you read?” I raise my eyebrows at her.

“The smutty kind.” She chuckles.

I shake my head, wondering if I heard her right. “I’m sorry, what? The smutty kind?”

“Yeah. You know the romance books with the sexy stuff in them. You have the hunk of a book boyfriend that has it bad for the woman in the book. They do all sorts of sexy things together and then live happily ever after.” Allison smiles. “Also, my favorite color is purple. Oh, and blue. Well, I really like red too ...”

“So, what you’re saying is you don’t have one favorite color, but you love them all.”

She crinkles her nose, “Um, yeah. Guess I do.”

“So, no room in that reading schedule for dates then?”

“Well, I’m here, aren’t I?” she bites back.

“Touché.” I laugh, and we fall silent for a block until I break it. “Does your family live out here?”

She doesn’t respond right away. “I only had my parents, and they passed away when I was eighteen.”

“Wow. I’m sorry.” I’m really racking up the wins on this one. I clear my throat and try to change the subject. “Look, I really am sorry. Despite the back and forth, you really are a beautiful woman who I’m thanking my lucky stars actually came out tonight for a date.” Despite my ass of a way of getting her here, but I leave that out.

“It’s all right. I needed to get out. It’s been a bad couple of weeks. So, I actually owe you a thank you.” The corners of her mouth turn down.

“What happened?”

She shakes her head. “It’s not important. But I do have a question for you. Did you always want to become a lawyer? When little Conner was running around the house, was he playing lawyer instead of cops and robbers?” Her lips turn up slightly, but her eyes stay glued to the ground ahead.

“No, actually. When I was little, I wanted to be a police officer.” I always wanted to make sure people got justice. I wanted to protect people, save the good from the bad. It’s always been in my blood, something that was taught to me at such a young age.

“What changed your mind?” Allison looks up at me, her brows pulling together.

I grip her arm a little tighter against mine for a moment. This is never an easy thing to talk about. I let out a sigh. “My father was a cop. When I was sixteen, he was killed in the line of duty.”

Allison gasps, “Oh, I’m so sorry, Conner.”

“He was just sitting in his car when someone came up and opened fire on him.” I pause for a moment. She pulls herself closer to me, and I can see the emotion locked on her face. “They arrested a guy, but he was later found innocent and that it was a case of mistaken identity. So, his killer was never caught, and a man’s life was ruined because of some horrible lawyer who was given to him by the state. There was no one to actually defend this guy. No one who gave a damn other than just blaming someone for my father’s death. So, in the process, two lives were ruined.”

“That’s when you decided to become a lawyer?”

“Yeah. After a year of this man’s life being dragged through the mud, I knew ... I knew I needed to protect people like him.” I take a deep breath as I continue. “So, now I do. It may not be the way my father protected people, but I still get people justice.” I shrug. “I take on some cases of people that may not be able to afford a good lawyer. Pro bono work. It’s my way of fighting for what’s right.”

I look down at her as she looks up at me. She glances away, pushing the hair away that the wind blew into her face.

“I’m sorry you lost your father,” she says quietly.

I grip her arm tighter and nod. Around us carolers are already out and singing Christmas carols. I can hear Santas along the road ringing their bells as we continue down the sidewalk.

“It was a long time ago. And I think he would be proud of what I’ve become since then. But let’s change this topic. So, you read smut.” I curl my lips up and give her a sidelong look.

She throws her head back and laughs. “Of course you remember that.” We stop at the crosswalk and turn down Central Park. “My building’s right here.” She points to the building on our left after we cross. “Um, would you like to come up for a little bit? I have some beer or wine.”

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

I think about it for a moment. This would be good for me to get to know her more, learn more about what makes her tick. I look around us as we stand on the sidewalk in front of the building. This could help put us back on a path to me actually pulling this bet off.

But the thought turns my stomach. I hate myself for this. I should just call this whole thing off. Be the decent human I just told her I was, not the asshole who will eventually break her heart.

“Sure. I’d love a beer.” I nod and give her a smile. There’s a part of me that is happy she’s inviting me up, but the other part of me is sending out the red flags that I’m about to make a huge mistake.

Obviously, I ignore the warning.

Chapter 6

Allison

Awesome. And I mean that in the most non-awesome way. I can’t believe he’s actually coming up to my apartment. When I asked him, I was trying to be nice, but I thought he would turn it down. We haven’t exactly had the best start. But he said yes, and now he’s here, standing in the middle of my apartment.

“Wow, this is a nice place. And you have a great view too,” Conner says as he looks around.

“Yeah, it was definitely a lucky find. It’s one of the reasons I haven’t moved. This is a beautiful building, I have a shit ton of closet space, and the view of Central Park is an added bonus. So, beer?”

“Yes, please.” His hands find his pockets as he continues to look around.

I head into the kitchen, taking a deep breath as I cross the threshold. He’s here in my apartment.

Why did you invite him up?

Because of the whole dirty sex thing. Well, that was before. This is now, and he genuinely seems sorry about the whole thing. And he’s not that bad of a guy. He’s actually quite sweet when he’s not conspiring with my best friend to take me on a date. I open up the fridge and take out a couple of Torpedo Extra IPA bottles. I pop the tops on the bottle opener over the trash can and take a very deep breath before I head back to the living area.

I find him sitting on my couch holding my copy of *Enter the Black Oak* by Monique Edenwood. He’s reading the back of the book, smiling and chuckling to himself. He flips through the pages and must come across one of her spicy scenes when he shifts uncomfortably and clears his throat.

“Doing okay there?” I ask as I come up to the couch and set the beer in front of him. Sitting down next to him, I take a sip of the IPA and taste the pine and citrus ale as it hits my tongue. I study him as he places the book on the table and grabs hold of his beer.

“Not at all. You really do like your books. Your bookshelf is stocked to the brim. You may need a bigger one,” he replies with a laugh. “Honestly, I think you need to come into this century. There is this thing called an e-book.” His brows reach his

hairline as he tilts his head.

I smile and reach over to the end table and open the drawer. I pull out my Kindle and place it on the table. “I know.” The corner of my lip goes up. So, I have a lot of books, and a lot of e-books. Basically, I could spend the rest of my life reading and I probably wouldn’t get anywhere on my ‘to be read’ list. I may have a slight book problem, but I digress.

Conner lets out a deep chuckle. “Okay, I’ll shut up now about your books.” He picks up his beer and tips it back. I can see his Adam’s apple bobbing as he takes a long pull. “So, why was your friend Lacy so hell bent on you coming out tonight?”

I let out a groan and lay back against my couch. “Because she thinks I need to keep dating to find Mr. Right, sooner rather than later.”

Conner narrows his eyes. “I’m not following.”

“Um, this is kinda heavy for a first date.”

“So that means there will be a second?” He grins.

“Ha!” I shake my head as I smile. “Maybe.” I feel the couch move and a sudden warmth on my side. I turn my head, finding his face is close enough to mine that our noses almost touch. “What are you doing?”

“Something I’ve wanted to do since I walked into Legends.”

Before I can react, his lips crash into mine. His tongue runs along my bottom lip as he coaxes my mouth open. Opening my mouth slightly, I feel his tongue brush against mine, making me moan into his mouth. My heart’s beating wildly in my chest. His kiss brought down every ounce of defense I had. There’s no fighting against this.

From the inside out, I feel like I'm on fire. Slowly, he leans me back against the arm of the couch and hovers over me, his lips feverishly working against mine.

Conner's arms box around my head against the arm of the couch. His body presses against me, igniting every nerve ending in my body. He groans into the kiss, causing me to push up against him in need.

His fingers slide down to the side of my face, gliding over my neck until his hand finds my left breast. He cups it, and my head tips back, breaking my lips away from his. He kisses along my now exposed neck. Conner shifts his hips and starts grinding against me, giving me the friction I've been craving. The friction I need to push me over the edge.

Without warning, a dinging cuts through the air, and Conner instantly pulls back. The spell between us is broken. Our breaths are coming out fast and heavy. I turn my head towards the table and see my phone there. I'm internally cursing whoever just decided to blow me up. Also, I should have put the damn thing on silent.

My chest is rising and falling as I try to get myself to come down from the high, my body still objecting to not finding its release. Conner stands, adjusting the very thing that was pushing against my core moments ago.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

Damnit, it felt so fucking good. He holds out a hand to help me up, pulling me up towards him. The air is still charged all around us, my body still needing to feel him on top of me. But he steps back for a moment to collect himself. He releases me, running a hand through his hair, letting out a long sigh.

“I, um, I should get going. Thank you for letting me come up here for a beer.” He leans in and kisses me on the forehead.

“Yeah, sure.” My mind is completely scrambled. This man went from hot to cold in one second flat. My lips are still tingling from him, and my heart is still beating against my chest like it wants to break free from its cage. Before I can say anything more, he’s opening my front door.

“Night, Allison.” He turns, giving me a wide smile and a wink.

“Night, Conner.” Once the door clicks shut, it snaps me out of my dream, and I fall back onto the couch. I stare at the arm of the couch where my head was only moments ago, and my entire body heats up from remembering what his body on top of mine felt like.

I’ve never had that happen before. The feeling of desire and need, the wanting him to never stop. I let out a long, loud exhale and run my hand through my hair. My phone goes off again, and I grab it off the table. There’s a text from Lacy telling me to call her as soon as the date is over.

Well, the date is over.

I pull up her contact info and click on her phone number. It rings once before she answers.

“Oh my god. It’s only ten o’clock. Why are you calling me and not busy doing the bonk bonk with the hottie?” Lexi demands when she answers the call.

“Bonk bonk? Really?” I laugh into the phone. She really has a way of putting things. It’s one of my favorite things about her. I call them Lacyisms.

“Yes, really. You were supposed to get laid with the dirty sex he was going to give you, and then you were going to be happy enough to move on to the next penis. Get laid some more until the right penis fit you, Cinderella.”

I throw my head back giggling. Tears form in the corner of my eyes, and my stomach starts to tighten as I try to catch my breath.

“So, what happened? I need the deets.”

I wipe my eyes and take a deep breath. “Honestly, he’s a nice guy.”

“But?”

“He’s intense. I mean the night didn’t go off well at first. I left him at the bar right in the middle of our date. He ended up stopping me before I got into a taxi and walked me back to my place.”

“Wait, what?” she gasps.

“He walked me back. We talked, and he was nice ...” I trail off.

“You asked him up, didn’t you? For the dirty sex?”

I groan, “Oh my god! Enough about the dirty sex. And to answer you, yes, I did ask him up. It’s just ... I don’t know, Lacy. There’s something about him. I can’t quite put my finger on it, but my mind and my heart are not on the same page.”

“So, there’s something that make you want to pull him in and ride him off into the sunset, and another part of you that wants to send you running for the hills.” She chuckles into the phone. “What happened when he came up?”

“Well—”

“You guys did it like bunnies!” Lacy yells through the phone.

I snort and shake my head. “No! We kissed. That was it. We had a bit of a hot make out sesh that your text message interrupted. He got up and left. I mean, I didn’t even get his number or give him mine. So, that’s it.”

I turn myself and lay my head against the arm of the couch again. My finger traces my lips as I remember how he felt against me. My body still tingles from his touch.

Lacy sighs, “And now I hate myself more for being nosy. Sorry, Allie.”

“No worries. Look, it was nice, if not weird. But I did have a nice time.”

“Okay, well, I’m glad. I’ll let you get back to reliving the hot make out session. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

I end the call and place the phone on my chest. My mind recalls the entire night with Conner. The ups, the downs, and everything in between. I don’t understand how on one hand I can just not want to be anywhere near him, but on the other I am completely drawn to him like a moth to a flame.

His eyes, his laugh, even his egotistical attitude ... it all makes me want more of him. I want to sass him, I want to push his buttons. I want to feel his lips brushing mine, his body pressing into me. Fuck. I rub my hand over my face.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

Operation Dirty Sex was a complete failure.

Chapter 7

Allison

Monday came and went with its usual sucks-to-be-Monday vibe. Tuesday was uneventful and boring as all hell. When I looked at my watch at ten in the morning, it was one of those moments where it felt like I had already been there for twelve hours. Yet I had only been there for two. They were typical long workdays, clients, events, work tickets, and emails galore. Seeing how Monday and Tuesday sucked, I'm not expecting much of a change today.

My face is buried in my papers as I answer some emails and work on some booth furniture orders. But then a knock at my door pulls me from my screen.

"Hey, Allie. These came for you just a moment ago." Rita, the front receptionist, walks in with a giant bouquet of red roses inside a beautiful glass vase. She sets them down on my desk and walks out of the office before I can even ask who sent them.

My mouth drops open, and my eyes are wide as they gawk at the roses on my desk. I'm not even sure who would even send me a rose, let alone a huge ass vase filled with ... a lot. There are so many of them. Thirty-six? Forty-eight roses? Oh my god.

Shaking myself out of my shock, I reach out, letting my fingers glide over the silky petals. Leaning forward, I take a deep breath of the wonderful scent. The arrangement of the roses and the baby's breath with the greenery surrounding it all ... it's

brehtaking.

A card in the center of the arrangement catches my eye, so I pluck it out, my curiosity growing with every second. Slowly, I open the card up and read it with more than a little trepidation.

Allison,

Thank you so much for the do-over to our do-over.

-Conner

A smile spreads on my face, and my heart start to beat wildly in my chest. He sent me flowers. My lips start to tingle from the memory of his kisses, his tongue dancing with mine.

Bringing my fingers up to my lips, I let out a shudder. My body suddenly feels like I'm sitting on the sun, heating up at just the very thought of him.

"Well, well, well. What do we have here?" Lacy steps into my office, folding her hands over her chest. Her lips turn upward as she stares between me and the giant bouquet of roses sitting in front of me.

The heat spreads from my neck to my cheeks. "They're flowers."

"Yeah, no, I see that. Who are they from, Allie?" She tilts her head, still grinning because she knows exactly who sent them.

Clearing my throat, I speak softly, "Um, Conner. Conner sent them." I fall back into my seat and place my hand over my heart, willing it to calm down.

“Of course he fucking did!” She throws her head back with a laugh. “Mr. Hottie Pants sent you, what, forty-eight long-stem roses after the crazy night you had with him? Oh, girl, I think there is definitely going to be a second date out of this.”

“I doubt it. These literally could just be ‘Hey! I’m sending these to let you down nicely. Thanks for the good time. Have a nice life,’ roses,” I scoff.

“Okay, I don’t think anyone has ever sent roses for that reason. A Hallmark card, possibly, since they’ve got cards for everything. I’d put money down on someone sending a card for that reason.” She shakes her head. “These are not break-up roses. These are ‘I have to have more time with you because you rocked my world Friday night until your bestie texted and sadly interrupted us’ roses.”

Breaking out into a laugh, I shake my head at her. Still, while Lacy probably has a point, I’m stubborn enough to still think otherwise. “Well, I think you’re wrong. He didn’t get my number, so he can’t call me, and this is the first contact he’s made since Friday. This is honestly nothing.”

“Whatever you say, Allie. You’ll owe me twenty bucks when you lose this bet.” She points at me and squints her eyes.

I shake my head, furrowing my brows. “What are you talking about? I didn’t bet anything.”

“Oh, no. We’re definitely betting on this because I want to be able to tell you ‘I told you so’. My coffee will taste so good when I’m buying with your money.” She winks at me and disappears out of my office.

I let out a huff as I throw myself down into my chair. Staring at the card, I can feel my stomach doing little flips. Staring back up at the flowers, I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from smiling. What is even going on here?

Never once have I ever felt this way over a guy. I have no idea what has come over me. As I sit and think about getting my head checked, my phone vibrates on my desk. Picking it up, I turn it over.

Unknown: I really did enjoy myself Friday. I hope you like the flowers.

Oh my fucking god. How did he get my number?

Me: Conner?

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

Unknown: Um, did you get other flowers today? Wait, did you have other dates on Friday night? Wow. Maybe I should have ordered 200 roses. Maybe a balcony full of roses.

Nothing comes after that. I sit there completely stunned, not sure what I should respond with. Did I offend him? Hurt him? Before I can come up with a response, I see more chat bubbles pop up in the message.

Unknown: Of course this is Conner. A very concerned Conner because now I have to step up my game. Especially if you're getting flowers from other guys.

Me: No! No flowers from other guys. I'm just a little shocked since I didn't give you my number.

Conner: Phew. Okay, good. I really didn't want to have to compete. I mean, I would put the others to shame, but that's just a lot of work.

Me: Oh, so I'm not worth the effort or work?

Conner: Sure you are, as long as it's flower competitions. I mean, if I have to step up my date night routine, then I would just have to reconsider this whole thing.

Me: Oh, you mean the date where I walked out on you and then somehow you still ended up back at my apartment?

Conner: It worked, didn't it? As you said, I still ended up in your apartment. I have mad skills, FYI.

I laugh so hard there are tears in my eyes. This man is so sure of himself.

Conner: Have dinner with me tonight. I'll even pick you up. I mean, I do know where you live. Wait, that sounds creepy.

Again, he has me giggling so hard my sides hurt. I pick up my phone and stare at his last message. It wouldn't hurt to go out with him again. After we got over the awkwardness, he really did turn out to be a nice guy. I feel light. Goosebumps coat my skin as I think about how we ended that night. I want that again.

Me: Okay. Dinner tonight.

Conner: Pick you up at seven, Allie.

Sitting back in my chair, I close my eyes and bring my phone to my chest. I take slow, steady breaths to calm my excitement.

Once I finally come down from the clouds, I grab my purse and head towards Lacy's office. I don't knock, I walk straight in.

"Hey. What's up?" she says without even taking her face away from her laptop screen.

I say nothing. I reach into my purse and slap a twenty onto her desk.

Lacy starts to laugh uncontrollably. I turn around and walk right back out of her office.

I was going to lose that bet from the beginning. But at least I know it's going to be well worth it.

Chapter 8

Allison

After work, I go straight home to get myself ready for the date with Conner tonight. Sifting through my closets, I pick out a cute new dress that I had bought a couple of weeks ago. A beautiful colorless red tiered dress. I wrap a thick black belt around the waist and throw on my black leather knee-high boots.

As I study myself out in my mirror, I run my brush through my long blonde hair one more time, making sure everything looks good. Not that I have to look good for him, I just want to.

Standing in the middle of the room, the big brown tree box I dragged out of the closet this morning catches my eye. I originally had plans to put up my Christmas tree and decorations tonight. I'm way behind on getting them up. That shit is usually up the day after Thanksgiving. But that will have to wait, once again, until tomorrow.

I look up from the tree box and spot the plastic container of ornaments on my table. I saunter over and slowly open it up.

My heart warms the minute I pull out the first wrapped ornament. I know exactly what this one this is. I store it in the same red paper after every holiday. Slowly, I peel back the tissue paper to find my half of my best friend heart ornament, with Lacy holding onto the other half. I clutch the glass ornament in my hand and smile. We got this on our first Christmas together back in high school. We knew then that our friendship was stronger than anything and that we would always be together.

Honestly, she is more than a friend; she's become my family. After everything I've gone through, she's always been there to help me pick up the pieces, standing beside me when I need her most.

As I put the ornament back into the wrapping paper, there's a knock on my door. He's here. Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath. My body shakes, and my stomach flips. Why is my body reacting to him like this?

I let out a long breath and head towards the door. When I open it, I find Conner standing there holding another beautiful bouquet of roses. He's dressed in a black long-sleeve, button-down dress shirt with a pair of black slacks. His hair is slicked back, his jawline clean and shaven. He looks sinful. Deliciously sinful.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

He smiles. "Hello, Allison." His low voice sends a shiver down my spine. My lips tingle like they remember his against them again.

"Conner. Hi." My mouth runs dry, and I can feel the heat rising in my cheeks. "Um, please come in." I step away from the door and let him walk inside my apartment.

"Here, these are of course for you." He hands me the roses. His hand brushes against mine, my skin tingling from the contact.

"T-Thank you. Please, make yourself comfortable. Let me just put these in water."

Conner nods and walks towards the living area. I turn on my heel and head into the kitchen. I lay the flowers down on the counter and then proceed to grip the edge of the counter and try to steady my heart.

Why does this feel so weird? There has never been a man that has made me feel so damn nervous around him. Yet here I am, awkward as fuck, like I'm some sixteen-year-old getting ready to go out on a date with the hot quarterback. Get a fucking grip, Allie.

Closing my eyes momentarily, I shake myself out of it. Once I regain my composure, I reach up into the cabinet and pull out a red vase, then fill it with water to place the roses in. Leaning in, I take a moment to literally stop and smell the roses. With the vase in my hands, I head out to the living area and see that Conner has found himself over by my ornaments.

I place the roses on my coffee table and turn back towards him. "Sorry for the mess. I

was going to put my tree and decorations up tonight, but that was before we had plans.”

“So, I’m keeping you from putting the tree up?” Conner furrows his brows and frowns.

“No, that’s—”

“Well, we need to rectify that.” He walks over to the box with my tree and starts to unpack it.

“Wait, what are you doing?” I stare at him, my mouth falling open.

“We’re decorating your tree and apartment. What does it look like?” He chuckles.

“Don’t we have reservations?” I step closer to him.

“Yes, with takeout and a tree to decorate. Look, I don’t really care what we do as long as I get to spend time with you. If you really want to, we can go out and eat. Or we can order in and get festive.” He waggles his eyebrows.

I giggle and place a hand on my cheek. It’s hot to the touch, and I know I’m blushing.

“Okay, I guess let’s put up the tree then. What do you want to order?”

“Don’t worry, I got it.” Conner pulls out his phone and spends a couple of minutes tapping away before putting it in his back pocket. “Pizza’s on the way.”

“Wait, I didn’t tell you what I’d like.” I frown.

“Trust me, you’ll like what I ordered.” His lips turn up into a beautiful smile, and he winks at me. Wow, this man really is cocky. Conner pulls out the three individual

pieces of the tree and begins to assemble them. “Pre-lit?”

“Yep. Makes it easy to put up and put away. Also, I’m horrible at untangling the big knot of lights. You put them away all nice and neat, but somehow when you’re not looking, they transform into the world’s biggest ball of shiny tangles. So, two years ago, after drinking a bottle of wine and crying myself to sleep on the floor while I tried my hardest to detangle the lights, I went out and got that one.” I smile up at him.

He lets out a hearty laugh and places the last piece on the top. “Got it. No stringing lights for you. We’ll keep it simple.” He bends down and plugs it in to the outlet. The tree lights up with sparkling white lights strewn on each branch. Immediately, I feel the excitement in my bones; this is the best time of year. I notice him standing there idly for a moment before turning to look at me.

“What’s wrong?” I look over at him.

“We’re missing something. Ah! I know!” He pulls out his phone and within seconds, It’s the Most Wonderful Time of the Year by Andy Williams is playing. My face breaks out into a wide grin.

Conner grabs my hand and pulls me into him. On contact, my body comes alive against his. The air around us practically crackles. My breathing quickens, and my heart begins to race in my chest. He begins to pull me around the room, dancing with me. My face hurts from the giggling and smiling, and my heart feels like it’s grown two sizes bigger.

Conner leans in and softly brushes his lips against my forehead. I let out a gasp as soon as he makes contact. His finger comes up to my chin, tilting my head so that my eyes meet his. Slowly, he presses his lips to mine, making me let out a soft moan. My lips tingle from softness of his.

“Allison,” he whispers against me before he devours my mouth, his tongue pushing past my lips to dance with mine.

My arms wrap around his neck, pulling him in closer to me, my fingers grazing against his skin. Without warning, a loud knock at the door startles us, and I jump back out of his grasp.

“I’ve never hated pizza more than I do now,” he growls as he shakes his head and heads to the door. I stay planted where I am only because my legs are like Jell-O and I’m pretty sure I’d fall flat on my face.

Conner comes back with the box and throws it onto the coffee table, pausing for a moment. There’s a fire in his eyes. They’ve darkened, and I can see a deep intensity in them. Without warning, he stalks towards me, and I swear I hear what sounds like a snarl right before his lips come down on mine.

My hands grab his shirt and fist it as I try to keep myself from falling. His arms wrap around me as he picks me up and carries me straight to my bed.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

“Allie, you fucking taste so good, like honey,” he moans as he pulls back and grazes his lips across my neck. We come to a stop, and he lowers me gently onto the bed. As he hovers over me, he begins to kiss me again while his hands burn a trail of desire on every inch of my still fully clothed body.

His lips work at a feverish pace, his teeth grazing my lips with a slight nibble. My hands drag down his face to his chest. His hard body is pressed up against mine, his hardness pressing against me. It’s enough pressure that he could have me coming in seconds if he keeps it up.

He kisses down my jaw, his lips finding my melting button right under my ear. That’s the spot that literally turns me into a puddle of desire. I let out a soft moan as I feel it shoot straight to my core.

“I fucking love listening to you moan for me.” Conner’s voice is low, and the vibration from his words make my body quiver. My hands move to his belt, needing access to him.

He pulls back. “Not yet. Let me make you come. I want you shaking, screaming, and I want to taste every drop from you.”

My pussy throbs with desire. I nod, not able to come up with a single word, because I need all of what he just promised me.

Conner’s hand runs down my thigh and back up the inside. My breathing shallows upon contact. He pulls back slightly from my lips, and his mouth curls up as his fingers find my very wet panties. “Allie,” he says, his voice hoarse, “your panties are

soaking wet.”

I nod and finally find my voice. “I am. What are you gonna do about it?” My body is humming with need. He has me on edge, and if it wasn’t for his body between my legs, I would be trying to rub them together to get the friction I need to bring me to that edge.

He lets out a groan, looping his fingers in the band and yanking them down and over my boots. I’m pulled to the edge of the bed. Then my legs are lifted over his shoulders and my dress is pushed up a bit.

“I wonder if you taste just as sweet here too.”

Before I can respond, a tongue swipes up my slit. I moan, and my hands find his head under the skirt of my dress. I gasp, my hips lifting slightly off the bed. His tongue can do no wrong.

“Oh yeah. You taste so fucking good,” he growls as he dives back into me, his tongue circling my clit. His lips close around the sensitive bud, and a jolt of pleasure pulses through me. Holy shit, this man is going to have me coming all over his face pretty quickly if he keeps this up. My entire body pulses with pleasure.

My legs tighten around his head. “Oh my god, Conner. Don’t stop, please.”

He pulls back, grinning. “Never.” He slowly pushes his finger inside me, and I gasp. “So fucking wet for me. So tight. Fuck, Allie. Are you going to come for me?” he taunts right before his tongue laps at my clit again, bringing me closer to euphoria.

My body begins to vibrate, every nerve ending ready to explode. His tongue laps at me, and his finger curls up inside me, hitting the sensitive spot. My stomach tightens, and I know I’m right on the edge.

“That’s it, Allie. Come for me. Let go and come for me.”

As if on command, my body responds to him, giving him what he’s been working me towards. My mouth opens, but no sound comes out as I crash over the wall. My thighs lock against his head as I grind out every last sensation of my orgasm against his face.

“Fuck, Conner.” I finally find my words as I come down from my body high, slowly releasing his head.

Conner slowly crawls up my body and his lips lock against mine. I can taste myself on him, and I need more. I start to claw at his shirt, struggling with the buttons, when I feel him go rigid next to me.

He stops kissing me and closes his eyes. Before I even know what’s happening, he pushes off the bed and stands at the end of it. There is a tightness in his face, confusion. His lips are in a thin line, and suddenly the air around us feels different. Conner walks away for a moment but comes back with his phone beeping in his pocket. He reaches for it and pulls it out.

“Shit. Allie. I-I’m sorry. I hate to do this, but I need to go. Um, family emergency.” Conner shakes his head and drops his phone back into his pocket. “I’m so sorry.”

“No, it’s okay. Go. Handle what you need to.” I sit up on my bed and nod to him. I adjust my skirt and try not to let the awkwardness of the whole situation show on my face. It’s like cold water had just been dumped on him.

Conner leans in and kisses my forehead. He keeps his lips on me for a moment and then slowly pulls away. He gives me a sad smile and then steps back. “I’ll give you a call. Night, Allie.”

With that, he walks to the front door with his head down and slowly closes it behind him.

My head is still slowly coming down from the high I had just minutes ago. I take in a deep breath and try to assess the situation. This was not how the night was supposed to go. What the hell?

I glance down at the bed, my body still tingling from the high, from the euphoria. But I can slowly feel myself coming down from that high upon realizing that he up and left with an excuse of a family emergency. We didn't even eat the pizza or finish setting up the tree. That's when it hits me. That's when the tears make an entrance.

The crash and burn.

Chapter 9

Conner

“So, you just up and left? Dude!” Roland sits in the chair in front of my desk. He shakes his head. “That's not going to win you the bet.”

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

I run my hand through my hair. I let out a long breath and look at him. “Do you have any idea how hard this is? I feel like absolute shit about all of this. I’m using her for my own personal gain.”

“Well, I mean last night it worked out in your favor. Got yourself a taste.” Roland shrugs nonchalantly.

“How the fuck are you even married?” My eyes narrow at him. “This is a person we are talking about. Someone with feelings.”

“First, my wife loves me, and I love her. Second, I’m not saying you have to marry the woman, but you are actually committing yourself to her for all this. It’s not as if you’re off and screwing around while dating her. So, I mean, really, you’re in a dating relationship. You know, the real thing.”

“The guilt is eating away at me. Last night,”—I run my hands over my face—“she was laying there after, and that’s when it fucking hit me. She’s beautiful, she’s funny, she’s everything. But I don’t want that. I don’t want a ball and chain. But I’m leading her on to think that I do. When I eventually pull back, when I end it ... I’ll end up hurting her.”

“Wow, Jack was right. You might be the first lawyer with a conscience,” he replies with a laugh.

“Shut the fuck up, asshole. It’s called being a decent human being, something you are apparently not familiar with. This bet? This bet is the most selfish, in-humane, stupid as fuck thing to do to someone.”

“You agreed to it. You went in on the bet.”

“I know. I know. Fuck!” I jump out of my chair and walk towards the window. “I haven’t slept well since I left her apartment.”

“So, you want to throw in the towel? You know what you’re giving up, so that’s on you.” Roland lets out a little chuckle. He’d keep his 1969 Mustang Mach 1, so he would love for me to back out. “Beth would be devastated to know that the Mustang is staying with us. She’s been wanting it gone forever.”

Ugh. The twisting in my stomach tightens. “I don’t want to throw in the towel. This is killing me inside, and I know when I break it off with her, she will hate me with every bone in her body. That kills me even more.”

“Why do you care? If you aren’t looking for love, then just do what you need to so you can get through this. It doesn’t have to end in an actual marriage; she just needs to want to marry you. It’s simple. Again, why would you care?” Roland crosses his leg over his knee and throws me a puzzling look.

“How the fuck did you actually find a woman to even put up with your bullshit? Fuck, I need to get Beth an all-expense trip to Europe or something just for marrying you. You’re a complete assfuck.” I shake my head, completely blown away at how my friend is pushing me to go through with this. This is not the man I grew up with. I don’t know if it’s him wanting me to actually fail or what, but he’s not acting himself. Our bets never hurt or threatened to hurt anyone outside of our group.

Roland uncrosses his legs and leans forward. “You feel something for this chick, don’t you?”

“Her name is Allison,” I growl. “And I don’t know what I feel.”

Except that I do. Sort of. I know that my body seems to respond when I'm around her or even thinking about her. I love the smell of her shampoo. And I wanted nothing more than to slide inside her and feel her warm pussy wrapped around my cock. Fuck, and now I'm starting to sport a hard on just thinking about it.

"Look, I need to get some work done. See yourself out, would you?" I ask.

Roland innocently holds up his hands. "Fine. Fine. I'll go. Should I tell the guys you're backing out?"

"Get out!" I yell.

Roland laughs as he leaves my office and I return to my desk, sighing, not sure what I'm going to do. I haven't talked to her since I left, and now I'm not sure if I should or if I should just let it fall out and move on with my life. But then I'll lose the bet.

It's not like I don't have enough to do as it is. My clients depend on me. This job takes up a lot of my time and focus.

"Mr. Dawson." My assistant's voice breaks through the intercom on my phone, interrupting my thoughts. "Your mother is on the line. Would you like me to put her through?"

The fog clears out of my head. "Yes, please." I pick up the phone just as my mother gets sent through.

"Hi, my boy. How are you doing?" My mother's cheery voice filters through the phone receiver.

"Hi, Ma. I'm fine. How are you?" My tone is flat, which I internally curse myself for because she will pick up on it.

“What’s wrong?” There it is. Now she’s all worried.

“Nothing. Just stressed out with work. I have a lot of things going on.”

“You work too hard, my boy. You need to get out. Date some ladies, experience a social life.”

“I have a social life. I have the guys and I talk to you, don’t I?” I laugh dryly.

“Conner, sweetheart, as much as I love you, I’m not your social life. You need a good woman in your life. Someone to make you smile, to fall in love with. And of course, most importantly, make me some grand-babies to love on.”

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

I groan into the phone and close my eyes. “Ma, I’m not having this conversation with you.”

“Okay, okay. How about dinner on Sunday? You need a break, and your mother misses you,” she says sweetly.

“Sounds good, Ma. I’ll be there. Love you.” I hang up and grab the cellphone on my desk. I scroll to Allison’s name and let my finger hover. She doesn’t deserve this. She doesn’t deserve me ignoring her or this stupid fucking bet. She is such a nice person, so beautiful, with such a kind heart. Fuck.

Except I can’t turn my back on the bet. My pride just won’t let me.

Me: Hey, Allie. Sorry I haven’t contacted you sooner. I have had a lot going on. How are you?

Allison: Hi. Sure, I get it. You’re busy and all. Family stuff going on.

Damnit. I run my hand down my face and growl. Why did I lie? Well, because this whole damn thing is a lie.

Me: I’d like to make it up to you. Dinner tomorrow night? Actual dinner this time, at a restaurant.

Allison: Sure. Okay.

I let out a sigh of relief. I still have a shot at rectifying this. If she didn’t say yes to

this date, then I know for sure I would've lost this bet. And I need to rectify this. Just thinking that makes my stomach drop. I'm still pushing forward, knowing this will end in the worst of ways.

Me: I'll pick you up at seven.

She reads the message but doesn't respond. I'll take that for what it's worth. I'm sure she's upset that I've been radio silent for the last couple of days.

I hate myself for making that bet. This whole thing should have never happened. My friends are complete assholes, and I'm an asshole for going along with it.

But the way her lips felt on mine, the burning of her touch ... that's not something I want to forget or let go of. When she laughs, she lightens the air around me. Her little moans and whimpers as I brought her to orgasm ... fuck. I've had those sounds on repeat in my head since Wednesday night. I'm not even ashamed to say that I've had some quality time with my hand to the tune of those sounds.

I sit back in my chair and close my eyes. Immediately, I see those blue eyes staring back at me. Goddamn, she's beautiful. Her long blonde hair, her soft creamy skin. Strawberries. She smells like strawberries. I feel myself harden at the thought.

My hand palms my hardened cock, and I slowly start to stroke it through my pants. I wanted to be inside her so bad. Hear her moaning underneath me as her pussy squeezed my cock.

Voices in the hallway outside my door bring me back to reality and to the fact that I almost got myself off right here in my office thinking about her under me. Shit.

I'm such an asshole.

Chapter 10

Allison

I should have said no. Why did I agree to go out with him tonight? Stupid, stupid stupid. It's obvious he's not interested. He bailed on Wednesday night using the excuse of a 'family emergency'. He didn't call, text, nothing. It was all bullshit, and I know this because Lacy stopped at Legends on Thursday to pick up some dinner to-go. There was Conner with his friends, laughing and hanging out like he had no care in the world.

Like he didn't just up and leave me after a mind-blowing orgasm.

"See anything?" Lacy breaks my concentration. The Christmas music inside Macy's hits my ears. I come back to reality and focus on the tasks in front of me.

We're out shopping for gifts for our loved ones. Normally, I'd take in the hustle and bustle of the shoppers, enjoying the shopping frenzy. However, my mind is completely taken over by the fact that I decided it would be a good idea to go out on a date tonight with Mr. Liar Liar Pants on Fire.

It's not my best move to date, but I feel like something else is going on with him. Maybe he got scared, maybe he felt like he was taking it too far. Or maybe he just lied.

I shake my head. "No. I have no idea what to get anyone."

"Sure. Or maybe your mind is on a certain man." Lacy tilts her head and gives me the 'I always know what you're thinking' look.

"He lied, Lacy. For some reason I repulsed him enough that he lied just to get away

from me.” I throw the clothes I’m looking at back on the table.

“You don’t know that. Maybe something did come up and he didn’t have a chance to tell you.” She shrugs.

“Even if he did, he left me fully exposed. Got me off and that was it. He froze, like he was doing something wrong. Like he shouldn’t have done that with me. Oh, and let’s not forget about the kiss to the forehead before he left. That was soft, intimate, almost caring. So fucking confusing.” I close my eyes, remembering how hot my body felt. After a few seconds, my eyes fly open. “Either way, he left me high and dry.”

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

I walk over to the jewelry counter and look to see if anything jumps out at me. Brenda Lee's Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree is coming out of the speaker above me. As much as I love this song, today I'm just too upset to care.

I thought there was a connection between Conner and me. Never had I ever felt that spark or intensity before. From the moment he came over to me in the bar, the air was always thicker when he was around. My skin prickled at his touch, and my breath caught when my eyes locked in on his.

"But he still called and asked you out again. Maybe there is a reason. Just hear him out." Lacy wraps her arm around my shoulder. "And if he gives you some bullshit excuse, drop him like a bad fucking habit."

"Why are you defending him?" I turn and frown at her. She's my best friend, and she's supposed to be loyal to me. I can't deny what I felt with him, but I can acknowledge what I feel right now, which is disappointment.

"I'm not. Allie, I know what I saw that day in the bar. There was a spark between the two of you. A pull. Something shifted that day, I just know it. It's different with you two." She purses her lips.

I let out a sigh as my finger taps against the glass case in front of me. One chance. That's all I need to give him. If he lets me down again, he's getting written off like the rest of them.

* * *

I stand in front of my full-length mirror as I put my small diamond stud earrings in. I give myself a once-over, making sure I look good in my black and red color-block sweater dress with a V-neck and short, dolman-style sleeves. I decided to pair my dress with some red suede boots. Feeling confident in my outfit choice, I grab my black leather jacket and throw it on as I leave to meet Conner at the front of my building.

He texted this time and didn't come up to my door. Not a good start to the night as far as I'm concerned. It takes everything in me to not just tell him to forget it.

I head out of the building and find him standing in front of a black SUV.

He doesn't smile, merely nods to me. "Hi." He pulls open the door, and I slide in the front passenger seat. Conner shuts the door and walks around the front to his side, giving me a moment to breathe without his presence, which is quite overwhelming.

He slides into the driver's seat and starts to pull out into the street. I stare out the window and watch the city pass by as we drive along. Out of the corner of my eye, I see how tense he is. His hand grips the steering wheel so tight that his knuckles are white. Turning my head more I can see him clenching his jaw and trying to avoid looking at me.

I should have stayed home.

The ride is silent, all fifteen minutes of it. The air is thick and tense—I feel like I'm suffocating. There's Christmas music softly playing on the radio, and it's the only noise between us. We pull into a parking garage on 29th Street, and I squeeze my purse tighter as Conner finds a spot to park in. My entire body is tense, my eyes facing forward and not sure where to look.

He throws the car in park and lets out a huge sigh. I see his hands go to his thighs,

and he looks at the dashboard before turning to me. “Before we go in, I need to say something.”

My hands wring together on top of my lap. “Sure.” My eyes meet his as I bite my bottom lip. Whatever he has to say, it would have been nice if he’d said it before we left.

“I need to apologize.” He takes a deep breath. “I ran out on you on Wednesday, and I lied about the reason why.”

“I figured as much when Lacy saw you at Legends the next day and you hadn’t contacted me. Look, Conner, I don’t have time for the games. I get it, you don’t like me, so there’s no need to try and play this like you are.” I grab the door handle and open it, jumping out of the SUV before I spin to face him. “I don’t appreciate liars, and I really don’t appreciate a pity date. I’ll find my own way home.”

Slamming the door shut, I take off toward the stairwell exit and find my way out on to the sidewalk and street. When I pull up my phone, my name is called by the man I just ran from.

“Allison, wait!” Conner comes running up alongside me as I turn my back to him. “Please. Please, look at me. It’s not what you think.”

“No? You force me to go on a first date with you, which ended up actually being a nice date. Then you send me roses and ask me out for a second time only to end up never taking me out and leaving me on my bed, stunned and exposed. You make up some ridiculous lie about a family emergency and confirm to me what I already know, which is that it was never true. So please, Conner, tell me it’s not what I think, because from where I stand, it’s exactly what I think.”

Tears start threatening to fall. I hate being made to feel like a fool. I start to walk

away, already sniffing.

“I’m scared!” he calls out. I stop dead in my tracks and turn back to him. “I’ve never dated a woman or even wanted to. You ... you’re different. There’s something about you, and it fucking scares me.” He slowly walks up to me, his hands in his pockets. “Wednesday night, I just panicked. I don’t do relationships, and I don’t normally care about what’s going on. I’m just there to get off and that’s it. But you’re different. And that ... that scared me. I’m sorry. Please let me have a do-over.”

“You’re asking for another do-over? How many do you need, Conner?” I scoff at him. My eyes narrow, and I grind my teeth together to keep myself from saying something I’ll regret.

He runs his hand over his face. “I know. I know. But please. I really like you, Allie. You’re absolutely gorgeous, bright, and I’ve never laughed as much in my life as I have with you. And when I kiss you. Fuck, Allie, I want to devour you.” I let out a gasp as he continues. His voice becomes low as he steps closer, “You make me feel something I’ve never felt before.”

I let out a shuddering breath. “I could say the same.”

“So give me this last do-over. Let me show you how I feel, make it up to you for lying and leaving you. I won’t make that mistake again.”

“Don’t let your mouth write checks your ass can’t cash.” I shake my head at him.

Conner chuckles. “Yet another reason I like you. You don’t tip-toe around things.” He comes up and takes my hands in his. Our eyes lock in on each other, and I can feel the intensity running through him. “I will make damn sure my ass can cash that check. I won’t hurt you again, Allie.” He leans in and softly brushes his lips on mine. “I promise.”

I nod as he takes my hand, and we walk down the sidewalk to the restaurant. Even with everything that just happened, walking next to him, I can't deny how I feel when we're together. The pull, the need, the sexual tension.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

But there's a voice inside my head that's starting to get louder. This is not the last do-over, and I'm a fool to think otherwise. I'll end up getting hurt.

I'm worried that little voice is right.

Chapter 11

Allison

It's a week before Christmas, and you can feel the season everywhere you turn. The sights of shoppers lugging their hauls around, the sounds of bells and Christmas music from every storefront I walk past. Holiday lights and decorations adorn window displays, and the snow that's falling down around the city? It's magical.

I've been spending so much time with Conner, and it's been amazing. He's been sweet, kind, and attentive. Also, there have been no do-overs in sight.

Tonight, Conner is surprising me by taking me somewhere special, as he put it. He asked me to dress warm and comfortable. So, I threw on a pair of skinny jeans, a black V-neck sweater, and some boots. I have no idea what's in store for me, but I'm feeling pretty comfortable. Also, very excited. I love surprises, and Conner taking me somewhere as one has me doing mental somersaults.

As I grab my black leather jacket and throw it on. Then there's a knock at the door. A huge smile comes over my face. He's here. Butterflies swirl inside me. Sauntering over to the door, I open it and find Conner standing there with a wide grin.

“Hello, beautiful.” Conner leans in, and his lips meet mine. Softly and slowly, he kisses me. I melt into him, letting out a sigh as he pulls away. “You ready to head to your surprise?”

“Yeah. I just need to lock up and then we can go.” I break away from him and reach for my purse on the hook adjacent to the door. I dig through and find my keys, then step out into the hallway, turning to the door to lock up. As I slide the key in, I feel Conner press up against me. His hand slowly moves my hair to the side, and he peppers my neck and shoulder with kisses.

“If you don’t stop, we’ll never get to where we’re supposed to be going.” I reach back, my hand threading through his hair. God, I want nothing more than to take him inside and let him continue this.

I hear him growl as he pulls away, “Let’s go so I can get you back here.” I turn to see his megawatt smile as he gives me a wink. He reaches out for my hand, and I take his. His warmth spreads from my hand to every single part of me. This man does things to me that I never knew was possible.

When I told Lacy I wanted that connection, that spark, I had no idea it would be this good. I crave that inferno, that fire that rages through me. That need to touch him, be consumed by him. I wanted what I feel for Conner, the burning when his fingers graze my skin. The goosebumps when he’s anywhere near me. The blazing of his lips on mine and getting lost in his gaze. That’s what I want. And I want it with him.

We pull into a parking garage on East 50th Street and start walking. People are window shopping and checking out Radio City Music Hall. Traffic is thick with taxis, and horns sound every few minutes. The air is crisp and so cold that my breath frosts in front of me. I hook my arm into his and look up at him. Conner leans down and gives me a quick peck on the lips.

When we get up to the intersection of 50th and 5th Avenue, I look up at all the giant buildings in front of us. I feel so tiny, like a speck of dust compared to them. They tower over the people walking around from all sides. No matter how long I live in this city, I never get tired of the beauty in the architecture here. Then it dawns on me where we are.

“Are we at Rockefeller Center?” My head turns towards Conner, who’s grinning.

“How are you with ice skating?” He takes my hand and brings it up to his mouth, kissing it softly.

“I-I have two left feet.”

“Well, then it’s a good thing I’m here.” He holds my hand tightly in his own, and we cross the street, eventually making our way into The Rink.

The Rink is fucking amazing. I spin around and take in everything around me. People are packed into the level above us. Others are huddled together taking pictures or talking into their phone with selfie sticks. Flags above The Rink flap in the wind as the people below skate with smiles on their faces, laughing and enjoying their time circling around.

“I’ve never been to The Rink before.” I shake my head as my eyes fall on the giant Christmas Tree above the Prometheus statue. It’s stunning, giant, and festive; it’s a symbol of the holidays and it gives the perfect ambiance to the skaters below.

“What?” Conner’s eyebrows pull together, and he looks at me with confusion. “You’ve lived here for how long along?”

I shrug. “For a while now. Several years, I think.”

“And you’ve never been here?” Conner shakes his head, his eyes wide with shock.

“No. I told you, two left feet. This would be the last place I’d ever go.”

He leads me to the skate rental counter. “Then I guess this is a first for you.”

After we get our skates and put them on, we wait for our time to hop on the ice. I look around at all the couples huddling close, lip locked and adoring each other. I smile at the thought of love that surrounds us. I wonder how many are getting proposed to tonight?

Conner’s voice pulls me from my thoughts, “Here, it’s our turn. Grab my hand. Go slow.”

We make our way to the ice, and the moment I step out onto it, I feel myself start to slip. Conner’s arms wrap around me and hold me tightly against him, keeping me from falling flat on my ass.

“Thank you,” I breathe, looking up at him. He places a small kiss on my forehead and slowly helps me move on the ice.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

“Glide with your feet. Use me for balance, but slowly glide your feet along the ice to move.” He holds my waist and pushes us towards the wall of the rink. “If you think you’re going to fall, grab me or the railing.”

I nod and bite my lip. My heart is racing from just being on the ice. There’s no way I’m not going to not make a fool of myself. I’m going to end up on my ass.

“Relax. Your body’s stiff as a board right now.”

Exhaling, I try to do as he says. Working up the courage, I take a small step and move my foot along the ice. My body wobbles as the other foot naturally follows suit. I hold out my arms like a bird, flapping to keep myself upright.

“Oh my god! Conner, I just moved on ice. I skated!” In my excitement, I jump up, forgetting that I’m on ice and immediately fall on my ass. “Fuck! Ow, that hurt!” I roll over and grab the railing to try and hoist myself up. Conner comes up behind me and grabs me around the waist.

“Shit, I’m sorry, Allie. I didn’t move fast enough. Are you okay?” He moves around me and leans against the wall, his eyes roaming over me to check for any injuries.

“Yeah, yeah. I’m fine. My ass stings a bit. Oh, and my ego may be a little bruised, too.” I try to brush it off, but I can feel the heat in my cheeks.

“Should we try again? We can just take it slow. Why don’t you hold on to the railing, and I’ll help guide you?”

Giving him a weak smile, I nod. "Okay."

Slowly, we start moving along the ice as I hold onto the wall with a death grip. I'm lost in thought, trying to hold on for dear life, when Conner breaks through.

"So, can I ask you a personal question?" He turns towards me.

"Um, sure." My hand isn't leaving the railing. I have it gripped so tight my fingers hurt.

"I'll preface this question by saying you don't have to answer it. What happened to your parents?"

I let out a long sigh and look up at the people above us, watching all the skaters on the ice. "It was a bad winter storm after the holidays. They were driving home from a little getaway that my dad had planned for my mom. They hit a patch of black ice and their car skidded into another car head on." I purse my lips and try to hold back the lump forming in my throat. It's been a long time since that happened, but it still gets me emotional. They were my parents, and I miss them so very much.

"Christmas was the last holiday we all celebrated together."

Conner nods. "That's why you go all out."

"My mom was the ugly Christmas sweater, decorate the minute Halloween ended, and Christmas music on all day long kind of person. She loved Christmas. She loved bringing the family together, the laughter, the chatter, all of it. I got my love of Christmas from her. So, every year, I go all out. I even shop last minute at the stores like she used to. It's how I hold on to them." I clear my throat, fighting back against the stinging in my eyes.

For a while, we skate in silence. I think Conner's trying to process everything I just laid on him. Honestly, it's a lot. Lacy is the only other person who knows about my family. Well, her and her family. They took me in after everything and have been my everything since then.

"My dad used to bring me here every year. It was our tradition. Him and I would skate, laugh, and just lose ourselves in the moment. Being a cop wasn't easy, so a lot of time I saw him stressed or exhausted. But when we came here, he let go. He was happy. It was a side I rarely saw." Conner's voice softens almost to a whisper.

I don't even know how to respond to that. "I'm so sorry, Conner." I take my left hand and place it on his bicep. "He sounds like he was an incredible man who loved his family. Loved you."

Without warning, Conner turns me, placing my back against the rink wall. His arms move under mine, locking me in place. His lips crash into mine, and he kisses me with fervor. My lips work against his as his tongue pushes past and thrusts against mine. If it weren't for his arms and body supporting me, my weakened knees would have me crashing to the ground again.

He pulls back from my lips and presses his forehead against mine. Both of us are trying to catch our breath, our chests heaving from the intensity of that kiss. I need to feel him again, I need that intimacy with him. My lips feel swollen; the burn lingers from his kiss.

"My place?" I pant.

"Let's go."

This is going to be longest fifteen-minute drive of my life.

Chapter 12

Conner

The minute the door to her apartment shuts, I back her up against it. I need to taste her sweet lips again. She's addicting. Her laugh, her smile, her taste, it's like a drug I need more of. Since the night I left her on her bed, I've tried to pull back, tried to not to want more of her. But I just can't deny how much I need her against me. I need to taste her, feel her. I fucking need to consume her.

My hands box her in against the door, and I nibble on her lip, eliciting a moan from her.

"I really like hearing you moan for me," I groan. I grip her hair and tilt her head back as I kiss her neck, making her whimper. Letting go of her hair, I place my lips back on hers.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

Allie starts to shift against the door as her hands fumble with my jacket to try and take it off me. I shrug out of it and toss it to the floor. I work to free her of hers, throwing it somewhere down the hall behind us. My hands find the hem of her sweater, slowly moving underneath it. A growl rips from my throat the moment my skin makes contact with hers. Her skin is soft and smooth against my hands. Fuck, I want to lick and taste every inch of her.

Ever so slowly, I move my hand up until I can cup her right breast. Allie tips her head back and lets out a shuddering breath. I take advantage of her position and kiss along her neck and down the V-neck of her sweater, right above her cleavage.

Her arms wrap around my neck, and my hands settle under her ass as I lift her up. Her legs wrap around me, her hips shift slightly, and she rubs her pussy against my very hard cock.

I groan into her ear, “Are you sure, Allie baby?”

“Yes. I want you to make me moan more,” she replies, her voice low and gravely.

My lips find hers and I turn us towards the bed. I nibble at her bottom lip as I walk the short distance to her bed. Once we reach the mattress, I gently place her on the edge.

“Hands up.” She obeys, and I lift her sweater up and over her head. My throat rumbles when I see the black sheer bra underneath. I can see her pretty pink nipples. “Oh, Allie, you have no idea how sexy you are right now.”

“How sexy am I, Conner?” A slight pink blooms in her cheeks. She reaches back and unclasps her bra, letting it slide down her arms to the floor. Her beautiful tits are on full display. I drop down to my knees and lock my lips around her left nipple while kneading her right. I pull and twist it slightly, making her breathing pick up. Her hands tangle into my hair as she tries to pull me closer.

“So very, unbelievably sexy. Your skin is so soft, your curves are so perfect. You’re beautiful, Allie.” I kiss slowly down her stomach, pushing her back against the bed. My fingers dip below the waistline of her jeans, just slightly, and I feel her shiver under me. I reach the buttons on her jeans, slowly undoing them. In reality, I want to rip these off her, but hearing her breathing get heavier with each button undone, the slow buildup to her inevitable orgasm, is the best sound in the world.

My dick is painfully hard, and I’m doing all I can to keep myself from bursting just at the sight of her laying there for me. Slowly, I slide her jeans over her nice, plump ass and find her in a sheer back thong. Her pussy is glistening through it. A low, guttural growl comes from me.

“You’re so wet, Allie.” I run my fingers softly over her soaked thong and a groan comes from her as she arches her back.

My thumbs hook under elastic, and I yank them down and pull her legs apart. “So fucking perfect. Your pussy’s so fucking beautiful.” I lean closer, taking in her arousal. “Fuck.” My dick is ready to rip apart my pants.

“Please, Conner,” she begs. Her voice so soft that I almost don’t hear it.

Turning my head, I slowly kiss my way from her ankle, trailing to the inside of her thigh. Her breathing quickens as I get near her pussy, but instead I pull back and switch to the other leg, repeating the process. She says nothing, but I hear her whimper softly in the disappointment.

“Conn—”

I cut her off as my tongue makes contact with her and swipes up her slit. Fuck, this is the only meal I want for the rest of my life. She moans above me, and my already hard dick is now a fucking steel pipe. I press my tongue against her clit, causing her hips to thrust up. My arms come around her thighs to hold her down. My fingers move to take over where my tongue was as I move it down to thrust inside of her. She's delectable.

“You taste so good, baby.”

“I'm so close, Conner. Oh fuck,” she pants. I immediately pull back, deciding that I want her to come with me inside her. She lets out a frustrated noise when I stand up and start removing my clothes. I reach into my pocket and pull out a condom, then throw it onto the bed.

“Scoot farther back,” I command. “Spread those legs and let me see what I'll be sinking my cock into.” Without any pushback, she spreads her legs and shows me her pretty pink pussy. As I start to remove my pants, I catch her hand move down her stomach to her wet center. She starts to slowly circle her clit, moaning in the process.

“Don't you dare make yourself come.” I watch her fingers work feverishly as I sheathe myself with the condom. I climb onto the bed, taking her hand and bringing her fingers to my mouth to lick them clean. She gasps, her mouth wide open in disbelief.

Placing my hand by her head, I use my other hand to guide my cock inside her. And fuck me six ways to Sunday, her pussy swallows my dick whole. Her warmth, her tightness, it's too much. I stall for a moment to try and get control. I look down at her beautiful blonde hair fanned out against the pillows, her blue eyes staring up at me with a need for me to move. To give her that release she's craving.

Bending down, I melt my lips into hers as I slowly start to thrust in and out of her. Her legs come up and lock around me as she works in tandem with me, trying to find that friction.

“Conner, fuck. Harder, please,” she begs. She turns her head, kissing down my jawline until she reaches my ear. I feel her teeth bite down, and that sends me into a frenzy. I piston into her with more force, giving her what she needs.

“Holy shit, baby. Your pussy is fucking ...” I can’t even find the words to finish the sentence. I can feel the sweat start to bead on my forehead as I thrust into her with such force, it causes her to cry out with each punishing push. I’m so close. I can feel the tingle in my spine, the telltale sign that I’m about find my release. I need to get her there with me.

I reach down and find her clit and with my thumb, circling it. “Come all over my cock, baby. Let me feel that pussy come around me. Come, Allie. Come hard for me.”

Allie’s eyes go wide, and I feel her tighten around my dick. “Fuck! Conner! Oh!” Her mouth opens, but no other sound comes out. Her head tips back, and I can feel her pussy convulsing around my dick, sending me over the edge with a roar as I come inside her. My hips thrust once more before I still. There’s no other sounds but our ragged breathing as we both come down from our highs.

Leaning in, I kiss her, still fully inside her, not waiting to move from her warmth just yet. It’s too perfect; she’s too perfect.

I’m totally beyond fucked at this point. And if that means I get to keep doing this with her? Then let me be that fucked.

* * *

A soft snore wakes me up. My eyes slowly peel open to find a blonde beauty with her head laying on my chest and half her body draped over mine. Her leg is wrapped up in between mine, her arm thrown over me. I smile down at her and admire how peaceful she looks, how beautiful she is.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

If I hadn't felt it before, this would have done the job; this would've done me in. I need her. I want to wake up like this next to her. There is no greater feeling than her smooth, creamy skin against mine. Her soft breaths warming my skin. I run my free hand over my face.

I really fucked this up. I never should have taken that bet. If she ever found out about it, she would be fucking crushed. Or maybe I should tell her. Maybe I should let her know what started out as a bet ended with me falling in love with her.

Am I in love with her?

Shaking my head, I try to dispel that thought. I don't know what that actually feels like. I just know that she pulls me to her. There's not a moment I can't stop thinking about her.

Am I pissed off that I met her under the guise of a bet? Yes and no. When I walked into that bar, my eyes immediately picked her out of that crowd. I was drawn to her.

But I also know that I would've probably pushed her away after one date had it not been for this bet. I would have done what I've always done: fuck them and leave. Gotten my dick wet and moved on to the next warm place to put it. But she's different.

Fuck, she can never know about the bet. Even if this goes on, she will never know how this all started.

As I'm lost in thought, I feel her stir.

“Hmm, good morning,” she says with her eyes still closed, but a smile starts to form on her lips.

“Good morning, beautiful. How did you sleep?” I ask as I run my fingers through her hair, placing some behind her ear.

She moves in, shifting herself so she’s closer to my face. “I slept wonderfully. I had someone keeping me warm all night.” Her big, beautiful eyes met mine and instantly turn me into putty.

Turning my head, I mold my lips to hers, softly brushing against her tongue with mine. I pull back and see a huge smile on her face, her eyes still closed.

“I have a question to ask you, Allie.” I run the back of my hand down her cheek.

Her eyes shoot open, and her brows pull together. “Sure. Ask away.”

“Well ...” I shift my arm to her waist and roll us so that she’s underneath me. I pepper her face with kisses, then place my forehead on hers. “My company Christmas party is next Friday. I’d like to know if you would be my date and accompany me to it?”

Her eyes widen. “Y-You want me to go?”

I chuckle. “Yes, I do. I want you next to me. I want to laugh with you, dance with you, and be able to steal a kiss from these lips anytime I want.” Leaning in, I brush my mouth against hers and give her bottom lip a little nibble.

She pulls back just enough so that our noses touch, then brings her hand up to my face. The moment it makes contact, a desire, a fire, rages through me. Every hair on my body stands on end. This woman is it. Allie is everything. I need her in my life.

“I’d love to go, Conner.” Her face lights up.

Saying nothing, I smile back and roll us onto our sides, pulling her into me. Allie snuggles into my chest and lets out a sigh of contentment. Within minutes, I hear her soft little snore.

My hand traces along her back, and my mind starts reeling, making it well known to me that I’m an asshole for making this bet in the first place. It was stupid, and I need to make sure that I tie up any loose ends so she doesn’t find out it was ever a thing.

There’s a feeling that I have crawling around inside the pit of my stomach that I don’t like. It’s a warning, a red flag. If I can do enough defense, I can make sure it never comes to the surface. That this bet never sees the light of day.

The inevitable is coming. I just need to be ready to fix what I’ll end up breaking.

Chapter 13

Allison

It’s only two days before Christmas and I’m giddy with excitement over it. Have I mentioned how much I love this time of year? Well, if I haven’t: I love this time of year. The family, the friends, the festivities. But today even more so because I’m accompanying Conner to his Christmas office party. Well, it’s actually more of a gala type of party. People from all over the city come and donate to help the less fortunate, sponsored by his firm.

I stand in front of the mirror, unsure whether my dress is too much or not enough. Conner explained to me that this was a black-tie event, so I picked what I am hoping will be enough for the evening. I don’t want to overdress, but I also don’t want to underdress. It’s a burgundy satin trumpet mermaid dress with a V-neck and a sweep

train. The entire upper part of the dress is embellished with sequins, including the long lace sleeves of the dress. I throw on black satin shoes and grab my hand purse, making sure I have what I need for the night.

This whole night is kind of a big deal. I mean, Conner and I have really only been together a few weeks, yet he asked me to attend his work holiday party as his date. He's become my sun and moon in such a short amount of time that it's kind of crazy to think about. Do people really move this fast? Do relationships progress this fast? I've never had a relationship with someone that I've been head over heels for, that I loved so fast.

Whoa. Love? Am I in love? Yeah, I think I am. Wow. I'm in love with Conner.

As I'm throwing my diamond studs into my ears and contemplating my sudden realization that I'm in love with him, a soft knock comes from the door. Opening it, I find the man who has stolen my heart standing on the other side, leaving me completely speechless.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

He stands in front of me in a black tuxedo, looking like sin. Black bowtie, white shirt, and a small burgundy handkerchief inside his front pocket of his jacket. He had called a little while ago to ask what color I was wearing, and now I know why.

Realizing my mouth is still wide open, I quickly shut it and step back, letting him inside.

Oh my god, he smells like the fucking ocean.

Conner turns to me once inside, bringing me against his chest and dropping a kiss on my lips.

“You look absolutely stunning, but you’re missing one small thing,” he says against my mouth.

“What? No.” I pull away from him and head over to my full-length mirror. “What am I missing?” I shake my head, looking myself over.

“This,” is all I hear before I see arms come over me and something is placed around my neck. When I look up, I see what he’s fastening to me. A beautiful, graduated drop-down pendant necklace.

“Conner, I—”

“Shh. It’s perfect. It looks beautiful on you.” He smiles at me, then leans in and kisses me on my cheek. “Merry Christmas, Allison.”

I turn with tears in my eyes. “What?”

“It’s your Christmas gift.” He laughs. “You do know about those, right? Santa in a jolly red suit comes down from the chimney and leaves presents under a tree. Except I’m Santa dressed in a tux, and I came in through your front door.” His hands cup my face. “Do you not like it?”

I shake my head, “No. I love it. I-I just ... It’s a gift. I wasn’t expecting ...” I can’t find the words to tell him that it took me by complete surprise and that it means so much that he got something like this for me. He’s done the impossible. He’s rendered me speechless.

Conner leans in and kisses me. “I’m not expecting anything in return.”

“Well, thank you, I love it.” I place my hand over it and smile. My heart warms over his kind gesture.

There’s something so different with Conner. The way my body lights up in his presence, or the way my heart feels like it’s getting ready to burst from my chest. The way my lips burn when his are on them, the air that crackles around us. My senses are always on overload when I’m with him. Conner makes me feel like I’m floating. He warms my heart.

I love him.

* * *

We walk into the ballroom of the hotel and are immediately greeted by a Christmas wonderland. White Christmas lights drop down from the ceiling, twinkling to make it look like it’s snowing. Beautiful green Christmas trees dusted with fake snow and décor are scattered throughout the venue. Lights project snowflakes along the floor

and walls. All the tables are adorned with pristine white tables cloths, and a beautiful display of silver and white ornaments in the shape of a Christmas tree sits in the center surrounded by lit candles.

This place is magnificent. I have goosebumps walking through, I feel as if I'm in an actual winter wonderland.

"Oh my god, Conner, this is beautiful." I look around, trying to take in everything around me.

"They do a great job every year making it a party to never forget." He wraps an arm around my waist. "Let's head over to the bar and grab a drink."

Conner starts to lead me over, but not before we get stopped by three men with drinks in their hands and smiles on their faces.

"Conner! It's about time you got here. And who is this beauty?" One man turns to me and gives me a smile.

"Guys, this is Allison. Allison, these three are my friends: Roland, Jack, and Tommy." Conner points from left to right, starting with the man who smiled at me.

"Oh, it's nice to meet you all." I shake each of their hands, giving them a smile.

Conner looks at me. "Come on, let's go find our table."

"Actually, we have a table over that way by the tree in the corner with a couple of extra seats." Roland smiles.

Conner shrugs and I nod. "Sounds good, Ro. We'll meet you back there." Grabbing my hand, he leads me back to the table while his friends get refills from bar.

“Your friends seem nice. I remember seeing them at Legends with you. How do you guys all meet?”

Conner sighs and smiles. “Well, Roland and I have been best friends since middle school. The other two we met in high school when they moved here. We’re like brothers to each other. We went to college together and have been there through moves, weddings, families, all that.”

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

“Wow. That’s really awesome that you all are so close. I take it they’re all lawyers too? And you said weddings, so are they married?”

“They are lawyers, but for different firms. Well, except Roland. He and I work for the same firm. Tommy works for his father’s firm, and Jack works for another firm in the city.” As we make our way to the table, he pulls out the chair for me to sit. I smooth my dress down and take my seat.

I blush slightly as his hand touches my back when he moves to his chair.

“Jack and Roland are married,” he continues. “Tommy’s engaged to be married.”

“So, you’re the last one holding out.” It wasn’t a question. This was completely an observation. “You’re a playboy, aren’t you?” I giggle.

Before he can respond, his friends walk up to us, with Roland slapping him on the shoulder.

“You up for drinks after?” Roland sits down next to Conner. “Since we’re out, go visit the new club over by Central Park?” He turns to Tommy, “What the hell was it called again?”

“The Vault.” Tommy takes a sip of his drink and sets it in the table.

Conner looks at me. “Would you want to go?”

“Sure. If you want to, that is.”

“There they are.” Jack points behind us. “Our beautiful ladies.” I turn slightly in my chair to see three gorgeous women walking towards us. Seriously, these three are fucking stunning. I sort of feel a little underdressed and plain compared to them.

Conner stands up, extending his hand to mine, and helps me up. “Ladies, it’s good to see you. This here is Allison. Allison, this is Erin, Jack’s fiancé.” I grin at the red-headed beauty. Her skin is peppered in freckles. Her green dress against her fair skin makes her look like a goddess.

“This is Beth, Roland’s wife.” She comes up and hugs me. She’s bouncy, and her smile stretches from ear to ear. She’s in a beautiful silver satin fit and flair dress, and it’s as shiny as her brown wavy hair that’s pulled to one side.

“Last but not least, Trish. Jack’s wife.” Trish reaches out and puts a hand on my arm.

“It’s nice to finally meet you. The woman who has captured the lone playboy.” She turns back to Conner and gives him a wink. Her blonde hair in a beautifully braided bun, her dress a long black gown.

“Thanks, Trish,” Conner scoffs and shakes his head. Well, I guess I was right. Playboy.

“You know I’m just giving you shit.” She wraps her arms around him and hugs him. “If I didn’t give you a hard time, how would you know I loved you?” She tilts her head back and laughs.

“You know, I’m going to go find the bathroom.” I turn to Conner. “I’ll be right back.”

Conner leans in and gives me a kiss. “Hurry back.”

I walk down around the dance floor and outside the ballroom to the nearest bathroom. I can hear Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree playing in the background as I walk into the restrooms. Humming to myself, I find an empty stall and go through the rigorous effort of trying to shift and move what I have to in order to pee. There are days I wish I would just pull down a zipper, grab my stick, and just pee. Today is one of those days. When I finish, I wash up and make my way back into the ballroom.

My heart fills with joy and my senses overloaded all over again as I head back into the winter wonderland all around me.

Have I mentioned I love this time of year?

I return to the table to see the girls sitting there, but the guys are gone.

"Hey. Um, have you seen Conner?" I ask Trish.

She places a hand on my shoulder and offers me a smile. "Yeah. They went onto the balcony off the doors there to have a cigar or something. You know, guy shit."

A giggle rumbles in me at 'guy shit'.

"Thanks, I'll see if I can go locate him." I grin at the women and head to where Trish indicated. I make my way over to the glass doors and open them up. Then I hear voices that sound like the guys.

"Yeah, it's been pretty good." That sounds like Conner's voice, so I start walking towards them.

"Do you think she's in love with you?" That question has me stopping where I stand. Yes, I am. My heart clenches.

“I don’t know, honestly. I really don’t know. She’s a firecracker. I can’t get a read on her.”

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

“Well, you know that winning the bet depends on Allison falling in love with you, so you kinda need to find out.” My world slowly starts to go out of focus, my heart beating fast and my stomach dropping. A bet? What?

“Don’t forget the other half of the bet,” someone pipes in, but I don’t know which one it was.

“Yeah, you know you don’t want to miss out on that sweet prize. You’ve always dreamed of having that Mustang,” one of the guys taunts. He bet on me falling for him for a car? What the actual fuck?

“I mean, I’ve been with her a lot, I’m sure she feels something for me.” Oh, motherfucker, I feel something for you, all right. Anger, hatred, and pure fucking rage are what comes to mind. Conner goes on, “Look, I don’t want to—”

“Well, you need to find out! A bet’s a bet, Conner. Win or lose. You need to find out. You only have a couple more days to do it. Tick tock, man.”

I step around the corner, seething and seeing red. “So, I’m a bet? For what I understand is a car?”

“Well not just any car, it’s a —” My eye daggers keep Roland from even finishing that sentence.

I snap, “This whole thing has been a bet?” My vision begins to blur, but I can see their faces pale before me.

Yeah, motherfuckers, I heard it all.

Conner looks like a deer caught in headlights, his mouth dropping wide open.

“Is this seriously real, Conner? Did you bet on my heart for a fucking car?” My fists curl at my sides, my blood racing through me, my skin feeling like it’s on fire.

“Look, it’s not what you think. I—”

“Oh, it’s exactly what I think, Conner. I heard it with my own two fucking ears. I was a bet. What was the whole bet, Conner?”

I see his Adam’s apple bob as he looks at me. His face has completely paled; he looks almost sickly. “It doesn’t matter.” He shakes his head.

“The fuck it doesn’t, Conner. What was the bet?” I ask again through gritted teeth.

Conner looks down, stalling for a moment trying to find his words. “I had to make you fall in love with me by Christmas. I had to get you to want to marry me.” His voice wavers and grows hoarse.

My breath catches in my throat and my stomach drops. This has all been an act.

This was all a game.

I was a game.

“And you would win this car if I did?” I seethe.

“That’s not important.” He holds up a hand towards me, trying to reach for me.

“Yes, it is. Because that’s what this was worth to you. That’s what I was worth to you. A. Fucking. Car.” I take a step back, trying to keep the distance between us.

“No.” Conner shakes his head. “I mean, that was the bet, yes. But, Allie, it was a stupid bet. Please.”

“Well then I guess you won the bet. Because up until a few minutes ago, Conner, I was not only falling in love with you, but I saw a future with you. Congrats on the win.” Tears slide down my cheeks as I turn on my heels and run back the way I came.

I burst through the doors and sprint down the hall. I hear him calling my name, but I don’t turn back.

How could I have been so stupid? I thought we had something together.

I was wrong. He now has a fucking car, and I have a shattered heart.

Chapter 14

Conner

Ifucked up. I really fucked up. I called out to her and chased her until I was sure it would cause a scene. But I fucked up royally.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

I lost her. And there are no do-overs on this one.

Slowly and with my stomach in complete knots, I make my way back to the balcony where the guys are still standing, waiting. They were probably hoping I would come back with her in my arms. Except I'm sans Allison.

All three of them are silent. Tommy leans against the balcony railing with his arms crossed over his chest, Jack stands there with his hands on his pockets, and Roland has his hand on the back of his neck with his lips turned down as he stares back at me.

"Conner, man, we're so sorry." Roland comes over towards me.

"You had to open up your mouth! You fucking couldn't just wait, could you?" I spit.

"How were we to know? It's not like we thought she would come out here!" Roland fires back.

"Because, Ro. Common fucking sense. She's here, at this function. She's not barred from coming outside. She's free to move about. This should have been a conversation for the office. Or hell, not a conversation at all, because this should never have happened." My voice fades a bit as emotion swirls in me.

"You're right. This is our fault. We can go talk to her, get her back. Tell her it's all our fault," Jack pipes in.

For a moment, I stand there running my hands through my hair, pulling on the ends.

The cool air does nothing to cool my body down. I'm high strung and on edge after that confrontation. I take a deep breath and try to settle the unease in me.

Shaking my head, I turn to the guys. "This isn't your fault. The bet was a stupid idea and should've never taken place. I should've called this off. Fuck. I should've never taken this bet in the first place. I should've known better. I'm a grown ass man who just ruined the best thing to ever happen to him." I run my hands over my face, trying my best to suppress the rage inside me. "I destroyed her."

The hurt in her eyes, the pain in her face. I caused that. I hurt her. For what? A stupid car? A game?

"Look, let us help. We can go and try to smooth things over." Jack comes towards me.

I step back, not really wanting their help in this. This isn't for them to fix. This is my mess. I need to explain to her how much she means to me, how much I care for her. This all got so out of control. That look on her face killed me inside. What did I do?

Swallowing the pit inside my throat, I wave them off. "No. This is on me. I don't need anyone else to step in. I ... I need to go. I need to find her and tell her this was all a mistake and that ..." I trail off, not wanting to finish that sentence. I know the words I want to say, but she gets to hear them first.

Without waiting a single second longer for them to respond, I turn around and march through the hotel, right out to the front. I grab the first taxi that pulls over.

"Please take me to 106 Central Park South as fast as you can," I tell the driver, heaving myself into the back of the cab.

"Sure thing." The man speeds off down the street.

I pick up my phone and try dialing her number. It rings twice and then goes to voicemail. Bringing the phone to my forehead, I sigh. She's rejecting my calls. Hitting her number again on the call log, I call her again. It too goes to voicemail.

"Allison, please just listen. Please pick up the phone and let me talk to you. This was such a mistake. I feel horrible that I did this to you. Please," I beg.

I hang up and try texting her.

Me: Allison, please pick up the phone. I'm so sorry. Please, let me explain.

I wait for the message to show delivered, but it never does. The message failed to deliver. My stomach sinks. She blocked me. No, I can't let her hurt like this. A sharp pain in my heart has me clutching my chest. I destroyed us. How fucking selfish did I have to be? Why?

I fall forward, placing my head in my hands and letting out a huge sigh.

"You okay back there?" the driver asks.

"No. I fucked up. I fucked up big time. Hurt someone. Someone who didn't deserve to even know an asshole like me." My chest starts to tighten again, and I sit up, rubbing my hand over my cold, dead heart.

"Ah, give her time to process. But don't stop showing her how much she means to you. My wife, I always do something to piss her off. She'll ignore me, not talk to me, sometimes for a couple of days. Hell, I'm pretty sure she's called me every horrible name there is. But I admit my faults. I never claimed to be perfect. So, I'll bring her flowers, cards, make her dinner, whatever. It eventually softens her enough to get her to talk to me.

“Love’s complicated. You have to fight for it sometimes. The sucky thing is, you can fight for thirty minutes or months on end. She’s worth fighting for if you love her. No matter how long it takes.” I see his shoulders quickly raise up and down with laughter.

“I don’t know if it’s love,” I say as I stare out the window.

“How could it not be? You wouldn’t be this upset, this determined to get to her. Listen, buddy, we don’t do things like this for anyone. We don’t act crazy for everyday people. The ones we love, the ones who become part of our heart, part of our soul, those are the ones we fight for. Those are the ones we will do anything to never let them out of our lives. We’d do anything to love them.”

Letting out a sigh, I sit back and lean my head against the headrest. The rest of the drive is silent as Allie flashes in my mind. The betrayal that crossed her face when she found out what I did to her. Her beautiful features twisted in pain. The blue eyes dulled. That look almost killed me.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

We pull up to the outside of her building. I throw a hundred his way and run out of the taxi. As I make my way up the stairs, I nod to the doorman as he opens the glass doors for me.

I run over to the elevators and hit Allison's floor. It's the longest elevator ride of my life. Everything inside me is twisting, my head is pounding, and my heart is racing with nerves.

Please be home, please.

When I finally do reach her floor, I bolt out of the elevator and run up to her door. Taking a deep breath, I knock.

I listen for any tiny bit of sound coming from inside, but there's nothing.

"Allison, if you're in there, please let me in. Or ... or please just open the door and let me explain. I'll stay right here, outside your door. Please, Allie, let me explain." I lean forward, putting my head on the door. "I'm so sorry." My voice comes out in a whisper, emotion creeping up my throat as I try to hold back myself from completely losing it. "I'm so sorry, baby."

Nothing. Nothing stirs beyond that door. Either she's in there, as quiet as a mouse, or she went somewhere else.

I turn around and sink down to the floor. I have never felt so low. I'm a horrible person for making that fucking bet. For hurting Allison. She didn't deserve it. Tears start to form in the corners of my eyes. I don't deserve her.

Wiping the tears away, I push myself up off the floor. I take a deep breath and slowly exhale. There's no way I can let this be the end of us. Thirty minutes or fucking thirty years, I'll get her back.

Then I'll spend the rest of my life making it up to her.

I'm not giving up on us.

Chapter 15

Allison

A warm feeling on my face makes me stir. As I slowly open my eyes, I can see a bright light shining through opened curtains beaming down on me. Goddamn it, why aren't my curtains closed? It's at that moment I realize the reason. I take a look around, finding I'm not in my own bed.

Running my hands under my eyes, I feel the roughness of the dried-on makeup I didn't take off from last night.

Last night.

My stomach rolls as I remember what happened. The horrid sounds of their laughter, the comments, and the fucking bet. Then there's the look of being caught, the very look that Conner had when he turned and saw me standing there. The reality of what he did slammed in his face.

My heart, my feelings for him were all based on a bet. That man buttered me up and got me to be head over heels in love with him just to turn around and throw it all in my face. All to win a fucking car.

A fucking car!

Looking around at Lacy's place, I let out a groan. When I left the hotel last night, I immediately came here to her apartment. I called her from the cab in tears, and she rushed home from her date to meet me here.

More tears start pooling in my eyes again as I replay all this in my mind.

When she got me up to her apartment last night, she made me some tea, and I explained to Lacy everything that went down. How betrayed I felt, how my heart hurt. She was livid. But then she told me she felt awful because she felt she forced us to go on a date. I tried to explain that it wasn't her fault, that it was one hundred percent Conner and his band of assholes who were to blame. We eventually graduated from tea to the adult drinks and then proceeded to drink and stuff our faces with pizza.

Now I sit here on her lumpy ass couch unsure of what to think or do.

Damnit. It's Christmas Eve.

Tears fall down my cheeks as I silently let myself cry. My chest shakes as I sob into my hands. I was supposed to go with him to his family's holiday get together for dinner tonight. Get to know his mother, his family. Get to know more about him.

How heartless do you need to be to play with a person like that? Make them feel things for you for the sake of a game? I've never felt more used in my life, more hurt.

I throw the blanket off and swing my legs over the cushions, placing them on the floor. I pick up my phone that I had turned off last night once I called Lacy. I knew I would have voicemails or text messages, and I wasn't strong enough in that moment to just ignore them if they came in.

I knew my heart would cave at the sound of the first ring, wanting to ask him why. There was no doubt I would have lost my cool and yelled obscenities like a crazy person until I broke down again. No, I needed to be stronger, stand taller. I needed the night to find my inner bitch and reconstruct the wall around my heart.

After I turn my phone on, it immediately lights up with missed voicemails and messages. I click on the voicemails and see one from him. Bringing the phone up to ear, I brace myself for the sick feeling I'll get when I hear him.

“Allison, please. Just listen. Please pick up the phone and let me talk to you. This was such a mistake. I—” I quickly delete the message.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

A mistake is absolutely the right word in this situation. My stomach turns as I pull up the text messages.

Conner: Allison, please pick up the phone. I'm so sorry. Please, let me explain.

Deleting the message, I immediately go into my contacts and block his number.

Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me. I won't give him the chance to even try to fool me for a second time. Well, actually, I really am the fool. We called them do-overs, but really, they were just ways to figure out how to worm his way into my heart. I allowed him back in every time.

"Hey, you're finally up." Lacy comes out of her bathroom drying her hair with a towel. She's dressed in a t-shirt and shorts as she walks over and sits down next to me. "How are you feeling, sweetie?"

Shaking my head, my lip starts to tremble. "Not good. I don't like this feeling. I don't like that I feel I had something great ripped from me. My heart ... I fell for him. I loved him. And now it's just gone, and my heart feels like it's cracking. Is this what the guys I dated felt? When I told them no?"

"No." She scoots closer to me wrapping her arm around my shoulder. "You were in a dating situation. No one was using anyone as part of a bet. Those just didn't work out. It's completely different. This was a cruel joke betweenboys." She emphasizes the word boys. And she's right, that is something boys do, not men.

"Yeah, you're right." I let out a sigh. "I just hurt. My heart hurts. He didn't seem like

he was this cruel of a person. I mean, he told me the story of his dad, and then with the ice skating, he just didn't seem like a cruel person." I shake my head, as if I'm trying to convince myself that this didn't happen. But it did.

"What's the saying? 'Wolf in sheep's clothing?' He was just playing the role of doting boyfriend." She squeezes me and pulls me closer.

I feel like I'm suffocating. My body starts to get jittery, and I feel hot and lightheaded. I need to go, to run out of here and get some fresh air.

I say, "You know, I think I'm going to go for a walk and then figure out what I'm going to do tonight now that my plans have changed."

"Why don't you come to mine? You know you're family to us. No one should be alone." Lacy takes my hands in hers and pleads with me, her eyes soft.

"Fine. But then I really do need to go because I need to get dressed and all that." I stand up and grab my stuff from the chair next to the couch. I'm so thankful that Lacy and I are about the same size. I really didn't want to head home in the same outfit I left in.

"Okay. Be there around five. Dinner's at six."

Leaning in, I hug her and let out a long breath. "Thank you. Love you, Lacy."

"I love you, Allie."

With that, I head down and out of the building, out onto W 57th Street. The air is bitter cold, and I can see my breath in front of me like last night. People are walking down the street with wrapped gifts and Christmas bags in hand, more last minute shoppers trying to find that perfect gift they waited to get. Snowflakes fall from the

sky, giving the city a fresh layer of the white powder for all the holiday festivities tonight. I let out a long sigh.

I don't live far from Lacy; it's just a few minutes' walk to my place. So instead of grabbing a taxi, I decide I need the walk to think and process everything. Beginning my trek down to 6th Avenue, I keep my head down just enough to avoid bumping into anyone.

My mind wanders back to the stroll I took with Conner. We had made a connection that night, or at least I thought we did. He opened up to me, told me some personal things about his dad. Instead, it was all a ruse. He played the game.

For a car.

Looking up and around, I catch some of the Christmas decorations on the buildings around me. Fake trees adorned with lights and colorful ball ornaments, windows with fake snow sprayed on the inside, lights and garland placed around the edges. None of it makes me feel happy today.

My Christmas spirit is completely on the decline. I would just lock myself up in my apartment if I knew it wouldn't make Lacy feel even worse about the whole situation.

Crossing the street, I head up 6th Avenue, and my mind drifts back to the night he took me ice skating. I was so sure that he was it for me. His touch, his lips on mine, the air that crackled around us, it was all so much. But it felt so right.

My stomach turns at the thought of how Conner duped me. I can feel the ball of emotions in my throat trying to push its way out. I swallow it down and keep walking along the bustling sidewalk. Head down, keep walking.

When I get to my street, I head towards my apartment as quickly as I can. I need my

sanctuary; I need my bed to cry in. A hot shower and a shot of fireball to help drown the anger and pain.

The loss and the hurt.

That's what gets me the most. I went along for the ride. I bought the idea of him. Hook, line, and sinker. There isn't one thing he can tell me that would change that.

My mind has already written him off. My shattered heart still needs to get the memo, but that will just take time.

It's hard to turn off the love you had for someone.

Chapter 16

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

Allison

It's after midnight and finally Christmas Day. There should be excitement in the air, a giddiness inside me, and Christmas music slowly lulling me to sleep.

I should be curled up with Conner.

Instead, I'm just waiting for this whole day to be over with. Today has been sullied by Conner and his band of assholes. That bet deadline was today; I had to fall in love with him, want to marry him. And I did. I did fall in love with him, and I did see a future with him.

Let me state for the record: Idid. For obvious reasons, that will never happen. Now I stand here, looking down at the necklace he gave me that's laying on the coffee table, and willing my heart to stop cracking. I just need to get through to today. Next year this will all be different. He will be a distant memory. Now I'm just waiting on the clock to strike midnight and for it to be December 26th.

Tonight was a nice break from the drama. Christmas Eve dinner with Lacy and her family was comfortable and relaxing. Since no one brought up Conner, I'm assuming Lacy let them know what was going on. Instead, everyone cracked jokes, told stories, and reminisced about past holidays together. Like every year, Mrs. Boyd wait for me to hang the ornament she got me to remember my parents by: a small picture frame ornament with their picture inside of it.

For tonight, I was able to forget about Conner in the moment. I was able to just feel like myself again, feel a smidge of happiness again.

Changing out of my dress, I slip on some fleece pants and a Supernatural t-shirt. Normally I would be decked out in Christmas pajamas, but like I said, I'm just waiting for it to be tomorrow. Walking into the kitchen to grab a water, there's a knock that startles me at my door. Looking at the clock on the stove, I see that it's a quarter to one in the morning.

Who the fuck is here at one in the morning?

I stand at the door and look out the peephole. Instantly, my mouth goes dry, and my eyes widen. My heart starts to beat wildly out of my chest at the sight of the last person on this earth I wanted to see.

Conner.

"What the hell are you doing here? Do you have any idea what time it is?" I hiss through the door.

"Hi to you too." He chuckles.

"I don't know what you're laughing at, Conner. Is my misery funny to you?" I snap through gritted teeth.

"No. Allison, please, I'm so sorry. Please let me in. Let me talk to you, explain everything," Conner pleads through the door.

"No way! You're insane if you think I want you anywhere near me. Go back to your band of misfits. Go enjoy your holiday and leave me to mine."

He laughs. "Band of Misfits. I like that." I can see him smiling and shaking his head. "Look, I'm already here and ready to explain. And if you want, I can talk loudly out in the hall with everything I have to get out. I'm sure your neighbors won't mind. It'll

be like reality T.V. A real-life drama. But at least I'd be able to get it all off my chest."

I let a growl escape and place my forehead against the door. He's right. I can either let him talk until they remove him from the building, pissing my neighbors off in the process, or I can just let him in.

Tipping my head back for a moment, I let out a sigh and I reach for the locks on my doors. I unlock them, but I don't open the door. He's a big boy, and he can handle opening a fucking door.

Walking away and heading into my living area, I hear him slowly come in behind me.

"Say what you came to say and then get out, Conner," I seethe with my back still turned to him. I close my eyes for a moment, trying to gain control of my features and body. Both of which are betraying my right now. The stoic façade I've put on is slipping fast being this close to him, hearing his voice, seeing his face.

The door shuts, and I hear his shoes against the floor. I walk closer to the Christmas tree, trying to gain as much distance as I can get between us.

"Allie—"

"Allison. My name is Allison." Is it petty? Probably, but he doesn't get to call me that nickname. He lost that privilege when he broke my heart.

He sighs, "Allison. I'm sorry. So very sorry."

"Yeah, I'm sure you are. Did you have to give up the car? I'd be sorry too. Was it a nice car that you stomped all over my heart for?"

Bile rises in my throat, and I try to keep force it back down. He can take his sorry and shove it up his very good-looking ass. Sorry just won't cut it.

"I miss you. I miss your laugh, your smile. I miss kissing you—"

"How can you miss something you were going to throw away at the first sign of a win?" I spin to face him. "How can you miss someone you were using to gain something from? How can you miss a lie, Conner? How can you miss a heart you obliterated by your selfish ass fucking bet?" Tears are starting to threaten to break free, and it takes everything in me to get the words out without choking up.

"Shit, Allison, I hate myself for hurting you. What I did was god fucking awful. I'm disgusted at myself for agreeing to that." He runs his hands through his hair, pulling slightly at the ends in frustration. He frowns at me.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

“That? That? Call it what it is, Conner: a bet. You’re disgusted at yourself for the bet. A bet to mind fuck someone into loving you.” That’s it. The dam has given way, and the tears are streaming down my cheeks. I must look pathetic.

Conner hangs his head and runs a hand along the back of his neck. “A bet. I’m disgusted at myself for agreeing to it. It even sounds disgusting rolling off my tongue. I hate myself for hurting you because of it.” He looks up at me with a longing in his eyes. “I’m so sorry. Truly.”

I sneer, “You’re sorry? That’s supposed to make everything all better?” I can feel my nostrils flaring, the anger in my veins boiling over. “You broke down my walls, you made me fall in love with you only to find out that all you planned to do was crush my heart into dust! You broke everything in me.”

“No. I never wanted to do that. I never wanted to hurt you.”

“That may not have been the intention, but Conner, you bet on the emotions of a person. Not the outcome of a football game, or a horse, you bet on the heart of a human being. You had the power to stop it, to say no, and you didn’t. You kept on going, getting me to fall for you.”

My bottom lip quivers as I watch him stand there in front of me. There are black circles under his eyes, his beard unshaven, his face looks pale and tired. He looks like he’s been through hell, but I can’t let myself think about that. I need to focus on what he did so I don’t cave and feel bad for him.

“Actually, when the guys went out there with me, I was going to break it to them that

the game was over. That it was obviously wrong to be with. But ... Shit. The guys fucking started going off before I could stop it. Asking questions and before I knew it, you were standing behind me. I was ending it, no bet. It was over. Fuck, Allison, these have been the best few weeks of my life.” Conner runs his hands over his face, his eyes glassy and filled with sadness.

“They were the best few weeks of my life,” I murmur sadly. It’s taking everything in me to keep my emotions at bay. My hands shake in front of me, and I close my eyes for a moment. Nothing about what he said makes me not believe him; I genuinely think he was going to end it. But the fact that he started our relationship because of the bet still stings.

Opening my eyes, I see him take a small step forward towards me. He reaches out, his warm soft hands cupping the sides of my face. A small tear falls from the corner of his eye.

“Allison, I mean everything I’m about to say, and I will spend every single minute of my life proving it to you. What may have started off as some juvenile bullshit turned into something real for me and I think you as well.”

“But how do I know this isn’t another part of the bet? How do I know you’re not going to leave me, or that this is all a joke?” I whisper.

His scent surrounds me, his eyes lock in on mine. There’s a sense of vulnerability in them.

Conner frowns. “There’s nothing I can say to make you see that I won’t ever hurt you again. Actions speak louder than words. So, let me show you. Give me the chance to spend every day showing you how sorry I am and how much I love you.”

“What?” My eyes widen at his declaration.

“I love you, Allison. Let me show you how in love with you I am.” Conner’s voice is hoarse, filled with emotion.

It’s at that moment I feel my heart warm. The pieces of my heart slowly are putting themselves back together.

Because I can’t lie to myself. I love him too.

Chapter 17

Allison

Conner places his fingers under my chin, lifting my head up. His eyes shift from mine to my lips and then back to my eyes. “Let me show you. I want to show you how much I love you, Allie. Let me make love to you,” he whispers as he leans in and brushes his lips against mine. The air crackles around us, making me heady.

I suck in a quick breath, and he crashes down onto me. He works against my lips like he has been starved of them. His hands tip my head up further, giving him better access to my mouth.

He groans against me, pulling away just enough to whisper, “I missed your lips.”

Conner’s hands thread through my hair, his body pressed up against mine. His lips once again reconnecting with my own, our tongues dancing. His touch makes every inch of my skin burn with desire. There’s no denying how much I missed his touch. That I need him as much as he needs me. And that scares me.

Do I give in right now? Do I let him back in? Give him the chance to show me that he truly did make the mistake and that he does really love me? Can I let him heal what he broke?

Conner pulls back slightly, resting his forehead against mine. Both of us are breathing heavy as we try to catch our breaths.

“I’m so sorry, Allie. I don’t expect you to forgive me, and if you want me to leave, I will. But I needed you to know how I truly felt. I needed you to know that I love you. If you want me to go ...”

My eyes meet his as another tear falls from his eyes. My body is pressed up against his, and I can feel his heart beating frantically in his chest. Every muscle of his is shaking, waiting on pins and needles for me to send him away or tell him to stay.

My lower lip trembles, and my fist wraps around his button-down shirt, my teary eyes never leaving his. “Please, don’t destroy my heart,” I whisper.

Conner shakes his head. “Never again, Allie. Never again.”

Before I can respond, his lips steal mine as he turns me. We move in sync until my back hits the nearest wall. His fingers find the hem of my t-shirt, and he breaks the kiss as he lifts it up over my head. His warm hands land on my hips as his body thrusts against mine. My whole being heats up against him.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

“Fuck, I missed you. I missed you against me, Allie,” he says into the crook of my neck.

As my head tips back against the wall, his lips travel down my neck, his tongue tasting every inch of skin along the way. His right hand slowly travels up, his fingertips leaving goosebumps in their wake. Conner’s hand cups my left breast, his thumb softly grazing over my hardened nipple.

His lips continue their decent as they find my other breast. His mouth latches onto my bud, and he softly swirls his tongue around it, sucking it slightly. Conner hums with my nipple in his mouth, the vibrations making me moan.

Between this thumb and his mouth, my legs are trying to ease the need between them. I can feel my pussy throbbing, wanting the attention that it’s not getting. My hands find his head, and I gently try to push him lower.

Conner lets out a hoarse laugh. “I’ll get there, Allie. Trust me, I want to bury my face into that pretty pussy of yours, but relax. Let me take care of you.” With that, I feel his hands move to the waist of my pants, his mouth taking turns sucking on my breasts. “So fucking beautiful, Allie.”

Slowly, and with the obvious intention of torturing me, he pushes my fleece pants down my legs, helping each leg out of them. His hands travel back up my thighs, igniting every nerve ending on fire. His fingers move closer to my very wet and needy center.

“Please, Conner,” I groan and look down at him. His eyes are hooded as he moves his

mouth closer.

A low growl escapes his lips when I feel him press his mouth to my soaked panties. The friction is enough to make me moan again.

“You’re soaked, Allie.” I feel his tongue press against my clit through my panties, causing me to let out a low groan. “Have I ever told you how wonderful you taste? How I love having you explode against my face? I love tasting you on my lips.”

My hands try to push him closer, trying to give myself his face to grind against. My entire body’s vibrating with need. My breathing’s ragged, and my vision’s blurred with tears from the need of release. His head pulls back a bit as his eyes swimming with desire look up at me.

Conner starts to kiss up my thigh, giving it soft bites as he goes along. His fingers travel to the band of my panties, and he pulls them off me. Before they hit the ground somewhere behind him, his face is buried in my pussy. Like a moth to a flame, he immediately starts working his mouth against me. Conner grabs my leg, swinging it over his shoulder to allow him better access.

I throw my head back against the wall again as I feel his tongue swirling around my clit. His lips close around it, sucking it as his finger pushes up inside me, curling around the perfect spot. His tongue licks up along my slit as he flattens it against my clit. My eyes roll into the back of my head.

“Oh my god, Conner. Please don’t stop. I’m so close.” I grind against his face and hand, slowly reaching that precipice.

Conner hums against me, “You wanna come for me, baby? Explode all over my face?” He wraps his lips around my clit, his teeth softly scraping against it. He pulls back slightly and slips a second finger inside me. My body burns, and my heart’s

racing as I get closer to my release. His fingers pick up the pace as he hooks them inside, pressing harder against my spot. I'm so close.

"Come for me, Allie." His face moves back against me, his tongue, his fingers all working me towards the cliff.

My body obeys as I immediately fall into a bliss. I scream his name as I crash over that wall as wave after wave of pleasure seeps through every inch of my body. My legs squeeze him against me. When I finally come down, Conner stands up and attacks my lips with his. Tasting myself on him sends a thrill through me, making me try to pull him closer to me.

"I need you. Please. I need to feel you, Conner," I beg.

"I've got you, sweetheart. I'm going to love on every inch of you." He nuzzles his nose against mine, then kisses the corners of my mouth.

Conner grabs my legs and wraps them around his waist as he pulls me against him. He walks us over to my bed, where he gently lays me down.

He stands up and starts to strip off his clothes. His eyes stay locked onto me as he unbuckles his belt, dropping it to the floor with a clank. Next, he pulls his shirt out from his pants, unbuttoning it and throwing it behind him. His hands dip into his pockets as he brings out a condom and throws it on the bed. He makes quick work to remove every last stitch of clothing that's left on him. Soon he stands there beautifully naked, like chiseled perfection carved from the gods.

Stroking his hard cock, Conner stalks over to the bed. Climbing on the mattress, he hovers over me. He leans down and kisses me slowly, his body grinding against mine. My hands run down his back, grazing every hard, taunt muscle.

“Hm, you feel so good. Your skin’s so soft, baby,” Conner whispers in my ear. He starts to shift slightly to grab the condom, but I place my hands on his face and pull him back.

“No condom, Conner. I’m clean and on the pill.”

Conner nods. “I’m clean too. Are you sure?”

“Yes. I want to feel all of you. Please,” I beg.

His face breaks out into a grin. “Then you’ll get to feel every inch of me.”

He places his forehead against mine as he grabs himself, slowly directing it between my slick folds. He slowly pushes his hardness inside of me, grunting as he bottoms out. My mouth forms an “O”, but no sound comes out as I try to adjust to his thickness inside me.

“Damnit, Allie. You feel so good. Fuck,” he whispers against my lips. “I’m going to need to start off slow, or we won’t last five seconds.” He chuckles. He starts to slowly push in and out of me, starting the sparks of the inferno between us. Our breathing is ragged, and I can see the beads of sweat starting to form on his forehead.

A moan leaves my lips. There’s a burning fire building inside me. Conner peppers kisses along my jawline, down my neck as he rocks against me. My arms wrap around the back of his neck, trying to hold him close to me. Our bodies work together to rock ourselves to complete ecstasy.

“I can feel you clenching my cock, baby. Are you going to come all over it for me?”

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

“Yes. Conner, faster. Please, I need to come,” I breathe out.

Conner starts to thrust into me harder and faster. I tip my hips up slightly, wrapping my legs around him and creating the friction I need to help me fall into heavenly bliss.

He drops his head next to mine, growling as he pushes deep inside me. His arms move under me as he wraps himself around me, trying to bring me closer to him. Our skin is sweaty and hot, our breathing rough and fast. We’re both chasing our highs.

“Allie, baby,” he groans into my ear. The vibrations send a shockwave through my body, pushing me towards the finish line.

“I’m coming, Conner. Oh fuck, I—” My mind goes blank as I feel the edge coming. All words cease to exist; all I can do is feel. My mouth drops open as I feel the heat build up, my body vibrating around him. Stars start to fill my vision.

“That’s it, come for me,” he groans into my skin, still working himself in and out of me. My whole body responds to his command.

My vision goes white, and my body stills as my orgasm rocks me. Conner follows me, his body stiffening above me as he releases inside of me. For a moment, he stays hovered over me, not wanting to pull away from our moment. He gently kisses me as I feel him start to soften inside me.

Conner falls to the side, pulling me with him. Wrapping his arms around me, we both lay there catching our breaths, our gazes locked.

Brushing my hair away from my face, he cups my cheek. “I love you, Allie. I’m so sorry for all the pain I caused you. I promise I’ll do everything I can to make it up to you. I’ll never hurt you again, baby. Never again. Please, please forgive me. I’m so sorry.” His voice wavers with emotion, and his eyes water with unshed tears.

My heart swells as I watch him. My own tears start to fall from my eyes, my emotions spilling over. I nod. “You’re forgiven. Conner, I love you too.”

I’m not sure how long we lay there for, but no words are needed. All we need is each other. In this moment and in every moment from here on out.

My eyes start to grow heavy as we lay there.

“Sleep. I’ll be right here when you wake. I promise,” Conner whispers to me, pulling me closer into him. “Merry Christmas, Allie.”

“Merry Christmas, Conner.”

Epilogue

Allison

One year Later

It’s the twenty-third of December, and I’m behind on all my shopping for this year. So is Lacy. It wasn’t on purpose, though. We’ve been so busy at work that the holidays have taken a bit of a back seat. But today we made some time to not only start but finish up and spend the night eating greasy food and wrapping gifts.

As I sit on my couch finishing up my latest romance read, *Chased Beyond the Tide* by N. Dune, there’s a knock at the door.

“Coming!” I yell back. I throw my Kindle down on the coffee table and jump up.

“Let’s go, woman! We’ve got a schedule to keep!” Lacy calls through the door.

Smiling, I fling the door open. “Really?”

She shoots me an exasperated look. “Yeah. We’re on a deadline! Christmas is in a couple days. We don’t have a lot of time. Plus, I’m starving. Feed me or I’ll be hangry the entire time.”

“Oh no. We definitely don’t want that. Pushy Lacy I can deal with. Hangry Lacy, nope. Nobody wants that.” Shaking my head, I let out a laugh. “Besides, I’m hungry too.”

“Legends then?” She tilts her head to the side.

I jump around with excitement. “Yes! Fried pickles here I come!”

“Starting on the greasy food early?” Lacy shakes her head.

“Well, yeah. Today’s a day of all the good stuff. Fried pickles being one of the many good things in this world. Well, then there’s you. And Conner. I declare it, so it’s true. Today is ‘Good Stuff Day’.” I love that man with every fiber of my being.

Lacy gives me a wicked grin. “You love that man.”

Nodding and feeling a blush start to spread over my cheeks, I smile at her. “I do.”

Page 32

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

Lacy loops her arm into mine. “Let’s go, girly. Fried pickles are waiting for us.”

* * *

When we get to Legends, I walk into a completely different ambiance than I’m used to. Normally at this time of year, it would look like Christmas threw up in here. But right now, I have no idea what’s going on. Looking around, the bar is completely covered in twinkle lights and roses.

“What is going on here?” I turn to Lacy, who has backed off, her hands clasped in front of her face, failing to hide her smile as her eyes flick behind me. I turn and find Tommy standing in front of me. His arms behind him, his head bent down slightly.

Over the past year, the guys have done nothing but apologize for their childish actions. Also, when their significant others found out, they were in the doghouse for a long ass time. Trish made Jack sleep in the backyard in a tent, Beth made Roland write a thousand times ‘I won’t be an asshole’, and Erin packed Tommy a suitcase and made him go to his parents and tell them what he did. That did not go over well. But in the end, we have all become closer, and I eventually forgave the band of merry assholes. Also, I still call them that. They earned that name, so they’re stuck with it.

“Tommy? Hey! What’s going on?” My eyebrows pull together in confusion. I look back and forth between Tommy and Lacy, completely at a loss of words.

“Allison, please take this as an apology and a token of all that’s special about you.” Tommy brings his arms around and hands me a single rose.

“I don’t understand. An apology for what?” I reach out, taking the rose from him.

“From the moment he walked into the bar that day, you captivated him. Stopped him dead in his tracks. You make Conner a better man. What started out as a bet turned into a life-changing meeting. While I’ll forever be sorry that you met him over a bet, I’ll never be sorry that you and him found each other.”

My eyes start to sting with unshed tears. I’m totally lost on what’s going on, but this is incredibly sweet. “Tommy, I already forgave you. This is wonderful, but I don’t get what’s happening.”

Tommy smiles. “From here on out, you will be sent on a bit of trip down memory lane. For your next memory, you need to head to the place where you had your first date with Conner.”

My mouth drops open and I turn from Tommy to Lacy. “What’s going on?”

Lacy throws her arms out, “Memory lane, babe. Memory fucking lane. Ready for the trip of a lifetime?” When I don’t say anything, Lacy does for me. “Come on. Let’s hit the next spot!” She grabs my hand and leads me out of the bar, then hails a taxi. We hop in, letting the driver know we’re headed to The Bar. The site of our first date.

“Lacy ...” I still can’t find my words, but my face must say it all.

“All will be revealed.” She waves her hand in front of her like she’s a magician. I shake my head with a rueful smile and blindly stare out the window.

My mind moves at the speed of light trying to process everything that just went down. Before I have a chance to ask any more questions, we pull up in front of the Baccarat Hotel.

Without saying a word, I get out and immediately walk inside and around to The Bar. Sitting at the table that Conner and I sat at on our first date is Jack. Slowly, I stroll up to the table and slide down on the bench against the wall, my heart beating rapidly.

“Hi, Allison.” Jack has a wide smile plastered on his face as he gives me a small nod. “This is for you.” He produces a rose and hands it to me. Taking it from him, I add it to the one that I’ve had a death grip on since Legends.

“Jack, what’s going on?”

“This was the first night he realized he needed to know more about you. He was so relieved that you actually came out to meet him. That you gave him a chance. Full disclosure, we actually had a bet on if you would show or not.” I narrow my eyes at him. “Conner had no idea, but yeah.” Jack pauses for a moment, his fingers tapping on the table. “I’m sorry that it started out the way it did, but I’m so glad it didn’t keep you two from being with each other.”

There’s a swelling in my chest as I think about Conner. I’m doing all I can to fight the tears trying to break through. My entire body is wrecked with emotion at this point. I sit there shaking, gripping the roses as tight as I can. Breaking eye contact with Jake, I look up at Lacy whose eyes have also gone glossy.

Jake starts to talk again, pulling my attention back to him, “I heard that you need ice skating lessons. Here.” He plops a ticket in front of me. “I just so happen to have a ticket for you.” I look down and see it’s for The Rink.

I grab the ticket and jump out of my seat, eager to get to the next spot. Will Conner be there? Or will it be another rose? Lacy calls after me, running to try to catch up. As I hail a taxi, she finally catches me and we slide in, giving directions to the driver.

My mind turns with everything that has happened so far. Questions roll through, my

thoughts lost in the possibilities. We pull up to The Rink, and I quickly pay the driver and jump out. Lacy speeds up right behind me. Once inside, I grab some skates, hurriedly throw them on, and get out onto the ice.

Standing against the railing, I hold on for dear life as I look for Conner. My head darts back and forth trying to look through all the commotion, but I don't see him. A voice to my left grabs my attention.

"Allison." Roland skates over to me. "Hey there." He smiles as he hands me another rose. "For you."

"Roland, where's Conner?"

"Waiting for you. But before I tell you where, I have something to say." He moves closer to the railing. "I'm so sorry for the pain we caused you. There will never be anything I'm more sorry for than what happened. But I'm not sorry that my best friend fell in love with you."

Damn, now I'm crying. Like, full-on crying. "Roland—"

"When he brought you here, he wanted to create a new memory of this place with someone special. You know the story of what this rink means to him, and he wanted to give it a new meaning. He did that with you. That's what he wants to do, create memories with you for years to come."

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

I wipe the tears from my eyes. I look down at the roses, my heart ready to burst from my chest.

“Lacy is going to take you home and get you ready for something special. Your final trip down memory lane.” Roland leans in and hugs me. “We love you, Allison.” He winks at me and grins. Looking up, I see Lacy waving at me to get a move on.

Once I’m safely off the ice and we’re back in the taxi, I turn to her. “What’s happening? Why all of this?”

“What’s happening is Conner is making sure you remember what got you here.” She shrugs.

We pull up to my apartment and hustle inside up to my floor.

“Do you still have the dress you wore for his Christmas party last year? You know, the day it all went to hell?” Lacy looks at me as I unlock my door.

“Yeah, why?” I furrow my brows, and the side of my mouth pulls up.

“Put that on. Those are the directions.” She gives me a sly smile. “Come on. I’ll help you with your hair.”

An hour and a half later, we come up to the hotel. I swallow over the lump in my throat and look up at the place where my world fell apart a year ago.

“What are we doing here?” I ask as we get out the taxi. My nerves are shot, and my

stomach is doing somersaults as I balk at the last place I want to be.

“Go in.” Lacy pushes me towards the door.

I shake my head. “Lacy, this ... Why would he bring me here?”

She grabs me by the shoulders and turns me towards the doors. “Go in and find out. I’ll be right behind you.”

I hesitantly walk towards the doors. My entire body is vibrating with apprehension. The only thing keeping me moving forward is knowing that Lacy is behind me. Which means she knows and she’s okay with everything.

When I get inside to the ballroom, there are candles lit everywhere. The lights are so low that the glow from the candles does most of the work to illuminate the space. My eyes try to take in the ambiance, but I can feel a nervousness that makes my stomach drop. I turn to my left as I scan the candles and see a carpeted walkway adorned with more flickering displays.

The balcony.

I slowly make my way along the red carpet, feeling like royalty with each step I take. I get to the glass door and push them open to a beautifully decorated balcony. Roses fill the planters, and petals are strewn about all over the stone floor. A balcony of roses.

I gasp at the scene around me. Recalling the text message from a year ago, and seeing it come to life before me. Tears start to well in my eyes when I hear a voice behind me.

“Allie, baby.”

Turning, I see Conner dressed in a beautiful black tuxedo, like the one he was wearing a year ago.

“Conner.” It’s all I can get out. My voice is weak, and my heart is beating out of my chest. My hands are shaking, and I’m doing all I can not to break down in tears.

“I know you’re wondering why I brought you here, of all places.” Conner comes up and take hold of my hands. All I can do is nod. “That night one year ago was the worst mistake of my life, and I know I broke us. I can never erase that memory from our history. I can never take away the hurt and the pain I caused you. And I’ll never forget that look on your face, the sadness and betrayal that was etched into your beautiful features. I never meant to destroy your trust in me.” Conner shakes his head.

“So, why are we here then?” My words come out in a whisper.

“I can’t erase the memory of what happened here, but I can create a new one.” Before I realize what he’s doing, he gets down on one knee and pulls out a black box.

Oh my god. My mouth drops open, and my vision starts to blur with tears.

“That night, I was going to tell you that I loved you. I knew from the moment I saw you in that bar ... you captivated me. I brought the guys out here to tell them the deal was off, but before I could, you overheard. And at that moment, my whole world crumbled.”

Conner takes a deep breath, his eyes getting misty.

“I love you, and I’ll do everything in my power to never let you feel anything less than the love you deserve from me. You mean the world to me, Allie. I wanted you to relive those memories from a year ago so that we could make a new memory here. I want to fix the past and give you a new way to remember this place.”

“Conner ...”

He opens the box to a beautiful princess-cut diamond ring. “Marry me, Allie. Be my wife and let me love you forever.” His voice wavers with emotion, and small tears fall from his eyes.

Page 34

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:50 am

My hands cross over my chest as I let out a sob. “Oh my god, Conner. Yes. Yes!” I cry out.

He jumps up, and his hands go to my face, pulling me in for a kiss. “I love you, Allie.”

Before I can respond, I hear cheers come from above us. I look up and see our friends and family standing on the balcony above ours, jumping and clapping.

“Um, were they there the whole time?”

“Yeah. I couldn’t have done this without them, so I felt they needed to see it all the way through.”

“I love you, Conner. I can’t believe you did all this.” I smile as I look up at him.

“For you, I would do anything.” His lips press against mine, and my world shifts. I’m going to marry this man.

When we pull apart, our friends and family have made their way down to hug and congratulate us. My heart swells with all the love we have around us.

Conner was right; he just replaced the worst memory I had of us with the best one.

I couldn’t love this man any more than I already do, but I would now have a lifetime to try.

The End.