



The Single Matchmaker: A Lesbian Romance

Author: J.J. Arias

Category: Romance, Adult, Lesbian Romance

Description: Who helps Cupid fall in love?

Libby Cassanova is the last in a long line of matchmakers. After years of hard work, her grandmother has finally handed her control of an empire built by generations of Cassanova women.

When the secret that Libby was dumped by her fiancé comes to light, she must act fast to salvage her reputation. There is nothing she wouldn't do to keep the truth of her failed relationship from toppling her future, and that includes pretending to date a woman if it makes her story more believable.

Reagan Soto is a struggling artist offered a chance at easy money by pretending to be Libby's girlfriend. Upon meeting the tightly wound thirty-something, Reagan is immediately intrigued by what lies beneath all the polish and barely held-together facade.

As Libby and Reagan play at being in love, the line between fantasy and reality quickly blurs. Can Libby get over her fear of getting hurt and see that her perfect match is right under her nose. . . even if she never expected it to be another woman?

Total Pages (Source): 106

CHAPTER 1

LIBBY WAS PANTING after running across the parking garage when she mashed the elevator button. She glanced down at her watch, ignored the warning about her pulse being too high, and cursed at the time.

“Come on,” she muttered, repeatedly pushing the button as if the twentieth press might wake the lumbering beast waiting to carry her up thirty floors to the top of the high-rise building.

“Good morning, Ms. Cassanova,” a man’s voice echoed in the cavernous garage.

In one fell swoop, Libby pushed her chin-length brown hair out of her face and straightened before turning around.

“Morning, Mario,” she replied with a practiced smile. It faltered when she saw the sign he was carrying. “Oh no, please don’t tell me—”

The apology etched in his face was all the confirmation she needed. Libby’s shoulders drooped and she blinked for a long five seconds as she breathed in and out slowly. When she returned to the present after chanting her calming mantra, Mario was hanging up a sign indicating the elevators were temporarily out of order.

“How about the service elevator?” she asked, reaching for an alternative that wouldn’t add to her lateness.

Mario winced. “Those are being inspected too. It should only be a few minutes. Ten

tops.”

Libby didn't have a few minutes. She was already late, and according to the many messages she tried to ignore, her grandmother was none too pleased about it.

“I can see how much longer it'll be,” he offered, pulling a small radio from his pocket.

“That's okay,” she replied as she peeled off her blazer and stuffed it in her large purse. She bolted for the door to the stairwell. “Thanks, though! Come up later. I'm sure we'll have those guava danishes you like,” she shouted as she kicked off her heels and tucked them under her arm.

Running up the first five flights wasn't too bad, but by the time she reached the eighteenth, she was sure her heart was going to explode out of her chest. Her beeping watch was even more frantic about her circumstances. Libby had no interest in reenacting a horror movie scene, but if she stopped to rest, she was afraid she wouldn't be able to start up again. The daily yoga she practiced was more about meditation than building endurance.

As she climbed, Libby tried to distract herself from the excruciating ache in her calves and thighs by anticipating what her grandmother would say. With two floors left to summit, she gripped the handrails and pulled herself up with her arms.

In a delirious out of body experience, she saw herself as if watching a movie. A thirty-two-year-old woman, her long, wavy bob plastered to her tanned skin in the same unflattering way her navy-blue sheath dress was clinging to her heavily perspiring body.

Damn, this was a bad idea, she decided when she dragged herself to the top floor on wobbly legs. She made a mental note to rejoin the CrossFit class she'd abandoned as she put

herself back together and spritzed a dash of perfume to mask the sweat.

Libby emerged from the silence of the dull, gray stairwell and into the sprawling, open-concept penthouse. Skirting the reception area where KMQ buzzed in neon letters just above the classic Cassanova Matchmaking Est. 1902 insignia, she tried to avoid being spotted sneaking in. If she could just get to the bathroom and freshen up, she might be able to pretend she'd been there all along but had been stuck on a call.

Considering Libby was the face of modern matchmaking, going incognito in her own office was a task. Neither of the girls manning the phones behind the curved glass desk noticed her. She took it as a good omen.

Sneaking into a place where nearly every surface was glass wasn't easy, but Libby slipped on her sunglasses and the engagement ring stored in her bag and took the longest strides she could without running. She was halfway to her office when she smelled her grandmother's trademark gardenia perfume a moment before she heard her kitten heels clicking against the white, marble floors.

So close.

"Elisabeth," she said with the dramatic flair of a telenovela villain confronting a rival about a hidden twin.

Libby gritted her teeth for a second before perfecting her posture and smiling. "Good morning, Mima," she said as she turned and moved toward the elegant woman dressed in a plum-colored suit and the same conservative hairstyle she'd worn her whole life. As a kid, Libby's older brother had convinced her their grandmother had been born with the 'do.

In nearly eighty years, no one but her hairdresser had seen it in an imperfect state.

After greeting her grandmother with a kiss on the cheek, Libby stepped back and let herself be inspected. She knew

what was coming.

“Didn’t you tell Mauricio not to go too short? You know they all get scissor happy,” she added, scrutinizing the dark, wavy hair. “With your heart-shaped face, they’re always going to want to go short.”

Only Carmen Cassanova could take the flattery out of a compliment.

“I like it,” Libby countered. “It’s fresh and new.”

Carmen quirked an eyebrow and made a sound in her chest that Libby took as disapproval out of habit. Her grandmother was a business genius who’d taken her mother’s little home-based matchmaking service and turned it into a very successful international operation. In the months since she’d retired and handed over control to Libby, there was little they’d agreed on. New haircut included, apparently.

“I have a meeting with my accountant in thirty-five minutes,” her grandmother announced as she turned Libby away from her office and toward the conference room overlooking the skyline and palm tree-lined bay. “I want to go over that offer to take your dating advice segment to Spanish language television permanently. That’s why I asked you to be here at eight.” She glanced at her thin gold watch, then at Libby with a stern gaze. “Not ten after.”

The elder Cassanova took her usual seat at the head of the long conference table. All the modern, white leather chairs around the table were identical except for the one with a dramatically high back at the head. It was supposed to be Libby’s chair, but she wasn’t going to remind her.

; Instead of taking the seat to her grandmother's right that she'd occupied for ten years, Libby strode across the room as she pulled o her sunglasses. "Television is dying, Mima. We make a hundred times more from YouTube ads than what the networks pay. Significantly more exposure, too," she

explained again as she approached the table overflowing with pastries and anchored by two co ee urns. The Friday catering was an homage to the company's birth in a Havana kitchen at the turn of the twentieth century.

As her grandmother aired her thoughts on the Cassanova Matchmaking brand, Libby poured herself a cup of co ee.

The Miami skyline was a brilliant, glassy display of tall buildings reflecting the bodies of water around them. Before Libby took over, the expensive views were hidden behind heavy curtains. According to her grandmother, she wasn't in the business of daydreaming.

Half an hour of barely suppressed frustration later, which Libby survived by reminding herself that she loved her grandmother who was struggling to let go of a business she'd poured her life into, they emerged having resolved very little.

Another few months, she told herself, give her another few months to adjust to not being in the driver's seat. If she wasn't truly stepping back by then, Libby would take more direct measures. It had been the same thing she said leading up to the transfer of power, but this time she meant it... she hoped.

"Elisabeth," her grandmother said before Libby could flee to her o ce. "Remember, you are the face of this agency now. You should arrive before anyone else so you aren't skulking around like a cat burglar."

"Thanks," she replied with a forced smile. "I'll keep that in mind."

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:40 pm

“It’s not too late to tell me if you’re in over your head,”

she said as they charged toward the lobby. Her grandmother only had one setting: full steam ahead. “I can wait another few years to retire...”

“You’ve worked hard enough, Mima,” she interrupted with her hand on the woman’s padded shoulder. “Don’t

worry. I have it all under control.”

Kissing her grandmother goodbye before depositing her in the restored elevator, Libby was moments from freedom when her assistant Taylor raced toward her, big eyes wide and panicked.

Oh, Jeez. Just wait one second.

She glanced at the elevator doors, willing them to slide closed before her grandmother was alerted to whatever five-alarm fire was coming her way.

“Libby!” Taylor called, earning a scowl from her grandmother. Except for Libby’s dad and her brother, there wasn’t a person on Earth who didn’t call her grandmother Mrs. Cassanova. Before he died, even Libby’s grandpa called his wife Mrs. Cassanova. It was mostly a joke, but she’d never heard them use any terms of endearment for each other.

When the elevator closed, Libby took her first full breath. “What’s up?” she asked when the young blonde all but tackled her.

“I’ve been calling you—”

“Of course, this morning of all mornings a delivery truck tried to get into my building’s parking garage. Why would he think the stated height was a ballpark estimate? He managed to break the gate so badly it apparently shorted the motor for the whole thing. Took me forever to get out. Thanks for trying to give me the head’s up about my grandmother waiting—”

“That’s not why I was calling,” Taylor said, looking paler by the second. “Have you checked your email or anything?”

While you were waiting in your car maybe?”

Libby furrowed her brow. Taylor knew full well there was no service in her condo’s parking garage. As her right-hand woman for the last few years, there was very little Taylor didn’t know about her. “What’s going on?”

When Taylor looked around before answering, Libby’s blood ran cold. Whatever it was couldn’t be that catastrophic if her grandmother hadn’t known about it first.

“Maybe we should go to your office,” she suggested before taking off like a shot toward the corner suite overlooking the water.

Libby’s mouth morphed into a desert as her skin turned to ice. When she stepped into her office covered on one side with floor-to-ceiling windows, Taylor closed the door behind her.

“I don’t know how he found out,” she said, hands trembling as she reached for the phone in her cardigan pocket.

Libby couldn’t speak as she waited for Taylor to provide context for her freak out.

Instead of explaining, she handed her the phone. In bold letters at the top of a universally read gossip blog was Libby's nightmare come to life: Cassanova Cupid. . a Con?

As she scanned the post that had already been viewed a thousand times in two hours, Libby clenched her jaw.

Fidgeting with the engagement ring on her finger, she stared at the picture under the headline. It was a wedding announcement. Davis Rothschild, her longtime boyfriend and recent fiancé, was getting married, and he hadn't had the decency to tell her.

What was worse, now everyone with an internet connection knew what she was. A single matchmaker who'd failed at love.

ALONE IN HER OFFICE, LIBBY WATCHED THE SUN SET OVER BISCAYNE

Bay. What she wouldn't give to be on a sailboat drifting away into the red-orange horizon. Instead, she was in the dark

trying to figure out a way to tell her grandmother she'd destroyed the business built by four generations of Cassanova women.

Since she was old enough to read, Libby wanted nothing more than to be the next great matchmaker. She'd started learning at her grandmother's side well before she was allowed to date for herself. A degree in psychology taught her how people worked, acting classes showed her how to interpret body language, and interning as a grief counselor gave her the skills to be gentle and empathetic.

There was no nepotism at Cassanova Matchmaking. She'd started at the front desk and worked her way up from reviewing client files to eventually matchmaking herself, a job held only by her grandmother for nearly forty years.

As she thought about everything she was losing, Libby stared at the engagement ring on her desk. At least she didn't have to live a lie anymore. Maybe she'd find comfort in that after a time.

"Come in," Libby replied wearily to the knock at her door.

"I brought you something to eat," Taylor said, slipping through the smallest crack in the opening door. "Everyone's gone now if you want to come out."

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:40 pm

Libby smiled sadly and thanked her for the sandwich she set on her desk. Judging from the paper wrapping, it was a panini from Sal's downtown. Her favorite. Too bad there was no way she could eat it.

She swallowed the lump growing in her throat. "I'm going to tell my grandmother to keep you in your position when I step down. You've really been invaluable to me for a long time. I don't want you to go back to glorified intern work."

Taylor shot around Libby's desk and grabbed her by the shoulders, shaking her out of her melancholy. "You're not

thinking of quitting, are you? Because of a little public faux pas?"

Libby gritted her teeth and bit back the tears she'd been holding in all day. "It's more than that, Tay. I'm a fraud!

What kind of reputable love guru gets dumped by her fiancé, doesn't tell anyone for a year, and just keeps wearing the ring pretending nothing happened? I've made such a fool of myself in addition to having torpedoed my entire family legacy!"

Unable to sit still any longer, Libby squeezed Taylor's hand before getting to her feet. If only she could outpace her disaster.

"I'm not gonna lie, this is definitely not optimal, but you can't just give up. Everyone here is rooting for you. You know that right?" Taylor hesitated. "And . . . I mean . . . most of us had noticed that Davis stopped coming around and you stopped mentioning him."

Libby turned away from the window with her arms crossed over her chest as if her own hug might comfort her.

“It’s one thing not to tell my sta about my personal life, but another to pretend to still be engaged to the worl

d.” Her stomach dropped as she glanced at her computer. “I’ve already gotten a few dozen emails from clients asking if I’m some kind of swindler. What am I supposed to tell them?”

She dropped onto the modern couch across from her desk.

“No one wants a single matchmaker in charge of their love life. If I couldn’t figure it out for myself, why would they trust me to help them? I’m ruined, Tay. And I’ve taken my family down with me.”

“I’ve fielded a bunch of those calls today,” Taylor admitted quietly as she crossed the room and sat next to her.

The revelation increased Libby’s nausea. How many people are going to jump ship?

“I have to tell my grandmother. It’s going to break her heart,” Libby muttered to herself. “I don’t know how to fix this.”

“I’ve been reading a lot about crisis management today,”

Taylor said, leaning forward in her seat. “I might have an out of the box idea to keep you in your job and our clients on the books.”

Libby looked up from the painted fingernail she’d been picking at to busy her hands. “If you have a way out of this that doesn’t do more harm to my family name, I’m all

ears,”

she replied with a tired, lopsided smile. It was impossible not to feel a little lifted by her positivity. “Does it involve selling my soul to a crossroads demon?” she joked, knowing Taylor would get the Supernatural reference.

She smiled, relaxing her shoulders. “If that’s the ceiling on what you’re willing to do, then you might be way more on board with this than I thought.”

At the prospect of a way out, Libby dared to allow hope to creep into her gut. “What’s one step down from a deal with the devil?”

“Another little white lie to cover up the lie of omission,”

Taylor replied with a grin. “Davis and you ended your engagement amicably, and you have since moved on to a new, serious, relationship. You’re not single. You’re just private. Maybe we can say how the public eye put too much pressure on you and Davis and you didn’t want it to happen again.” She waved a hand and added confidently, “We can work out the kinks.”

Libby considered her idea. “Okay, I see what you’re going for, but there’s at least one major problem. I don’t have a boyfriend.”

Taylor’s smile only widened. “That’s why I have a casting call set up for tonight and confidentiality agreements drafted by legal. All you have to say is yes, and I’ll have forty-five

guys here ready to roll. And before you ask, I didn’t call all the talent agencies, just Janice. She won’t breathe a word of any of this.”

“She and Rick just celebrated their second wedding anniversary, didn’t they?”

Taylor wiggled her eyebrows in response. “Yep, and I didn’t even have to remind her what a life-changer you are.

She offered to sign an NDA just to give you peace of mind, and hand-selected every candidate herself.”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:40 pm

“I don’t know, Tay,” she said with a sigh as she let herself fall against the couch. “What if this blows up in my face? I’ll look even more pathetic.”

“What’s your alternative? Tell the truth and step down when too many clients leave? I intercepted Sebastian Brio’s call. He’s convinced the reason you haven’t found him a wife is because you don’t know what you’re doing. He was ranting about getting his past membership fees back.”

Libby swallowed hard to keep from getting sick. If all the unmatched clients did the same, it would mean more than just losing her future. There would be nothing left for anyone to rebuild.

Without a word, Libby stood, leaving Taylor perched on the edge of her seat. With each step toward the mini fridge in the corner of her office, she was less sure she knew what to do. Crouching, she pushed passed water bottles and expired yogurt to reach for a tiny bottle of rum a client sent her as part of a thank you basket after his honeymoon. Cracking the top of the bottle open, Libby closed her eyes and poured the coconut flavored alcohol down her throat in one go. As it burned, she tried not to gag or spit it out.

Running through all the ways Taylor’s idea could make a bad situation worse, Libby tried to come up with an alternative that wouldn’t mean stepping down in disgrace or damning Cassanova Matchmaking. Nothing appeared before her brain felt a little hazy.

“If you’re going to pull the trigger, I need to let Janice know ASAP. I figured time is

of the essence here, so I made sure our sta went home. She's got her talent in a holding pattern."

Taylor's voice shook Libby out of her trance. With a sharp inhale, she straightened her back and smiled. "Let's do this."

CHAPTER 2

FOUR HOURS and two bottles of supermarket wine later, Libby sat in the conference room surrounded by forty-five headshots taped to the floor-to-ceiling windows. Using the speed dating questions she'd been developing since high school, they'd narrowed the list of possibilities to three, the only candidates sitting right on the border between too much chemistry and not enough. Libby wanted to be believably in love, not put herself in actual jeopardy of actually falling for someone.

After prolonged debate, Libby was less and less sure Taylor's idea could work. How would she ever sell the ruse?

She'd never tried to use what she learned in acting classes; it was just a way to learn about nonverbal communications to read the things people weren't saying.

When Taylor stepped out to take a call, Libby reminded herself that the alternative was disgracing her family's matchmaking dynasty. Time was ticking, and come tomorrow morning, she'd have to make a decision one way or the other. She stared at her three candidates and tried to pinpoint why she was resisting making a choice.

"I just got o the phone with Janice," Taylor announced as she rushed back into the conference room.

Libby looked up from the glossy 8 x10 with her notes scribbled on the back, something she'd done a thousand times when evaluating possible matches, but never

for herself. “Is she sending more guys?”

“Not exactly,” she replied in a tone that made Libby shift in her seat and drop the photo onto the table. “She has someone she thinks is really perfect for you, but she didn’t initially send them over because she wasn’t sure how you’d feel.”

Crossing one leg over the other as she picked up her water bottle, Libby furrowed her brow. “Why? What’s wrong with him?”

“He,” Taylor grinned as she handed her a tablet, “is a she.”

“A she?” Libby echoed, glancing at the image of a striking woman. She looked a little like Cara Delevingne if she had darker features.

“Reagan Soto,” Taylor read off her phone. “Twenty-seven, born and raised in Miami, Cuban parents, full-time ceramics artist who just recently joined the talent agency.

She’s been called out for some local print work but hasn’t booked anything yet, so there’s little risk anyone will recognize her from that.”

Libby studied the image on the tablet as Taylor spoke.

There was no chance she’d end up romantically involved with a woman, and it would explain why she hadn’t gone public with it yet. Part of her wasn’t sure that her story would hold water in the gossip blogs. Davis had no problem being in the public eye, and judging by his giving up his law practice to start a band, he hadn’t become shy overnight.

“Let’s call her in,” she decided, returning her gaze to Taylor’s startled face.

“Really? I didn’t think you’d go for it, but Janice insisted,” she admitted with a

relieved laugh.

Libby cocked her head to one side. “Why wouldn’t I go with it? Because she’s a woman?”

“I mean, coming out is a big deal, right? People are going to think you’ve been closeted this whole time. Maybe even question whether Davis was your beard.”

Libby laughed. “I’m pretty sure there are bisexual people in the world. And I don’t care who they think I’m with, as long as no one thinks I’m a loser at love.”

“How modern of you,” she quipped. “What do you think Mrs. Cassanova is going to say?”

Taylor’s question evaporated the tiny bit of hope that had lifted her spirits. “I have no idea,” she confessed. “My Great Uncle Rolando is gay, and he and my grandmother are thick as thieves. I mean, he still has to call her Mrs. Cassanova, of course,” she laughed, “but maybe she’ll understand how I got into this mess if the love of my life is another woman.”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:40 pm

Libby sighed. “Or she might insist that I step down for bringing scandal to her good name. It’s a toss-up.”

While Taylor made arrangements for Reagan to come into the office, Libby paced the conference room as she stared at the Mediterranean-style Freedom Tower on the horizon. Lit up against the night sky, the yellow building was the Ellis Island of Miami, the first stop her grandparents made after fleeing their home in Cuba to start over. With nothing but the clothes on her back and a notebook full of her own mother’s matchmaking secrets, her grandmother had started again from zero. Libby’s next steps could easily unravel it all. No pressure.

Libby was so lost in thought that when Taylor returned an hour later, she didn’t hear the glass door open.

“Ms. Cassanova, Ms. Soto is here,” she announced, causing Libby to turn toward the sound of her voice.

The woman standing just behind Taylor was much more attractive than in her pictures. Her sideswept dark hair was

short and framed her oval-shaped face perfectly. Her huge, brown eyes were absolute showstoppers. In a loose, white linen shirt and jeans, she oozed casual confidence. On the top of her head, Libby thought of a half dozen people who would love to match with her based on looks alone - not that it worked that way.

“Ms. Soto, nice to meet you. Thank you so much for coming on such short notice,” Libby said as she crossed the room, her hand extended.

“Call me Reagan,” she offered, her full lips forming a broad smile framed by dimples at the corners of her mouth.

“I’m sorry my hands are a little dry. I was working all day,”

she added before slipping a warm palm against Libby’s outstretched hand.

“You feel great to me,” she replied, immediately cringing at her strange response.

“And please, call me Libby.”

After sitting next to each other at the

table instead of across like with the rest of the candidates, Libby opened her mouth to ask Reagan the first in a series of eighteen questions designed to measure compatibility. She got no further than the first word before Reagan leaned forward, resting her elbows on her thighs.

“Tell me why you’re doing this,” she asked, her tone firm but not unpleasant. It was strong and sure, like her handshake. “You’re a successful, attractive woman. Why do you need to hire a stranger to pretend to be your partner?”

The question cut her to the bone. Libby shot Taylor a questioning glance before beginning to formulate an answer.

Taylor took her meaning immediately. “She’s already signed the nondisclosure agreement.”

Libby hesitated anyway. The stranger sitting across from her might not have qualms about getting sued,

eviscerating the NDA’s deterrent effect. Nothing in her demeanor showed deceit, but

she couldn't be sure.

As the silence crept around them like a slow-moving river, Reagan's lip twitched into the tiniest smile. "If I'm going to commit to this, I need to understand what you want."

In her life, no one had ever so directly asked her that simple question. What do you want? It was disarming in its weight.

"To save my reputation," she confessed, to her own surprise. "To save my family's legacy."

Reagan leaned back in her seat, taking a long, steady inhale without releasing Libby from her gaze. "And all of that hangs on whether or not someone is on your arm?"

Libby let out a bark of laughter to relieve the tension mounting in her gut. As insane as it sounded, it was true. At least to a lot of her clients and the public at large. "It does.

How can I find people love when I haven't found it for myself?"

Her expressive brown eyes softened in sympathy. "That's an incredible amount of pressure you're under, Libby. I'm sorry you're in this position."

Heat flooded Libby's chest and curled around her neck like a wool scarf in the Florida summer. "That's sweet of you to say, but it's okay—"

"It doesn't have to be," Reagan said before Libby could finish. "You don't have to think something's okay to endure it. There's power in expressing what you're feeling. In being overwhelmed, or scared, or unsure and in that not being okay but moving forward anyway."

“You sound like a women’s empowerment retreat I went to once,” she replied despite a dry throat and quickening pulse. “Did you also spend a week in the Colorado mountains learning how to shed the chains of patriarchy?”

Reagan’s laugh was throaty and syrupy, forcing a smile on Libby’s lips. “I’ve been shocked by the injustice born of my feminine form since I was ten. That’s when my parents told me I couldn’t go on the field trip to the Seaquarium because they weren’t available to chaperone. You have no idea how much I wanted a picture with those dolphins. When I complained that my brothers went on the same field trip when they were in the fifth grade, my dad countered with the incomprehensible, *pero ellos son barrones*.” She shook her head. “As if telling me my male brothers were boys was some kind of explanation.”

Slipping unconsciously into Spanish, Libby replied with her own experience. “When I was sixteen, I was finally allowed to go on my first date. A big deal considering my dad didn’t think I should date until after I was married,” she chuckled. “At that age, my brother had already had like three girlfriends. When I protested that my grandpa not sit between my date and me at the movie theater, you’d think I’d asked to go to an orgy. I was promptly informed that I couldn’t be jeopardized like that. As if the poor guy would’ve tried something with my grandpa sitting next to him and dad behind.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:40 pm

Reagan tossed her head back and opened her mouth wide, engaging her entire body in the act of laughing. “El pobre!

Poor guy! Did you go on a second date? I would have been terrified but probably risked it.” She winked, triggering a rush of warmth to Libby’s cheeks.

“Tommy Jackson was not into it,” she admitted, briefly covering her eyes as she recalled the ancient embarrassment.

“He couldn’t understand the next level overprotectiveness.”

“I guess you didn’t have the luxury of pretending your teenage loves were your new best friends.” She chuckled.

“My mom wasn’t thrilled when I came clean years later, but it got me around all the crazy restrictions.”

“You knew when you were that young?”

“What? That I was into the ladies?” Reagan wiggled her eyebrows. “Yeah. I figured it out when I kept begging my parents to rent Mr. and Mrs. Smith for me. One fine day, I realized it wasn’t for Brad Pitt.” After a brief pause, Reagan countered with her own question. “When did you know?”

“Oh, I’m not —” She cut herself off before sounding rude.

“I’ve never dated a woman.”

Reagan smirked but didn't comment. Libby was curious about what was happening behind the woman's brilliant brown eyes. They seemed to bore straight to the center of her. "Can you tell me what this job would entail?"

The way she asked made it seem like she was interviewing Libby rather than the other way around.

"Staging a few pictures, publicly declaring our relationship," Libby began rattling off the list she and Taylor sketched out earlier in the evening. The contours were still rough, but they'd tried to brainstorm as many situations as they could. "I get invited to public events all the time, and you would accompany me to them as often as practicable. We can set a maximum number you're comfortable with. There would also be dates and various things like that. You'd be on a monthly retainer, and—"

"I guess this means I can't actually date anyone else in real life, huh?" Reagan asked. "Not that I can imagine where I'd find the time while juggling all of that."

"Are you dating someone now?" Libby countered abruptly.

The moments between question and answer were interminable. "No. Not really. Janice asked before she told me what this was about."

Libby smirked. "Are you trying to negotiate a higher fee for your trouble?"

Reagan's dimples appeared at the corners of her mouth for a split second. "I guess that depends. How long do you think you'll need my services?"

For the first time in a half hour, Libby glanced at Taylor.

"The contract terms are six months, with the possible option to renew for continuing six-month periods until the time is right for you to break up."

Reagan gripped her chest as if mortally wounded. “We haven’t even gone on our first date yet, and you’re already planning for Splitsville?”

Libby smiled at the corny term. “I haven’t even decided whether you’re the right candidate for my fake relationship,” she countered. “Counting your chickens a little quickly, aren’t you?”

“Forgive my presumption. I’m sure this will be quite the challenge.” Her eyes drifted around the room at all the pictures taped up, staring at them. “It sounds like you intend to spend as much time with your fake partner as you would a real one.” Reagan stood and extended her hand. “I wish you the very best of luck and I look forward to hearing from you.”

The rigid formality was so different from Reagan’s fluid ease that Libby didn’t buy it for a second. Before she got any further than saying goodbye to Taylor and reaching for the door, Libby swiveled toward her in her chair.

“If we’re going to pull this off, you’ll have to be a much better actor than that.”

Reagan turned back, her smile wide. “Damn it. Laid it on too thick, huh?”

“Just a little,” Libby agreed with a wink. Since when the hell do I wink?

“Sorry to interrupt, but don’t you want to ask the questions?” Taylor’s eyes darted to the untouched questionnaire on the table.

Libby replied with a single shoulder shrug. “It’s been such a long night, I guess I forgot about those.”

Taylor’s furrowed brow reflected how rarely Libby

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:40 pm

put aside the questions. Apart from the YouTube videos and syndicated dating advice column, they were the only part of Cassanova Matchmaking she'd come up with. Getting rid of the curtains didn't count.

"I don't think they're necessary," Libby decided. "Ms.

Soto, if you're interested and would like to review the terms in detail, I'd love to have you as my faux girlfriend."

Reagan pretended to be scandalized. "Ms. Cassanova, that's the most romantic proposal I've ever gotten."

As they signed the agreement and ironed out the details, including scheduling a full day of photos starting early the next morning, Libby dared to take a deep breath and indulge in a moment of relief.

CHAPTER 3

MIAMI IN MID-SUMMER was hot and humid even at night. As Reagan walked away from Libby's high-rise and toward her pick-up truck, the soft linen of her button-down clung to her back. If she hadn't been surrounded by highfalutin onlookers rushing to overpriced drinks and dinner, she would've peeled it off and let the salty air coming off the bay cool her.

Driving from the glossy confines of Brickell to the familiar boxy, concrete paradise of Hialeah, Reagan rolled down her window and let the breeze ease the stickiness on her skin. The smell of rain, imminent but not falling, triggered a little smile. A nice

centering moment for such an odd night.

When she'd received the call from Janice earlier that evening, she hadn't been at all sure what to expect. She'd only joined the talent agency on a whim after a friend begged her to go with her for moral support. Once there, Janice was convinced that her artsy, femme/butch aesthetic was unique enough to be marketable. Reagan had balked at the idea of modeling for anything, but the possibility of making extra cash was too attractive to pass up. It wasn't like she was making easy money teaching pottery classes and selling ceramics.

Reagan didn't give a single shit about money, but she did care about some of the problems only money could solve. As she turned onto the main road, congested with traffic no matter the hour, she disappeared into the lonely winding road that followed a canal littered with trash and plastic. It was the dusty, jagged artery feeding into the atrophied industrial heart of the city.

As she drove through the familiar road, dodging potholes by muscle memory, she grinned. Pretending to be a woman's significant other wasn't the kind of work she'd expected, but the opportunity was impossible to walk away from. In a few months, she'd earn more than she had all last year.

Spending time with Libby didn't seem like it would be too much work. Other than a tightly wound demeanor and an obvious crushing amount of worry, her core energy was light. There was an ease in her company that intrigued Reagan almost as much as the hope of financial freedom.

It didn't hurt that Libby was conventionally attractive in the crush-inspiring tradition of a Hollywood ingenue. There was no clear picture in her mind of what her odd new job would be like, but she couldn't deny being excited.

Reagan was still smirking when she pulled up to the old ceramics factory that stood at

the center of the manufacturing district for nearly a hundred years. It was a shadow of its former glory. With a crumbling exterior and perennially empty parking lot built to accommodate a hundred cars, it was the last building on the block harboring any signs of life. Albeit fledgling.

When Reagan was feeling particularly nostalgic, she'd lay across the hood of her truck, peer up at the starry sky, and wonder what the energy was like in the 1960s. Instead of a handful of lumbering factories hobbling on like zombies, there were thousands of new, thriving manufacturers making everything from garments to airplane parts. Her

grandparents had been two of the many dream chasers swarming the City of Progress for their chance at a new life in a new country. Reagan wasn't naïve; there was no returning to some great, long-lost era, but she still worked to invigorate the once fertile soil with new life.

The thoughts filled her with pride and offered comfort as she ignored the faded no overnight parking sign and unlocked the massive metal door that creaked so loudly it was like a living creature shrieking in pain.

As soon as she stepped into the vast space that now served as her art studio, she slipped on a sheet of paper that had been thrown through the crack under the door. Reagan didn't need to pick it up to know what it was. Her landlord always used the same bright pink paper when he threatened her with eviction for some violation or another.

Without reading the notice, Reagan walked around a dozen worktables where her students learned to throw clay on pottery wheels, and all the way to the back where the massive kilns were. As she tossed the paper in the wood-fired kiln she only used occasionally, her phone buzzed in her back pocket.

Cash, a woman she'd gone on several dates with before she left for Micronesia a few months ago for a photojournalism gig, was back in town. With regret, Reagan turned down her offer of dinner at her place, knowing exactly where it would lead. She wasn't going to break the contract within an hour of signing it, despite the temptation.

From the studio to the vast drying rooms connected to the sprawling storage space, Reagan reached an old set of wooden stairs. Taking her life into her hands as she climbed the rickety steps that swayed just enough to get her heart thumping, Reagan arrived home. The storage loft she'd converted to a studio apartment complete with shower

and kitchenette was her Shangri-La and favorite place in the world. The fact that they were all in essentially the same huge room didn't bother her.

Dropping into the big bed screened off with a hand-painted wood divider, Reagan closed her eyes and pictured all the improvements she'd make with the easiest paycheck ever. Before she got too ahead of herself, she jumped to her feet and pulled out her suitcase. Tomorrow she'd give Libby as many days of fake relationship pictures as she wanted.

CHAPTER 4

LIBBY AWOKES BEFORE THE SUN. Not that all the tossing and turning she'd been doing for six hours could really count as sleep. Wrestling with the wisdom of her decision left her more exhausted than when she'd gone to bed.

In the shower, her self-doubt went down the drain along with the cold water blasting her face. There was no room for indecision. Later that afternoon, she'd put out an official response to the tidal wave of questions surrounding her relationship status. If she had any good fortune left, it would shut down the internet trolls who'd been mocking her since the day before.

More importantly, it would ease her clients' fears and let everything settle back to normal. She hoped it wouldn't take more than a few outings with Reagan, and an explanation that she didn't want the spotlight to affect this relationship as it had her last, before she could ease her private life out of the public.

As Libby towel-dried her dark hair, she wondered what Davis would say when he heard that she'd moved on with someone new too. He was so self-obsessed he set up notifications for anytime his name popped up anywhere in the dark recesses of the internet. Would he be scandalized?

Intrigued? Jealous?

Grinning as she put a variety of products in her hair to mimic the soft, twisty waves her hairdresser had accomplished, Libby fantasized about Davis running back to her cursing himself for being such a fool and begging for her return to his side. The wishful thinking accompanied her as she applied smokey violet eyeshadow to highlight the green in her dark eyes.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

Twenty minutes later, she'd imagined a full reunion with her ex-fiancé, makeup sex and all, and filled her garment bag with a variety of outfits. After grabbing a tote full of cosmetics and a hair iron, she was ready to recreate a whole relationship in a single morning.

It was early enough that the drive from her condo to the office took less than ten minutes rather than the usual thirty.

As she pulled up to the parking garage, she noticed Reagan waiting in a restored, gleaming orange pickup truck right out of the 1970s. Libby grinned. The cool vehicle suited Reagan perfectly.

After waving for Reagan to follow her in through the gate, Libby gave her the spot reserved for her while she borrowed her grandmother's designated space.

"You're here early!" Libby shouted, her voice echoing in the still mostly empty garage, as she approached.

Reagan slipped out of the truck with a smile on her face.

"I had to decide between getting here an hour early or an hour late," she joked. "If I get it wrong, it can take me an hour just to get out of Hialeah."

Libby laughed before realizing she was serious. "You don't really live there, right?"

Reagan raised her thick eyebrows in response.

“I mean, there’s nothing there but factories, mud, and

—”“And a quarter of a million good people doing their best to keep a city full of history alive?” Reagan finished her

sentence but hadn’t guessed correctly. The old joke ended crudely.

Libby had only been to that side of the county once as a child. It was nothing but traffic, incomprehensibly messy city planning, and old warehouses. She didn’t consider herself a snob, but there was a reason the enclave was the butt of every joke. No one she knew visited it, much less lived there. As far as she knew, it was its own planet full of people who had no interest in assimilating. Why someone young and cool like Reagan would choose to live there was unfathomable.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to insult you. That just caught me by surprise,” Libby apologized as she tried to get her pointy-toed shoe out of her mouth.

Reagan smiled. “Why? Because I’m not a seventy-five-year-old woman with burgundy hair who doesn’t speak English, so why would I ever want to live in a shithole like Hialeah?” The rhetorical question slapped Libby in the face.

“Don’t worry.” Reagan winked as she grabbed her bags out of the back of the truck. “I’m sure I’ll get the chance to correct all your preppy little assumptions about my hometown.”

Getting called out for her bias would’ve normally triggered a defensive response, but Reagan was so nice in her delivery, it was impossible to be anything but embarrassed by her judgment of a place she had no first-hand experience with.

“I really am sorry,” Libby repeated as they waited for the elevator.

“That was super rude of me.”

“No worries,” Reagan insisted. “We’re made a little tougher in my neighborhood than you Miami girls.” She smirked.

Grateful for the playful gesture, Libby laughed. “Oh, and you think you know where I’m from?” she asked, knowing

she had nothing to back up her sentiment.

They stepped onto the elevator before Reagan replied.

“You’ve got Kendall written all over you. Maybe even Pinecrest, but we haven’t spent enough time together for me to be sure.”

Libby feigned offense, though the accuracy was surprising. She’d lived in both suburbs but had grown up in the more affluent and exclusive Pinecrest. “You’re so sure about that, huh?”

Reagan’s dark eyes sparkled when she laughed. “I’m willing to bet on it.”

The elevator doors slid open, saving her from admitting Reagan was dead-on correct. In the hazy morning sunrise, the office was still dark.

“Looks like we beat Taylor here,” Libby announced as she started flipping on the lights. “I guess we can start with some selfies until she gets here with her camera.”

Reagan lifted one of the bags in her hand. “I brought my own and a tripod. We don’t have to wait if you don’t want to.”

Libby nodded, impressed by her thoughtfulness.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

“Us cretins from Hialeah are a resourceful people,” she joked. “What’s the plan?”

Using the room set up for headshots, they managed only to get through their two formal outfits before realizing there was no natural environment for candid.

Reagan pulled off her mint green linen jacket as she followed Libby to her office. “We can change, have breakfast, and then change again and head to the beach,” she suggested.

Kicking off her heels and grabbing her hair iron, Libby agreed. “There’s a little bistro a few blocks away. They make an unbelievable Croque Madame,” she suggested, plugging in her straightener.

“Sounds good to me,” she agreed, milling through her bag before coming out with a pair of jeans and a soft-looking gray T-shirt. “Where can I change?”

While Reagan changed in her private bathroom, Libby used the mirror behind her office door to remove her eyeshadow. As she transitioned from evening to daytime natural, she decided on a mustard-colored maxi dress and paired it with sandals for a casual aesthetic. When she’d finished ironing the waves out of her hair, she noticed the missed calls and frantic texts from Taylor. After assuring her they were fine and reminding her a flat tire wasn’t her fault, Libby insisted that she take the morning off after working so late the night before.

“Wow, you look beautiful,” Reagan said as she slipped back into the room.

Libby spun around from where she’d been digging in her makeup bag for lip gloss.

The compliment warmed her cheeks, and she hoped the blush she'd applied covered most of the flush. "Thanks," she replied, wanting to tell Reagan that she looked very attractive too, but was unsure how to formulate the words. "You too," she added hastily. "I didn't know you had tattoos."

Reagan glanced down at the ink half-revealed by the end of her short sleeve. "Is that a deal-breaker?" she asked with a lopsided smile.

"I suppose it depends on what it is," she joked as she inched forward.

Chuckling, Reagan pulled up her sleeve to reveal a very nicely toned arm and a colorful rooster surrounded by flowers. The scene circled her arm and disappeared into her shoulder.

Resisting the urge to trace the lines of the beautiful design, Libby engaged her other curiosity. "Why a rooster?"

"It's my Chinese horoscope," she confessed. "What's yours?"

Libby regretted not having pegged her sign immediately, but the last twelve hours had been a whirlwind with no time to reflect on anything. Astrology was a significant part of her matchmaking, and Reagan displayed all the easy confidence of a rooster. She wiggled her eyebrows before responding, already knowing they were a good match, at least theoretically. "Dragon."

"I might have guessed," she replied before her eyes dipped down to her lips in a way that warmed more than just Libby's cheeks. "It explains that low-key intensity bubbling just beneath the surface." Before Libby's stunned brain could come up with a response, Reagan turned toward her bags.

"We can take all this stuff if you want to change a few more times."

Still speechless, Libby nodded, and a few minutes later they were back in the garage dropping their things o before walking to breakfast.

BREAKFAST WAS SPENT CRAMMED TOGETHER IN A TINY ROUND TABLE

wedged between the wall and a refrigerated case full of colorful and elegant pastries as busy patrons streamed in and out picking up to-go orders. Their meal flew by as they chatted about their work and current events without any lull in the conversation. Despite Libby's protestations, Reagan bought one of everything to take with them for later.

"Where to next?" Reagan asked, gently swinging the paper bag full of French treats as they strolled full-bellied back to Libby's o ce. "I don't think three outfits and settings are going to cut it."

Libby glanced at the time. "Not too many options before nine in the morning on a Wednesday."

"Says you," Reagan replied before snapping an unexpected picture of Libby. "How do you feel about kites?"

"I don't know if I have any strong feelings on the topic,"

she decided with a lopsided grin.

"Then I guess it's my job to get you to commit one way or the other," Reagan replied with an unexpectedly sober tone.

When they returned to the parking garage, Reagan insisted on driving rather than following each other in separate cars. The inside of the orange truck was pristine, and

the white leather seats gleamed as much as the chrome dashboard.

“I take it you’re an automobile enthusiast,” Libby said as Reagan pulled out of the side street and into bumper-to-bumper traffic.

Reagan ran her fingers through her short hair. “I don’t know a single thing about cars,” she confessed, “but this looks pretty cool, right?”

When they arrived at the sprawling green gash in the otherwise sterile cityscape, Libby realized she hadn’t set foot in a park in a decade.

Before they got more than a few steps from the truck, Reagan stopped walking. “Should we change? I have like a dozen snaps with this on.”

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

Libby looked around. There was nowhere to change. The public restrooms covered in graffiti weren't a viable option.

"We can use the truck," Reagan announced, reading her mind. "Before you concern yourself with public indecency, I've got an idea."

Reagan's idea involved covering the windshield with a sunshade and the other windows with some of her shirts.

Alone in the truck, Libby hesitated to get undressed. Despite the private cocoon Reagan created, she was still in public. A

quick change might not be terrible, but the plan to slip into a bathing suit while they had a chance was tricky.

As Libby twisted awkwardly in the two-seater, she honked the horn with her knee, triggering an audible chuckle from the woman standing guard outside. Shit. I should've told her to leave it running. After a sweaty struggle, Libby traded her dress for a tasteful one-piece covered up by denim shorts and a white peasant blouse.

"How'd it go?" Reagan asked once she emerged, covered in perspiration and grateful for the breeze even though it was hot. It was better than the narrow oven she'd been contorting in.

"I'm regretting not having slipped the suit on underneath the dress," she admitted, flicking humid, messy hair out of her face.

“Fair,” Reagan decided. “My bad. I should’ve mentioned it before we left your office.”

Before she could ask mentioned what, it was obvious she meant preparing for a trip to the beach. In a single fluid motion, Reagan pulled her shirt over her head, exposing a toned body and a high neck bikini top that looked more sports bra than bathing suit.

Libby’s

gaze lingered on the curve of her muscular shoulders and the soft tone of her paler abdomen.

“Throwing huge pots on the wheel is a nice workout,”

Reagan said, reading her mind again and forcing Libby to look away at the handful of colorful kites in the air across the park.

Leaving the comment right where it was and turning her attention toward the flying fabric, Libby cleared her throat.

“Who has time to do this in the middle of the day?”

Reagan slipped on a cropped Blondie band tank top and moved their bags from the truck bed to the cab before

locking it. “Tourists,” she replied as if it should’ve been obvious.

Kite flying was a lot more fun than Libby remembered.

Though to be fair, all she ever had as a kid were the little crappy ones from the pharmacy toy aisle. The extravagant phoenix that danced against the bright blue sky was nothing short of art. She was so focused on keeping the shaped nylon afloat, she

forgot the point was to create a backlog of pictures, the evidence of a long-standing relationship and definitely not a recent fabrication. For once, South Florida's lack of seasons was useful.

"That was fun," Libby decided, accepting the bottle of icy, cold water Reagan offered.

"Nothing like being a visitor in your city and doing all the stuff we take for granted," she replied, twisting off the cap to her own bottle and taking a gulp.

Libby nodded. "Well, it's been a solid three years since I've been to the beach, so we can keep the streak going."

The dimpled smile that shone in response was brighter than the sun partially blinding Libby. "Away we go then,"

Reagan said before pointing to the parking lot on the other end of the park.

"Hey, do you wanna drive?" Reagan asked when they returned to the truck. "I saw how you were looking at her. I can tell you're interested. I've got an eye for these things."

Libby laughed. "Coming after my job, are you?" After a beat she realized Reagan was serious. "You really trust me with this? Isn't this like your baby?"

Reagan pushed her long bangs out of her face, revealing sparkling dark eyes. "I'm already trusting you with my heart, aren't I?" She tossed the keys at Libby before could say anything else.

Driving from downtown to the beach was a lot more fun in Reagan's truck than in Libby's SUV. With the windows

open and music blaring, it was the most freedom Libby had felt in years.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

“You look good in it,” Reagan said before snapping a picture with her camera.

Libby smiled, her cheeks flushed from the heat streaming into the truck and a little something more. The causeway connecting the city to the beach took them by the gated man-made islands sitting on Biscayne Bay where the famous and ultra-rich lived in secluded privacy.

“I made a sculpture garden in there last year,” Reagan said, pointing out the window to the waterfront mansions beyond the gates.

“For whom?” she asked, curiosity piqued.

“Confidential,” Reagan replied with a lopsided grin, “but it was a rather dramatic scene of partially nude nymphs skipping out from a wooded patch and playing around a pond. Probably the biggest pain in the ass I’ve ever worked on.”

Libby listened with interest as Reagan described the process of making and transporting large ceramic structures.

She was so passionate it was impossible not to get wrapped up in her story. When they transitioned into the topic of business, Libby’s comfort zone, the time spent in traffic flew by. By the time they’d found somewhere to park a few blocks from the water, Libby was convinced Reagan needed a few business classes and a marketing department. It started making sense why she agreed to the admittedly hair-brained scheme. Money was the key to catapulting Reagan to the next level.

Libby was busy feeding the parking meter while Reagan gazed at the palm tree lined

road and pastel colored Art Deco buildings behind them. When Reagan didn't move after

Libby announced she'd bought them the two-hour maximum, Libby wandered over to her.

"Are you have some kind of déjà vu moment?" Libby asked, shielding her face from the noonday sun and wishing she'd thought of a hat. Sunglasses weren't enough.

"Composing a cute pic in my mind's eye," she replied before jumping in her truck and changing its direction in the parking spot.

Reagan lowered the tailgate and gestured toward the truck bed. "Madam," she said, offering her hand.

Libby glanced at her dubiously but took her hand along with a gentle push on her lower back. Reagan jumped on with practiced ease. How many girls had she wooed with her style and confidence?

"Now what?" Libby asked, her hands on her hips.

Reagan's response was to plop down and rest her back against the tinted glass of the back window. "Trust me. It's gonna be cavity-inducing."

"Where am I supposed to—"

When Reagan parted her denim covered legs, it became obvious where she was supposed to sit. Happy that she was so hot her blush blended in with her already flushed face, Libby spun around before performing a graceful plié and sitting between Reagan's parted thighs.

“Ready?” she asked, aiming her phone at them.

Libby looked at the image of them together before she took the picture. If she didn’t know the photo was staged, she’d believe the couple staring back at them, sun-kissed and smiling, was completely legit.

After a few snaps with the tell-tale Miami Beach setting behind them, Reagan surprised Libby by kissing her on the cheek. When she flinched, Reagan pulled away.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to—”

“No, no, please.” She shook her head, mortified at her reaction. “I just wasn’t expecting it. You surprised me.

That’s a good idea. We need some images to sell the romance,” she added in a rush as she fought back the fluster.

Reagan craned her neck to get a better look at her face.

“Are you sure? I don’t want to make you feel uncomfortable at all. We can skip—”

“Please,” she interrupted softly. “I promise.” She smiled, before taking the phone from her hands and snapping her own picture. This time, Libby’s lips were on Reagan’s cheek.

After a few lovey-dovey poses, Reagan had a new idea.

“Let’s do some without the glasses on.” She pulled off her own shades as she spoke. “Let’s make the most of those gorgeous green eyes.”

Libby smiled. No one ever noticed her eyes. They were so dark they often looked

brown without closer inspection.

When did she even get a good look at them?

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

For their last picture, Reagan instructed her to look right at the camera, which she did. What she didn't tell her was that she was going to kiss something other than her cheeks.

Starting at her jaw, Reagan placed a series of light kisses down the column of her neck and didn't stop until she reached her collarbone. Each point of contact made Libby dizzier than the last. She blamed the heat and blinding sunlight.

"At least one of us is a good actor," Reagan said cheerfully.

Libby was so disoriented she hadn't noticed when the woman had taken the phone from her. With her chin resting on Libby's shoulder, she hadn't even noticed that she'd stopped kissing her. Her skin was still buzzing as if warm lips were still pressed against it.

Shifting, Libby cleared her throat. "What?"

"The pics," she said, turning the screen for Libby to see.

"Those are some Oscar-winning heart-eyes you're channeling."

The sound of Reagan's laughter restarted her brain.

"Yeah, well. I tried," she lied. She hadn't tried, she'd barely been in her body. What the hell was that?

"I don't know about you, but I'm hot as hell. Ready to cool o ?" Reagan asked before

sliding the phone back into her pocket.

“Yeah,” she squeaked before clearing her throat again.

“Definitely.”

CHAPTER 5

FEELING AUDACIOUSLY OPTIMISTIC, Libby picked up the two white bakery boxes full of French treats and stacked them in her backseat. For the last twenty-four hours, she’d worked overtime doing damage control over the Davis breakup and new relationship news.

It hadn’t been as simple as posting on her blog and vlog like she hoped. Kiss Me Quick or KMQ, her modern take on the Cassanova Matchmaking brand, had a lot of followers thanks to her popular videos and advice column, but the KMQ brand couldn’t reach all the people suddenly drawn to the recent soap opera quality of her life. Convincing her clients that she had everything under control and nothing in their service would change was a bumpier ride.

Balancing the pastry boxes on one hand as she stepped into the elevator, Libby’s phone buzzed in the pocket of her white blazer. After sliding her sunglasses over her face to hold back her loose hair, she fished out the phone.

Zena: Hey girl! Long time no see! Sorry to hear about the split with Davis. I was already going carb-free while waiting for the save the date. HIS LOSS! Are you doing okay?

Libby smiled. She and Zena had been inseparable all through college. Neither of them had ever been away from home before and were elated to be paired as dormmates. As

the first semester wore on, they realized just how lucky they'd been as others shared horror stories about the people they'd been forced to room with. Rules about boys in the dorm and respecting each other's space had been easy for them to follow since they'd both gone to college with a purpose and rarely lost that focus.

Libby: I'm doing great! We just grew into different people going in different directions. It hurts, but it happens. Excited for the next chapter of my life!

She hadn't meant to use her trademark it hurts, but it happens platitude and hoped Zena didn't call her out for it.

Zena: You're so right. No sense in crying over spilled

men! I'm here if you need me, okay? We can have a virtual happy hour and trash talk that Jim Morrison wannabe.

Libby chuckled, earning a curious glance from the suited man standing next to her. Before he could creep closer and glance over her shoulder, she turned her phone at an angle.

Libby: I'm in for the happy hour, but out on the Davis talk!

Zena replied with a gif of Beyoncé patting her hair.

Zena: I have to run. I've got a patient waiting. But listen, I'm planning a trip to Miami! I need to hear the details of this lady-loving moment you're having IN PERSON. I mean your girl looks really cute from what you posted on your IG. Very Kristen Stewart devil-may-care energy. I need DEETS. I'll text you later and we can coordinate when works for you. LOVE YOU MEAN IT.

Libby stared at her phone as the elevator stopped to let people out on the twentieth

floor. The fauxmance was easy enough to sell online, but to her friend? That was more lying than she'd prepared for. Libby took a deep cleansing breath and calmed her racing heart. Zena had been talking about visiting for three years and had never moved o the planning stage. As a pediatrician in a busy practice in Houston, taking time o was almost impossible.

Libby: Let me know when! I'd love to see you! You're way overdue for a vacation!

When the elevator finally opened on her floor after filling and emptying along the way, Libby was holding onto her positivity with a white-knuckled grip.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

“Good morning, ladies,” she greeted the receptionists behind the large curved desk. “I brought treats.”

“Libby,” Taylor called just as she crossed from the waiting room to the main office. “I’m glad I caught you.”

“Those are words I never want to hear so early in the morning,” she replied, only half kidding as she glanced at the file folder in her hands. “From accounting?”

“What if I add that your tan looks great? Red has morphed into a nice, healthy, human color.” Taylor’s smile looked like a wince as she handed her the file. It was a little thicker than she expected. “These are the people still withdrawing from the agency after your hand-delivered letters. I thought maybe you’d want to reach out to them personally.”

Taking the file, Libby turned toward her office. “I’ll give them some space. If they don’t feel comfortable with me in charge of their love life, there’s not too much I can do about it.” She stopped short of opening the door and turned to Taylor, who looked poised to follow her in and continue the conversation. “I’m going to get ready to film a new video in a minute. Would you please make sure the studio is ready?”

Furrowing her brow, Taylor hesitated for a moment before agreeing. They both knew the studio was permanently staged for recording. There was nothing that really needed checking.

Once inside her office, Libby gripped her stomach with trembling hands. As her mind raced, she was flooded with doubt. Would it have been better to come out as a proud

single woman instead of lying? Maybe she'd have retained

more clients. Maybe the foundation of her legacy wouldn't be crumbling beneath her feet.

She pushed the reckless thought aside. A matchmaker's own relationship stability was the only marker of success that counted. No one would trust a mechanic who drove a car that didn't run.

Being over thirty and unmarried was already a hard pill to swallow. She'd spent years taking the pressure on her clients by reminding them that the median marriage age in the US

was nearly thirty, using herself as an example. But the argument that a person should be established in their own right before entering marriage only went so far once she herself reached the pinnacle of her career.

The long engagement with Davis was less worrisome once he made his own big move from law to music. No one knew that he'd been dragging his feet on commitment for nearly all of the six years they'd been together. Not a single person knew that she'd proposed to him and purchased her own engagement ring.

Libby closed her eyes and remembered how to take meditative breaths as a panic attack clawed at her nervous system and threatened to pull her under. When her blood stopped thumping in her ears like a marching band amped up on pixie sticks, she dragged herself to her powder room to wash the stress sweat off her body.

Hanging over the round towel holder next to the pedestal sink was Reagan's white, linen shirt from the day before. In the middle of her turmoil, Libby smiled. The day spent recreating a months-long relationship was the most fun Libby could remember having. Being in her presence was easier and more comfortable than it had any right

to be.

The tiny part of Libby that wanted to run away from the pressure and expectation considered calling Reagan. What

would they do with another day spent acting like tourists in their own city?

Libby remembered the sensation of Reagan's lips on her neck and closed her eyes. It had been so long since she'd been treated with such attention and care. She couldn't stop to care about how pathetic that was given her long-term relationship.

As she held the shirt up to her nose, Libby inhaled the clean scent of detergent mixed with a fresh, earthy smell she guessed was clay. It transported her out of the cold confines of the bathroom and back to Reagan's truck. Salt spray in the air. The hot sun burning her scalp. Beads of sweat dripping down her back as the waves crashing in the distance promised cool relief. Reagan's soft lips. Her warm body wrapped around her. Her dimpled smile accompanying her throaty laugh. And those arms. Those strong arms snaked around her belly. The arms that held her together. Held her steady. Even if just for a moment. Just for a picture. Libby flung herself into the memory like a woman lost at sea would scramble up a life preserver.

"Libby." Taylor's voice through the door ripped her from her reverie and into the hard lines of her modern powder room. "Your grandmother is here," she whispered. "And I don't think she's very happy."

Shit.

CHAPTER 6

LIBBY STOOD FROZEN with her hand on the bathroom's glass doorknob. She'd been silly enough to think her grandmother would respect her request that they talk in

person at her house over the weekend and not in the office. When her grandmother didn't return her messages, she hoped she just needed a little time to process by herself. She should have known better.

For a dizzying moment before emerging from the bathroom, Libby considered telling her grandmother the truth. Maybe she could be her ally and give her advice.

The idea died almost before it was formed. The great Mrs.

Cassanova, who loved her name so much she refused to change it when she got married, an unheard-of act in the 1940s, would never risk denigrating her reputation with lies.

Confessing would only prove Libby's greatest fears correct: that she wasn't ready to take the helm.

Straightening and projecting a false confidence, Libby leaned in with her entire body. If she'd learned anything in those acting classes it was that she had to live in her role, not just perform it.

"Good morning, Mima. I didn't know you were coming by," she greeted with feigned ease.

The woman standing with her arms crossed in a black and white tweed skirt suit as she looked out the window to the bay and city beyond didn't move. Every second that she didn't speak, or even look in her direction, made Libby want to curl up in a ball at her feet and cry.

Convincing herself that she was in control as her knees wobbled while she strode across the room, Libby refused to give in to her fear. Her grandmother didn't turn toward her when Libby stood behind her, leaning against her desk as she waited.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

Each passing second wore down Libby's resolve, but just as she was on the verge of breaking under the psychological attack of her silence, Libby turned the unease into a whetstone and sharpened.

"Mima, I understand if you're upset—"

"Upset?" she echoed without looking away from the window. "Why would I be upset?" Her words dripped with such sarcasm, pure acid poured down Libby's throat.

&

nbsp; "Please, you don't have to—"

The elder Cassanova whirled around, her dark green eyes wide and angry. Libby gripped the edge of her desk. "Do you think it was easy for me to step down and hand this over?"

Libby's ears rang as her heart hammered in her chest so violently it was hard to breathe. She didn't answer the question, not just because it was rhetorical, but because she wasn't sure any sound would come out if she opened her mouth.

"Is it too much to ask that I at least know the person I'm entrusting my life's work to?" she asked more gently as she dropped into the small sofa near the plate glass windows.

"That I know my own flesh and blood?" She grabbed the satin fabric of her blouse as if wanting to crush her own heart.

Libby furrowed her brow, unwilling to believe her grandmother was saying what she thought she was saying.

Her grandmother was intolerant in so many ways, but not about any people as a group. She disliked people on a case-by-case basis if they failed to meet her insanely high standards.

“How do you think this makes us look, hmm? Not just our name that has developed invaluable goodwill for generations, but us on a personal level. How am I to be considered a person of integrity, when I didn’t know my own grandchild, my successor, my pride and joy is...”

“Is what, Mima?” Libby demanded, clenching her jaw as she crossed the room to sit in the armchair across from her.

To look her dead in the eye and challenge her to finish. “In love with a woman?”

Her grandmother cocked her head slowly to one side like a masked villain in a slasher film about to strike. When her lip curled, Libby held her breath.

“You think I’m angry because you’re in a relationship with a woman?” she asked, at once offended and disgusted.

Libby leaned back in surprise. “Aren’t you?”

The way her grandmother closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose as she leaned into the backrest made it obvious that not only was she incorrect, her grandmother thought she was an idiot.

“Mija.” She paused before looking at her with tired but kinder eyes. “I don’t care who you love. If I have taught you anything, it is that life is fleeting and one of the only

true joys is the love and family we find in a soulmate. How could you believe that something as insignificant as gender could invalidate that?"

Her question robbed Libby of her ability to think, much less speak. They stared at each other, unmoving, for so long, Libby lost the feeling in her extremities.

"Come." Her grandmother patted the sofa cushion next to her. "Sit with me."

Libby obeyed and was relieved at the hand cupping her cheek. "Can you imagine how painful it is not to know that you've not only suffered through a broken engagement alone, but that you've found a new partner and not told me?

That I had to find out from the scandalized old gossips at the Rotary Club. It was humiliating not having any clue what they were talking about until Juana showed me on her stupid smartphone."

With each word, Libby shrunk further into her seat. "I didn't mean to embarrass you, Mima."

"Why did you keep this from me?" she asked in a soft tone she'd never heard her grandmother use before. There was hurt behind her words.

"I was afraid," Libby replied honestly. "Afraid that you wouldn't trust me if you knew about Davis and me splitting up. That you'd think I was a loser in love and unfit to match anybody."

Her grandmother's face contorted into a frown. "You, my treasure, are no loser. Davis was a moron. I told you he wasn't right for you from the beginning."

Libby dared a lopsided smile. "Can you imagine why I wasn't so eager to tell you he was in fact the douche you predicted?"

“I’m never wrong about these things,” she replied, the ghost of a smile twitching at her thin lips. “But, for once, I am sorry I was right. I don’t want any heartache for you, mija.”

“I do regret not being honest with you,” Libby confessed.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

The grand Mrs. Cassanova sighed before turning sideways in her seat to better face Libby. “When am I meeting this young lady? Your father wants to plan a barbecue for this weekend—”

Libby’s eyes widened. There was no way her acting skills would stand up to the challenge of her family’s scrutiny.

“That’s too soon,” she blurted.

“Too soon?” she repeated. “You’ve introduced her to every other person on Earth, and I refuse to learn anything about her from the internet. What will people think when they ask me about your new beau, and I can’t say a single thing about her?”

Libby tried and failed to return moisture to her mouth.

Her grandmother was right, but there was no way she’d make it ten minutes without folding. They didn’t know enough about each other yet; they needed more backstory.

She needed more time.

“If this weekend is too short notice, we can do the one after,” her grandmother said as if she was being magnanimous in her generosity.

“She has an upcoming art show,” Libby lied, hoping she didn’t sound as frantic as she felt. “She’s really swamped until then.”

“An art show? How wonderful. Where is it? I’d love to go.” Libby laughed nervously

as her heart raced for new and unexpected reasons. “Mima, that’s way too much pressure, don’t you think?”

Her grandmother narrowed her eyes. “Doesn’t she want to meet us? What’s wrong with her? Doesn’t she value family?”

“No! Of course, that’s not it. She can’t wait to meet you and everybody, but I don’t want to make her night about me and my family.”

Considering her pleas for a moment, her grandmother acquiesced. “Very well. When will she be finished with her show? I’d like to plan something appropriate for our meeting.”

As her grandmother stood, so did Libby. “Don’t worry, Mima. As soon as she can take the time away, I’ll put something together. Is that okay?”

Her grandmother hesitated before nodding once. “Fine,”

she said as she started for the door. “But, Elisabeth, please.

No more surprises, okay?”

“No more surprises,” she said, reasonably certain it was a promise she couldn’t keep.

C H A P T E R 7

“GREAT WORK, CLASS,” Reagan said, slapping her hands on her denim covered thighs as she stood from the stool behind her station at the front of the room. “Those are some lovely fruit bowls. Please take them to the drying room and I’ll see you all tomorrow for trimming and firing, okay?”

As the mix of senior citizens and folks from the adult group home milled out of the studio portion of the huge industrial space, Reagan pulled o her canvas apron and set to washing the drying clay o her hands.

“You know, if you actually charged some of these people, you could make some decent money.”

Reagan craned her head toward the woman in the doorway as her final student waved goodbye. “I’m not interested in your business advice, Imani,” she said before the tall woman with long black and turquoise loose braids could start her lecturing.

Long legs exposed by high-waisted short shorts made confident strides toward the sink as Reagan took a brush to her nails. Imani hopped onto the nearest clean worktable and crossed one leg over the other. “You’re so stubborn.”

Reagan smirked. “I’ve been called worse. And don’t worry, I have a plan that doesn’t involve charging the members of my community for something they deserve for

free.” She didn’t need to look up from the sink to know Imani was rolling her eyes. “One day your face is going to freeze like that,” she warned.

Imani laughed too loudly to be sincere. “Okay, Grandma.

Anyway. . .” She waved her away. “Does this plan of yours have anything to do with this very serious relationship with a stranger you’re in all of a sudden?”

Reagan took her time drying her hands and dusting o her overalls before replying. Tossing the towel onto the table before leaning against it and crossing her arms, Reagan looked at her for a long time before speaking.

“So,” she began with a grin, “you drove all the way from Ft. Lauderdale to satisfy

your curiosity? And on your day o no less.” She laughed before shaking her head.
“I’ve never known you to be so nosey.”

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

Imani gasped. “Don’t you dare make me come o like the weirdo here. As if it’s totally normal that you’ve allegedly been in a relationship with this woman for what? Six months? And I’ve never heard of her. Neither have any of your other friends.”

Biting her tongue, Reagan wiggled her eyebrows instead of breaking her contractually mandated silence. She trusted Imani with her life, but she’d learned long ago that more than one person couldn’t really keep a secret. Three was just begging for trouble.

“Are you really not going to tell me what the hell is going on?” Imani’s narrowed eyes made it clear she wasn’t going to let it go. If Reagan were in her shoes, she wouldn’t let it go so easily either. “Are you trying to have some While You Were Sleeping thing here? I thought you’d shed your bad romantic movie obsession years ago.”

“First, I don’t know what you think that movie is about.

Second, shouldn’t you be studying for the last part of your

CPA exam?” Reagan countered, hoping to shove her o topic.

Imani lifted a sculpted brow. She refused to be guided away from the subject. “Don’t you worry about my accounting career. What the hell do you have up your sleeve?

You’re not usually so . . . sketchy.”

“I’m in love,” Reagan replied, batting her eyelashes.

For a moment, Imani didn't react. She just stared, unblinkingly, until a high-pitched laugh tore from her body and bounced against the high ceiling and its exposed metal ductwork before echoing through the studio.

While Reagan waited for her dramatic display to come to an end, she pushed o the table and strode across the room to make sure her students' work was well arranged on the drying room shelves.

Moments later, Imani stopped cackling and leaned against the open door to the drying room. The closed-in space the size of a large bedroom had metal shelves on every wall and a row of high shelving units at the center.

"Reagan be serious. What the hell is going on?" Imani demanded, her tone increasingly sharp.

As Reagan covered some of the older pieces that had finished drying in plastic, she sighed. Lying wasn't comfortable, but she couldn't risk making Libby's situation worse by blabbing about their arrangement.

"Listen, I know it's a bit sudden, okay," she admitted as she exited the room with a board full of mugs ready to be fired in the kiln. "But I just want you to give her a chance,"

she said, sticking to the only truth she could whittle away from the farce. "Libby's a really great woman and I think you're going to like her."

"Why keep her a secret if she's so great?"

A fair question, one Reagan couldn't answer. "She's not out."

The confession softened the lines on Imani's forehead.

“Well, that’s the other part I was going to ask you about.

Kimber sent me some links. She’s some dating guru for straight people, and until five minutes ago she was engaged to some dude. Was she cheating on him?”

“No,” Reagan replied before she could get any further.

“They ended things a year ago,” she explained as an alarm went off, alerting her that one of the kilns was ready to be opened.

Following her to the row of large industrial kilns, Imani was still full of questions. Reagan wished she would just accept her answers at face value, but until Imani was satisfied she wasn’t going to stop. She was protective, if not unrelenting.

“And you’ve been having a secret thing with her all this time? Why wouldn’t you tell me? You didn’t trust me not to spill her secret? I didn’t even know who the hell she was. It’s not like she’s looking to set up any non-heteros for love.”

Reagan let the question sit with her a moment as she began unfastening the multiple locks on the kiln. “She just took over her family business. I’m sure diversification is high on her list of innovations.”

While Imani mulled over her response, Reagan pulled out a set of finished mugs from a class earlier in the week.

“Damn it,” she cursed, finding one of the mugs in four pieces and another with an unattached handle.

As she set the broken pieces on a table and grabbed some glue, Imani watched her. Using a magnifying glass at the end of a flexible arm clipped to the end of the table, Reagan started with the easier task of gluing the handle back on the body of the mug.

“I’m thinking about doing that fundraiser,” Reagan said when Imani stayed quiet.
“It’s going to take me forever to raise enough money otherwise.”

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

Imani eyed her like a detective fit for an Agatha Christie novel. “You’ve been talking about a fundraiser forever. Why now? Is it related to this sudden but allegedly months-long relationship with a woman you’ve never mentioned?”

“She’s inspired me to push myself further,” she replied.

Libby was inspirational. She’d taken over her family business and started to modernize it. Shape it to her own vision. Not too different than what Reagan wanted to do too.

The grumble Imani produced low in her throat made it obvious she was still highly suspect. “Well, I look forward to meeting her very soon.”

“You’re going to love her,” she replied, hoping it was true.

“I’m definitely curious about who has managed to nab your heart,” Imani admitted. “A great many women have tried and failed.”

Reagan finished reattaching the handle and pulled the totally broken mug toward her. As she did, Imani picked up the repaired mug. “Reagan, I know you see the beauty in things that most of us miss. You take a hunk of wet clay and breathe life into it. It’s a gift. Part of that gift is seeing the value in things others might deem useless.” She turned the mug over in her hand before setting it down and pointing at the mess of ceramic shards. “But remember, some things really are too broken. I know you’ve gotten better at learning the difference, and I hope you’re not back to picking up a beautiful thing just because you feel compelled to put it back together.”

Placing a piece of mug back on the table, Reagan stopped busying herself and looked up at Imani. Her big dark eyes were full of concern, and Reagan understood why. She couldn't pretend she didn't have a history of picking up wounded souls and trying to love them into wellness. It very rarely worked.

"I promise that's not what I'm doing here," she replied softly. "Libby is a put-together woman who doesn't need me to complete her. She's a strong, vibrant, independent person."

Imani nodded. "I hope so."

Me too, she thought, before remembering they weren't really in a relationship.

CHAPTER 8

LIBBY RAN her fingers through her straightened hair as she emerged from her office and into the hall leading to the consultation room. Unlike the rest of the office decorated with a minimalist modern design to accentuate the view of the city skyline and bay, the consultation room was an interior office. No windows to offer distraction. Instead of the cold, clean feel of the rest of the office, the room had two big overstuffed chairs that made it impossible not to sink into them. The purpose was to foster intimacy and connection. A sense of relaxed comfort like two old friends chatting at the kitchen table.

As she silenced her cell and dropped it into her blazer pocket, Libby projected quiet confidence. She'd stood at her grandmother's side a thousand times before consultations, but it was only a few years ago that she'd been allowed to go inside with her. The presence of two people made it much harder to recreate the safe space that allowed clients to open up about themselves. They didn't want it to have the trappings of an interview, even if that was exactly what it was.

During the consultation, it was Libby's job to see beyond the words coming out of the person's mouth. Her grandmother's theory had proved true over and over again.

Most people had no idea what they actually needed in a partner, but if you listened closely enough to all the things they didn't say, you'd learn where they ached for balance.

Getting to those moments of depth required complete honesty. No easy feat when people are trying to say the right things and paint themselves in the best light. Her grandmother was a master of precise inquiry; Libby had a much more wandering style.

"Ms. Jennifer Borgmann," she said as she entered the cozy room with her hand outstretched. "So nice to meet you."

The woman, tall and attractive in her mid-fifties, stood and took Libby's hand in between both of hers. "Thank you so much for taking me. My original appointment was for next month, but when your office called with a newly opened spot, I was so excited."

Libby gestured for her to sit and tried not to think about all the prospective clients that canceled their initial consult appointments. She told herself it didn't matter and focused on the woman across from her.

Taylor knocked on the door with two steaming mugs of tea exactly on time. Sharing food or drink with someone was an easy way to facilitate bonding. A few months ago, she switched from Cuban espresso to tea. Her grandmother had resisted the change, arguing that the tradition was an integral part of process. But once she'd tried the blend Libby had specially made, she understood. It was soothing and delicious while providing just enough stimulation to focus the mind. Espresso was jet fuel; what they needed was a breeze against a sail.

Once they were settled in, Libby started. “I don’t like to be distracted by taking notes,” she explained. “Our session will be recorded just for my own purposes. No one else, not even my sta , will listen to it. Is that okay with you?”

Jennifer blew on her tea as she nodded. “Yeah, definitely.

I read the disclaimer on the papers I filled out.”

Libby smiled. “Great, now—”

“Can I just say something before we really get into it?”

she interrupted, setting her mug on the small table at her side.

“Of course,” Libby replied with a gentle smile. “The more I know about everything and anything the better.” She took a sip of her own tea.

“I’m sure there’s

some kind of therapist-type line you don’t cross about your personal life.” Jennifer’s olive skin flushed as her eyes darted to the floor and back to Libby.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

“My whole life I’ve been pretty unlucky in love. It seems like no matter how hard I try, I always pick the wrong person.”

Leaning forward in her seat, Libby listened while making sure to keep her expression soft. She wasn’t sure what Jennifer was leading to that might implicate Libby’s personal life, but she waited for it anxiously. Because of the nature of her questions, clients often batted them right back at her, usually out of their nervousness rather than genuine curiosity. A well-placed joke about how Libby’s sex drive wasn’t going to help them find a partner, combined with reassurance to just be as honest as possible and reminding them it was a judgment-free zone, usually worked.

When Jennifer was finished sharing some of her dating history, she gripped her hands together as if praying for strength. Libby reached out and covered them with hers.

“Whatever you want to share with me, please feel free,”

she encouraged.

Taking a deep cleansing breath, Jennifer nodded. “I read about your relationship,” she admitted as if mortified by the disclosure. “It’s the reason I finally had the nerve to reach out to a matchmaker. I never really thought this was for me, you know. So old fashioned, but then I thought maybe this

person,” she straightened, “this non-traditional woman, will understand me.” She smiled. “And for the first time, I said out loud what I’d been starting to discover about myself.” She took another breath. “I’m pansexual and I want to date all kinds of people. Not just straight guys.”

The proclamation was followed by the woman's tears and a wide smile, prompting Libby forward to embrace her trembling body. "Thank you so much for sharing that with me."

"It's taken a long time to understand myself. I've been unlearning a lot of bullshit," she admitted with a laugh as she accepted the tissue Libby offered.

As Jennifer talked more about her road to self-discovery, Libby tried hard to suppress feeling like a fraud and just focus on celebrating her prospective client. After nearly two hours spent talking, Libby set out to do the hard work of finding her possible matches.

Normally, she wouldn't take on a prospective client when she had such few suitable matches, but after meeting Jennifer, she was making it her mission to find her just the right person. Losing the restriction of gender identity and the roles and expectations surrounding it was unexpectedly freeing. As intimidated as she was by the likelihood of taking a wrong step in the new landscape, she was eager to find Jennifer's match.

Striding back to her office, she was brainstorming ideas for how to expand her possible match portfolio, when Taylor called her name. She held her breath as she turned her head toward the sound of the woman running down the corridor and toward her.

Please don't let it be bad, she prayed. Lately Taylor rushing toward her was a terrible sign.

"We got it!" Taylor shouted, waving a large, square envelope.

Libby waited for Taylor to reach her. "Got what?"

"The invitation to the Ruiz Art Museum Ball," she explained before shoving the crumpled and stained invitation into her palm.

Libby gasped. “No way!” Tearing open the envelope, she grinned before pressing the linen invitation to her chest. She savored the moment of relief. “It’s this Saturday. I assumed I’d been left out thanks to my scandal.”

“Apparently there was some kind of mishap in the mailroom.” Taylor pointed to the black streaks. Libby didn’t care, all that mattered was that she hadn’t been left out. The benefit crowd wasn’t particularly understanding. “What’s the theme this year?”

Taylor’s voice brought her back to the present. She scanned the hand-painted card crushed on one side.

“Midnight in Havana,” she read aloud. “A 1920s inspired casino night with a silent auction.”

“Less creative than last year’s murder mystery theme, but probably a lot less obnoxious.”

Libby chuckled. “I don’t care what the hell it is. I’m just glad I’m invited!”

“Are you thinking of taking Reagan?” Taylor asked as she followed Libby into her office and plopped down into the chair across from her glass-top desk.

Libby eased into her white leather chair. “If I’m going to take this for a real test run, I suppose there’s no time like the present.” She smiled through her pounding heart and mildly perspiring palms.

Ignoring the overly formal text from her grandmother asking about dinner dates for the second time that week, Libby pulled up Reagan’s name and texted her.

Libby: What are you doing this Saturday night?

Twenty minutes later, while Libby was putting together the ad to attract new, diverse, singles to the agency, Reagan

responded.

Reagan: I'm guessing doing something with my girlfriend??

Libby grinned as she typed a quick reply.

Page 19

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

Libby: Are you ready for it?

Reagan: Gurrrrrl, I was born ready. Where are we going?

Libby: A very fancy gala. ;) All kinds of stu y people and hit or miss food . . . BUT it's a good cause and there's a silent auction and a Havana Nights casino theme. Very 1920s. Sounds like fun right?!

Reagan: Totally convinced! Almost like if I didn't have a choice lol So . . . what does one wear to a stu y event with mediocre food?

Libby: Either a dress or a dark suit . . . or if you're feeling brave

. . . a gown or tux ;)

Reagan: So many options. I guess I better come up with something gala-appropriate quick.

Libby: It's a business expense, so feel free to get something really nice and send me the bill.

Reagan: I don't need you to buy me clothes!

Libby: Please, you wouldn't have to get a new outfit if it weren't for me! You have to let me pay!

It was a long time before Reagan replied, so long that Libby started to worry she'd o

ended her. She tried to distract herself with work, but it was no use. All she could do was stare at the text conversation on her phone, waiting for the three dots to appear.

Reagan: Found a place to get my outfit. Do you have plans this afternoon?

Glancing at the electronic planner always open on her computer, Libby debated. She could move a few things around, film her video in the morning instead, and have Taylor sit in an advertising meeting for her. It wasn't impossible.

Libby: I guess I do now. Send me the details.

FOLLOWING THE DIRECTIONS ON HER PHONE, REAGAN PULLED HER

truck into a small strip mall anchored by an abandoned big-box store on one side. On the other stood a Cuban bakery with an open window serving espresso to a group of octogenarians in fedoras boasting about better days.

Reagan headed for the shop in the middle.

"Hey, Ray!" a curly-haired woman greeted as she rushed to stick pins in a lavish gown fit for Marie Antoinette's court. "You're early." She sprinted toward the door where Reagan stood among the tuxedoed mannequins.

"I'm sorry and I'm even more sorry that I haven't made it out here sooner," Reagan replied as she bent forward to kiss Mary's cheek. "The place looks fantastic! I can't believe it's all yours."

Mary laughed as she pushed her messy brown hair out of her face. "The location leaves a lot to be desired, but it's always been dream to have my own little shop."

Reagan pulled on the sleeve of a bold print suit jacket hanging on a rack. "You know

what they say,” she said with a smile. “It’s what’s on the inside that counts. Did you make all of this?”

“Yup.” Mary looked around the store packed with dresses and suits of varying degrees of formality. “All hand-crafted by yours truly.” She beamed. “What do you need? Your text was a little vaguer than usual.”

Ignoring the wink and moistening of lips, Reagan glanced at the dress form at the back of the shop. “Something appropriate for a black-tie optional event on Saturday.”

Looking over her shoulder, Mary shook her head. “You don’t want that.”

“Why?” Reagan feigned offense. “You don’t think I can pull off Quinceañera Queen?”

Mary laughed. “Maybe, but how about we try something a little more your style. Do you trust me?” she asked, raising a single eyebrow in challenge.

Reagan grinned. “Always.”

Armed with a few options, Reagan slipped behind a curtain to a dressing room. As she peeled off her jeans and tshirt, she heard the front door chime.

Shit. She’d forgotten to tell Mary that Libby was coming too. As she overheard them introducing themselves, she was impressed by Libby’s deft avoidance of relationship titles.

Standing in her underwear with her hands on her curved hips, Reagan considered her options. A long black dress with a high neck and a long slit up the side. It was beautiful but unremarkable. There would be a hundred outfits like that.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

The black tux was out for the same reason.

Reaching for the ivory tux jacket with shiny trim, she looked closer. The fabric was embossed with an abstract floral pattern apparently hand-stitched in a slightly lighter color. Invisible at first glance, but then impossible to ignore.

“Too bad I lost my tan,” she muttered as she checked herself out in the full-length mirror. There was no doubt the nearly white jacket would look better against less pale skin.

Maybe she’d have time to remedy the problem before the big event.

As Reagan buttoned the tuxedo shirt to just below her neck, Libby laughed.

What could be so funny between strangers?

For the first time, she considered they might be talking about her. Since they’d moved away from the dressing room, all she could make out was the low murmur of conversation and a random word h

ere or there. She guessed Mary was showing her some pieces she’d made. Something Libby might wear. But, she hadn’t considered the high probability

that they were talking about her. Would Mary try to compare notes?

Opting for barefoot instead of putting boat shoes against such a lovely suit, Reagan forced herself to saunter instead of spring out from behind the curtain.

“Glad you could make it,” Reagan said with a lopsided smile as Libby turned from the velvet gown Mary was showing her.

Instead of an immediate response, Libby’s dark green eyes scanned her more thoroughly than an airport security screener. Reagan bit the inside of her lip to keep herself from smiling. Before she could ask if Libby liked it, Mary rushed forward, pulling a pin from the little fabric tomato strapped to her wrist.

“I can take it in here,” Mary said, turning her toward the three-way mirror as she pinched the fabric under her arms to make the garment more formfitting.

As Mary suggested other minor alterations, Reagan watched Libby’s reflection. When her former friend-with-benefits crouched in front of her to mark the black trousers with chalk, Libby glanced up and caught her gazing.

“What do you think?” Mary asked, stepping away from the half-altered suit.

Libby gave her the once over before smiling. “Very midnight in Havana, but maybe we should look at all the options.”

Reagan smirked. “Or maybe you know when you’ve found exactly what you’re looking for?”

The moment of silence that hung between them was severed by Mary’s chipper voice. “Well, it never hurts to try on a few other things just to be sure.”

Half an hour and several discarded options later, the group consensus was on the first suit. While Mary dashed o

to the back to better mark the changes, Reagan slipped back into her clothes.

“I didn’t know you were friends with such a talented designer, or I would have come here for my dress,” Libby said as Reagan pushed back the dressing room curtain.

“I know a lot of people,” she replied with exaggerated confidence as she stepped into her personal space.

Libby chuckled without moving away. “I’ll keep that in mind,” she replied softly, holding Reagan in her gaze. “You really did look stunning in that suit.”

Reagan leaned forward, inhaling the light citrusy scent of Libby’s perfume. “I hope I can do you justice. There’s no doubt in my mind you’re going to be a showstopper.”

A smile crept over Libby’s lips like ivy reaching for a branch just out of easy reach. “Are you always such a flatterer?”

“I only call it like I see it,” Reagan countered as she lingered on the curve of her full bottom lip. In the heavy silence, Reagan wondered if Libby was putting on a show for Mary.

A buzzing phone shattered the moment.

“Shit,” Libby cursed as she typed. “I was going to stick around and invite you to lunch but—”

“But you have to run?” Reagan guessed. “No worries.

Go.”

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

Libby hesitated as she glanced between her phone and Reagan. “I really hate to bail like this. It’s just Taylor...”

Reaching out, Reagan placed her hand on Libby’s forearm. “Hey, you don’t have to explain anything to me.

I’m glad you made it all the way to Hialeah without bursting into flames.”

Libby laughed. “Well, GPS helps.” When her phone buzzed again, her smile disappeared. “I really have to run,”

she said with open disappointment before closing the gap

between them and kissing her cheek. A moment later, the door chime beeped, and Libby was gone.

“I didn’t know you’d settled down with anyone,” Mary said as she returned to the dressing room where Reagan was still looking at the front door.

“You know I’m an international lady of mystery,” she replied, sidestepping the question.

“If you really want to make a splash with my creation, I have one suggestion.” Mary’s grin was wry and devilish.

“It’s a bit bold, but I think your lady friend will like it. Based on how she described her dress to me, I think it will be a perfect compliment.”

Without hesitation, Reagan nodded. “Let’s do it. How much do I owe you?”

“No worries. Your Cassanova’s got you covered. Pretty and generous. Did you win the lottery?”

Reagan laughed. “To be determined.”

CHAPTER 9

DRESSED IN A WHITE, ru ed, one shoulder dress, Libby took a deep breath and pulled her SUV alongside a nearly dilapidated looking factory in a ghost town of an industrial neighborhood. If it wasn’t for Reagan’s very unique pickup truck parked outside, she’d be sure her directions were wrong.

At least I’ve got an hour till sunset, she thought, glancing in the rearview mirror as if a zombie hoard might round the corner any second.

In the moments she spent waiting for Reagan to emerge, her palms started sweating and her empty stomach twisted in knots. Her mind raced with worries. What if they weren’t believable as a couple?

As she imagined the catastrophe of being confronted by an angry mob and accused of being a fraud, Reagan appeared from behind a huge metal door. The light perspiration in her palms turned into a flood. She knew she should stop staring at the woman striding toward her car, but she couldn’t look away. Instead of the tuxedo shirt she’d worn at the shop, Reagan had ditched the shirt all together. The jacket now o ered a plunging neckline exposing modest cleavage and half her flat tummy. With slicked back hair, newly tanned

skin, and professionally applied make-up, Reagan was literally stunning.

Smirking as she approached the car, Reagan had to pull on the handle twice before Libby registered it was locked.

“Sorry,” she said, face flushed with heat as she ran her hand over the controls on the driver’s side door and found the unlock button.

“Too much?” Reagan asked before she slipped into the car. “I have this double-sided tape,” she explained as she ran her fingers over the swell of her chest where the fabric kissed her skin and threatened to expose too much. “But I’m not convinced. Mary said they’ll hold, but I can put on the shirt if you don’t think this looks right.”

“No! You look amazing,” Libby blurted, her gaze lingering on her cleavage as she stood trapped somewhere between envy and intrigue.

Reagan looked up from inspecting her outfit and quirked an eyebrow. “Not too try-hard?”

Shaking her head, Libby smirked. “Just the right amount of effort.”

“Are you sure this is up to snu ? You look like a Hollywood starlet right out of a silent movie.”

Libby chuckled and lightly patted her curled hair. She wasn’t convinced when her hairdresser talked her into a curly updo, but the look was growing on her. “Now if I can just manage to keep this blood red lipstick from getting on the white dress, we’ll be golden.”

Reagan laughed as she stepped into the front passenger seat. “I’ll do my best to keep those red lips where you want them.”

As they pulled out onto the main road heading toward the highway, Libby watched

Reagan from the corner of her eye.

She reclined in her seat like she was completely at ease in a

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

foreign environment. Libby wondered what it would be like to be so relaxed. To be so comfortable in her own skin.

Reagan's husky voice knocked Libby out of her thoughts.

"You know you really didn't have to go out of your way to come get me. Vizcaya can't be more than fifteen minutes from your office. I could've just met you there."

Libby couldn't pretend she was just in the neighborhood when she'd driven ten miles northwest just to return to where she'd started. "That's not the point," she decided.

"You're doing me the favor of accompanying me. The least I can do is pick you up."

"I guess having a little time to get to know each other isn't a bad idea since we're supposed to be helplessly in love."

> My friends have been giving me a little grief about not having met you in all these months we've been dating."

Libby winced. She didn't like making a liar out of either of them. "I'm sorry--"

"Stop," Reagan interrupted, her warm hand on Libby's exposed forearm. "I chose to do this with you. Okay? We just have to get to know each other and it'll be fine."

Looking into her dark eyes, made that much more striking by the dark eyeshadow and nude lipstick, Libby's anxiety eased. Her soft gaze was like hot chamomile tea warming and soothing her from the inside out.

“Stop!” Reagan shouted, forcing Libby’s attention back to the road. In the instant she’d been distracted, all tra c had stopped on the eight-lane highway.

“Shit!” Slamming both feet on the brake while she gripped the steering wheel, Libby stopped the SUV just before it landed in the bed of the truck in front of her.

“You okay?” Reagan asked, her warm hand on Libby’s exposed shoulder.

“Yeah, I’m sorry. I—”

“No worries,” she interrupted with a reassuring smile.

“Miami tra c is a thousand percent not your fault.”

Libby peered around the tra c stopped in front of her.

The line of vehicles parked on the highway disappeared beyond the horizon. Squinting, she made out firetrucks blocking tra c in the distance. “This looks bad. I think they closed the road. And we’re stuck between exits,” she added, glancing back at the sea of metal forming behind them.

Reagan groaned with her hand on her stomach. “Damn, I shouldn’t have skipped lunch. But it was either a burger or this.” She grinned as she gestured at the makeup on her face.

“Then I guess it’s lucky for you I’m better prepared than a Boy Scout,” she replied, opening the glovebox and taking in the clean scent of Reagan’s perfume as she leaned across her body.

“Damn! You’re not kidding! Look at all this. It’s like a little convenience store. Granola bars, nuts, dried fruit, pretzels. Do you have a soda machine in the back

somewhere?” Reagan joked, pulling two bars from the back and handing one to Libby as she put the car in park.

“No soda, but I’ve got room temp water,” she replied, reaching back for one of the glass containers she hadn’t had a chance to drop off at the office.

“Now, I’m not going to judge you, but do you live in your car?” Reagan asked, unfastening her seatbelt and turning in her chair to face Libby.

Libby chuckled. “I get stuck in the office late more than I’d like.”

“Isn’t the whole point of being the boss getting to leave whenever you want?” Reagan asked, her mouth full of oats and dried cherries.

“You’d think so.” Libby reached for a small pack of almonds. “But carrying the Cassanova name is a ‘round the clock job.’”

“Is that what led to Splitsville with the ex?” she asked as if getting to the good part of a movie.

Libby took a deep breath. “It’s a loaded question. Is there ever really just one reason?”

“An equivocation. There’s a lot to this story, huh? It’s okay if you don’t want to talk about it.”

“I can talk about it,” Libby decided. “To be honest, I hid from the breakup for so long, I think the wound healed over without me noticing. I was kidding myself to think I could juggle both, though. This job and a love life.” She shook her head. “I don’t have time to focus on both.” It was sort of true.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

Reagan tipped her head to one side as she crumbled the wrapper in her hand and jammed it in her pocket for later disposal. “And picking the job was a foregone conclusion?”

Sipping water while she thought over the question, Libby shrugged. “Can’t build an empire on top of a dynasty while taking care of someone else, right?”

Reagan raised her newly sculpted eyebrows. “It can’t really be so all or nothing, can it?”

To combat the dry mouth caused by the confrontation, Libby reached for the water again. “Haven’t you ever had a break-up?” she asked, needing a breather.

Leaning back in her seat, Reagan ripped open a packet of dried cranberries. “Oh, I can do better than a break-up. I’ve been divorced, but I’m pretty sure we’re not supposed to talk about that on our second date.”

“Divorced? Really? You’re not even thirty.” Libby heard the judgment in her tone and backpedaled. “Sorry, that was

—” Reagan interrupted with a throaty chuckle. “It’s fine. We made it almost three years.”

“Do you mind if I ask what happened?” Libby was too curious to act nonchalant.

Reagan’s dark eyes drifted toward the stopped traffic before snapping back to Libby. The way they shone like crystalline syrup sprinkled with amber in the sun made it

impossible to hold her gaze. “Does the confidentially agreement go both ways?”

“Of course,” she replied, eyebrows knitted as Reagan deflated a little.

“We’d been friends for a long time before—”

“Before the lines got a little blurry?” she asked with a knowing grin.

Reagan’s plunging neckline exposed flushing skin. “More than a little,” she admitted. “I fell for her pretty hard, but it was complicated. She and her parents moved here from Lagos when she was a baby. Her mom was a big shot chemical engineer recruited on some special visa.”

“Oh no. I think I know where this is going,” Libby said when Reagan looked away as she paused. Miami was an international city, and people sometimes approached her to help them find US citizen spouses. Immigration fraud wasn’t worth the hefty paycheck to her, but plenty of people saw it as a final, desperate measure.

Reagan’s shifting gaze told her everything. “The attorney they hired missed some kind of deadline and the entire family ended up out of status after being here like twenty years. They didn’t find out until it was too late. When it was all said and done, she either had to go back with her parents or get her own status. At that point, her only option was to marry a citizen and apply for a green card. An impossible choice, but she’d never even been to Nigeria. It wasn’t home, you know. Plus, we had already talked about spending our lives together, so we just took the plunge a few years sooner than planned. So in one fell swoop her family was gone, and we were married. Can you guess how many different ways we were set up for failure?”

Libby gritted her teeth as Reagan winced. “And the lawyer just got away with it? After ruining their lives?”

“They sued him and won. He got his license suspended and they got some money, but there was no undoing it once they left. Even if there was, I think the trauma was so severe they’d never take the risk again. They’ve never even been back to visit.”

With her attention focused on the way her dimples looked different when she frowned, Libby reached out and put her hand on Reagan’s forearm. “I’m sorry.”

Reagan’s eyes drifted from Libby’s hand to her face. Gone was the enviable confidence and easy demeanor. In its place was something akin to regret. Reagan’s hand was warm when it covered Libby’s. The contact was a mild sting that electrified her touch-starved skin.

An ear-piercing honk from the truck behind them made Libby jump. Her head snapped back to yell at him for being an asshole, but before she did, she caught sight of the cars moving along the shoulder to her right.

“Looks like they’re diverting us off the highway to the nearest exit,” Reagan explained as she rolled down the passenger window, asking for a chance to merge into the lane.

Doing her best to regain her balance after the moment left her disoriented, Libby shifted the car into drive and forced her way onto the shoulder. Aggressive driving was a means of survival in her city.

As Reagan directed her through a maze of side streets toward her destination, Libby tried to ignore the lingering tingle on her skin. She couldn’t.

REAGAN HADN’T BEEN TO VIZCAYA SINCE A SCHOOL FIELD TRIP WHEN

she was a kid. The closest thing Miami had to a castle was a Mediterranean style estate on fifty manicured acres butting up against Biscayne Bay. The extravagant

manor built for a rich businessman from the Midwest in the early 1900s was nothing but new money fashioned to look historic. Reagan hated how much she loved it.

“Ready for this?” Libby asked as they pulled up to the valet stationed in front of a massive fountain just ahead of the mansion.

I’m not sure, she thought as she watched well-dressed couples emerge from the cars stopped ahead of them and walk toward an area staged for pictures. She couldn’t be more out of her depth. In her mind, Reagan had envisioned the party. Standing around making small talk with people she didn’t know. She hadn’t imagined the grand arrival.

Once a valet appeared on each side of the car and opened the doors, it was showtime. When the kid offered his hand, she politely declined but patted him on the shoulder when she stepped out of the vehicle unaided.

“Come on before I turn into una calabaza at midnight,”

Reagan joked, her arm extended for Libby to take. In her tall heels, Libby would’ve erased Reagan’s moderate height advantage, but Mary had convinced her a pair of black stilettos would give her the perfect shape for the suit. Not only was she right, but it kept Reagan a few inches taller which she decided she liked.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

Libby's green eyes sparkled when she laughed. "I hate pumpkin, and if you ever put it in a soup, we're breaking up."

Smiling and posing for pictures was easier than Reagan anticipated. It wasn't like paparazzi were screaming their names, just a couple of photographers, probably for some privately circulated newsletter. Resting her hand on Libby's

hip as they followed the other guests from the entrance to one of the gardens put Reagan at ease.

"I'd stay away from the salmon mousse," Libby suggested as they emerged from the covered walkway to the massive white tent erected at the foot of the garden. Millions of tiny lights illuminated the space while adding just enough whimsy to transport them to another place.

No sooner had they joined the other guests with varying degrees of commitment to the theme than a server carrying a silver plate full of bite sized food appeared. Reagan's growling stomach took control of her hand, but before she could snatch one of the little confections, Libby grabbed her hand and laced their fingers together. The jolt from the contact was enough to make

Reagan forget the offering as the server continued to the couple behind them.

"Didn't I just tell you to say no to the salmon?" Libby chided as she chuckled. The brightness in her smile was even more electric than her touch.

"It looked so good," Reagan whined, her fingers still locked with Libby's despite no

apparent need to remain connected.

Handing her a glass of champagne from a passing tray, Libby shook her head. “Just because something looks good doesn’t mean it’s good for you.”

Reagan tipped her head to one side in tacit agreement.

“I’ve been burned there before,” she muttered, taking a sip of the bubbly too dry for her liking. “So, what does one do at a fancy benefit for the arts?”

Libby drained her glass before changing out her drink for a fresh one. “Well, we should mingle a little. Peruse the silent auction items and maybe make some contributions by losing at some of the casino games.”

The silent auction was set up on a raised terrace overlooking one of the gardens. As Libby talked to some

people she knew, Reagan stood by her side, imagining what it must have been like for anyone to live in the closest thing to Downton Abbey she’d ever seen.

Moving through the crowd took forever. It seemed like they couldn’t get more than a few feet without someone flagging Libby down. The dozen or so interactions were roughly the same. They’d ask about Libby’s grandmother, then give Reagan the once over. The only difference was varying degrees of subtlety.

To her credit, Libby took it in stride. She was gracious and complimentary about her while Reagan did her best to come up with small talk in between mouthfuls of hors d’oeuvres.

Noticing that Libby was too consumed to eat, she wrapped anything contained inside the pastry in a napkin and stuck it in her pocket. No doubt she’d need it later.

“I always forget that Dragons are born extroverts,”

Reagan commented as they finally broke away from the crowd and sauntered toward one of many tables lined with auction items.

Libby laughed, tipping her head back to reveal a long, slender neck and well-defined collarbones. “Remind me, Roosters are known for their meekness, right?”

“Pot, what are you calling me?”

Her dazzling green eyes darted to the tattoo hidden under white tuxedo fabric. “I think you know,” she replied, swaying just a little.

Reagan lingered on her gaze for a moment until a waiter brought Libby another glass of champagne. “Come on. Let’s see what we can win.”

After dropping some modest bids on a spa day, charter boat trip, and a month of personal training, they stopped in front of an item too good to be true.

“Did someone seriously donate an electric sports car?”

Reagan asked as they approached the end of the last table

where a large group had gathered in front of a poster of a sleek roadster.

“Last year they auctioned off a thirty-thousand-dollar fur coat. I guess they learned from the ethical backlash and are trying to make up for it.”

Reagan sneered. What kind of monster still wears fur for fashion?

“Are you thinking of placing a bid?” A man dressed in white suit and fedora took the

unlit cigar out of his mouth when we joined them. “A gorgeous car for a couple of gorgeous girls.”

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

Reagan's back straightened as she reflectively snaked her arm around Libby's waist. His dark eyes shot down to her hand resting on Libby's hip. Instead of backing o , he smirked, a gesture that only served to raise Reagan's body temperature another degree.

"I don't think I'm a sports car kind of person," Libby replied graciously after a beat.

The Pompous Penguin rocked on his heels as he jammed a hand in his pocket. "Nonsense. This is everyone's kind of car. I have suicide doors on mine. Means I have to take up two spots when I park it so I have enough room to get out, but it's worth it."

Reagan cocked her head to one side. "So you modified the car to be so impractical that everyone else has to sacrifice space for you?"

Libby sti ened against her, but Reagan couldn't stop glaring at a shining example of everything wrong with the world.

The Penguin laughed before popping his cigar back in his mouth. "You gotta take the space for yourself before someone else does."

"Imagine where we'd be if everyone were that selfish,"

Reagan replied with a tight jaw and what she hoped was a

taunting smile.

Before he could reply, Libby linked her arm in Reagan's and started to turn them away. "Good luck on your bids,"

she said as she muscled her toward the exit.

They didn't get more than a few feet away before The Penguin was harassing someone else about the car.

"What a dick." Reagan decided when they were out of ear shot.

"Yep," Libby agreed with a chuckle. "I wouldn't mind if PETA doused him with red paint. So, do you want to try your hand at roulette? Blackjack? Maybe a little Texas hold 'em?"

Eager to take a break from the confines of the foreign environment, Reagan came up with a better idea. "I want to check something else out. Are you feeling dangerous?"

Libby scanned her face before her painted lips curled at the end. "What do you have in mind?"

Remembering her childhood visit to the historic property, Reagan led them out of the deafening activity on the terrace and behind the red velvet ropes. Beyond the Do Not Enter sign, they slipped into the house turned museum, the aroma of flowers from the huge, fresh bouquets littering the grand hall greeting them as they wandered towards their destination. Nothing but the sound of their shoes clicking against marble followed them as they snuck through the ostentatiously decorated rooms.

"Do you know where you're going?" Libby whispered when they ended up in a music room fit for Henry the Eighth.

"Trust me," she whispered before taking them down a different, dark hallway. A few

minutes, and a few more wrong turns later, they'd reached the promised land.

"Wow," Libby gasped as she glanced around the grotto.

The pool was partially covered by a plaster and stone alcove cut into the side of the house. The still water shone pale blue

like the faded ocean mural painted on the domed ceiling.

"Can you imagine swimming in here?"

Reagan pulled the pastries from her pocket and handed Libby the stained napkin as she stared at a Cupid sculpture. "Eat something."

Libby turned away from the sculpture and stared at the offering in her hand. For a moment, there was nothing but the sound of water lapping gently against the pool's stone walls, the scent of salt from the bay in the air, and Libby's wide, unreadable eyes.

"What?" Reagan asked when the tension mounted more quickly than she could metabolize. "I avoided all fish-based pastries."

"You snuck me food in your pocket?" she asked, swaying on her feet gently like the breeze filling the grotto.

Reagan couldn't tell if she was touched or grossed out.

Maybe a bit of both. "You were taking that champagne down pretty quickly without eating. I figured you might need a little something so you didn't crash."

Taking tentative steps forward, Libby closed the gap between them. Instead of

making any moves to take the food, she tilted her chin up just a little. The gesture drew Reagan's attention to Libby's full lips and sent her heart racing.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

“That’s the most thoughtful thing anyone has ever done for me,” she confessed so softly her voice was just above a whisper.

“It’s just a few snacks squished in my pocket,” Libby joked, but she couldn’t laugh. She was too drawn in by the lips calling for her kiss.

When Libby licked her lips, Reagan’s own twitched to taste her.

“This might be the most fun I’ve had in a long time,”

Libby said after neither of them dared move any closer.

“Thank you.”

; Finding Libby’s waist with her palm, Reagan smirked. “I think I’m the one that’s supposed to be thanking you for bringing me to this swanky party.”

Libby’s throat danced as she laughed. The melodic sound bounced o the plaster ceiling and drifted through the archway before being carried o into the bay. It was the most enticing song Reagan had heard in a long time. “Do you always know the right things to say?”

“Maybe it’s a trick I learned after spending a week in the Colorado mountains,” she joked halfheartedly. Her mind was too occupied with warning her that a kiss would be a terrible idea while her body yearned to lean in and take the plunge.

The conflict left little room for cleverness.

“I thought you were born this way,” Libby challenged, her words low and slow like thick honey.

“You can’t be in here,” a man’s voice boomed, startling Reagan. Instinctively, she reached for Libby and pulled her close. “This area is o limits to guests. I’m sure you saw the many signs warning you of that.”

Before Reagan could come up with an excuse for their unauthorized presence, Libby stepped toward the man glowering in the small archway leading back to the garden.

In less than a minute, she’d managed to convince him of their innocence and asked if he’d escort them to the valet since they’d lost their way when trying to leave the gala. It helped that Libby really played up her intoxication.

As they walked, Reagan wondered if Libby really was that tipsy. Was she misreading her interest? Unwilling to take any chances, Reagan insisted on driving Libby home and then taking an Uber back to her place. Libby protested, but when she fell asleep a few minutes into the ride, Reagan headed for the place labeled home in her GPS. She had nothing to

keep her company on the ride except for stolen glances at the lightly snoring woman and mild unease.

Was she going to kiss me? Am I the only one who forgot we were playing pretend?

C H A P T E R 1 0

AFTER A COUPLE of painkillers to ease the ache in her head, Libby was ready to take on the world. She told herself her good mood had nothing to do with Reagan’s

sweet text telling her she'd gotten home safely and thanking her for last night. It wasn't about a fun evening spent being the center of someone's attention.

No, her good mood was sparked by the great press she'd gotten after stepping out with Reagan. One online gossip mag had called them a breath of fresh air in the stale Miami social scene. Most importantly, no one had accused them of being together just for show.

Indulging in complete relief for the first time in what felt like a year, Libby practically skipped to the office. She had too much energy to waste it sitting at home and planned to bank a few dating advice articles. The muse was calling, and she was smart enough to answer.

As she entered her office, silent on her staff's day off, she was invigorated. She'd only gotten as far as sitting at her desk when her phone buzzed in the back pocket of her jeans.

Reagan: Apparently we're news.

Libby smiled at the name on her screen. A moment later, Reagan sent the link to a blog post. She chuckled as she read the glowing commentary.

Libby: I don't know if I should be insulted that I was never called anyone's girl crush before you came along.

Reagan: Oh, come on, I'm sure you've been the subject of many a crush.

Libby: Nope. At least never publicly. You must have rubbed some of your swag on me last night.

The conversation bubbles appeared and disappeared. Did I say something weird?

Reagan: You were 100% enchanting last night . . . and I don't use that term lightly. Actually, I'm pretty sure I've never used it lol. My point is it was easy to look good with such a hottie on my arm.

Page 27

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

Libby laughed out loud. It was more nerves than amusement, but she let it go.

Libby: Okay, Keith Sweat. Did you really just call me a Hottie??

Scratch that, does 1995 miss you and is time travel difficult?

Reagan: First of all, the number one rule of time travel is that we don't talk about time travel.

Libby: Hate to break it to you, but I'm pretty sure that applies only to fight clubs. Are you in one of those too?? If so, why have you chosen the late 90s as your beacon of culture??

Reagan: Just because a girl held on to her butterfly clips and jelly shoes does not mean she's stuck in the 90s okaaaay.

Libby's laugh shattered the silence in her office.

Libby: You did NOT wear butterfly clips.

A moment later, a photo popped up on Libby's screen of a little girl who couldn't be older than five with a dozen colorful clips in her dirty blonde hair. The huge brown eyes were already so striking, she was instantly recognizable.

Libby: You were so cute!

Reagan: Now show me yours.

Libby hesitated. She didn't have childhood photos on hand.

Libby: Unlike some people I don't walk around with pictures of myself at all ages.

Reagan: And here I thought you were always better prepared than a Boy Scout. I guess a pic of you as an adult woman at this very moment will have to do. Can't leave my offering unreciprocated. It would be so rude, and you strike me as the kind of person who read Emily Post like bedtime stories.

Libby: I will not be derailed by your attack on Emily Post. She's an American Treasure. Mocking Ms. Post and me doesn't explain how my present-day selfie is the same as your late 90s baby picture . . .

Reagan: It's not, but I'm generous enough to accept it as a substitution.

Libby: Oh really?? So now this is you doing me some kind of favor??

Reagan: Personally, I don't need to put a label on things. You can call it a favor. Or having good manners. Or caring about my ability to time travel.

Libby: A selfie of me in this moment helps you move through time and space how exactly??

Reagan: I can't explain the intricacies but believe me. It's like a point of reference. If I ever want to return to this time, I can use a photo of this moment . . . of you frozen in time. Think of it like a waypoint.

Libby: And why would you want to return here? What's so special about it?

Libby knew she was asking the question to elicit a particular response, but she sent it anyway.

Reagan: Because isn't the beginning always the best part?

Reading the words over and over, Libby's heart raced.

What did Reagan think they were starting? What precipice were they leaning over and daring each other to jump? For the first time that morning, she allowed herself to think of the moment in the grotto. Her lips twitched into a smile of

their own accord as she remembered the smell of Reagan's perfume. The warmth of her breath against her skin. The curiosity that felt more like temptation as she looked up at her perfectly shaped lips.

"You took your friend to a gala, but you don't have any time for your family?"

The sound of her grandmother's voice made Libby jump in her chair. As she did, her phone flew out of her hand and landed on the tiled floor with a loud crash.

"What are you doing here?" Libby asked, hearing the accusation in her tone as if she'd been caught red-handed and was trying to turn it around on her.

"Are you texting her now? You were smiling like a schoolgirl before you turned white as a sheet," she continued before sitting on the small sofa against the window overlooking the bay.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

Caught in the misogynistic undertone of being called a schoolgirl for smiling, Libby rejected the implication. Her grandmother waved her away and focused on the more salient point.

“Why didn’t you just tell me you were going to the art benefit? I could have gone as well and brought your parents.

A perfectly simple solution to her being too busy for us,” the eldest Cassanova said as she peered at Libby.

The possibility had occurred to her, but she was in no way ready for that trial by fire yet. They needed to have their story perfectly straight, a milestone still far off considering they hadn’t ironed out any details.

“I wasn’t planning on going,” she explained honestly, leaving out that she didn’t have a date until one was contractually obligated to accompany her. “But at the last minute, I thought maybe it would be good for the company for people to see me with my partner.”

Her grandmother nodded slowly as if not completely convinced. “Was it so last minute you couldn’t pick up the phone and call your poor grandmother?”

The accusation was accurate and hard to hear. She hadn’t intended to be sneaky; she just wasn’t ready for a public outing and a homestyle grilling for Reagan. It was too much in one night.

“Next time I promise I’ll let you know, Mima.” After a beat that Libby took as an

acceptance of her regret, she changed topics. “What are you doing here anyway?”

“I stopped by your condo and you weren’t there. I assumed you were here or with your new . . . friend. Since I don’t know where she lives, I took my chances here.”

Libby grinned a little. “You wanted to criticize me in person for taking Reagan out before you got a chance to meet her.”

“Maybe,” her grandmother replied as she stood. “And I needed to pick up the financials Taylor left for me.”

“About that,” Libby said despite the knot in her throat.

“You should have a seat. I want a chance to explain the numbers before you freak out.”

They’d only lost a percentage of their client base, but they were important clients and she wanted to break it to her personally. Her grandmother listened without saying word.

She still hadn’t spoken when she picked up the folder with her name on it on Taylor’s desk and left.

Crushed by her grandmother’s obvious disappointment, Libby collapsed onto the sofa and picked up her phone again.

Despite the ache in the pit of her stomach, the series of messages she returned to lifted her spirits.

Reagan’s slew of baby pictures made her feel a little less hollow. Not wanting to appear rude, lest Emily Post roll over in her grave, Libby fixed her hair, applied a

little lipstick, and posed with the city behind her. It was the first time in a long time anyone had asked for a picture of her. She couldn't be rude.

C H

A P T E R 1 1

AFTER SUNRISE YOGA by the pool hovering high over the city's financial district, Libby opted for the stairs to get from the pool on the twenty-second floor to her condo on the fortieth.

Once inside the modern, two-story loft overlooking downtown and the Miami River, Libby kicked off her sneakers and wandered out to her balcony.

The tail end of summer was unbearably hot, but perched so high in the sky like an exotic pigeon, the whistling wind dried the sweat from her skin. She tried and failed not to think about her grandmother, who hadn't been answering any of her calls. What if she decided to take the business from her? She tried and failed to swallow the knot in her throat. Would she fight her for control, or would she respect her wishes and step down? She didn't know what she'd do.

Tears stung the backs of Libby's eyes, but she closed them until the unshed emotion retreated. No. She couldn't give up. There was only one option and that was to keep KMQ on track and prove to her grandmother that she was capable. Not by doing things the old way, but by forging her own trail. They were losing clients, but they'd gotten some new ones too. People who welcomed inclusivity and diversity would replace the intolerant. Didn't her grandmother see

that as a net good? Nothing survived while clinging to the past and ignoring the changing tide.

After another attempt at mantra meditation failed to ease her worry, Libby traded the balcony for her shower. The blue glass windows that stretched across both floors of the loft made it impossible to see inside, which was the reason many units had no curtains, and the master shower had a full window instead of a wall. Showering with a view had taken some getting used to, but after a while, it became Libby's favorite part of her home.

Clean and content, Libby wrapped herself in a robe and her wet hair in a towel and laid in bed. Overlooking the living room below and the city beyond, it was her nest. She'd resisted a king-sized bed initially, but the space was so big it needed the softness of the bed or risk feeling too cold.

Tucked under her down comforter, Libby opened the agenda on her phone.

Tackling the first thing on her list, Libby jumped on her social media page to post a weekly #SuccessStorySaturday image. Thanks to generations of matchmaking and her family's dedication to record keeping, she had thousands of happy couples to post about. Libby smiled as she pulled one of her favorite couples, a handsome pair dressed to the nines captured in faded sepia tone. According to her notes, Rafael and Maricela Cortez were matched in 1932. They survived a world war where Rafael served as a sailor on the only Cuban ship to sink a German submarine. Libby added a picture of the mustached young man in his gleaming white uniform to her collage. For the final picture, she selected a colorful one of an elderly pair at the center of several children and nearly a dozen grandchildren. Libby lingered on the image. What she wouldn't give for a love like that.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

When she finished her post, Libby clicked on the notification at the corner of her screen. In the long list of

new followers, one name stood out. ReaganSotoCeramics. It wasn't catchy or easy to remember. Not great for a brand.

Libby shook her head. Even the profile picture was wrong. A clay jug wasn't distinct enough.

After kicking herself for failing to have followed each other on the socials already, she followed her and went into her profile. Pots, ceramic dishes, and the occasional sculpture littered her page. Taken against boring white backgrounds, it was hard to appreciate the beauty she'd crafted with her fingers and palms. There was a playful fluidity to her craft, but it was lost in poorly lit pictures. The more engaging posts were the ones she'd taken of her students. Libby couldn't suppress her smile as she stopped scrolling.

Reagan posing in the middle of a pack of smiling octogenarians holding out brightly colored vases was beyond endearing. The passion oozed from her dark eyes like candlelight, and based on the picture, it was contagious. If she were a stranger pursuing her page, the image would be enough to make her sign up for a class.

Libby: We need to work on your online presence.

Reagan: What's wrong with it? I've got a website and everything.

Libby: First of all, you need to have a profile picture of your face across all platforms.

People are significantly more likely to engage with you if they can see you're a real person and not a piece of pottery.

Reagan: lol . . . I suppose that makes sense. I will take it under advisement.

Libby: And take way more pictures of your classes. They get a ton of activity and they're really sweet.

Reagan: I'll be sure to take as many as I can tomorrow.

Libby: What's tomorrow?

Reagan: Every few months I do a little art installation at the studio. Gives my students a chance to show o to friends and family. They love it.

Libby: Is your GF invited?

Every second that Reagan didn't respond upped Libby's anxiety. Had she pushed too far? Made it weird?

Reagan: Do you want to come? There aren't any fancy foods or free champagne. I don't know if it's your speed.

Libby: Do you think I'm really that much of a snob?? Give me a little credit!

Reagan: I'm just trying to set appropriate expectations! I don't want you to get here and be disappointed. It's really simple and something I do for them, you know?

The warmth that spread through Libby's chest should've been getting familiar, but it still quickened her pulse.

Libby: So . . . are you inviting me or what??

Reagan: Ms. Elisabeth Cassanova, would you like to come to my studio tomorrow afternoon?

Libby: I thought you'd never ask! By the way . . . how did we meet? At one of your art shows? Or maybe I came to take a class?

Reagan: And what . . . did we fall in love over a pottery wheel like in Ghost ?

Libby: Have you ever actually watched that movie?? That's so not what that pottery scene is about lol.

Reagan: What . . . are all ceramic artists required to watch that movie??

Libby: Meh it's overrated anyway. And also, a little creepy.

Spoiler alert. Patrick Swayze is dead the whole time.

Reagan: Wait . . . so when he gets it on the wheel he's . . .

Libby: Yep. Ghost sex.

Reagan: Well now I regret not having watched it. It sounds a lot more interesting than I realized.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

Libby: You'll have to let me know what you think when you watch it.

Reagan: Or maybe we can watch it together on a date? It sounds like the kind of thing that can't be enjoyed alone. It's on my list of great romances to watch. I have a bad habit of just watching the same ones over and over. Since our NDA is in effect, I'll confide in you that romance movies are a little like my comfort food.

Skirting the question that made her suddenly nervous, Libby changed the subject.

Libby: Soooo are we decided on how we met?

Reagan: In one of my classes? That's quite the meet cute. Do you think it will hold up to scrutiny?

Libby: Very romantic. I'll be sure to pay attention to my surroundings tomorrow. Add some credible details to my retelling of our origin story.

As Libby leapt out of bed to blow dry her hair and get dressed, she couldn't help but smile.

What does one wear to their fake girlfriend's real students' art exhibition? Why do I care so much?

CHAPTER 12

WITH ONE LAST look in the mirror, Reagan ran her fingers through her hair as she styled her long bangs to the side. It had been a long time since she dyed it blonde and

was feeling the itch for a little change.

Usually, she'd have thrown on a t-shirt and jeans without a second thought, but not today. Today she spent an hour in the shower, twenty minutes longer than the water heater held out. When she emerged from the upstairs loft and down to the main studio area, Reagan was dressed in a sleeveless white blouse and pink trousers. A chunk of rose quartz hanging at the end of a gold chain offered the bit of clarity she needed.

ded.

In the studio, Reagan busied herself with rearranging the table covered in hand-painted and glazed bowls before she fiddled with a large flamingo painted in a puzzle pattern.

What the hell is wrong with me? I'm not a fidgeter. Before she could change the layout all together, the industrial metal door screeched open and blasted the studio with sunlight.

"Peggy! You made it!"

"Hi, doll!" The elderly woman waved one hand while she clung to a tall, handsome man with the other. "I got Nurse Charlie here to give me a ride. He took the afternoon off from work for me and everything."

Reagan hugged her favorite student before shaking hands with her escort and thanking him outside of Peggy's earshot.

While she was showing off Peggy's work, a steady stream of students and their loved ones filtered into the studio.

Every time the door lumbered open, Reagan's head snapped toward the creaking

sound like it was mounted on a swivel. Each time it wasn't Libby her smile faltered. But only for a second.

When all her students were present and helping themselves to sodas and snacks, Reagan swallowed her disappointment with some flavored seltzer and stopped looking at the entrance.

"I just want to take a second to welcome everybody,"

Reagan called as she leapt onto a table to stand above the crowd of thirty milling around the studio. "Thank you all for being here. We're so proud to share our hard work and creativity with you all."

As Reagan called out each of her potters by name and pointed to their showcase piece, she forgot the thread of disappointment pulling at her stomach. She was nearly at the end when a sliver of light appeared in the corner of her eye. Just before the door creaked closed, she caught sight of wavy brown hair and the guilty expression of a woman sneaking in late.

Struggling to keep her train of thought on track, Reagan boasted about her youngest student's attention to detail when creating an Alice in Wonderland inspired chess set.

Every time the kid's dad asked a question, Reagan's eyes drifted to Libby, who was effortlessly blending into the crowd as if she'd always been there.

Slowly, Reagan snaked around the studio glad-handing until she slid up alongside Libby engaged in a discussion with Freddie, who'd spent months sculpting a self-portrait.

When he'd finished, Reagan hadn't been the only person

moved to tears. No one else in the class had ever seen a person with Down's Syndrome reflected back at them in clay either.

“Freddie’s ability to capture motion and emotion is incredibly striking,” Libby said without taking her eyes off the image of the boy playing with a French Bulldog.

“See?” Reagan crossed her arms. “I’m not the only one who says it.”

Page 31

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

The teenager scratched the back of his shaved head as his face erupted into a violent blush. “Maybe you planted her,”

he joked.

Reagan wrapped her arm around his shoulder as she laughed. “Oh, you think I’m that clever, huh?”

“Yeah. You’re tricky,” he agreed while chuckling.

“That might be true,” Reagan agreed. “But that doesn’t mean you’re not awesome at this and should see where it takes you.”

After discussing Freddie’s real chance of getting into an art program based on the strength of his portfolio, Libby chimed in. “Is the artist selling his work?”

Freddie’s blue eyes widened and darted between Libby and Reagan.

Understanding his unspoken question, Reagan responded on his behalf. “He should be.”

Freddie knitted together white-blond eyebrows. “But my mom wants this one,” he explained, scratching the back of his head again.

“Hmm. . . we definitely don’t want to start a bidding war.

Not with your mom, anyway,” Libby joked. “How about I commission something

from you? I'll buy the next thing you make."

As Reagan watched Libby and Freddie discuss possibilities, she couldn't stop the warmth spreading across her chest. It reminded her of drinking hot chocolate by a fire the one and only time she'd seen snow. There was no way of knowing whether Libby was feigning interest, but the more she talked, the more Reagan guessed she was being sincere.

"That was very kind of you," Reagan whispered when Freddie's attentions were forced elsewhere.

Libby cocked her head to one side. "What was?"

Suppressing a smile, Reagan leaned in closer. Even with the odor of dust, chemicals, and wet clay permanently imprinted in the air, Libby's perfume was sweet and intoxicating. "Thank you for coming today."

Before Reagan could say more, Libby interrupted her. "I wouldn't miss it," she whispered, resting her hand on Reagan's hip, sending a surge of electricity through her body. "How would it look if your fake girlfriend wasn't here to support you? Fishy, right?"

The words, uttered softly and with a gentle smile, were a sledgehammer to Reagan's stomach. She straightened.

"Yeah. Fishy," she agreed before spinning on the balls of her feet. "Come on, let me show you some of the other gallery-worthy things my little geniuses made."

As they walked, Reagan was reinvigorated. The pride of watching her students delight others with what they'd made was an unbeatable rush.

“That’s interesting,” Libby said, her eye on a pitcher displayed on a pedestal at the far end of the studio. It wasn’t meant to be exhibited. The focus wasn’t on her work. “Why are you hiding it?”

“I’m not exactly hiding it,” she replied, her feet moving of their own accord as they left the activity of the studio while following Libby.

“Half this stu is covered in canvas,” Libby countered, pointing to the fabric obscuring most of the pieces.

“Today is about what they’ve made. Not me,” Reagan explained when they stopped in front of the uncovered white

pitcher bearing the silhouette of a dark figure riding a horse.

The corner of Libby’s lips twitched in a tiny smile before turning her attention back to the ceramic jug.

“This is one of the first things I made. I went through a very rip-o -Picasso period when I started,” she joked. “I’m not down with bullfighting, so I used his work for inspiration.” Reagan plucked the piece o the base and handed it to Libby, who turned it over as she looked at it.

“It’s really beautiful.” Libby looked up from the pitcher and into Reagan’s eyes, forcing her to shift her weight and glance elsewhere for a moment to break the connection.

Her sincerity triggered a palpitation in Reagan’s chest.

“You think so?” She stepped close enough to indulge in the fragrance clinging to her warm skin. “I still didn’t really have the hang of finishing o the rim yet. You can see

a dip here.”

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

When Reagan reached over to point out the flaw, Libby leaned back, pressing her shoulder to Reagan's chest. The avalanche of desire the contact triggered was unexpected and unstoppable.

"Is it for sale?" Libby asked, fixing her in her gaze. "I'd love to say I own a piece from your early years."

"You don't want that. There's much better stu over there," she replied, her eyes drifting down to Libby's painted lips. "Then I suppose we better get back to it," Libby replied before putting the jug back without a second look.

As she watched Libby saunter away, she wondered if Libby felt the spark between them too, or whether she was on her own.

BY THE TIME LIBBY RETURNED TO HER HIGH-RISE CONDO OVERLOOKING

the river, she'd tried and failed to buy about a dozen pieces at Reagan's art expo. Apparently they'd brought their own rabid fans who didn't even leave crumbs behind.

Libby slipped into yoga pants and a sweatshirt before taking a glass of wine with her to the balcony. The tendrils of autumn were curling pleasantly around her. She was happy to trade the balmy breeze for something much less humid.

As she swirled the red wine in her glass and watched the city twinkle in the moonless night, she thought of Reagan.

Could anyone really be that nice? Having spent hours watching her interact with so many different kinds of people, she never dropped her act once. No matter who Reagan talked to, she treated them like they were the only person in the room and of the utmost importance.

She remembered how she'd made Freddie's chest pop out with pride when she complimented his sculpture. Her expression was so similar to how she regarded Libby.

Concluding that she couldn't read anything into the way Reagan seemed to look at her sometimes, she picked up her phone and shot off a text.

Libby: Thank you again for letting me come to the studio.

Judging by all that talent, you must be one hell of a teacher!

It was a while before Reagan replied. As she sipped her wine, Libby searched for one of her favorite videos. Eckhart Tolle telling her to stop searching for happiness helped soothed her overthinking. At least for a while.

Reagan: Thank you for coming! I'll have to give you a lesson so you can decide for yourself.

The sight of Reagan's name interrupting her video made her smile.

Libby: I'll have to take you up on that sometime.

With her finger hovering over the wink face emoji, Libby stopped herself.

Reagan: I hope you do. It will give you more material for your social media pages. You don't want to go too long without posting or THEY will discover our secret.

She chugged her wine before responding. The charade. Of course.

Libby: I don't know if my family is going to fall for photographic evidence.

After sending the text, she stared at it, surprised by her own admission.

Reagan: Have they been asking to meet the love of your life?? A reasonable request I suppose lol. How are you getting around that?

Libby: Oh, I didn't tell you? You have a HUGE art show coming up. It's keeping you incredibly busy.

Reagan: Dang! Did I forget about it

again?? Where's my head?

When is this event exactly? I should mark it on my calendar so it doesn't keep slipping my mind.

Chuckling, Libby finished her drink before the chilly air kicked her off the balcony. Skipping the gorgeous but still sofa, she slipped into her bedroom and under the covers.

Libby: You are up to your eyeballs in clay for the foreseeable future. Or until I can convince my grandmother that we're legit.

Reagan: How hard can that be?

Page 33

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

Libby: HA! You have no idea. She's basically always suspicious even when nothing is sketchy. She missed her calling as a detective who bends the rules to get the bad guy. If we don't have our routine perfected, we won't stand a chance against her bullshit detector. I swear that woman could break international spies without breaking a sweat.

Reagan: Damn. . . I wish I had a rep like that! She sounds intense and I can't wait to meet her lol. Are you sure you can't engage

these

heart-eye-making-skills????

Look

pretty

convincing to me.

A moment later, Reagan sent the picture of them sitting on the bed of her truck in the sun, Libby half-smiling half-dazed while Reagan kissed her. The image brought more than just the memory. It caused a buzzing in her skin where Reagan's soft lips had pressed against her. Her skin remembered the moment as well as she did.

Libby: Are you making fun of me or are you just jealous of my acting chops??

Reagan: Maybe a little of both. I definitely need to learn to act as well as you.

With her wine-soaked brain swimming just enough to be dangerous, Libby said good night and threw the covers over her head. Unable to stop replaying the last few messages in her mind, she couldn't help wondering what Reagan meant.

Was she not acting when she kissed me in the picture? Was I?

Unable to resist temptation, she reached for the phone and looked at the photo again. The electricity dancing on her skin was no less powerful than it had been the first time.

CHAPTER 13

STRIDING into her office with a bounce in her step she credited to unexpectedly light traffic and a good hair day, Libby smiled. Never before had she assembled such a diverse group of hopefuls looking for love. It would be a new challenge to select possible matches without the limitation of gender, but freeing too.

Libby greeted the hopefuls and encouraged them not to be nervous before she picked up some folders from the reception desk. Jennifer, the first pan client she'd ever matched, already had some excellent prospects and they'd only just started.

Nearly floating as she stopped in on Taylor recording her interview with a hopeful, Libby had the nearly uncontrollable desire to whistle. She couldn't remember the last time she'd done it. The sound was always so irritating when others did it, but now it took active self-control not to give in to the urge.

By the time she pushed open the glass door to her private office, she was several bars into Unchained Melody. The music streaming in her head stopped as soon as she saw what was waiting for her on her desk: a bouquet of bright blue irises sitting in a very familiar ceramic pitcher. Her stomach

fluttered and her skin warmed as soon as she registered where she'd seen it. One of Reagan's first creations.

Libby ran her fingertip over the minor imperfection on the rim before reaching for the phone in her bag and opening her texts. She didn't need a note to know who they were from.

Libby: Thank you so much for these flowers and the vase.

They're beautiful. And it's not even my birthday!

Reagan: Since I don't actually know when you were born, I suppose they could either be belated or anticipatory lol. They were more of a thank you for coming out to the studio the other day and being so sweet to my students. Freddie has sketched out a few different ideas for his next sculpture. He said since you liked his dog so much, he's going to make you a big blue one standing on two legs balancing a ball on his nose. To hell with the likelihood of it blowing up in the kiln lol.

Libby: I'm the one who should be sending you thank you flowers! I can't wait to see what Freddie creates. Tell him I'll love it no matter what his muse devises. ;)

Staring at the wink emoji, Libby instantly regretted her choice. She was not the kind of person who sent winks all willy-nilly.

Reagan: I wish that took the pressure off of him, but the man is determined to outdo Rodin!

Grateful that she let the mortifying wink go without comment, Libby released the breath she'd been holding before texting her reply.

Libby: Well, I'll be very honored to display his magnum opus.

Reagan: You know. . . I really should know when your birthday is and how did we celebrate last year?? There are so many holes left unfilled. . .

Libby: And how do you propose we fill them?

Page 34

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

As soon as she sent the text, her face flushed with heat and her eyes were forced closed by the crush of

embarrassment. It sounded far filthier than she intended.

Reagan: I've got an idea or two. ;)

Frozen with indecision, Libby had no idea how to respond.

Was she flirting? Was there any other way to read the text?

She'd innocently used a winky face only minutes before, but her heart skipped a beat anyway. Flustered, she gulped and hoped to convey casual confidence.

Libby: What do you propose?

Relieved at having found a way to volley the ball back into Reagan's court without risk of misreading her intention, she relaxed and dropped into her chair.

Reagan: Most people do often start to get to know each other with drinks or maybe dinner?

Without her consent, Libby's lips parted in a lopsided smile. She wanted to see her again more than she realized. It had been a long time since she hit it off with someone so effortlessly.

Libby: As a matchmaker, I usually discourage early dates in restaurants.

Reagan: Why's that?

Libby: They're noisy for one and prone to continuous interruption. Not conducive to meaningful conversation. For two, it's easy to drink a little too much. Never a good idea.

Reagan: All very reasonable points. Where do you propose we get together? This is what . . . our third date? Fourth?

Libby laughed, spinning around in her chair to give her back to the computer. She didn't want to watch notifications popping up on her screen.

Libby: Is it that many?

Reagan: Ugh . . . you wound me! Have you forgotten?? I've been called many things but mediocre isn't usually one of them.

Biting her bottom lip, Libby stifled a grin. She knew she shouldn't play coy. There was no point. It's not like they had to convince onlookers.

Libby: I must have a bad memory I guess. . .

Reagan: Guess that leaves me with the thankless task of reminding you. First, we had that lovely French breakfast. Then flying kites at the park. What did we do next? Oh, the beach! Four was the Gala and five was the expo at my studio.

Libby: What about our trip to Mary's shop for your fitting? If you count that . . . it makes six.

Reagan: Very true! So then what does the Cassanova Cupid suggest for date number seven?

Feeling emboldened and the rush of Cuban coffee thumping in her chest, she replied.

Libby: I guess it would be a bit suspicious if we don't have any pictures in my house or yours.

Reagan: An increased level of intimacy, huh? Bold move. I like it. We'll have plenty of time to learn everything we need to know to convince Grandmother Cassanova.

The reminder of reality pulled at her stomach, but she ignored the discomfort and indulged in the frivolity of the text exchange.

Reagan: What should I bring? I know you like champagne, but do you drink anything else? Red wine? White Wine? Whiskey?

Tequila? Rum? Vodka???

Libby: Hard pass on the tequila. Long story that I'm sure I'll tell you soon. You really don't have to bring anythi

ng.

Page 35

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

Reagan: Oh, come on. I was not raised to show up empty handed. Either you tell me, or I show up with something you don't like. Libby: Okay. What do you like?

Reagan: I'm not a big drinker, but I'm kind of having a bourbon moment.

Libby: Sounds great to me. Bring your favorite and I'll make us something.

Before Reagan replied, Libby fessed up.

Libby: That's a lie. I don't really cook, but I'll have something delicious waiting for you.

Reagan: I'm sure you will. . .

Libby stared at the ellipsis and wondered what they meant. She shifted in her seat as her pulse raced. In a long line of firsts, she was trapped in an existential crisis over three tiny dots.

Reagan: Tonight too soon?

Libby: 8?

It would give her time to shower and shave her legs, she thought before shaking herself out of the haze. It's not a real date, she lied.

CHAPTER 14

REAGAN WAS PRACTICALLY VIBRATING when she jumped in her truck to pick up pastries and coffee for her first class. She shouldn't have favorites, but the folks from the retirement community were pretty up there. In the years since she'd been getting to know them, she'd learned so much. Not just about history, which came alive in their first-hand accounts, but about so many life lessons they'd figured out the hard way.

She was on her way back from the Cuban bakery with a box filled with treats and tiny plastic cups to serve a shot of strong, black coffee, when her lip curled at the sight of a shiny black sedan. The car was deliberately parked in her spot. Shoving the sugar substitute for her mostly diabetic class in her jeans pocket, she gripped the box and tried not to give him the satisfaction of a reaction as she parked alongside him.

"Ms. Soto, I'm surprised I didn't find your truck here,"

Silvio said as he forced his short, thick body out of the driver's seat. "You know I keep getting complaints about overnight parking. I'm a nice guy, but the terms of your lease are very clear." He pointed a sausage finger at the faded tow-away sign.

"Sil, there's no one here. I have a ton of parking for my building. Who the hell would be complaining?" she challenged, clenching her jaw to keep herself in check. She wanted nothing more than to wipe the perennial smug smile off his face.

"Listen, it's not me." He lifted his hands as if in surrender as he rested against his car door. "But the city zoning laws are very clear. This is a commercial, manufacturing area only. You can't live here."

Reagan bit the inside of her lip. Every few months they had this exact same conversation. It was the world's lamest dance. She knew what he wanted. All she had to do was flatter him a bit. Ask him to please look the other way. Make him feel like a big generous guy and he'd go away for a while, but she couldn't bring herself to do

it. She loved her place and cherished the generations of memories, but she wouldn't fake desperation or gratitude. They both knew full well that tenants weren't clamoring to lease the space. No one but her would pay a penny for it.

While she was seething, Jabba the Hut with legs continued his rehearsed charade. "It's enough that I allow you to be open to the public. Teaching your little classes in a building full of dangerous equipment. Can you imagine if one of those special kids of yours got hurt? The lawsuit would ruin me, but I have such a soft heart for you."

His emphasis on special made her want to rip him a new one. "I have insurance for that, and you know it. I've shown it to you a hundred times. My policy fully covers all accidents. You're not liable for anything," she snapped.

Silvio laughed. She'd given him the satisfaction of getting under her skin. She never understood what his actual problem with her was, but she guessed he thrived on power trips wherever he could get them. How she wished she had the money to buy the place out from under him. He really

didn't make any money on her rent. It wasn't even enough to cover the property taxes, but it had been vacant for so long, her money was better than nothing.

Out of the corner of her eye appeared a large white van rolling down the empty street.

"I'd love to have this conversation all day, Sil, but my class has arrived," she said, kicking the door to her truck closed and heading to the door.

"I hear pottery is therapeutic," he shouted behind her as he walked around to the front door of his car. "Maybe I'll buy a few private lessons from you. Get my hands dirty."

She didn't dignify him with a response. Instead, she propped the door open so her class could file in after they slowly disembarked from the van. When she'd finished

setting up the coffee, empanadas, and sweet laminated dough pastries, he was gone.

“Morning, doll!” Peggy greeted cheerfully. Using her walker instead of a cute nurse’s arm, the woman ambled into the studio and went right for the coffee. “You know I love this cafesito,” she said, pronouncing the word with a strong American accent, “but I need real sugar for this thing.”

Peggy lowered her voice and leaned in conspiratorially.

“Where’s the good stuff?”

“You’re not supposed to—”

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

“Oh, come on,” she interrupted. “Would you deny a woman her last dying wish?”

Reagan laughed as she shook her head. “But you’re not dying!”

Peggy put a hand on her replaced hip. “I’m eighty-five. I could die at any minute! For all you know this could be the last thing I taste. Do you really want to send me to meet Saint Peter with stevia on my lips?”

Her willpower eroded to nothing, and she pulled out the real sugar packet she’d grabbed for her as a precaution.

“Don’t tell the others,” she whispered. “You know how Horace gets.”

Peggy’s dull blue eyes gleamed. She loved mischief so much Reagan couldn’t imagine what she’d been like in her twenties. As she sipped the potent, black drink, she closed her eyes and savored it.

“How many of your dying wishes do you think I’ve granted by now?” Reagan asked.

Peggy peeked out of one open eye. “Are you including the time you took me and the other girls to the all-male review?”

Reagan laughed. The image of musclebound men in G-strings flashed in her mind. “Definitely.”

The old woman shrugged. “More than a few. No more talk of kicking the bucket. Tell me about that nice young girl that was here this weekend. I saw the way you two

were making googly eyes at each other. Is she a new sweetheart? There hasn't been one around here since—"

"Yes, actually. She might be pretty special." It didn't sound like a lie.

"I knew it." Peggy wagged a gnarled finger at her as she discarded her tiny coffee cup as the others fluttered in slowly.

"The last time I looked at someone like that I married him."

Full of sugar and caffeine, Peggy left her standing alone with her thoughts. Maybe their acting was better than either of them realized.

When everyone had finished eating and were set up at their stations, Reagan settled at her table at the front and had them grab one of the little balls of clay she'd already prepared for them. Following her lead, they rolled out long, thin coils. At the end of the session, they'd have a bowl whose shape was limited only by their creativity.

As Reagan worked the cool material, her mind drifted as it tended to do when she hand built. It didn't require the

concentration that throwing on the wheel did.

Moments later, her thoughts landed on Libby and the texts from that morning. She'd only realized how flirty they'd been when she'd reread them. She'd gotten a little carried away, but she hadn't been the one to start it, right?

The coiled lengths of clay snaked around the base and climbed up to shape an oval bowl. Reagan's thoughts rushed with images of Libby's smile, her long neck exposed when she threw her head back and laughed. The way her skin was soft against her lips and how easily she fit under her arm.

Don't do this to yourself.

Libby had been loud and clear when they'd first met. She wasn't ready or interested in dating. Not for real. As soon as the thought crossed her mind, Reagan argued with herself.

Her actions say otherwise.

Somewhere in her core, Reagan wasn't convinced Libby was just playing at liking her. She'd noticed the goosebumps on her arm, the warmth on her cheeks. She couldn't be that good a faker as to force a physiological response to her touch.

Debating whether or not their meeting later was a real date, Reagan reminded herself of a hard and inconvenient truth. She'd done this before. Seeing the person behind the walls built for self-protection was a gift, but also a curse. She had no way of knowing just how high the walls went.

Sometimes she saw beyond barriers and baggage people weren't ready to shed.

A question from one of her students jarred her out of her reverie. Shaking o her worry, Reagan reminded herself to stay in the moment. No use in overthinking it. Their time together would be what it would be whether she worried about it or not. She'd learned long ago to divorce herself from expectation.

She'd show up at Libby's door open to where the night might take them. At least that's what she told herself every time her chest tightened, and her stomach fluttered.

CHAPTER 15

LIGHTING the last of a few scented candles scattered around her condo, Libby checked her hair in the bathroom mirror for a third time. Waves weren't working

thanks to an unexpected drop in humidity, but she'd straightened it and left it loose just above her shoulders.

Hidden behind her closet doors were the few dozen outfits she'd tried on and discarded in a pile on the floor. They were all either too dressy or too causal. Despite a packed walk-in closet, she didn't have anything appropriate for a non-date at her house. Usually, she'd recommend something simple and relaxed for the first date at home. But she reminded herself, this wasn't a date.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

In the kitchen, Libby set her sights on the food splayed on the counter. Positioning and repositioning the wooden trays covered in cheeses and fruit, Libby worried it was too much.

Without knowing Reagan's expectations, they were impossible to meet.

When she couldn't fidget with the charcuterie a moment longer, she checked the lasagna warming in the oven.

/> Returning to her room for another costume change, she prayed Reagan liked eggplant.

Libby was in the middle of flinging another dress into the growing heap when the doorbell rang.

Dressed in tight jeans, a loose blouse, and no shoes, she ran down the loft steps and answered the door with a racing heart. Standing in her doorway with slicked back hair, Reagan looked like James Dean and Charlize Theron had a baby. The sight short-circuited her brain.

"Hey, you made it," Libby said before cringing internally at the obvious and unimaginative greeting.

The dimples at the corners of Reagan's mouth appeared before she spoke. "Were you hoping I got lost in downtown's myriad of one-way streets and dead ends?"

Laughter eased the nerves replicating in her belly. "Oh please, this from the girl who

loves a city planned by drunk mice with pens strapped to their tiny paws.”

Libby stepped back to let Reagan inside.

“That’s kind of an adorable image,” Reagan decided as she crossed the threshold. “Imagine just how tiny those pens would have to be.”

“You’ve got a cute answer for everything, don’t you?”

Libby asked as Reagan sauntered in wearing jeans and a long-sleeved shirt. The scent of clean linen and sandalwood trailed behind her like an intoxicating tail curling around a curious cat.

Reagan set the paper bag she’d been holding on the kitchen counter and looked back at her. “I’ve been told more than once that I’m rather adorable.”

Chuckling, Libby pushed the door closed and followed her inside. “What do you have in there?”

“Something delicious,” she promised as she pulled out a bottle with no label, a little jar of something clear, and a bag of oranges. “I think it will go well with this amazing spread you’ve made for us.”

Libby grinned. Always the charmer. She turned toward the cabinet and pulled out a set of tumblers she’d bought for Davis before they’d broken up. They hadn’t seen each other

in so long before the split, she hadn’t had a chance to give them to him. His loss was her gain once again.

“Where exactly did you procure this?” she asked, standing close enough to smell her

perfume again.

“A friend of mine makes her own small batch bourbon.

It’ll be the single best thing you ever tasted,” Reagan replied with her chest all puffed like a particularly proud peacock.

“Trust me.”

“You say things with such unshakable confidence,” Libby said as she brought her a tray of huge, square ice cubes.

“If I’m wrong, then you can have anything you want as a reward,” she replied without looking up from the orange whose peel she was slicing off.

Libby rested against the counter and peered up into Reagan’s deadly serious face. “You must be an amazing poker player,” she decided with a grin.

“Me?” Reagan’s lips formed a wry smile. “I never gamble.”

Libby let out a bark of laughter. “Then I guess I’m going to have to call your bluff. What do I get if it’s not the best thing I’ve ever tasted? And mind you, I’ve been going to very fancy dinners since I was, like, twelve.”

Reagan’s dark eyes widened. This was exactly the game she was hoping for, and Libby was playing right into her trap. She was a mouse too drawn in by the cheese to care about the metal spring aching to let loose and snap her neck.

“If this is not the best Old Fashioned you’ve ever had, then you set your terms. It’s your wager.”

Accepting the glass, Libby didn't break eye contact. They were locked in a game of chicken, but she didn't know what the stakes were. "Okay, then. If I win, you have to give me a pottery lesson. On the house."

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

Clinking their glasses together, Reagan laughed. “Is that all? I’m sorry to tell you I was already very happy to do that.”

Libby was still smiling as she sipped her drink. The flavor was at once sweet and spicy. Her eyes slipped closed as she tasted rose blooms and clementines. The only thing she didn’t taste was the alcohol until it warmed her belly.

When she opened her eyes, Reagan was staring at her expectantly.

“Oh my God,” she whispered, willing her eyes not to get watery.

“I know, right? Can you believe she refuses to sell it?

Barter only, and she only makes one barrel every other year.”

“It’s a crime not to share this,” Libby decided as she took a smaller sip to make it last. On the second tasting, she detected vanilla and cardamom. It was impossibly complex but not overwhelming.

“That’s what I tell her! Apparently her grandpa has been working on it for years. The bourbon is like a family member.”

“I’ll give her whatever she wants for the next bottle. Does she need matchmaking services?” Libby asked, her lips and tongue tingling from the moderate spice.

“Her husband would probably say no,” Reagan joked.

“I’m so glad you liked it. I told you I didn’t gamble. There was no doubt in my mind this was a sure thing.”

Libby offered a lopsided grin. “I don’t think any girl wants to be called a sure thing.”

Reagan’s response was to clink glasses once more. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

The silence between them grew heavy like an unexpected pressure system sucked the air out of the room and made it hard to breathe. With her eyes fixed on hers, Reagan took another sip of her drink.

Libby watched as her lips parted and her tongue peeked out just enough to make her pulse jump. In that moment,

she realized it had been an awfully long time since she’d been kissed.

Buzzing with the alcohol that warmed her skin and dulled her brain, Libby pressed further. “Well, you won the bet.

What’s your prize? And it can’t be matchmaking services when this is over.”

Reagan cocked her head to one side. “Oh, no? Are you the jealous type?” She chuckled. “I can’t believe I learned that before I learned your birthday.”

Libby wanted to stay on topic, to find out what she’d bargained away, but birthday facts were long overdue.

“January seventh, if you must know,” she replied before popping a grape in her mouth to appear more relaxed than she felt.

“A Capricorn,” she noted with approval. “No wonder we make such a great match.

Our stars are aligned all over the place.”

“I did such a great job vetting you, I only know how old you are and not your birthday,” Libby countered, unsure how else to respond.

“I’m almost a Christmas Eve baby. December twenty-first,” she admitted before taking another agonizingly slow sip of her drink. It was more mesmerizing than staring into a cartoon villain’s twirling umbrella.

“A Sagittarius,” she nodded because it made sense. “I can see that. Alright, with that out of the way, what’s losing going to cost me?” The not knowing was starting to eat away at her.

“I think I’m going to hang on to my win. Just for a little bit,” Reagan replied before helping herself to a slice of manchego cheese. “Are you going to give me the grand tour?”

Reigning in her desire to continue pressing Reagan, Libby popped another grape in her mouth and obliged.

“This is a two-story condo? Who knew there was such a thing?” Reagan stood at the foot of the stairs leading to the loft after having seen the main floor guest bedroom and den.

“How much space does one person need?”

Libby couldn’t disagree. “When I bought it, I was sure it wouldn’t be single occupancy.”

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

Instead of continuing toward the steps, Reagan turned and faced her. Her inexorable dark eyes searching her face as if unravelling a mystery. Libby had never felt like some precious relic that needed deciphering. Until she'd been on the receiving end of Reagan's gaze.

"You know that ex of yours must have been a certified chump to let you go, right?" Reagan's tone was so sincere.

"You're not the first person to come to that conclusion,"

&

nbsp; she joked, wanting to steer clear of the Davis topic. He'd ruined enough of her evenings for a lifetime. "Come on. Let me show you the best part."

Without thinking, Libby reached for her hand. It had been so natural that it wasn't until Reagan intertwined their fingers that she realized what she'd done. As she started for the sliding glass door leading toward the balcony, she did her best to wrestle her jackhammering heart into submission. She failed.

At least the walk was short and the view distracting. As soon as they stepped outside, Reagan released her fingers and darted toward the railing to peer over the side.

"I don't think I've ever seen any part of the river that wasn't all gross and polluted," she gushed, her short hair blowing in the breeze.

Staring at Reagan's body half hanging over the metal railing, Libby couldn't stop the

horrifying image of an unexpected gust knocking her over the side. She couldn't help pulling her by the shirt tail and back onto firmer

footing. "Didn't your parents ever tell you the devil is bad and always watching?"

Reagan's belly laugh was carried away by the cool winds as she plopped into a patio chair, allowing Libby to take a full breath. "Of course. The way my parents made it sound, his one job was to lay in wait and shove unsuspecting children into lethal accidents. Couldn't run around the pool. Couldn't sit on a ledge. Definitely could never go near the stove."

Libby chuckled. "Do you think any other culture frightens their kids like that? Because let me tell you . . . I'm thirty-two years old and all I could picture was you plummeting to your death."

Sitting together on the balcony, they looked out at dark, clear skies and the twinkle of city lights like modern constellations.

"Man, I'd set up a hammock out here and never leave,"

Reagan said as she stretched like a cat. "I suppose living in the middle of a rat's maze isn't all bad."

When Reagan ventured back to the railing to get a better look, Libby followed and held back the urge to tell her she was getting too close again. Struggling with her natural desire to catastrophize, she tried to be in the moment with Reagan and the city buzzing below them.

"Not afraid a nefarious entity is going to push you to your doom?" Reagan joked as she glanced at Libby, who was sliding into the space next to her.

“Looks like I’m willing to risk it,” she replied, her elbow grazing Reagan’s arm before she braced against the banister.

“When am I going to see your place?”

Reagan turned from the view and focused her attention on Libby. “You’ve already seen it.”

Cocking her head to one side, Libby furrowed her brow.

There was only one place she’d been, but that wasn’t a home. “You live in your art studio?”

“It’s a lot more than just an art studio,” Reagan replied, the overhead light dancing in her eyes. “It has been my home since before I was born.”

Libby stepped forward, getting close enough to feel the warmth of Reagan’s body. It was a gravitational pull willing her closer. “What do you mean?”

“My grandparents worked there when it used to be a ceramics factory. My grandma just briefly, but my grandpa until it was shut down and most of the machinery sold o
,

she explained.

“What did they make there?”

“Nothing exciting.” She grinned. “My gramps worked in the kilns baking tera cotta roof tiles. He loved it though.”

“When did it shut down?”

Her dark eyes shifted away from Libby and out to the slow-moving river before she returned her gaze. “The early 90s. I never got to see it while it was operating, but whenever we’d drive around the area he’d take me there and tell me stories about what he made and the people he worked with.”

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

Libby imaged Reagan as a little girl. All wide-eyed and hanging on her grandpa's every word. Could he have known how much his stories would shape the course of her life?

"How did you end up running a pottery studio out of it?"

"I used to talk about it all the time. Having my own space.

I drove by the old factory on a whim. My ex's idea, actually."

She chuckled. "Said I had to stop dreaming and start doing.

What was the harm in trying, right? I thought she was nuts. I was twenty-four making just enough as a courier to afford a car and a crappy excuse for an apartment. How could I afford it?" "But you did," Libby said, eager to hear the rest. In that moment, she realized she could listen to Reagan talk about absolutely anything.

"Only because the rent was dirt cheap and my landlord is an idiot." Her dimples cut into her soft skin as she offered a lopsided smile. "The utilities are expensive, though. My family helped me for a while, and I only let go of my day job last year."

Libby stepped a little closer until her toes hit the tip of Reagan's shoe. "Pottery classes don't keep the lights on and the ovens roaring?"

"They might, but I don't charge for most of them. I want to be part of the community, not someone who comes in and takes what little people have. In a perfect world, I'd subsidize all of it, but material isn't free. Every now and again I think about doing

fundraisers or something. Save enough to keep it running so everyone can find something special in that studio like I did. That and maybe buy it out right.”

“I’ve never seen anyone have so much love and passion for a building,” Libby replied, her skin buzzing from the bourbon and Reagan’s contagious energy.

Reagan furrowed her brow. “It’s more than that. More than a pile of bricks and poured cement. It gave countless people a new start. The chance to create, but more importantly, to earn good wages for hard work. I know it won’t do that again, but it can still be meaningful.”

“I meant it as a compliment,” Libby interrupted, desperate to bring back her inspirational enthusiasm. “It’s beautiful how you feel and the potential you see,” she added, swallowing the lump growing in her throat.

Reagan’s shoulders relaxed. “Sorry, I get a little wound up.” Her cheeks flushed, maybe from the booze or maybe from the rush of emotion.

Staring at her lips, Libby wanted to say something, but she couldn’t think. She couldn’t move. Her body was buzzing like a neon sign while feeling adrift and disconnected from it at the same time.

As Reagan leaned forward, tilting her head down, Libby craned hers up. With her eyes fixed on parted lips, Libby was vaguely aware of dark eyes darting over her face. Searching, always searching. Libby wished she knew what Reagan was thinking, what she was seeing when she looked at her like that.

Her trance shattered when Reagan cleared her throat and stepped back. “Maybe too much of a good thing.” She rattled the chunk of ice in her empty glass. “Shall we eat some of that delicious food you made?”

Libby laughed too loudly, an effort to conceal how the shift in energy knocked her off balance. “I just picked up a few things. You can thank the car and the little Italian market a few blocks away.” Her voice was high-pitched and unnatural, but she couldn’t fix it.

The weight of her embarrassment was crushing. Her chest caved as she curled forward while reaching for the sliding glass door. It was as if her true form was a hedgehog and all she wanted to do was roll into a spiky ball to protect herself from the onslaught of emotions.

“I’m just going to wash my hands. I’ll be right back,” she called, erupting into a full body sweat as she raced up the stairs to her bathroom.

Reagan replied with something like okay. Libby wished she hadn’t heard the confusion in her tone. It only made her face grow hotter still.

For crap’s sake, isn’t there like a max body temperature?

Once in her bathroom, she locked the door. Not that she expected Reagan to follow, but she couldn’t risk looking even more unhinged in front of the eternally composed queen of cool.

Yanking off her shirt, Libby hovered over the sink and jerked the faucet lever open. Splashing her face and chest with cold water, she felt a little like a returning space capsule

landing in the ocean. All hot metal and cool water. She was surprised she didn’t hear an audible sizzle at the contact.

When she’d lowered her core temperature from nuclear meltdown levels, she looked at herself in the mirror. Makeup running and the tips of her no-longer-straight hair

dripping water, her pale bra soaked and clinging to her modest chest.

The mess, as jarring as it was, couldn't distract her from the inexplicable truth.

I wanted to kiss her. Libby pressed her palm to her twisting stomach. I want to kiss her.

CHAPTER 16

“ELI!” a woman screeched from the doorway of Libby's private office.

Jolting her out of her thoughts, Libby rolled back in her chair before jumping to her feet. “Zena! What the heck are you doing here?”

Page 41

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

With arms extended, Libby rushed toward the friend she hadn't seen in years. Embracing in the kind of bearhug only Zena could deliver, Libby squeezed her back with equal enthusiasm.

"Girl, I have missed you!" Zena shouted in her ear. "Look at you! You look amazing!"

Libby laughed. "Thanks, but you're the one who looks like a million bucks!" She stepped back to get a better look at her friend. The white dress she was wearing was painted on her body.

"I've taken up Zumba. A little dorky, I know, but one of the older ladies in my practice has a lot of fun doing it and she finally convinced me to give it a try," she replied, sitting on the sofa with Libby.

"Not dorky at all! You're practically radiant."

"Well," her dark skin flushed as she played coy. "That might be thanks to Ari."

Libby raised an eyebrow. "Who is that?"

"The very cute sports physician who works across from me," she replied mischievously. After she'd told Libby about how she tagged along with Ari to a medical conference in Miami to surprise her and how serious they were getting, the conversation turned to Libby's new relationship. "Sooooooo tell me everything about this new girl you're seeing! And you better spill all the tea."

The temperature in the room soared as Libby

's blazer tightened and constricted inexplicably. "I don't know if that's a conversation for the o ce," she replied, hoping to push the topic o the table.

"True, because I want all the scintillating details," Zena said as she stood. "Let's go. I looked up the nearest bar and there's one three rooftops away."

Libby laughed. "I can't leave work in the middle of the day to go drinking! If you'd told me you were coming, I could've prepared better."

Zena propped her hands on her hips. "First of all, what's the fun in giving you a head's up on a surprise. Second of all, it's six o'clock, a time well regarded the world over as happy hour. I don't want to hear another word of protestation.

Doctor's orders."

Standing to grab her purse out of her desk drawer, Libby shook her head. "You can't use that on me. I'm twice the age of your patients."

"Well, I'm older than you, so there," she joked as they started for the door.

"By like four months!" Libby argued as they strode through the empty lobby to the elevator.

"Older is older. Now mind your elders."

Minutes later, they were sitting at a glass bar being served by a very attractive bartender. Despite her objection that it was too much, Zena ordered half a dozen tapas and a bottle of wine.

“I’ve seen your new hottie on your socials,” Zena said once half the bottle was empty and their food was gone.

“What’s your grandmother have to say? I’m sure Abuela was shocked with a capital S. Did she give her the third degree?”

How bad was it?”

Libby was out of stalling tactics. She wasn’t eager to lie to her friend’s face. The fauxmance required so much more dishonesty than she realized. Faking it for the world was one thing, but deceiving the people she loved made her queasy.

In her silence, Zena cringed. “That bad?”

“Not nearly as bad as I expected. Considering I feared excommunication from the family, it was pretty okay,” she replied honestly. “But she hasn’t actually met her yet.”

Zena’s dark eyes widened. “And the Grande Dame is just allowing you to have someone in your life she didn’t stamp her seal of approval on? Shit, I remember the first time I came here with you on spring break. Your grams played psychological chess with me the entire ride home from the airport, and I was just your roommate!”

Libby laughed. “And that’s precisely why she hasn’t met her. It’s too soon. I don’t think she’s ready to suffer the inquisition.”

I know I’m definitely not ready for Mima’s intensive scrutiny.

Zena’s dark eyes shown with sympathy. “Well. . . I’m going to be here for a few days. Do I get to meet her? I promise not to put her under my microscope.”

“She’s out of town for a ceramics thing,” Libby snapped, praying the lie was delivered quickly enough to sound believable and definitely not made up on the spot. She winced internally. If Zena pressed, she had no idea what kind of pottery-related event would require out of state travel.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

“Dang.” Zena frowned. “I guess that’s the real downside of having surprised you. No time to plan.”

Her friend’s crestfallen response sent a surge of guilt-laden nausea churning in her belly. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it,” she replied, straightening as she picked up her refilled wine glass. “You’re just gonna have to fill me in on all the lurid details, and don’t you dare skimp. I need to know how you jumped headfirst into the lady pond!

Don’t get me wrong. I see the appeal. If Kerry Washington so much as looked at me twice it would be on.”

Trading nausea for nerves, Libby gulped the Chardonnay like it might rescue her from the fate she’d created. Plunging into herself like a treasure hunter, she scavenged for nodes of truth to mine. “I mean people are just really energy, right?

We both carry masculine and feminine. The more I think about it, the more I feel like gender is an artificial construct in some ways. I’m attracted to her energy, you know?” As Libby listened to herself, she realized she wasn’t lying.

“Maybe because your girl has some serious swag if those pictures you posted are to be trusted.” Zena looked away before leaning closer. “And I may have stalked her on social media. Those videos of her all dirty and dominating that clay with those strong arms.” She leaned back and pretended to fan herself. “Shit, show me one person that wouldn’t switch teams for that, and I’ll show you a liar.”

Abruptly exhilarated, Libby cackled. “Wait until you meet her in person. She has this way of looking at people.” The memory of Reagan’s piercing eyes triggered her racing pulse. “It’s like you’re the only person on earth.”

Zena squeezed Libby’s forearm. “Damn, Eli. You have it bad! I’ve never seen you get all doe-eyed like that before.”

Heat rushed over Libby’s cheeks. “I can honestly say I’ve never been in this position before.”

“Oh, I hope she’s putting you in all sorts of positions,”

she joked before emptying the rest of the bottle into their glasses.

After another bottle of wine and a lot of catching up, they called a ride-share service and made plans for breakfast the following day so she could meet Ari. Libby didn’t miss the chance to tease her about it, since she’d never found any other guy worthy of introduction.

As soon as they parted, Libby regretted having lied about Reagan being out of town. Zena wouldn’t be back in Miami for a while, and after talking all night, she realized she wanted her to meet Reagan.

Once home, Libby went straight for the shower. By the time she crawled into bed in nothing but a T-shirt, she’d replayed the conversation with Zena half a dozen times. She couldn’t tell how long she’d had such fluid opinions on gender and sexuality. It wasn’t something she’d ever given too much thought to before, but as she talked, she realized she didn’t really see Reagan as anything other than Reagan.

The idea was at once freeing and terrifying.

Deciding that existential questions about identity were a bit heavy for her tipsy, sleepy brain, she tried to meditate to clear her mind. She failed.

Frustrated, Libby rolled around under her Egyptian cotton sheets trying to get comfortable. With all the classes, retreats, and self-study, she should at least be able to stop the barrage of thoughts making her restless.

Admitting defeat, Libby gave into the greatest enemy of sleep and reached for her phone. First she tried to work a little, brainstorming topics for her advice column. Somehow, she ended up researching a new espresso maker she didn't need.

By the time she ended up on Reagan's social media profile, she admitted to herself that she'd been circling it all along. Zena's deep dive had rendered her too curious for self-control.

Libby's thumb hovered over the icon tagged videos on her page. Her stomach hitched as if she was standing at the edge of a platform about to dive into the air at ten thousand feet.

She couldn't decide whether it was pathetic that her life was so devoid of excitement that clicking a button felt like skydiving. She opened her eyes and leapt.

The first few videos were ones Reagan had made. They didn't showcase her and instead focused on her students. It was an art exhibition much like the one she'd been to, but judging by Reagan's long hair and Peggy not needing a cane, it was some time ago.

A smile blossomed on Libby's face as she watched Reagan help a kid struggling with a mini pottery wheel. When the next video played, the smile disappeared, and her eyes widened.

This is the video Zena must have been talking about.

In an instructional clip, Reagan was explaining how to make an enormous vase in two parts. Her hair was shaved on one side and dyed blonde. Not a terrible look, but she preferred the sideswept style she currently used.

Libby listened dutifully as Reagan explained all the preparation required even though she didn't understand anything she said and had no intention of replicating her work

. She didn't consider skipping forward as she drowned in the sound of her voice.

Once Reagan sat at the wheel, Libby rolled onto her stomach and propped her head on one arm and the phone on the pillow.

Jesus.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

Not only was Zena right, she may have undersold the unexpectedly erotic nature of the image. Reagan's biceps bulged as she lifted a mass of clay over her head and slammed it down on the wheel. Within seconds, she'd wet her hands and gripped the misshapen ball like a horse's

reins. The dark red material was a living thing thrashing around, desperate to free itself from Reagan's grasp. As she controlled the clay, her muscles flexed, making the flower adorned rooster tattooed on her upper arm dance.

Libby licked her lips. All of a sudden there was too much saliva in her mouth, too much heat in the room. She kicked off the covers and returned to laying on her back with the phone inches from her face.

When Reagan sat back with obvious pride at having completed the first task and created a shape that didn't fly off the wheel as it spun, Libby smiled too. Her body wasn't ready for the second attack. After a cut in the film, the camera lens was set much closer to get a better view of Reagan's hands as she worked.

Shit.

The ache that started low in her belly was unmistakable and left her feeling uneasy, but she was powerless to stop it.

The desire that grew from watching Reagan's adept fingers sliding through the wet clay was a tiny spark on the driest of kindling. Reagan leaned forward, revealing her neck and the bottom of her face to the camera. Her flushed skin was covered in a thin layer of perspiration that forced a pulse of desire through Libby's being.

Transfixed by Reagan's strong arms and powerful fingers, Libby imagined that her body was the clay. If she focused hard enough, she could feel Reagan's body on top of her, her bicep bulging next to her head as she held herself up with one hand and slipped into Libby with the other.

Libby slammed the phone down before her hand slipped to where she was in desperate need of a little pressure.

"What the hell am I doing?"

Shame took the place of arousal. Wishing a crater would open up and swallow her whole, she pulled the covers over her head as if she could hide from herself. She never

considered herself a creepy voyeur, and she wasn't eager to add it to her list of personality traits.

CHAPTER 17

STARING DOWN AT HER PHONE, Libby was doing everything in her power to distract herself. With the exception of breakfast with Zena and Ari, every waking moment had been spent keeping thoughts of Reagan's sweaty body out of her head.

Results were mixed.

Usually, Taylor waiting for her by the elevator triggered a panic attack. Today, she was grateful for the distraction, even if it meant there was a fire to put out. Better a work-related blaze than the creepy one forming in her pants.

Gross.

“Morning! I have great news,” Taylor announced before she stepped into the lobby.

“Well, that’s unusual for me these days,” she joked before handing her the cappuccino she’d picked up for her.

“I know right,” she agreed with a chuckle as they barreled toward Libby’s office. “Jennifer’s list of prospects is down to twenty. I left them sitting on your desk. All but a couple are from the new round of interviews. Who knew removing gender and sexuality boxes would increase our pool of quality hopefuls?”

Libby nodded. As mortifying as it was, she hadn’t realized how alienating some of their old biographical screener questions were. Leaving lines blank rather than providing

boxes to choose from had been such an easy fix, she regretted not having done it sooner. With the new process and new ads directed at diverse clientele, her brand was expanding. She hoped the revenue would catch up soon as well.

“Let me know if you need anything while you review. I organized them in order of horoscope and love language.”

Taylor sipped her coffee in the doorway as Libby sat at her desk. “I put my favorite on top,” she added before disappearing down the hallway and out of her view.

Work, she hoped, would stop the unwanted voice in her head calling her a pervert.

Opening the green file on top of the others, Libby glanced at the photo of a stunning woman. According to her bio, Gale was in the process of transitioning but did not wish to discuss the specifics with the team. Fair enough, Libby thought. Those details weren’t relevant to her prospective compatibility with Jennifer as long as she was open to meeting a cisgender woman. Since she was, and since they both had a similar

hierarchy of values, Libby made a note to bring her in for a second interview. She'd have to vet her before recommending a date, but she had to admit, she had a good feeling about them. Good job, Taylor.

Libby had just reviewed the third file and was making notes when her phone and computer dinged at once. If she hadn't been in the middle of switching profiles, she wouldn't have glanced at the sound.

"An alert, huh?" she muttered to herself. Taylor had set up something to track the whole of the internet and notify her when her name came up in something new. Usually, the alerts were from the content she created herself, either the posting or the sharing, but she clicked on the link to be sure.

"Oh God," she whispered, her hand covering her mouth.

The article was, unquestionably, a pointed attack.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

Through the tears obscuring her vision, Libby read a slew of accusations. Understanding the bits and pieces her brain allowed her to absorb, the author was accusing her of not really caring about the LGBT community. She called her a fake dyke du jour, no better than sad Hollywood has-beens playing gay for attention. According to the article, her latest cattle calls seeking diverse hopefuls were nothing but empty pandering.

Gripping her chest, Libby tried not to puke or faint, a tall order considering she wanted to do both very badly.

Reaching for her phone as she fought back the overwhelming desire to hyperventilate, she hit the person near the top of her recents list.

“I’m so sorry. I never meant to use you as some kind of prop,” she blurted as her tears broke through her dam of self-control.

“Libby? What are you talking about? Why are you crying?” The alarm in Reagan’s voice only made her feel worse.

“I’m not Katy Perry,” she shrieked between sobs, unable to string coherent thoughts together. “I never meant to hurt you.”

“Where are you? I don’t really understand what’s going on, but you’re scaring me,” she said, sounding like she’d stepped into a quiet, echoey space.

Libby tried to speak, but all she could do was cry until her jaw hurt. It was the strangest reaction she’d ever had to anything and she couldn’t control it. She hadn’t

even cried like that when Davis dumped her.

“Are you in your office? Are you home? I need to know your safe, okay?”

Every word Reagan uttered in kind compassion made Libby cry harder. She didn’t deserve it. She was a fake. She was everything the author called her. Except she’d been

sincere in her efforts to diversify. Once her eyes were open to how narrow she’d been with her services, she’d traded longstanding clients for the possibility of serving every adult who wanted to find love.

“Libby, are you there?”

Shutting her eyes to stop the burning, Libby croaked all she could manage. “Office.”

WEAVING IN AND OUT OF HIGHWAY TRAFFIC, REAGAN RACED TOWARD

downtown. Libby hadn’t been able to explain what the hell was happening, but after she texted her a link to the article, the source of her distress was clear. Reagan had barely managed to get through half of it before she tossed the phone into her truck in disgust. Libby wasn’t perfect, but she wasn’t the opportunistic scumbag the blog post described.

As she drove like a woman possessed, Reagan imagined showing up to the author hiding behind a pen name and stock photo and ask if they would like to be attacked by a total stranger for no reason. Gripping the steering wheel so tightly that her knuckles turned white, Reagan imagined doing a little more than shouting.

When she’d finally broken free of the bumper-to-bumper hellscape, Reagan turned

into the valet parking in Libby's building and gave the kid twenty bucks to let her park it herself. The elevator to Cassanova Matchmaking was eternal.

It stopped every few floors, raising her blood pressure a little each time.

Who the hell wants to be in a building this high? We're not birds. This is unnatural, she thought, frustrated at how absurdly long it took to get from her parked car to where she needed to be. By the time the doors opened at the top, she

was sure no building should ever be more than four floors tall. "Can I help you?" One of the receptionists greeted her with open confusion.

Reagan looked down at herself. In clay-covered overalls and an equally dirty tank top, she was sure she wasn't the kind of person they saw very often. If ever.

"I'm here to see Libby," she said, unsure which of the doors connected to the waiting room led her to her goal.

"I'm sorry, but Ms. Cassanova is not expecting any appointments," she explained, looking like she'd press some secret security alarm if she could.

"No, I know, I'm not an appointment. Taylor!" she called when the familiar young woman crossed a corridor on the other side of the glass wall.

She did a double take before her eyes widened and she rushed out. "Reagan? What are you doing here?"

Reagan rushed toward her, hoping to get behind the barricade. "Where's Libby? Is she alright?"

Taylor cocked her head to one side exactly like Libby often did. "She's in her office. I

don't think anything is wrong.”

Her expression turned from confused to alarmed. “I’ve been in a meeting. Is something wrong?”

“Take me to her?”

Taylor hesitated.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

“She called me. She needs me,” Reagan pleaded.

“Yeah. Of course,” she replied before stepping back and letting her inside.

/> Doing away with pretense, Reagan ran toward the end of the hall where she remembered Libby’s office was. This time, white curtains obscured her view inside.

Asking Taylor to wait outside until she was sure Libby wanted to see her didn’t go over well. It was obvious Taylor was used to knowing everything happening with her boss

and being left out was visibly uncomfortable. After begging Taylor to trust her, she agreed and let her go in alone.

“Libby?” Reagan asked, glancing around at the empty office. Deciding she couldn’t be anywhere else, she darted for the bathroom. “Libby?” she repeated softly against the door.

“In here,” Libby replied, her words trembling.

Sitting in the corner with her knees pressed against her chest, Libby’s eyes were puffy and her nose bright red.

“What happened?” Reagan asked as she squeezed in between her and the sink. “Did something come of that stupid post? I don’t even think anyone’s even seen it. There weren’t any comments on it, and I didn’t see it shared anywhere.”

“Are you trying to tell me this extremely embarrassing nervous breakdown is premature?”

Reagan wrapped her arm around Libby’s shoulders and pulled her in for a side hug. “Well, I’m glad you’ve got your sense of humor back. Now that you’re intelligible, do you want to tell me why you’re so upset?”

Libby’s head lolled to the side and dropped on her shoulder. “I’d rather wait for the ground to swallow me whole.”

“You might be waiting a while. It would have to eat thirty-something other floors first. Maybe you should sit in the basement instead. It would be a lot faster.”

Libby snu ed and chuckled at the same time before burying her head in the nape of Reagan’s neck. “I’m so selfish. Even in my own demise, I would take a few thousand people with me,” she wailed before starting to cry again.

“That’s being a little dramatic, don’t you think? One person’s opinion is not worth falling apart over. Especially when they won’t even put their name on it.”

“Stop being so nice to me. I don’t deserve it. You do remember what that person said is true, right?” Libby sat up

and wiped her eyes on her sleeve. “We’re not really in a relationship. I’m paying you to be my girlfriend. How am I not an exploitive fake?”

“Okay, but that wasn’t really the accusation,” Reagan countered, not wanting to address the arrangement portion of their connection.

“But they’re right. I hadn’t tried to serve anyone but straight people. In, like, five years I think we’ve helped maybe a handful of guys find each other, and those were

people we already knew. They were more like favors for friends.” Libby shut her eyes so tight it looked painful. “How can I pretend that I hadn’t been proactively looking to be inclusive until I started dating you?”

Reagan nodded. “Okay, and you need to own that. You didn’t think about all the different sorts of people out there looking for love, but now you are. And it’s never too late to improve, right? Where would we be if people never humbled themselves and used whatever power they have to improve the world around them after realizing they’d been a bit myopic?” She paused. “Do you want my advice?”

“I think that’s kind of obvious since you’re the first person I called,” she joked before blowing her nose with toilet paper. “The only person I called.”

At the sight of Libby’s smile breaking through swollen lips, Reagan’s stomach unclenched. “I’m glad you did because I don’t feel exploited in the least.”

Libby cringed. “It was never my intent to use you,” she whispered, her words thick and heavy as they struggled out of her throat. “There was our agreement, of course, but I didn’t pick you to make some kind of salacious spectacle. If I ever made you feel that way . . .” Fat tears ran down her slim cheeks. “I’m so sorry, and you’re a hundred percent free to back out at any time. No penalties or anything, and I’m happy to put that in writing.”

Reagan chuckled and pulled Libby into her arms, inhaling the sweet scent of her perfume. “I don’t want out,” she confessed, her heart hammering uncontrollably in her chest.

“I want the opposite of out, and I’m kind of shocked you don’t see that. Actually . . .” she leaned back to get a good look at her eyes, a dazzling green compared to how red the whites were. Jumping on a cliff without a failsafe, Reagan confessed what had taken her a little while to put together.

“I like you. And it has nothing to do with pretending for your job.”

Libby’s eyes widened. “I . . .” Gathering her breath as if she was about to run headlong into a cement barrier, she continued. “I really like you too. Like . . . a lot.”

Willingly, Reagan surrendered to the unknown. She leaned forward as she contemplated the meaning of Libby’s words. No, her words didn’t spur her forward. It was everything she wasn’t saying. It was the new emotion seizing her pretty eyes. Nothing like the sorrow she’d been overcome with when Reagan first plopped down next to her.

It was hope and desire and trepidation. It was the look of a woman about to plunge into the unknown right along with her. “Reagan,” Libby whispered as she narrowed the space between them. “I don’t know what I’m doing,” she confessed as her eyes darted between Reagan’s eyes and her lips. “I have absolutely no idea—”

“What are you all doing in here?”

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

An elegant woman's sharp tone cut the moment into ribbons. Their heads swiveled toward the doorway.

"Mima!" Libby shrieked as she scrabbled to her feet, nearly bulldozing Reagan in the process.

"Que te pasa?" The woman Reagan guessed was Libby's grandmother emanated concern as she gripped Libby's arms.

"What's happened?"

"Nothing," she lied. "I just got a little bit of bad news.

Nothing to do with the business," she added, talking so fast she was nearly incomprehensible.

The woman, dressed in a sharp, pale pink suit, was the epitome of class and barely restrained aggression. "This is obviously not nothing. I am not accustomed to finding you floundering on the ground like a half-dead trout."

"Mrs. Cassanova," Reagan said as she stood and extended her hand. "I'm Reagan. Reagan Soto. It's very nice to meet you."

The elder Cassanova's face undulated with subtle confusion until she offered a tight smile. A feigned nicety.

"Reagan," she declared finally as she embraced her in a loose hug instead of a

handshake. “I didn’t think I’d ever get to meet you. Elisabeth has been rather greedy with you, I’m sorry to say.”

“What? I haven’t been hiding her.” Libby’s face was so red, Reagan worried she might have a heart attack.

“I’ve heard so much about you. I’m sorry I haven’t made this happen sooner.” Reagan looked down at herself. “This isn’t the first impression I wanted to make.”

Libby’s grandmother’s shoulders dropped a fraction.

“Elisabeth told us you have an art show to prepare for but has been very tight lipped about when.”

Libby’s eyes darted between her and her grandmother.

Reagan could almost hear her thoughts screaming out at her, begging her not to say anything wrong.

“That’s my fault,” Reagan said as she slipped her hands into the pockets of her clay-covered overalls. “I keep having to postpone it.”

Mrs. Cassanova eyed her quizzically. “I hope that’s not a testament to your ability to commit.”

“Mima, please don’t be rude,” Libby chided while still doing her best impersonation of a cherry.

Reagan chuckled. “I promise I’m much more committed to your granddaughter than an art installation.”

The elderly woman's eyes shone with something like approval. "Por favor, Elisabeth," she tsked, "this girl is not so fragile that she needs your protection. Are you?"

"No, señora," Reagan replied earning an unreadable look from Libby.

"Good. Elisabeth, please make y

ourself look presentable.

We have the segment on Tonight with Terri to record."

Shutting her eyes tightly for a moment, Libby nodded. "Of course, I'll be right out."

"I'm so glad you didn't forget," she replied with a terrifying smile. "Reagan, dear, I'll walk you out to the lobby so Elisabeth can finish getting ready."

When Libby didn't protest, Reagan leaned in and kissed her cheek. "Call me when you're finished, okay?"

Trapped somewhere between stunned and scared, Libby squeaked out an okay.

They hadn't walked more than a couple of steps from the bathroom when Libby's grandmother hit her with a surprise attack. "Reagan, I imagine your art will have to take a break for Thanksgiving. Can I expect you for dinner? Before you answer, you should know I don't accept no very well and I pardon any tardiness, as I assume you celebrate with your own family."

“Mima, don’t pressure her!” Libby shouted from behind the closed bathroom door.

Under the woman’s intense gaze, Reagan couldn’t think of a single excuse. How could she decline without sounding like she didn’t value family? She embraced her fate. Whether Libby was ready or not, her grandmother couldn’t be avoided after such a direct contact.

“Of course,” she smiled. “I would love to. Thank you for thinking of me. Please let me know what I can bring.”

Reagan chose to read the nearly imperceptible nod she offered in return as approval.

CHAPTER 18

REAGAN WAS elbow deep in cool, liquid clay and a thousand miles away, replaying the moment on Libby’s bathroom floor, when Freddie’s voice shattered her muddled thoughts.

“I don’t like this slip casing thing,” he announced, holding up a mutilated object that should’ve been a lantern.

“I can’t figure out how long to leave it in before pouring it out of the mold. Too quick and it’s thin,” he explained looking at the disastrous result in his hand. “But if it’s too long, Bonnie said it won’t come out of the kiln right because the walls will be too thick.”

“I know,” she agreed, understanding his frustration. “It’s an art in and of itself. Just

keep working at it, and if you don't like it, you never have to do it again."

Freddie returned to his molds but didn't drop the scowl. A few minutes later, she put them all out of their misery.

"Okay, class. I think that's a hard N.O. on casting in molds,"

she announced with a chuckle. "How about next week we do some hand building?"

Between murmurs of displeasure, a few students took great joy in dumping their tedious and boring lanterns into the clay recycling bin. The mischievous grins were better than the frowns she'd seen for the last hour.

Moments after her last student left, Reagan started the dreaded task of returning the discarded and hardened pieces back to liquid form. When the door creaked open, she didn't look up. Her younger students invariably left something behind every class.

"Do you not lock this thing?" Libby's soft voice bounced against the cement walls and forced Reagan's attention toward the melodic sound.

"I don't often have unexpected visitors," she replied before depositing the bucket full of clay in the sink.

Libby, dressed in a pristine white pantsuit and blue silk blouse, crossed the studio to where Reagan stood at the sink.

"I hope unexpected is not the same as unwanted."

Reagan rinsed her hands clean before shutting off the water. "Never unwanted," she confessed, searching her face.

“Are you feeling a little better?”

“Yeah.” She cleared her throat and looked away, “I texted and called to let you know, but I guessed you might have been busy with your potting.”

“Good guess,” she replied with a smirk.

“I’m really sorry I lost my entire mind today. I’m so mortified I stood outside your building for like fifteen minutes before coming inside. If Freddie hadn’t spotted me and forced me to come inside or look like some kind of creep, I might still be sitting there.”

The vulnerability in Libby’s tone spurred her forward.

Without thinking about it, Reagan cupped her face and gently tilted it toward her. “Emotions, no matter how unruly and unexpected, are never anything to apologize for. Not with me. You have every right to feel whatever you’re feeling.

That doesn’t hurt anybody.”

“There you go . . .” Libby whispered. “Sounding like a woman I’d have to pay thousands of dollars to take me to the side of a mountain to teach me inner peace.”

Reagan chuckled, her chest filling like a helium balloon being inflated at a snail’s pace. “And you didn’t even have to pay me or go without running water for a week.”

Libby’s eyes brightened, making it just a little harder for Reagan to breathe. “I came to apologize for more than just my unhinged outburst. My grandmother—”

“Your grandmother was lovely,” Reagan interrupted, wanting to stay in the quiet moment lost in Libby’s soft face.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

Libby let out a shriek of laughter. “Liar! She was a bulldozer. That’s her only setting. I told her she should never have put you on the spot about Thanksgiving like that. It was very rude. You most certainly do not have to come. I told her you’re not going to speed through time with your family just because you’re too polite to decline her offer.”

As Libby worked herself up, Reagan couldn’t stop the warmth spreading through her chest. She wanted more than anything to lean in and kiss her.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Libby asked, her cheeks flushed with color.

“Sorry, I, um. . .” Reagan had no excuse, so she jumped back on track as she stood up straighter. “How will it look to the world if we don’t spend such a major holiday together?”

More importantly, I don’t want to make a bad impression with the Cassanova Clan.”

Libby cocked her head to one side and wrestled a smile.

“You think we’re ready to take on the whole clan? My parents? Brother? Assorted relations?”

Trying to retain a serious expression, but only half-succeeding, Reagan was pulled toward the scent of warm skin, expensive perfume, and clean linen. “I mean, I’d believe that I’m romantically interested in you,” she admitted with a pounding heart. “Would you?”

Darting between her lips and her eyes, Libby's eyes moved with defined purpose. All the things she'd almost said

in the past couple of months . . . Reagan was sure she knew then what they were.

"What about your family?" Libby croaked just above a whisper.

For a moment, Reagan had completely forgotten what they'd been discussing. "I think they'll definitely believe we're dating."

Libby's throat danced as she laughed, sending Reagan's pulse into a frenzy. If she just dipped down she'd taste her. It was the only objective she could focus on.

"Okay," Libby replied, making clear that wasn't really the question. "How do you plan to attend two dinners at once?"

Accepting her fate that a kiss wouldn't happen, Reagan stepped out of her brain fog and paid attention. "They eat lunch. My grandma is convinced that if she eats meat after dark she'll get lethal indigestion and die." Reagan rolled her eyes playfully. "We've told her it doesn't work that way, but she will not be moved. So we moved it to lunch a few years ago. Turns out everyone prefers eating at two in the afternoon rather than midnight. The change has also brought down the number of drunk uncles to zero."

"How very American of you," Libby joked. "If our lechón is finished roasting any time before nine at night it's a win."

By that time, almost everybody is drunk right alongside the uncles. But don't worry, it's all very orderly." Libby paused as she stared at her quizzically. "What? Why are you smiling?"

“Oh nothing. . . other than it looks like we have a Thanksgiving match made in Heaven. Lunch with my fam and a late dinner with yours,” she explained. “We have what? Like forty-five days to get better at this? I can’t even imagine a world where we don’t succeed.”

When Libby didn’t offer any further protestations, Reagan considered the matter settled. She wasn’t exactly sure she

was ready to meet Libby’s entire family, but she wasn’t scared either.

“Okay, then. I guess we’re doing Thanksgiving.” Libby’s declaration vibrated with a mix of trepidation and delirious hope. “I better go and leave you to your. . .” She gestured at the bucket full of smashed clay lanterns. “Whatever this is.”

“Or,” Reagan held her in her gaze, “I can collect on my winnings.”

Libby furrowed her brow until understanding softened the creases in her face. “How could I forget? What have you waited this long to claim?” she asked, her dark green eyes silently beseeching her.

A thousand thoughts raced through her mind. Tempted as she was, she couldn’t bring herself to use the silly bourbon wager to get what she really wanted. “A lesson on the pottery wheel,” she blurted.

“Seriously?” Libby laughed, surprised. “Wasn’t that what I was supposed to win?”

Reagan grinned. “What can I say? I’m very generous.”

Looking down at herself, Libby put her hands on her hips.

“Do you have something I can borrow?”

“I’ve got an apron. Pull o the jacket and you should be alright.”

A few minutes later, Libby traded her suit jacket for a heavy split-leg apron. “This is very flattering,” she said sarcastically, looking down at the denim material.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

“I don’t know. . .” Reagan said, pretending to give her appearance a great deal of thought as she set a bucket full of prepared clay in front of the wheel. “You look pretty cute to me. Come to think of it, I don’t think I’ve ever loaned a woman one of my aprons.”

When Libby looked at her, her cheeks were flushed. “I guess I should be honored instead of complaining then.”

“You do whatever feels good to you,” she replied, immediately earning a sideways glance.

>

“How long before you drop it?” Libby asked as she followed her instruction to sit at the stool behind the wheel.

Reagan feigned ignorance. “Drop what?”

“Always saying the right thing. Always being so perfect.

No one is this put together,” she challenged.

Rolling a stool next to hers, Reagan shrugged before sitting. “I’m not trying to do that,” she replied honestly. “I was being serious. If you want to complain, do it. Why not?”

Libby cocked her head to one side in a way that made Reagan feel like a zoo exhibit.

“Well . . . for one . . .

complainers are annoying.”

“Maybe to you,” she replied with a laugh. “Maybe I don’t mind if you complain. Ever think of that?”

Libby tried and failed not to smile. “You’re something else. You know that, right?”

The shifting intent in Libby’s eyes quickened Reagan’s pulse. “Me? Why?” She tried to put on an innocent expression.

“No one is really this selfless and understanding. It’s just not possible.” Libby crossed her arms over her chest. “No one single, anyway. Trust me. I’ve interviewed every single single in the county.”

Reagan chuckled as she tossed the little clay ball from one hand to the other. “Actually, you only interview singles who either need help getting out of their own way or don’t know themselves well enough to be objective about prospective life partners.”

For a long time, Libby didn’t respond. She just watched her as if waiting for a sudden movement. “Why are you single?”

Instead of responding with a joke, Reagan considered the question. “Because I know in the deepest recesses of my soul

that I haven’t found the other half of my orange.”

After another long pause, Libby dropped her arms and leaned forward. “You know . . . I really didn’t think this is what you wanted to win with your bet.”

With heat flooding her body, Reagan laughed to escape her nerves. “You find it impossible to believe that we wanted the same thing?”

Libby raised her eyebrows. She wasn’t buying it. Does she know what I want?

Reaching out, Libby took the ball from her hands and slammed it onto the wheel like a veteran potter. “Maybe I’m agreeing that we wanted the same thing.” The laser focus in her eyes and intensity pulsing from her like an EMP was disabling.

“Wanted?” Reagan asked, her heart leaping into her throat. “As in don’t currently want?” She glanced at the clay.

Every cell in her body told her they were beating around the same bush, but she found naming it impossible. She pivoted to a joke. “What else was on the table?”

Each second of silence took a month of Reagan’s life. She would have given everything she had, and even some things she didn’t, to know what Libby was thinking as she gazed at her with an unreadable expression.

“Were you really thinking about this when you formulated the wager?”

The question, delivered in an unexpectedly throaty voice, made the tiny hairs on the back of Reagan’s neck stand at attention. No part of her body was spared from the warming tension mounting between them.

Reagan was trapped between making another joke and taking the moment seriously. If she got it wrong, the quiet resolve in Libby’s being would slip away. She was so sure she risked their future on it.

“No,” she admitted, rolling forward in her stool until their knees were touching. Her body ached at the minor contact and eviscerated any delusion she’d been harboring

about her interest being platonic.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

Libby glanced down at where their apron-covered legs pressed together before looking back at her.

Does she feel the same seismic activity at the slightest touch?

“What did you want?” Libby leaned forward, her wavy hair falling in her face.

Instinctively, Reagan brushed the wayward strand away, tucking it behind her ear. It was the last gasp of friendship.

An act of war. A declaration of freedom. Her palm lingered on Libby’s cheek as she fought the nerves causing a tremble in her normally steady hands. Reagan knew nothing would ever be the same.

“Kiss me,” Libby whispered as if trying to keep a white-knuckled grip on the confident woman who’d sauntered into the studio hellbent on getting what she wanted. It was a facade cracking just enough to reveal the unsure person beneath the cool exterior.

In a breath, Reagan closed the gap between them. With her fingers tangled in Libby’s hair as she held the back of her neck, she kissed her. As soon as she did, she was lost. Her head spun and her body shivered. It was jumping into a pool with no bottom. Leaping from a trapeze with no safety net.

With a soft groan that rumbled deep in Libby’s throat, she parted her lips and deepened their kiss. The light incursion of Libby’s tongue grazing the tip of hers had an immediate, dizzying effect.

There was nothing but teeth and lips and urgency. They were wanderers crawling out of the desert desperate for water as they reached an oasis. With a familiarity she had no right to feel, Reagan reached forward and gripped Libby's thighs, sliding her roughly onto her lap.

Instead of protesting, Libby moaned as she wrapped her legs around Reagan's waist and grabbed fistfuls of her short hair.

Reagan released a breathy curse before deepening their kiss. Kissing her harder. It was the urgency of lovers reunited after being a world apart. This wasn't the awkwardness of new lips finding each other for the first time, but like they'd kissed for lifetimes before finally being reunited.

Sliding her open palms up Libby's back, she felt the long, lean muscles. She wanted nothing on Earth more than to tear the clothes from her body and carry her upstairs to her bed.

As Libby rolled her hips and moaned against the front of her jeans, Reagan was sure she wanted the same.

The tell-tale creak of an old metal door sent Libby flying out of her lap before Reagan's brain processed the new information.

"I forgot my bag!" Freddie's voice echoed from the rafters and brought Reagan's dripping desire to a crippling halt.

Whipping around, Reagan jumped to her feet a few seconds after a horrified Libby. "The driver brought you back?" she shrieked, unable to think of anything else to say as Freddie jogged toward his usual station at the corner of the room and grabbed a backpack.

“Yeah,” he replied, barely sparing them a glance as he bolted for the door. “Sorry, I can’t stay and talk to you, but he’s gotta take me back before he goes to his second job. Bye Libby!”

Libby’s squeaked response was inaudible, but Freddie was already halfway out the door when she uttered it.

“I’m sorry,” Reagan started to apologize, but Libby was already looking down at her phone.

“It’s okay. I should, um, I have to go. Taylor reminded me I have clients waiting. I don’t know how I forgot,” she

explained, shoving her phone in Reagan’s face as if she required proof.

“I believe you. Don’t worry. I won’t feel like you wham-bammed me,” she joked, as she hid her trembling hands in her pockets.

Libby strapped her bag to her shoulder as she dropped the apron on the table and grabbed her jacket. “I’m really sorry,” she repeated as if she hadn’t heard a word Reagan said.

“Hey, no worries, okay?” Reagan said, gripping her upper arm lightly. “Call me later or whatever.”

Libby swallowed hard and nodded. “Yeah. Of course.”

Resting against the table, Reagan watched Libby bolt for the door like she was the one who’d convinced a bus driver to take her somewhere after his shift.

When she was alone, all the desire and promise that had blossomed in her body was

gone. Cold dread took its place.

Refusing to let the doubt take hold, she took the clay she'd prepared for Libby and started throwing her feelings.

C H A P T E R 1 9

AS SOON AS Libby was a few blocks away from Reagan's studio, she turned down a small street and parked her SUV in fron

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

t of an empty building. Dizzy and shivering, it was impossible to operate heavy machinery while she freaked out. Letting her body drop into the seat as soon as she threw the car into park, Libby let the shock fade. Pressing her fingertips to her still buzzing lips, she closed her eyes. The scent of Reagan's skin was burned into her senses, the weight of her kiss tattooed on her lips.

What the hell did I do?

She didn't need to replay the events in her mind to know that she'd been the instigator of the kiss. The kiss. Libby squeezed her already closed eyes even tighter. It wasn't like any kiss she'd ever experienced. She'd mauled her like an animal in heat.

Under the crushing embarrassment, her chest tightened as she fought the urge to be sick. I'll never be able to look at her again.

She'd acted like a horny teenager who'd escaped under the bleachers for the first time with her crush. Worse.

Another wave of suffocating shame wrecked her. She'd been even worse than that because she was a thirty-two-year-old

woman and hadn't ever moaned and keened so dramatically while kissing anybody. Even in significantly more intimate moments, she'd never made so much noise.

Davis had always joked that they could have sex in a library, and no one would ever notice. In all her life, she'd never understood the theatrics of loud sex and was

convinced it was a cultural fiction, something people did because they thought they should.

Libby covered her face even though she was alone. As her groaning haunted her, she wished she could disappear from herself.

When she'd chugged a bottle of water and managed to think about anything other than the mortifying way she'd rubbed her body all over Reagan, she turned to the complication she'd created.

Through the haze in her cloudy mind, Libby could see what she'd done. On the verge of passing one of the greatest tests, she'd fallen for the attention Reagan had given her.

She'd been so starved for intimacy that she'd taken the contractually obligated acts of a nice woman and convinced herself it was real. She'd shown up to the bank with nothing to deposit but Fool's Gold.

Leaning forward, Libby pressed her head against the steering wheel. The kiss happened so fast, she'd probably stunned Reagan into inaction before writhing all over her.

She pushed away the memory of Reagan's hands on her body and her teeth scraping against her bottom lip.

At the thought, her body reacted with the same shattering desire that had spurred her on.

Get a hold of yourself. She was probably so embarrassed for you she didn't want to shove you o .

Libby's stomach churned painfully. All she wanted to do was curl up in a ball and melt away. Her cell phone rang instead.

"Libby? Are you coming? Gale Jackson is waiting for the second interview. She's the person we're considering for Jennifer and I—"

"I know. Please tell her I'm extremely sorry. I'm on my way. I've just been held up," Libby explained to the disembodied voice talking to her through the car speakers.

After another few minutes and a quick meditation session later, Libby pulled herself together enough to drive again.

Even as her body stopped its physical reaction, her head wouldn't let her have a moment's peace.

Every time she blinked, she was transported to Reagan's lips. There was no denying that she'd never been kissed like that in her life. She'd definitely never slipped her tongue so far into anyone's mouth.

During the drive, Libby revisited Reagan's lips, her arms, her scent, her hair. Each time she reminded herself that it wasn't real, that she needed to shake it off and focus on saving her business. Her family's legacy.

The admonition only bought her a few moments of reprieve. As soon as her pulse slowed and her mind drifted, she was back in Reagan's lap. Each time she remembered a little less and fantasized a little more. She envisioned what might have happened if Freddie hadn't forgotten his bag.

Would Reagan have thrown her against a table and had her way with her? Would she?

Lust turned to an aching hunger building between her thighs and compromising her nervous system, her muscles, her skin. It continued to build like an unstoppable flood of desire until she let herself imagine the full scene until the shuddering pinnacle. By the time she arrived at the office, she was breathless.

Shit. What have I done?

CHAPTER 20

LIBBY KNEW she was busying herself with trivial work, but she was twenty-four hours post kiss and had less clarity than when she'd been sitting on the side of the road hyperventilating. With her cellphone stashed in her purse, she sat at her office computer and started writing.

Her love and dating advice column were one of her favorite things. For that reason, she had a bank of articles ready to publish and thousands of emails from people wanting her help.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

There was no doubt that it was always easier to see the solution for other people than for herself. Over the years she'd advised countless people about barely interested partners and advised them to walk away from those unwilling or unable to put in an equal amount of energy into a relationship. At least ten times she warned that one party couldn't do their partner's homework. You can only row your side of the boat. All the while she was proposing to Davis, buying her own engagement ring, and frantically trying to keep the stupid boat in one piece without realizing she was just treading water.

As she advised a soon-to-be bride that her refusal to let her fiancé have a bachelor party was more about fundamental trust issues than jealousy that he'd look at

half-naked women, her email pinged. From the heading she could see it was an alert on her name. Her blood turned to ice. "Not another one. Please."

After the blog post calling her out for being a fraud, she hadn't heard anything else. Taylor kept an eye on the views, and it hadn't gotten more than a few hundred clicks, nor had it been reposted, as far as they could tell. Since the kiss, she'd been able to shove it in the back of her mind.

The post's limited reach made Libby feel all the more ridiculous for having fallen apart. She didn't need her psych degree or an advice column to tell her it had been more about her own guilt than the pandering accusation.

As she stared at the notification, the little bit of calm she'd allowed to take root in her chest was gone. There was a new article. A new source of humiliation. Let's get it over with, she decided before clicking the link.

It wasn't a gossip blog, as she expected, but a local online magazine hosting notifications about events in town. Libby furrowed her brow as she scrolled through the listings.

This has nothing to do with me, she thought, until she reached the concerts planned for the next few days at a small venue downtown. It was a glorified, standing-room-only hole in the wall, but she'd been there a few times to see some Indie bands with Davis.

When she finally found her name, it was linked to Davis', who was apparently in town and playing a show with his band. At the sight of their names together, Libby's stomach tightened. It was used to give context to Davis, who was described as the local love guru's ex.

"Could've been worse," Libby muttered aloud as she reached for the stainless-steel mug keeping her old coffee warm.

Deciding to be the bigger person, she opened her desk drawer and retrieved the phone in her bag. She was surprised to find texts waiting, but Reagan's name sent her heart into overdrive.

Reagan: Haven't heard from you . . . everything okay? Do you want to get together for dinner or something? I'm meeting a few friends for dinner. You're welcome to come. Or we can get a drink before or after?

It was a loaded question, and she didn't have the words to respond. She couldn't untangle all the competing emotions fighting for control of her head and her heart. Finding herself attracted to a woman for the first time in her thirties was disorienting enough. The added fact that they'd started as a fraud and her love-starved being was reacting to feigned interest put it over the edge.

Libby: Yeah, totally fine. I can't tonight, but I hope you have a great time with your friends!! I'm sure they miss you since I've been hogging your time for months.

She added a smiley face emoji to sell the light and airy tone.

Reagan: Okay. If you change your mind, here's where we'll be.

Knowing Imani, we'll probably be there a while. She just broke up with someone. If you feel like dropping by, there will be ladies eager to learn all kinds of dating advice. lol.

Libby found herself smiling at the screen before replying with a non-committal we'll see and opening a new message.

Since she'd deleted years' worth of text messages, she was staring at a blank screen. Entering his number from muscle memory, she wondered if he might have changed it. She left it to the fates.

Libby: Can't believe you're playing The Revo. Congrats! Break a leg - L.

As soon as she hit send, her body flooded with heat and doubt. You can be friendly, she told herself. You'd look petty if

you didn't wish him luck while he's in town.

After several minutes of no response, Libby calmed, made a fresh cup of coffee, and got back to work. She worked on a new piece about maintaining intimacy when your in-laws are staying over for the holidays when her phone dinged.

She'd almost forgotten about the text when his reply turned her mouth dry.

Davis: Eli! Awesome to hear from you! You're def coming to the show tonight, right??? I got you tix.

Libby furrowed her brow. They hadn't talked in nearly a year and he hadn't reached out before he got to town. Why would he have saved her tickets to a show she didn't know about?

Libby: What? Did your crystal ball tell you I'd find out about it?

Davis: No! I sent you an email. Didn't you get it?

Before responding, Libby checked her personal and work accounts. No messages in her inbox or junk folders. How had she forgotten that he was always a little full of shit. What else hadn't changed? Before she could wonder too far, she remembered the major thing that had changed. He was engaged and it wasn't to her.

Libby: I don't know. I have a lot of work to do. Really, I just wanted to wish you luck.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

Davis: Come on, Eliiiii

iiii! Don't make me beg. You know I'll do it! I'll drive down to your fancy office and serenade you until you agree to come out!

Libby laughed but stood her ground. Her present situation was complicated enough without adding the Davis factor to the mix. Grateful he'd finally taken no for answer, she went back to the hard work of helping others not be equally as tragic in love.

THE PARKING GARAGE WAS FULL OF PUDDLES FROM THE RAIN THAT HAD

come and gone while Libby was working. The night had been dark enough to obscure her view out her massive windows, so it came as a surprise when she had to walk around the huge puddles to avoid ruining her shoes. Not a great day for black suede.

With earbuds in her ears, Libby was so distracted by her Buddhist podcast that she didn't notice the figure leaning against her SUV until it was too late.

"What are you doing here?" she shrieked more accusatorially than she intended.

"I thought you'd be happy to see me," Davis replied with a crooked smile on his ruggedly handsome face.

Libby refused to smile at the sight of his pretty eyes and hair he'd started keeping long. He'd taken her advice and stopped letting his mother cut it. He'd also listened to her about leaving a little bit of stubble on his chin. She tried not to dwell in self-

satisfaction.

“I’m pretty sure I told you not to come here,” she replied, trying her best to ignore him as she pulled her headphones out and unlocked the car. She was grateful it opened at her proximity and she didn’t have to retrieve the keys. She didn’t want to give him the satisfaction of seeing her hands tremble. “How did you get in here anyway?”

“I bribed Mario with one of those sandwiches he likes, plus I told him I was here to win you back,” he added with a chuckle.

Hilarious.

“I’m going to have to stop rewarding him with food.

Looks like I’ve created a monster,” she joked, thinking of the building manager who was too sweet and naive for his own good. Or at least for Libby’s good.

Libby tossed her bag into the car, but before she could follow it in, Davis slipped between her and the seat,

effectively blocking her path. Her stomach clenched at his proximity. At the scent of the cologne he’d started wearing a few years ago.

Did he put it on especially for me? Does he remember I gave it to him as a gift or has he never stopped using it? Libby wasn’t sure which possibility made her more nervous.

“Can’t I at least get a hug? I flew all the way here from New York!”

Libby clenched her jaw to stop from smiling when he stretched out his long arms.

“You came here for a gig. Not for me.”

“Can’t it be both? You know I was right about to call you when you texted,” he added without dropping his arms.

“Oh yeah, that’s why you answered right away?” she asked with a playful roll of her eyes.

“You’re really going to leave me standing like this?” he asked, skirting her question. “I’ll do it, Eli. I’ll stand like this so long I won’t be able to play the song I wrote for you.”

“What song?” she asked, immediately regretting having fallen for his nonsense.

“A song for my brown-eyed beauty,” he explained.

Mistaking her hesitation for acceptance, he wrapped his arms around her and enveloped her in a crushing hug.

“Davis,” she said, wiggling away. “My eyes are green.

Dark green, but still green.”

“I know that!” He took a step back and feigned offense.

“It’s called creative license. It just worked better for the lyrics, but it’s the thought that counts, right? Come on,” he grabbed her by the arms, “I need you there. You have no idea how much I’ve missed you. I think about you every day.

Every single day,” he repeated in a less frantic and more sober tone.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

Libby raised her eyebrows and tried to look unimpressed despite the weakness setting into her knees. “Oh yeah? How

does your fiancée feel about that?”

Davis smiled his stunning smile. “She knows all about you. We’re in an open kind of thing. She couldn’t come with me this time, but next time we’re here she’s dying to meet you.”

The way he rocked when he moved, and his unblinking eye-contact told Libby he was lying. She’d been on the receiving end of his bullshit for long enough to know.

“That’s great for you, Davis, but my fiancée is not interested in an open kind of thing.”

At her news, he straightened and dropped the smile. Had he really not seen the news anywhere? “Who is he?” he asked, his tone sharp and caustic.

“She is no one you know,” she replied.

He dropped his shoulders and laughed. “He’s a woman?”

No freaking way!” His continued laughter was an irritating, abrasive thing. “You? No offense,” he said like people usually did before saying something offensive, “but I never pegged you for the type to color outside the lines. You didn’t even let me watch lesbian por—”

Libby interrupted him with a raised hand. “Okay, don’t be crass.”

He grinned. “See?”

“Not letting you be a pervert about my relationship doesn’t make me a prude, Davis,” she warned.

“Okay, okay. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done that. But won’t you please come with me tonight. Your girlfriend is invited too,” he said, looking down at his watch. “I’ve got sound check soon. Why don’t you come with me now and she can meet us?”

“My fiancée,” she corrected, “has plans tonight. I can’t ask her to break them because my ex showed up on a whim begging me to go to his rock concert.”

Davis smiled. “She has plans. Not both of you? That settles it, you’re coming and I’m not going to hear another word about it.” He crossed his arms like a little kid taking a stand.

Libby couldn’t stop herself from chuckling at the sight.

She’d forgotten he could be cute and playful. All she’d gotten was his aloof, disinterested side for so long she couldn’t remember anything else.

“I really can’t—”

“Before you say no,” he interrupted as if Libby hadn’t already said no several times. “Your song is the third one in the set. Just let me sing it to you and you can go. I promise if it doesn’t make you feel a little something . . . I won’t darken your doorstep again.”

With a sigh, Libby caved. “Fine, fine. Just stop asking me.”

Davis grinned the way he always did when he got his way.

“I had to park outside, just follow me.”

Despite the little voice inside her head telling her not to, Libby jumped in her car and followed.

C H A P T E R 2 1

SLIPPING THROUGH THE CROWDED RESTAURANT, Reagan followed the sound of women’s voices cresting over the roar of twenty other conversations. They were like sirens drawing her in, and for the first time, she was a little worried about crashing into the rocks. There was no doubt they were going to have questions

about

Libby,

and

she

wasn’t

feeling

particularly seaworthy.

Imani was the first of the three crowded around the round table covered in drinks and appetizers to see her. As soon as she waved, their other two friends turned and smiled.

“Reagan!” Sue shouted as she set her wine glass down and clambered to her feet. “I haven’t seen you in a million years! Where the hell have you been hiding?” she asked, wrapping her in a tight hug without waiting for a response.

“Who has she been hiding under is the better question,”

Imani interrupted.

“Very funny,” Reagan replied with a smirk before giving her a kiss on the cheek. “You cut your hair,” she added, stepping back to admire the cropped cut.

Imani shrugged. “I’m wearing it natural these days.”

Reagan knew the portion she left unsaid. I’m wearing it natural these days, and you’d know

what if you were ever around.

“It’s a good look. Very sexy,” Reagan replied before taking the empty seat between

her and their other friend Kimber.

Imani's stony expression softened just a little. Leos do love compliments. "You're wearing yours a little short," she said, running her fingers through Reagan's side-swept hair.

"Not on top," she explained, reflexively touching the freshly shorn sides and back. "Do you like it?"

"It's okay. You know I like it when you leave it longer and play with some color," she replied, saying more with her eyes than her mouth. "Is that how your girl likes it?"

"Oh, don't be so jealous, Mani," Kimber chided playfully as she poured Reagan a glass of red wine from the bottle on the table. "You always get so possessive when it's not your bed she's leaving her potter clogs under."

"Okay, okay, let's get o this topic quick," Reagan said as she signaled to the server that she wanted to order.

"I mean . . . I'm not gonna lie," Sue shifted her black cat-eyeglasses as she wiggled her eyebrows. "Inquiring minds are dying to know exactly who has you all wrapped up."

"We know who. That straight matchmaker lady," Kimber responded.

Reagan took her time taking a long sip of the dry, rich wine. She was more interested in Imani's silence than Sue and Kimber's chatter. One was normal, the other was not.

"Can't be too straight if she's sleeping with a woman,"

Sue interjected.

“Oh, God. I’ll never date a straight girl,” Kimber decided.

“Not again.”

“You just had bad luck with that Pillow Princess,” Sue said as she topped o her glass before refilling her own.

“I’m sure they’re not all like that.”

“I don’t know.” Kimber shook her head as she clinked her glass against Sue’s. “I think maybe they’re just used to

laying there, or maybe they don’t know what to do and freeze.”

Sue shook her head. “You can’t paint people with such a broad brush. You didn’t know what to do either the first time you slept with a woman. Did you just lay there like a starfish?”

“Bitch, please. You know I am a very enthusiastic lover,”

Kimber replied with a laugh. “What the hell is the point of just lying there.”

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

Imani pointed her glass at Reagan. “Since Reagan is the only one among us currently involved with a previously straight woman, why doesn’t she enlighten us? It is the longest relationship you’ve had since the divorce. Isn’t it?”

Reagan held Imani’s dark eyes in her gaze. Why was she so suspicious of her relationship? She couldn’t have any way of knowing it was fake. Or had been fake. It was real now.

“Why do you keep assuming she’s straight?”

Imani laughed, but it was a cold, joyless thing. “Maybe because she was with a dude and engaged to him for like ten years.”

“I don’t think it was that long,” Kimber started to say, but Imani was undeterred.

“Since when is sexuality a binary?” Reagan asked, her face warming and her chest tightening. “You date men. Does that make you straight?”

The muscles in Imani’s face tightened. “Obviously not, but that’s because I’ve dated women too.”

Reagan flared her nostrils. “What makes you think she’s never dated women? I’m pretty sure I’m a woman.”

“And before you? Before she had some broken engagement mini scandal. Did she date anyone before you?”

The acrid tone of Imani's words made Reagan think of the hurtful blog post accusing Libby of pandering. How many people felt the same way?

"Why do you care? What's your deal with her?" Reagan asked as the pointed inquiry knocked her off balance.

"Just answer my question. I'm willing to bet she's never been with anyone other than you, and I'll do one better. If she's not a complete and utter dead fish in bed who doesn't even touch you, I'll pay for your dinner tonight. Shit, I'll pay for everyone's dinner. Drinks too. That's how sure I am."

Reagan's anger faded as she looked beyond what Imani was saying. It was less important than the pain in her eyes.

The worry.

"Let's settle down here, girls. It's not like we can't be attracted to an entire gender without sleeping with them first. I know I was very in love with Doctor Dana Scully before I ever touched a boob. The good news is Reagan has found a lovely lady and looks happy as a clam," Sue said as she lifted her glass. "Let's toast to new love no matter where we find it."

Without taking her eyes off Imani, Reagan lifted her glass.

"To new love and good friends."

A couple of rowdy hours later, they paid the check.

Thankfully, Imani had dropped the sex talk about Libby and didn't say anything about their wager.

“Are you going to tell me what’s going on with you?”

Reagan asked when they were alone and walking toward the end of the lot where they’d parked close to each other.

Imani ran her hands through her short dark curls before looking at the sky as if pleading for help. “I’m leaving it alone. Let’s just say good night before my blood pressure spikes.”

Reagan stopped walking. After a beat, Imani sighed and dropped her head. “Since when do we not talk about things?” she asked the back of Imani’s head.

“Since you stopped wanting to hear what I have to say,”

Imani snapped, whipping around to glare at her.

“That’s not true,” Reagan protested, surging forward and grabbing Imani’s arms. “I don’t understand what your deal is,” she confessed. “Please, talk to me.”

Imani’s eyes welled up with tears Reagan guessed were born of frustration. “My deal is that I know you. You’ve been glancing at that phone all night without texting or answering it. I don’t know what her deal is, but if you’re this sprung, she’s got some kind of problem you think you can fix. When are you going to learn that you can’t love someone into wellness, Reagan? When are you going to take care of you and stop worrying about anybody else?”

Reagan’s mouth hung open for a bewildering moment.

Her shock softened the sharp edges of Imani’s angular face.

“I’m sorry,” Imani said after a laborious exhale. “This is your choice, and I should let

you make it.”

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

“That’s what you really think?” Reagan couldn’t wrap her head around what Imani was saying.

Sighing, Imani shook her head. “I don’t know. I guess I’m just afraid you’re repeating old patterns. That savior complex is real, Reagan. Even if you have the very best of intentions.”

Instead of arguing, Reagan listened. They’d had the same conversation in various forms for years. “I hear you.”

Imani dropped her shoulders. “I might not have your Zen delivery, but I’m looking out for you, okay? This whole thing is so like you and unlike you at the same time. Just promise me you’ll put the oxygen mask on yourself if the plane is going down? You’re not in a romcom, babe. This is real life.”

Reagan smiled softly and pulled her in for a hug, “I promise,” she said, hoping she could keep it.

CHAPTER 22

IN TRUE DAVIS FORM, he’d left Libby behind at several red lights after he’d run through them in his rented black Mercedes-Benz sedan. He’d apparently only noticed when he arrived at the venue and she wasn’t right behind him. The text he sent was more than she would have gotten a year ago.

Following his instructions, she arrived at a reserved parking lot that was supposed to be manned by an attendant.

It wasn't.

Libby: I'm here. No one's at the gate.

Davis: It closes once the performers and crew arrive, but don't worry. They told me you can roll it open and let yourself in. Park anywhere and put a note on your dash that says you're with me. I gotta go. Phone switching o . Once you get to the backdoor tell Gary you're my girl. He'll give you a pass.

Libby stared at the gate. This is such a bad idea.

Stepping onto the wet gravel road leading up to the chain-link fence on wheels, Libby quickly realized there was nowhere she could step to avoid a puddle.

"Shit," she cursed when she bared down to get the gate moving and pressed her high heel into the mud. Engaging the yoga muscles she never used for lifting, Libby moved the heavy gate a few inches at a time in choppy, squeaky bursts.

An eternity later, she was covered in sweat and her carefully

crafted waves were a frizzy mess. At least she'd opened the gate just enough to squeeze in, though closing it was even more annoying than opening it.

Bouncing along the unpaved lot, Libby found the only available space and wedged between two charter buses.

Finding a receipt in her purse for the coffee she'd bought that morning, she jotted a note explaining she was with the band. A little ridiculous, but a little bit of a rush too.

Dropping the blazer, Libby wished she'd thought to stop at home and change. It had all happened so fast. She didn't have time to notice that her high-waisted trousers and

silk blouse weren't concert appropriate.

Trading her wet heels for the ballet flats she found in the trunk were the only adjustment she could make, though it made the hem of her pants drag just enough to get dirty.

Libby groaned, deciding foot pain was preferable to ruining her pants, and changed back into heels meant for mostly sitting and not attending a standing-room-only concert.

As she neared the end of her long walk from the back of the lot to the black building, she caught sight of Davis' rental car. You're not that guy, are you? she asked herself as she stared at it parked diagonally across two parking spots. The sight reminded her of Reagan and the night they'd spent together at the gala. The image of her in that stunning suit made her chest tighten. She shoved it away before it could fully form. Before she could think of the kiss.

Libby's l

ips tingled in an act of treason. Too late. Her heart leapt in her throat as she remembered the smell of Reagan's skin. The sensation of her fingernails scraping against her scalp. The softness of her mouth and the warmth of her tongue. Most lethal was the thought of how Libby wanted more. How she wanted to lose control.

Rushing toward the back door, Libby tried to outrun her thoughts. She knew it was impossible, but she all but broke

into a sprint anyway. All the energy pent up inside her manifested in a loud bang on the stage door.

No one answered. After a few minutes and a couple more knocks, Libby pulled the

handle, not expecting it to open.

When it did, she got an unexpected jolt of adrenaline as she slipped inside. In the loud chaos of the corridor, Libby kept waiting for someone to stop her and challenge her presence, but no one did. It was a small venue for mostly local talent; they probably didn't have groupies to fend o .

God, am I a groupie?

After going down the wrong corridors a couple of times, she spotted Davis' head poking out in a crowd of women just o stage. More like girls, actually. Pretty young things with backstage passes around their necks.

I guess they found Gary.

Instead of waving to get his attention, Libby watched him.

He smiled and winked more at one girl than the others.

When someone dressed in black and wearing a headset slid up next to him, Davis started saying his goodbyes. Impressed by his restraint in overtly hitting on the fan, Libby started toward him to catch him before he was called to the stage.

As she closed in, Davis pulled his cell out of his pocket and moved closer to the blonde. The act stopped Libby dead in her tracks, not because she cared that he was getting the girl's number, though it stung just a tiny bit, but because for a moment she'd thought he'd changed. Grown up. But he was the same selfish egotist who couldn't be bothered to take care of her long enough to get her in the door.

Davis leaned forward to whisper something in the girl's ear when he did a double take at her. "Eli! You made it!" he shouted as his lips broadened into a wide smile. "Come on, you can stand here while I'm on stage. The best seat in the house. Well, spot to stand in," he joked as he beckoned her closer while Earpiece was begging him to get going.

Libby was rooted in place. In that moment she was aware of the ache in her uncomfortably wet feet. The rumble in her mostly empty stomach. And, most importantly, her desire to do anything other than stand in one spot and pretend to like Davis' shitty music. She'd done enough of that for two lifetimes.

“I’ll see you after the set!” he shouted, already walking away with his bandmates. “Remember, number three is for you, babe!”

When he was gone, Libby turned on her heels and walked away from the biggest mistake she almost made. In all the years they’d been together, she’d chased Davis everywhere.

It had been an exhausting endeavor. Always trying to stay interesting and alluring and putting his needs and wants so far ahead of hers that when she finally stood her ground and said she had to focus on the family business, he bailed. He’d never wanted a partner. He wanted an assistant and a world’s biggest fan. She’d been both for too long.

“Excuse me, miss, are you supposed to be back here?” a woman asked just as the band started to play and the crowd cheered.

Libby smiled. “Not in the least,” she replied with complete confidence before continuing toward the exit.

As satisfying as closing a chapter was, discovering that the pouring rain had returned was much less thrilling. She glanced back at the venue before looking at the rain. She thought of something her grandmother always said when she complained about getting wet. Her grandma was right.

She wasn’t sugar. She wasn’t going to melt. The monsoon was better than listening to some generic song Davis definitely didn’t write about her.

Cold rain pounded Libby’s face like a thousand frozen needles. At first she tried to run and shield her face with her hands, but as her skin numbed and it became harder to see,

she decided that breaking her ankle wasn't worth it. With each step, Libby felt freer. It was like the heavens had opened just to cleanse her of all the old energy holding her down.

By the time she reached her car, completely drenched from head to toe, she might have been light enough to laugh.

If there wasn't a giant traffic-cone-orange boot on her SUV's front wheel, that is.

"Seriously?" She yelled at the thing as if it might have something to say for itself.

Ripping the plastic wrapped ticket out from under her windshield wiper, Libby sloshed into her car and out of the rain. When she tore open the orange envelop holding the citation, she closed her eyes.

"Yeah, that's about right," she decided aloud after reading that she'd been booted for illegal parking. After indulging in a moment of self-pity, Libby glared at the handwritten note prominently displayed on her dashboard.

The one that was supposed to protect her. She should have known Davis' words were just as worthless on paper as they were coming out of his mouth.

Accepting that her stupidity had rightfully cost her however much the tow company was going to charge to take the boot off, Libby reached for her phone and called the number on the ticket. After an alarmingly unpleasant conversation with someone uninterested in providing her with decent customer service, Libby learned that a combination of the weather and a busy night meant it would be a few hours before anyone could come out and take the stupid thing off. Libby's argument that she couldn't have been away from her car for more than fifteen minutes so the person who put it on couldn't have gotten very far resulted in a very rude response, and likely another hour added to her wait time.

Shivering from the cold seeping into her bones, Libby debated calling someone for help. A rideshare wouldn't be able to get in the lot, her family lived way too far from downtown, and the only friend she'd ever ask such a big favor from was Zena. Though Libby guessed she might arrive from Houston before the tow truck did.

Libby opened her last message from Reagan. Would she come rescue her in the rain? The thought made her stomach flutter. She wanted the answer to be yes, but she didn't dare ask. After mauling her and then avoiding her for a day, Libby would never reach for her kindness. She certainly didn't deserve it.

After twenty minutes of indecisive waiting, Libby decided on walking in the rain to the above-ground metro station. It would only be a little farther than where she'd step out to meet a rideshare, and that way she didn't have to ruin someone's car with her soaking wet clothes.

The lightness of seeing Davis for the loser he was, and realizing that she no longer felt a single thing for him, was gone. In its place was the backbreaking regret of what she'd done to Reagan out of her own stupid fear.

As she walked toward the station under the consistent drizzle, Libby felt more alone than ever. She was lost and confused. By the time she made it to the station and into the Metrorail car, she was more concerned with silencing the voice in her head than with the air conditioning freezing her soaked body. She wrapped her arms around herself to stop the violent trembling.

In the minutes long walk, the voice had gone from a questioning whisper to a screaming demand. It was the truth she'd been avoiding for months. And it was petrifying.

CHAPTER 23

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

LIBBY'S THROAT burned before she even opened her eyes the next morning. From the heaviness in her chest and the ache in her joints, she knew it was bad. Could her grandmother have been right all these years? Could she really catch a cold by getting stuck in the rain?

Pain flooded her sensitive skin as Libby turned over in bed and reached for the phone on her nightstand. After texting Taylor and letting her know there was no way she'd be in the office, Libby stared up at her ceiling.

This is exactly what you deserve. The universe seeks balance and now its neutralizing you before you can make any more of a mess.

Fo

ried to stop running from herself, Libby took as deep a breath as she could before coughing. Using a trick she hadn't in years, she closed her eyes and imagined herself sitting in a chair in a corner of the room. With the imaginary distance, Libby took a good look at herself and imagined what she would say to a friend in the exact same situation.

Why are you so miserable?

The answer was simple yet insurmountable in its breadth and weight. Because I've been lying. Since that day so many years ago that Davis told me he didn't really see himself as the marrying type, I've been lying. Everything I've done since then

has been to propagate the illusion of who I'm supposed to be.

What I'm supposed to have.

Truth, as they say, hurts. The brutality of regret and lost time ravaged Libby's already tight chest. She didn't let herself cry. Not yet. It was a release she'd have to win after she'd faced it all.

What would she tell her best friend to do? If this was Zena confessing her mess, how would she help?

Unravel the lie. It only holds the power you allow it to hold.

Come clean and purge. This misery festers in the dark, but it can't survive in the light of day.

Another simple fact, yet the thought of confession made Libby want to retch. If she wasn't so fatigued, she might consider crawling to the bathroom. But she couldn't even seek refuge there.

Where would I even start? she wondered, tears stinging her closed eyes.

At the beginning.

Of course.

Opening an app on her phone, Libby started dictating her next blog post. If there was going to be a reckoning, then she was going to drive it herself.

"I am a liar. It's not something I ever expected to be. And like most things that come to define us, it crept inside me so slowly I barely noticed it until I'd managed to construct my entire life out of delusion. Like all great liars, I was the main target of my own deceit. At least at first."

Libby shifted to her side and let the tears flow freely, knowing her notes wouldn't make very much sense when she edited the essay later, but it didn't matter. This was truly a purge and all of it had to come out. Even if it was an ugly wreck.

After reaching back into her memory, Libby found the beginning. "The first lie I told myself was that he loved me.

Scratch that. The first lie was that I loved him. My memory is a little hazy, and I can't quite pinpoint the exact moment, but there must have been. There must have been a singular moment in time when I decided to convince myself that a partner who was mediocre at best was the person I needed to spend my life with. The person I deserved."

Pressing her palm against her chest, Libby wished she could massage the pain away. When she realized she couldn't, she let herself grieve for the precious years she'd wasted and the damage she allowed.

"With that big lie out of the way, the ones that followed were easier and easier. I convinced myself that couples should be independent when he didn't share any of my interests or make even the slightest effort to do something just because I wanted to. When I went to the theater alone, and dinner alone, and events alone, I held us out as the picture of modern, adult love. We were secure in our relationship and didn't need to be best friends."

Shame tried to grab her by the throat and silence her, but Libby couldn't stop now. It was a poison in her veins, and she needed to slice herself open to let it seep out.

"When he left his job as a lawyer to focus on his band full time without consulting me, I outwardly praised him for the bravery of following his dreams. I wrote about how partners needed to support each other's goals and lift each other up toward true purpose. Meanwhile, I was paying all the bills and begging him not to stay out all

night when I had to be up early. It probably goes without saying that I lied about liking his music.”

Regret tangled in Libby’s guts and forced her into a coughing fit. “And then there was the lie that broke me. The engagement ring I bought myself and held out to the world as a sign of our commitment. Pretending I was still engaged

long after he left me was less painful than the nights I laid next to him struggling to remain silent while I cried.”

The truth burned as the humiliation slapped her hard.

“For nearly a year, I lied every single time I put the ring on and walked out my door. Every day I pretended to be perfect.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

The model of domestic bliss. An example of what I worked so hard to give my clients but had never tasted for myself. In some ways, I think that made me numb to all the deceit that would come next.”

Thinking of Reagan tore into Libby’s congested chest and squeezed her heart. “The problem with lying is that it is never finished. One untruth requires three more to keep it hidden. Then there’s nine more to cover those. You get the idea. When the world found out I was single, I should have owned it. I should have stood atop my tall platform and uncaged the truth.”

Sitting up as she coughed, Libby’s heart raced. Her muscles twitched as she tore free from her delusions. “We’ve all been sold on the same garbage. As children we’re told fairy tales about an attractive body in shiny armor coming to rescue us from whatever crappy cards we were dealt.”

The thought of Reagan’s face poking out of a gleaming metal helmet made her laugh even as tears rolled down her cheeks.

“But there’s a reason fairy tales end at True Love’s Kiss.

Because love is messy, and relationships are hard and confusing. And that’s before we add in our baggage and traumas and skewed perspectives. There is no perfect person for you. We are all mismatched in some way, and the best we can do is find someone whose broken edges align with ours.

And even then, that initial flame needs to be tended or it will burn out. There are no fairy tales that teach us how to recognize that we’ve grown apart. That Prince or

Princess Charming swept us off our feet, but now that the lusty haze

has cleared, they're a directionless narcissist with bad credit."

Libby took as deep a cleansing breath as she could and pulled herself back from her tangent. "I digress. There are more lies to confess. When confronted with the chance to own my broken engagement, I lied. I wanted to be a proud, single woman working hard to build my family business. No, not a business. A way of life. My cherished legacy. But I was so afraid of what people would think. Of how they would reject my advice if I hadn't managed to find love for myself.

Of the shame I would bring the Cassanova name. Of how I would disappoint my grandmother. My idol. So instead of being a human being and admitting that relationships fail despite our best efforts, I hired someone to pretend to love me."

Dropping back onto the bed, Libby opened her eyes. "I didn't pick a woman to be salacious. I picked a woman because I thought I was protecting myself from the possibility of real attraction. Guess what? When we pretend long enough, it's impossible to remember what's an act and what's real. The irony? I fell for her anyway."

Libby stopped the recording with trembling fingers. At least there was one less person to lie to now, and she tried to focus on the positive as the distorted veil lifted from her eyes. Her fear of failure had tricked her into building a house on a crumbling foundation. There was no way to salvage it other than knocking it all down and starting over. All she could do was hope there would be enough left to rebuild with when it was over.

Before the terrifying unknown could crush the life out of her, Libby decided on tackling one thing at a time. As she considered her options, a knock at the door startled her.

Since it was impossible to get into her building without a key card or being let up, she guessed it was her grandmother.

The only person who could bully her way past the doorman.

Guessing Taylor had been forced to tell her she was sick, Libby climbed out of bed, covered herself in a fluffy pink robe, and inched down the stairs.

“Who is it?” she asked as she approached.

“Reagan.”

HOLDING A BROWN PAPER BAG FULL OF SUPPLIES, REAGAN SHIFTED HER

weight from foot to foot until Libby finally opened the door.

With swollen red eyes, a puffy nose, and an unusually pale complexion, Libby looked worse than expected.

“Hey,” Libby croaked, her voice raspy and weak. “What are you doing here?” Her eyes were wide with surprise.

Reagan held up the bag in her hands. “I got a call from your grandmother. Apparently she’s at some kind of ladies who lunch thing in Tampa and won’t be back until tonight at the earliest. She assumed I knew you were sick and taking care of you, sooooo she provided some . . . suggestions.” She smiled. “Did you let El Sereno get you?” She shook her head.

“You shouldn’t tempt the fates by going out at night with your head uncovered.”

Libby closed her eyes for a few seconds while her cheeks flushed with color. “That’s so embarrassing. I’m really sorry.

I don’t know how she—” she interrupted herself. “She forced it out of Taylor.”

“I guess that’s where she got my number too,” Reagan said with a lopsided smile.

“That’s really sweet of you to come, and I’m so sorry you drove all the way here in rush hour traffic. I don’t want to get you sick. You really don’t have to stay. I’ll report to Mima that you were a stellar nurse,” she promised as she fidgeted

with her messy hair before attempting to smooth it into submission.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

The more Libby rambled in a deep, hoarse voice, the more Reagan wanted to be in her presence and ease her nerves. “I can’t lie to your grandma like that,” she joked. “Plus, I already rescheduled my classes for today.”

Libby groaned as she winced. “I am so hugely sorry. I’ll absolutely compensate you for whatever income you lost today.”

The mention of money was a sharp jab to the gut. Libby couldn’t possibly believe she was still laboring under contractual obligations, could she? Even after the kiss? Even after they’d admitted liking each other?

“Don’t worry about it. They were by donation. Nothing lost,” she replied stily. “Can I come in?”

“Oh God, yes. I’m sorry.” Libby jumped back and out

of the doorway. “I don’t know where my head is.”

“Then I guess it’s good I’m here,” she replied, following Libby inside after closing the door. “Why don’t you go sit in there. I’m going to make you something.”

Libby wore a suspect expression as she slinked away to the couch but sat sideways so they could maintain eye contact while Reagan started unloading the bag.

Reagan pulled out a bag of limes. “La Señora Cassanova had very specific instructions.”

“I can’t believe she called you.” Libby looked like she wanted to crawl under the cushions. “You honestly don’t have to—”

“Stop,” she interrupted. “I’m here because I want to be, okay? Now be a better patient or I’m going to call your grandmother. And she’s apparently so terrifying that your doorman let me in the second she called.”

“You would tattle on me?” Libby shrieked. “How could you?”

“I’ll do whatever it takes to get this concoction in you. No holds barred,” Reagan replied with a casual shrug. “Do you think she expects visual proof? Should I send her a picture?”

Libby chuckled until she coughed. “She hates texting. It’s the enemy of true connection. I can’t guarantee she won’t call you later for a report, but I’ll try to head her off at the pass.”

Reagan found a pot and started heating some water. “I don’t mind,” she decided. “It’s very sweet how concerned she sounded.”

Cocking her head to one side, Libby raised both eyebrows.

“No one has ever called my grandmother sweet. Like . . .

ever.”

“Maybe I looked beyond her intimidating exterior and saw a loving grandmother worried about her favorite grandchild,” she suggested as she started slicing limes and squeezing the juice into a mug.

Reagan watched Libby out of the corner of her eye. She couldn’t tell what made her

deflate and retreat. Something was going on with her, she could feel it from the moment Libby turned on her heels and bolted after their kiss. She wanted to ask, wanted to know why she'd avoided her yesterday and where she'd been last night. The mud-caked high heels by the door said she'd done more than driven from her office's parking garage to the condo's garage.

Instead of asking her anything, she practiced patience even though it was hard and finished making her drink.

"I can't believe she called you and told you to make me this," Libby said as she pressed the hot mug to her chest and inhaled the steam.

"Don't tell her I added a little ginger. That's my grandma's contribution," Reagan smiled as she folded one leg underneath herself and sat across from her on the couch.

When Libby took a hesitant sip, she closed her eyes as if to savor it. "This tastes amazing," Libby said, gazing at her with half-lidded eyes. "There has to be a few more secrets than ginger in here."

Reagan smiled. "Local honey from a friend's farm. Limes purchased from a dude on the side of the road on my way here. And the ginger is all the way from Trader Joes."

"Oooh . . . imported. Fancy," she replied, sounding a little more like herself as she made her way through the contents of her mug. "I don't deserve this you know," Libby said as she set the empty mug on a coaster on her coffee table.

"Deserve what?" The tiny hairs on the back of Reagan's neck stood on end. She didn't like the shift in Libby's energy or the way she averted her eyes and stared at the floor.

Libby dropped her shoulders and smiled. "You are being so sweet to me after I've

been such a jerk to you.”

Reagan didn’t disagree. “Most women don’t kiss me and then semi-ghost me, that’s true.” She tried to sound like she was joking, but there was a tinge of hurt in her tone. “I could admit it didn’t feel great, but I’m sure you have your reasons.”

Grimacing, Libby shook her head. “I’ve never been a flake,” she explained, pausing as if gathering strength. “I’m never out of control.”

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

“Is that how you feel now? Out of control?”

Libby gulped, and for a moment, Reagan thought she might cry. It took all herself control not to reach out and comfort her.

“What else would you call going to see my ex-fiancé’s show, getting my car booted, and having to walk to the Metro in the rain,” she replied, watching Reagan’s face like a hawk for a reaction.

Reagan’s empty stomach twisted into a fiery knot. Our kiss made her run to the ex who dumped her. She hadn’t been

expecting that. In Reagan’s indecision on whether to leave or ask a follow-up question, Libby continued.

“Nothing happened, I swear. Actually, seeing him again after so long gave me some surprising clarity. Since we split, I often wondered what was wrong with me. Why I wasn’t worth keeping, and I realize it has nothing to do with me. We are just pieces from two different puzzles. No matter how hard I tried, we were never going to fit.”

Trying to remain nonchalant while a little spark of jealousy irritated her gut, Reagan crossed her arms. “That’s great. I’m really glad you found that closure.”

“I should have told you,” Libby said softly, leaning forward and putting her hand over Reagan’s. “I’m sorry.”

“I’m not your keeper. I’m your fake girlfriend, remember?” The sharpness of

Reagan's words hurt them both, and Libby recoiled.

Her eyes widened and her face paled. "Yeah. I know. I just

—"I'm sorry," Reagan said scooting forward. "That wasn't fair. The fact that you shut me out after the other night and then went running to your ex, even if nothing happened, made me feel kind of insecure. Well, more immediately it makes me angry, but it's coming from a place of unwarranted jealousy."

Libby shook her head. "How do you do that? How can you be so connected to your emotions and name your feelings so easily?"

Reagan offered a dry chuckle. "There's nothing easy about it," she confessed. "And it takes an exhausting amount of practice and self-regulation."

"When you said fake girlfriend—" Libby started, but Reagan didn't let her finish.

"I was being snide. I'm sorry—"

"No, please," Libby scooted forward until their knees were touching. "I'm the one who is trying to apologize here."

Reagan looked down at their hands. The sight and feeling of her fingers intertwined with hers, of her thumb running over her palm, forced her stomach from ache to flutter.

Libby's dark green eyes were as bright as they were irritated, and Reagan couldn't help staring back at them with the same quiet longing they projected.

"This doesn't have to be so complicated," Reagan whispered, leaning forward as her attention jumped from her eyes to her lips.

“It doesn’t. But I’m afraid I’ve made this complicated,”

she said, running her fingertips along the inside of Reagan’s wrist and making her pulse jump. “I should’ve been honest.

That’s pretty much the unifying fact for the last couple years of my life.” Her smile was sad and wavering. “Longer, really.”

Reagan waited for more details and focused on the warmth spreading up her arm from the ground zero of Libby’s touch. For the first time, Reagan was the anxious one while Libby emanated an eerily quiet calm.

“I like you,” Libby declared like she was claiming the moon for the motherland. “In a very real and terrifying way.” She collapsed against the couch. “You’re right. That’s not easy.”

Reagan chuckled as she got to her feet. “Don’t take on too much, tiger. Don’t take this the wrong way, but you look terrible. I’m going to run and get you something stronger than hot limeade. Just don’t tell your grandma.”

When Libby closed her eyes instead of protesting, Reagan realized just how sick she must feel. Swiping the keys on the glass entrance table, Reagan made sure they opened the door. No need for Libby to drag herself o the couch again.

Across the street, Reagan found a convenience store with overpriced cold medicin

e and the mentholated topical ointment all Cuban grandmas swore by. Waiting on the corner for her chance to jog across the city street, she couldn’t stop thinking about what Libby said. She wasn’t thrilled that she hadn’t found closure from the ex until last night, but she focused on the positive.

Reagan's chest ached and her lips twitched into an uncontrollable smile. Neither of them was faking it anymore.

Reagan wasn't sure she'd ever been pretending.

CHAPTER 24

AFTER TWO DAYS of chicken soup, Vick's VapoRub slathered on her chest, and more sleep than she'd had all year, Libby emerged from her condo feeling human again.

Reagan: Are you sure you don't want to take another sick day?

I'm pretty sure even the real Cupid took days off.

Libby: I'm pretty sure the son of Mercury and Venus did NOT get colds or vacation days.

Reagan: First of all, you rattled that fact off pretty quickly.

Impressive. Second of all, if the ancient Romans had labor laws, I'm sure they'd strike for leave time.

As she slipped into the driver's side of the SUV Reagan and Taylor very kindly recovered for her, Libby laughed.

Libby: Lol. Symbols of love are my stock and trade ;) Speaking of. . . I have an important debriefing with a client today. Wish me luck!

Reagan: Break a heart!

November in Miami brought the first cold front of the year, and Libby was glad she'd fished a heavier blazer from the back of the closet. Sixty degrees wasn't exactly chilly most anywhere else in the world, but in Miami it was a shock when the day before had been nearly ninety.

As she whizzed toward the office in the early morning hours, Libby couldn't stop thinking about Reagan. Never in

her life had anyone not related to her by blood taken care of her when she was sick. Reagan wasn't fazed by her runny nose or bloodshot eyes. She was undisturbed by her gross cough and inadvertent naps. Instead of looking put out, she'd watched bad TV with her and made her soup. Libby had never been so happy being miserable in her life.

It was probably her cold that kept any serious conversations at bay. When Reagan showed up every afternoon, they kept it light until she left Libby tucked in bed and half-asleep from cold meds. Neither of them asked what was next for them.

Libby's stomach relaxed. The not-knowing was comfortable. Not naming what they had eliminated the risk of losing it. She was safe in the muddy waters of Reagan's company. It was enough. Or so she told herself.

With two big bakery boxes in her hands, Libby stepped on the elevator and strode toward the reception desk to drop them off. Cattle calls of new possible matches for her hopefuls tended to last a while. Ordering something special made the wait a little more bearable.

"Well, you're looking much better," Taylor said as she joined her in the hallway leading to her office. "Dr. Soto's treatment must have been very restorative," she added with a sideways glance and a wry grin.

Libby raised an eyebrow but retained her poker face.

“Why Taylor, whatever do you mean?” she asked, doing her best southern accent, which wasn’t very good.

Taylor laughed but gave her a knowing look as Libby strolled into her office and she stayed by the door. “Jennifer Borgmann arrived like an hour early. I told her you had something else before your meeting, but she insisted she didn’t mind waiting.”

Stopping in the middle of the act of sitting at her desk, Libby straightened. “Can you push my call with—”

“Already done,” Taylor interrupted. “Shall I bring coffee or tea?”

Smiling, Libby grabbed her leather-bound journal off the shelf. “That depends. How do you think the meet went with Gale?”

“I’ll get the coffee,” she decided, signaling her belief that Jennifer was going to have good news to share. Tea was reserved for the deep work.

When Libby knocked and opened the door a crack, she found Jennifer sitting cross-legged in one of the armchairs and staring down at her phone. The smile on her face spoke volumes.

“Libby! I didn’t mean to rush you. I told your staff I was happy to wait,” she said, lunging forward and nearly tackling her with a hug.

Squeezing her back, Libby laughed. “I couldn’t wait to hear how it went! Tell me everything,” she said before taking the coffees Taylor brought and handing her one.

“Well . . .” Jennifer bit back her smile in attempt to play coy, but her joy would not

be restrained. “We met for lunch as you suggested.”

Libby leaned forward as she sipped her coffee, willing Jennifer to spill it faster. “And?” she asked when she couldn’t stand the tension for a moment longer.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

Her shy smile erupted into an open-mouthed grin. “I haven’t slept yet and we only said goodbye like,” she glanced down at her watch, “two hours ago.”

With wide eyes Libby wanted to resist being a wet blanket, but her strong suggestions were in place for a reason. “I’m beyond pleased that you had such wonderful chemistry, but the reason I suggest waiting at least a month before becoming physically intimate is that the dopamine rush can cloud your—”

“Oh, we didn’t sleep together,” she interrupted, her face flushing with heat. “We talked, Libby. We talked so long that lunch turned into dinner,” Jennifer laughed, shaking her head as in disbelief. “And when the restaurant closed, we walked along the beach. Somehow, before we knew it, the sun was rising, and we were still there. Just sitting on some hotel beach chairs with our feet in the sand watching a new day dawn.”

Jennifer’s joy was a vibrant thing radiating off her like a contagious high. It took all of Libby’s self-control not to burst into happy tears as Jennifer filled her in on the myriad of conversations they had and how she’d never felt so comfortable in a person’s presence. It was so much that Libby ditched the notebook she usually used to record date notes and went for her consultation recorder.

“I take it you want to give it a few dates with Gale before I present you with another possible match?” Libby asked in jest. Considering she’d nearly had to scrape Jennifer off the ceiling, she didn’t really think she’d want to see who else was out there for her.

“I know you said I should meet a few people before I decide to go on a second date with anyone, but I really don’t want to waste my time. Meeting Gale and connecting

with another human being at the heart level like this . . .” Jennifer wiped her eye, evaporating Libby’s self-control and sending them both reaching for tissues. “I’ve just wasted decades of my life and I don’t want to waste any more. I know enough about her to know that I want to see where this goes. If that’s okay?”

Libby dried her eyes and smiled. “You’re in the driver’s seat. It’s your heart you have to follow, and some rules are better broken. If that little voice inside your gut is telling you to do something, do it.”

Well after Jennifer had floated out of the consultation room and danced out of her office, Libby dropped onto the couch in her office and told the girls at the reception desk not to put any calls through.

Listening to their conversation on the recorder, Libby was struck with a glaring truth. Jennifer was happy not just at the prospect of finding someone special to share her life with; she’d also chosen love over fear and was bursting with pride at her own risk taking.

Settling back with her eyes closed, Libby confronted a fact she’d never acknowledged about herself. She’d never once done anything that wasn’t from a place of fear. Fear of being alone. Fear of failing. Fear of disappointing her family. The realization punched the air out of her lungs. How could she go her entire life searching for enlightenment and self-improvement and never notice?

Jumping to her feet, Libby didn’t take another second to think about it. She was going to do something dangerous and terrifying. For the first time she was going to do something in spite of her fear and not because of it.

CHAPTER 25

IN THE SILENCE of her empty studio, Reagan sculpted the largest piece she’d ever

attempted. Her back ached and her thighs burned as she squatted and stretched while shaping the wet clay. Every now and again she took a break to stare at the reference sketches she'd made instead of tossing and turning the night before.

Despite her best efforts not to think about Libby, her muse had forced her into creating a massive ceramic homage to her. It seemed that the more Libby stood elusive and out of reach, the more she longed to connect with her.

After a couple days together, Reagan was dying to know what Libby was thinking. She recalled some of the earlier conversations they'd had. Libby had always been pretty clear that there was no space in her life for a relationship, no room for a matchmaking dynasty and someone else.

As she added more clay to the mega-sculpture, Reagan couldn't help but argue with herself. Busy hadn't been the only signal she'd given. She'd seen something real between them too. They'd both felt it, right? The connection? The giddy and achy desire to be together? The atomic energy of the slightest touch? The kiss that Reagan couldn't stop dreaming about. The gravity between them was undeniable.

Imani's words haunted her. She so often saw too much of people's potential and not what they were actually willing and able to deliver. As well-meaning as she was, it often ended in unmet expectations and self-induced heartache.

When Reagan's eyes were too tired to focus, she covered the unfinished piece to keep it from drying out and started cleaning up. A hot shower and an early night were exactly what she needed.

Reagan was scrubbing beneath her nails when a thunderous knock against her heavy metal front door made her jump. She glanced at the big digital clock on the wall by the student work stations. Who the hell was banging on her door at eight o'clock?

Her mind went immediately to her landlord and she rolled her eyes. Tonight was not the night to deal with his bullshit.

Reagan dried her partially cleaned hands, leaving streaks of smeared clay behind on the towel.

At the second urgent knock, Reagan tightened her jaw. If he thought she was going to move her truck at this hour

just because he felt like it, he had another thing coming. By the time Reagan stomped toward the door, she was ready to tell him where to shove his lease and wish him luck in renting the space to someone else because she was done with his harassment.

Swinging the door open, ready to curse a blue streak, Reagan was stunned out of her building anger. “Libby, hey.

What are you doing here?” With her wavy hair blowing in the breezy night and her eyes dark in the dull, yellow light above the door, she was arresting. The unreadable expression in her face was unnerving. “Are you okay?”

“Can I come in?” she asked, so breathless Reagan wondered if she’d run there from downtown.

Reagan stepped back to get her inside as she scanned the parking lot for some pursuer. “What’s going on?”

“I don’t want to be afraid anymore,” she blurted.

Reagan’s heart leapt into her throat. “Did someone do something to you, Lib? I don’t follow—”

“The other night when I said this wasn’t fake for me, that wasn’t the whole story,” she explained in such a rapid-fire speed she was nearly unintelligible. “I didn’t finish what I wanted to say.”

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

Stepping closer, Reagan put her hands on her shoulders and tried to project calm into her. “Hey, slow down, okay?”

I’m not charging by the letter here. Come on. Come sit.”

Libby shook her head. “I have to get this out,” she explained, taking a huge cleansing breath as if it might help her start again.

Reagan left the stool she’d been pulling out from under the table and returned to her side. “Okay. I’m listening.”

Taking her hand in hers, Libby started again. “I’ve never felt like this before,” she explained so softly it sent a shockwave through Reagan’s chest. “Since the moment I met you, it was like reconnecting with someone I’d already known. Like we’d been inseparable friends in some past life.”

Reagan tried her best not to bristle at the word friend.

That’s the last thing she wanted to hear.

“I’ve never felt so completely myself around another person. Never been able to share all the superstitions I was raised with for fear of looking crazy. I mean who else understands the miraculous power of Vick’s VapoRub?” She smiled for the briefest moment, sending Reagan’s heart soaring. “I’ve never been honest about my quest for that one spiritual teaching that makes me make sense to myself before.”

When Libby paused and her eyes welled up with tears, Reagan wanted so desperately

to hold her close. To confess

her own feelings, but Libby wasn't finished and more than anything she wanted to hear what she had to say.

“You're the first person I've truly wanted to know. I want to know everything about you. Every dream. Every nightmare. Every success. Every failure. And it's not just that I never expected to feel like that about a woman, it's that I never thought it was my lot in life to feel this at all. I think I convinced myself that to be truly great at finding love for others I'd have to settle for something mediocre myself.

Something adequate that wouldn't take my attention away from my work. And if not that, then . . . nothing at all.”

Reagan frowned. It was such a tragic and skewed view of the world. Her gaze drifted from Libby's wild eyes to her trembling lips. She was so thirsty for them she could hardly stand it.

“And then I met you,” Libby said, a tear spilling onto her cheek and racing toward her jaw like it was on a mission.

“And you woke something up in me. A longing for more. A hunger. And now, I can't stop thinking about you. And I wish so badly that we hadn't started as a lie because I'm so afraid

—”“Stop being afraid,” Reagan said as she swooped forward, cupping Libby's face as she wiped the tear away with her thumb. “I'm not afraid. And nothing I feel for you is a lie,”

she said before pressing Libby's mouth to hers.

Libby wrapped her arms around her neck and pulled her in like a drowning woman desperate for oxygen. Parting her lips, Libby overpowered her and took decisive control of the kiss.

The sharp edge of the worktable pressed into her spine, but Reagan barely registered the pain. Every cell in her body was engaged in the act of being kissed. Each swipe of her bottom lip was a promise Reagan wondered if Libby could keep.

With a soft moan and a deepening kiss, Libby pressed her warm body closer until her small chest was against hers. In a lust-filled haze, Reagan ached to get closer. To lose the thin fabric separating their bare skin.

Libby's hand slid down her neck. Leaving a trail of pulsing heat, she ran her palm up Reagan's torso and stopped just short of her bra's underwire. At the new touch, Reagan wanted more, but she pulled back instead. She left the lips she'd been dreaming about and rested their foreheads together.

"What's wrong?" The way Libby's mouth quirked, her pink gloss smudged, made clear it was a taunt and not a question. "Are you worried another one of your students is going to wander in?" Each word was punctuated with a kiss down the column of Reagan's neck and over the collarbone exposed by her loose tank top.

Reagan closed her eyes, throwing her head back to indulge in the sensation until the pulling ache for more became too painful. "Hey, you're the one that keeps coming to my place of business to maul me."

When Libby laughed, her lips brushed against Reagan's shoulder, sending a pulse of desire ripping through her core.

"This isn't exactly what I came here for," Libby confessed against the shell of her ear.

Reagan's imagination raced. She nearly whimpered at the possibilities. "What do you want?" She hadn't intended on sounding quite so wanton, but there was only so much control a person could have.

Libby ran her fingers through Reagan's hair as she leaned back to look at her face. Wrapping her arms around her waist, Reagan struggled against the distraction of her nails scraping her scalp in the best possible way.

"I came to ask you out," she explained with a lopsided grin.

"Haven't we been on eight or nine dates already?"

Reagan asked, her eyes glued to her soft lips as she yearned to return to them.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

“A proper one. One where I ask you to have dinner with me with the hopes of exploring our compatibility and chemistry,” Libby responded clinically.

Reagan laughed. “Well, how about a food marathon on Thanksgiving? How’s that for a proper date?”

Cocking her head to the side, Libby looked up at her in the way that made her heart freeze and then burst out of the gate like a racehorse. “Do you still want to do that? Not under contract, but as my . . .”

Reagan leaned down and kissed her again, softly this time as she poured every ounce of emotion into the act. Her knees weakened and her hands shook when Libby went limp in her arms. “That agreement is dead. Contract null and void. Is that okay with you?”

“Hell yes,” Libby whispered before lunging forward and capturing her lips again.

HAND-IN-HAND, LIBBY AND REAGAN STROLLED OUT OF THE STUDIO.

After giving teenagers a run for their money on marathon make-outs, they decided to get actual food for dinner. After a quick shower, Reagan traded clay-covered clothes for tight jeans and a loose black t-shirt.

“Where are we going?” Libby asked as Reagan unlocked her pick-up truck.

“It’s a surprise,” she replied with an eyebrow wiggle as she flung her wet hair out of her face with a quick head turn.

Sitting in the truck, Libby couldn't stop glancing at Reagan in the driver's seat. The scent of her clean skin and light perfume was so intoxicating, it was impossible to take a

full breath. When Reagan suggested going for dinner, part of her wanted to protest. She would've been happy to stay in the studio wrapped in her arms, but she didn't have the nerve to admit it.

"I hope you're hungry. This place is amazing," Reagan said as she dropped her hand into her lap. Libby stared at it, itching to hold it aga

in but worried she'd come o as clingy.

God, she wanted to be clingy, though. She wanted to be hanging all over her like the citrusy scent on her skin.

Get it together, she chided before clearing her throat and looking out the window. It was like she'd never had any physical intimacy in her life. Libby's stomach sank. That was exactly what it felt like. Like she'd never been kissed or touched and now she was insatiable.

"Hey, are you okay? You're really quiet," Reagan asked as she joined a long line of cars inching along the congested road.

"Yeah, sorry." She smiled and twisted in her seat a little to the side to face her again. "I was just busy wracking my brain thinking of where you might be taking me."

Reagan smiled. "I think you're going to love it."

Half an hour later, they were in front of a tiny restaurant in what looked like a converted gas station between two used car lots. The Edison lights strung around the

front and extending into the parking lot like an abstract octopus was a lovely addition to the window box overflowing with flowers.

“Well . . . this looks very interesting,” she said, trying her best to sound upbeat, but her hesitation snuck in despite the effort.

“Don’t judge,” Reagan said before popping her door open.

“At least not until you get inside.”

“I wasn’t,” she muttered before taking the hand Reagan offered. The contact was a thousand tiny bees stinging her palm and seizing her heart.

“Sorry, they’re a little dry from the clay.” Reagan’s cheeks flushed bright pink.

Libby laced their fingers together. “They’re perfect,” she said before giving her hand a squeeze.

Reagan bit back a smile. Her pronounced dimples made Libby want to say forget the restaurant and drag her back to the studio like an enamored caveman. She resisted.

Inside, the small space was simple but incredibly elegant.

Each of the dozen round tables were crowded with patrons and exquisite looking food. After Reagan talked to someone in the back, while Libby tried not to fidget by playing with her fingers or reach for her phone, she waved her over.

Crab-walking between tables packed so close together they couldn’t possibly pass fire inspections, Libby joined Reagan at a counter being cleared of to-go containers and bags.

“They don’t have anything available for like an hour,”

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

Reagan explained. “But my buddy Chuck said we could take over their service station for a little bit. I know it’s not exactly comfortable,” she explained, accepting two wooden stools that did not match the impeccable decor and had probably never left the kitchen. “But the food is totally worth it.” Glancing down at the postcard sized menu, Libby quirked an eyebrow. “French?”

Reagan smirked. “I know, right? And in Hialeah. Can you believe uncultured swine like us enjoy escargot too?”

Embarrassment washed over Libby like a firehose of freezing water to the face. “That’s not what I meant. I’m sorry—”

Reagan covered her hand with her own. “Sorry. A lifetime of being dunked on by every other city makes me a little sensitive.”

“And I’m totally guilty of it,” she admitted. “I love that about you. You’re so passionate about where you’re from. I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone who cares that much about a place.”

“I just see so much potential, you know?” Reagan said before ordering a bottle of wine. “There’s more than the old exterior. More than just a dead manufacturing industry and all of us undesirables who didn’t come to this county in the 60s with the rich or powerful. There’s a whole new generation of people who grew up here and want to pour themselves back into this place. We want to create a place for ourselves that has our unique flavor. The children of the Cuban diaspora that live with a foot in two worlds. Our family’s past and a future that’s not quite ours. So many of us are trying to build something worth seeing. Occupying the space no one else values.”

With every person Reagan listed, starting with Mary and her boutique full of handmade clothes, her eyes grew a little wider and her cheeks more flushed. In response, Libby's heart pounded in double time until it was all she could do to keep from launching herself into her lap and claiming her lips. The passion was so intoxicating, she was ready to sign a lease and move her operation to Hialeah. Libby couldn't imagine what her grandmother would say. After all their hard work to be the right kind of family. The right class level.

The right reputation. Could she really undo it so easily?

Would serving the less affluent segment of their community really be so terrible?

"Sorry," Reagan said with a chuckle as she poured them each a glass of blended red. "Let's talk about something else or I'll just drone on all night. Not optimal official first date behavior."

Libby lifted her glass. "Here's to a night filled with all the stories that make you, you," she said, hoping Reagan would never stop sharing her passions.

CHAPTER 26

DESPITE KNOWING full well when it was coming, Thanksgiving morning brought along with it a frantic, nervous energy even Reagan couldn't ignore. In the living space she'd carved out of the second level of her studio, Reagan tried on and discarded half a dozen outfits. Limited to clothing that didn't reveal the tattoo sleeve on her arm, she wasn't left with much.

As she paced the metal rod hanging from the ceiling that served as an exposed closet, Reagan considered the modified tux she'd worn to the gala. Her chest tightened as she reached out and felt the fabric beneath the plastic. If there was anything like magic in this world, she'd definitely experienced it that night.

Plopping down on her bed, Reagan threw herself back onto the pillow. She'd never felt so much pressure to make a good impression. After years of learning to detach from outcomes and focus only on what she could control, the knowledge that very little was in her power was usually a comfort. But now, the fact that she couldn't control how meeting each other's entire families would go left her nauseated.

After showering for the third time that morning to get the cold sweat off her skin, Reagan checked the time. Libby

would be there in half an hour. She had to stop freaking out and get ready or she'd be showing up in her work overalls and flip flops.

Opting for the suit pants she'd worn to the gala and a quarter-sleeved ivory cashmere sweater her mother gifted her last Christmas, Reagan moved on to pulling the rest of herself together. Working a little product into her damp hair, she set her long, newly blonde bangs to one side and tucked it behind her ear. Brushing down the rest of her short hair, she was left with her best impression of a conservative Charlize Theron. It was definitely more accountant than artist and made her feel a little better about being surrounded by Cassanovas. Some light makeup later and Reagan was ready to go. Or as ready as she'd ever be.

Downstairs, she grabbed the bottle of palm wine Imani always gifted her parents around the holidays. She texted her to wish her a happy Thanksgiving and ask again whether she wanted to swing by, but Imani declined and insisted she had other plans this year. At Reagan's behest, they agreed on brunch the following weekend.

After her phone beeped with the familiar sound of a text from Libby, Reagan tucked a big box wrapped in blue paper under her arm and headed outside. Libby, dressed in a long-sleeved, short turquoise dress, her dark hair ironed straight, froze her in place.

"You look gorgeous," Reagan confessed as she strode toward her, unable to stop

herself from kissing her red lips.

The best she could do was use a light touch to minimize any smudging.

Libby didn't protest; instead she wrapped her arms around her neck and pulled her in closer. "You look so hot,"

she whispered before kissing her much more deeply.

Reagan's body reacted by shutting o communication with the logical part of her brain. "I can call my parents and

say I had an emergency," she said before gently biting Libby's bottom lip. "We can go inside and just be a little late to your family's dinner."

Libby groaned as she slipped her cool hands under Reagan's sweater and up her back. Chills and desire competed for dominance in response to her touch. "Don't I wish." She kissed her again before hugging her torso. "But that's not the kind of impression I want to make on the Sotos the first time I meet them. Or any time, really."

Staring at her lips, quirked in a smirk and smudged in the most achingly beautiful way, Reagan couldn't force herself to respond. Instead, she closed the gap for another lingering kiss.

"We're going to be late," Libby whispered. "What will your parents think of me?"

Reagan chuckled. "That we're good Cubans running an hour late for everything?"

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

Libby grinned and kissed her again. “Maybe we can be late next year,” she said before biting the inside of her cheek, making Reagan’s entire body pulse with desire.

Once they willed themselves apart like industrial-strength magnets fighting an inescapable pull, Libby opened the passenger door to her SUV so Reagan could set her things in the backseat next to two boxes wrapped in matching brown paper and twine.

“What’s that?” Reagan asked, gesturing toward the boxes with her head.

“Something I really hope your mom likes,” she replied with a nervous laugh.

After Libby fixed her lipstick in the visor mirror and they’d set out for Reagan’s parents’ house, Reagan asked the question that had been forming in the back of her mind. “My mom? Not my dad?”

“I know this sounds so old school, and it is a generalization, but women usually have to impress mothers.

It’s kind of a competition thing. Like a rival testing the mettle of an opponent they don’t deem quite worthy,” she explained as she drove.

“That sounds so Oedipal,” she decided, reaching for the lip gloss she’d stored in her pants.

“I don’t think most people are even aware of it. And, of course, it’s not always true. I just want to err on the side of caution.” Libby’s smile faltered as she took an audible

gulp.

“I really want them

both to like me. They probably think I’m some drama-filled lunatic—”

“Hey,” Reagan flipped the visor up and put her hand on her forearm. “First of all, my parents are so disconnected from social media and all that stuff they have no idea about your ex and all that. They only know you from the Spanish TV segments you do with your grandmother. Plus, all they care about is that I’m happy. And my mom is desperate for me to settle down,” she added with a lopsided smile. “She’s very excited that I’ve been dating the head of a matchmaking empire.”

Libby dropped her shoulders and exhaled. “I’m sure other people in your family know about all the attention I’ve gotten. About the accusations that I’m using you.”

“I’m sure they have. My cousins are nosy as hell, but once they meet you,” Reagan slid her hand down her arm and intertwined their fingers, “once they see that I’m legitimately crazy about you,” she admitted as her heart hammered in her chest, “they’ll have nothing to say.”

Libby glanced at her before returning her attention to the road. “You really think so?”

“I know so,” she replied, squeezing her hand tighter.

Forty minutes in traffic later, Libby parked her SUV on the side of the residential road packed with cars. “Are all these

people here for your party?”

“Nah, maybe half of them,” she replied, slipping out of the car and grabbing the

bottle of palm wine out of the back as Libby grabbed one of the boxes.

“Somehow I didn’t imagine so many people,” she said, her face pale as she met Reagan around the front of the car.

“Don’t worry. They’re going to love you,” Reagan promised as she took her hand and they started for the simple, one-story house at the end of the block.

LIBBY STARED AT THE HOLIDAY WREATH ON THE FRONT DOOR BEARING

a hand painted The Sotos Give Thanks sign and tried not to panic. She’d only ever met Davis’ parents, and that had been so long ago she couldn’t remember what it was like to meet family for the first time.

She’d made a rookie mistake. I should have suggested lunch before today. Meeting the family all at once had some benefits. With their attention diverted by other guests, there was only so much focus they could place on her. On the flip side, just about everyone in Reagan’s family would be meeting her at once. She didn’t have the chance to ingratiate herself with any of them. She’d be way more dependent on Reagan for conversation and socialization than she’d like.

“Sorry I forgot my key,” Reagan muttered before Libby could spiral any further down the panic attack blackhole.

“They’re probably in the back.”

Following Reagan around the front of the house and to a wooden gate on the side, Libby realized her second big mistake. Uncomfortable shoes. Her advice was to always wear something comfortable if going to a new environment where seating might not be plentiful or the terrain not

paved. She tried to keep her high heels from gouging holes in the lawn as she walked, but it was impossible.

The scent of roasted pork and loud salsa music guided them through the gate and toward a score of people milling about banquet tables covered in plastic tablecloths and surrounded by rented white chairs.

As soon as a tall man with a salt and pepper mustache and nicely coiffed hair spotted them traversing the uneven stone pavers, he dropped the platter of cubed cheese on a table and bounded toward them. “My baby!” he shouted before enveloping Reagan in a crushing hug.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

“Hi, Dad,” she said as if struggling to breathe but returning his embrace with the same intensity. “I want you to meet Libby.”

Reagan’s dad released her and turned toward Libby.

“Welcome, Libby,” he said before hugging her with unexpected warmth. “I’m so glad to finally meet you. Reagan has told us so much about you.”

“Thank you so much for having me, Mr. Soto,” Libby replied and hoped the heat rushing to her face wasn’t too prominent. “I’ve been looking forward to meeting you too.”

“Please, call me Carlos. We couldn’t believe it when Reagan told us she was seeing you. My mother thinks your grandmother is a romantic sage. Apparently, back in Cuba, she wrote into her newspaper column for advice and she swears it helped a spinster cousin find a husband.”

Libby tried not to flinch at the term spinster. “She’s unparalleled in her ability to give out no-nonsense advice,”

she agreed with a smile.

“Where’s Mom?” Reagan asked, as if sensing that Libby was desperate to get the first meetings out of the way.

“In the kitchen,” he replied with a playful eye roll as if she’d been stationed there for days. “Come on.”

Getting to Reagan's mother in the kitchen was no small feat. On the way, Libby was introduced to half a dozen cousins, a handful of aunts and uncles, two grandpas manning the enormous grill, and one great-grandmother sitting in a wheelchair and surrounded by little kids playing.

All of them greeted her with such loving familiarity it was like she'd been there for every family gathering.

By the time she arrived at the sliding glass door leading into the house, she'd sampled several appetizers and been handed a beer bottle wrapped in paper. She didn't even consider telling them she didn't drink beer and instead took an enthusiastic sip when it was offered.

"How are you holding up?" Reagan asked when they made it inside and the music was somewhat muted by the closed door. The scent of roasting meat clung to them like perfume. "I'm sure they can be a little overwhelming."

Libby smiled, her stomach in knots with anticipation.

"They're as wonderful as you are," she replied honestly.

Inside, there were only three women, and they were all in the kitchen. It reminded Libby of a boss level fight from the video games Davis played.

"Mimi," Reagan called with a wave as one of the two older women turned toward them with a serving platter in her hands.

The woman's wrinkled face brightened, and her lips eased into a smile. "Mi vida."

Reagan gave Libby's hand a squeeze before letting go.

Was that for luck or in warning? There was no time to figure it out. In a flash, she was following Reagan toward the kitchen and being examined by three sets of eyes.

“You’re too skinny,” the woman scolded in Spanish as she wrapped her arms around Reagan. “Come to my house.

I’ll feed you.”

“Mimi, I eat,” Reagan replied with a laugh.

“Maybe. But not enough,” she said before peeking over Reagan’s shoulder. “You must be Elisabeth.” She slipped around Reagan. For a heart stopping moment, Libby wasn’t sure what she was going to say next, but then she smiled and cupped her jaw. “Even more lovely than on TV,” she said before kissing her cheek.

“Libby, this is my grandma Iliana,” Reagan started before her grandmother waved her away.

“Call me Mimi. All the kids in the family do,” she said with a smile.

“Dad already told your story about writing to her grandma,” Reagan snitched.

“Bah, as if that’s going to stop me. He probably didn’t tell it right.”

“Okay, okay, my turn,” the other older woman said before bumping playfully into Mimi.

“Hola, Aba,” Reagan said, pulling the much shorter woman into her arms. “Don’t get jealous,” she said before kissing the top of her gray head.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

“If she’s Mimi, then I’m Aba to you too,” the stocky woman said as she wiggled her finger at Libby and then hugged her.

Libby couldn’t help but laugh. She’d never been in the middle of warring grandmothers before. It was so delightful; she’d nearly forgotten she still had an important person to face.

“And this is my mom, Natalia,” Reagan said as she hugged a tall, attractive blonde in her early fifties.

Libby forced her galloping heart to settle. “A pleasure to meet you. Thank you so much for having me,” she said, handing her the gift she’d spent two week

s researching.

Natalia’s dark eyes dropped from her face to the box in her outstretched hand. With every microsecond, Libby was sure she’d made a mistake. Was she o ended by the present?

Why wouldn’t Reagan have told her not to bring one? Was it the beer in her hand? Did she look like a lush?

When the woman’s full lips parted into a smile, it took all of Libby’s self-control not to sigh and hold her hand to her chest in relief.

“Thank you, mija. You didn’t have to do that.” She took the gift before they kissed each other on the cheek. “Oh, and Nigerian Palm Wine!”

“It’s nothing. I hope you enjoy it,” she said, hot and aware of how constricting her dress and shoes were. “I mean, I didn’t bring the wine,” she added awkwardly.

“I know, honey.” Reagan’s mother shifted her gaze between Libby and her daughter. It was so quick, Libby couldn’t decipher the significance. “I’ll call Imani later and thank her.”

While Reagan’s mother opened the gift of hand-pressed olive oil and artisan soap from a small grove in Spain, her grandmothers looked her over like she was a car for sale.

“Look at this figure, Iliana,” the short Aba said as she reached for Libby’s hand and spun her around. “Don’t you remember having a body like that?”

The other woman laughed. “Oh please, you never had a body like that. I, on the other hand, was fourth runner-up for Miss Cuba 1967,” she said, holding her chin out proudly.

“Ha! That’s a laugh. No, you weren’t.”

Mimi glared at her. “Well, I would’ve been if the spot hadn’t been stolen from me.”

Ignoring the bickering grandmothers who had stopped objectifying Libby to argue with each other, Reagan hooked her arm in Libby’s and pointed her toward the hallway just off the kitchen.

“Come on, I want to show you my room,” Reagan said before they turned down the narrow hallway covered in framed family photos. Libby refused to be rushed down memory lane and took her time indulging and asking questions as they inched along.

“Are these your brothers?” Libby pointed at the photos of a pair of handsome men in military uniforms.

“Yep. They’re both deployed. If you’re unlucky you might meet them for Christmas,” she joked.

Two massive portraits waited for them at the end of the hall, one of former US President Ronald Reagan, and the other of a young woman in an extravagant pink gown holding a parasol as she gazed off to the side while standing in a topiary garden. Her long blonde hair in ringlets were the tell-tale sign of a quinceañera. Every fifteen-year-old Hispanic girl's rite of passage. Somehow, Libby never imagined the cool Reagan ever having to suffer one.

“Don’t you dare laugh,” Reagan said as she struggled against her own smile.

Libby covered her mouth with both hands. “You look so freaking adorable.”

Reagan scratched the back of her head. “Okay, enough of that,” she said, prodding her into the bedroom on the right.

“Your parents never changed your room?” Libby asked despite the answer being obvious as they stepped into a high-schooler’s room complete with posters and pictures taped all over the walls and ceiling.

“Nope. My mom is always nagging me to come empty it out, but I don’t think she really wants me to,” she said as she plopped onto the corner of the very feminine bed. “I think she comes in here once a week and cleans it while pretending I’m still seventeen.”

Libby perused the pictures stuck to the mirror on the small vanity facing the bed. In one of them, Reagan had long green hair and a nose ring. She couldn’t fathom that

kind of freedom. In another, she was kissing a girl on the cheek.

“What did you want to show me?” Libby asked as she turned from the pictures and leaned against a dresser to rest her feet before setting down the beer warming in her hand.

“Nothing,” she replied, propping herself up on an elbow.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

“I just figured that was probably super overwhelming and you could use a little breather before we go back out there.”

“Do you ever stop being so thoughtful?” Libby asked as she took a few steps and sat next to her on the bed, taking her hand in hers. The act prompted Reagan to sit up and smile.

“Do you want me to?” she asked with a quirked eyebrow.

“I’m sure if I try really hard I can be more of a selfish jerk.”

Libby laughed. “I don’t think you could do that if your life depended on it.” She traced Reagan’s cuticles with her fingertips before looking back at her. “How many girls have you brought here?”

Reagan tried not to grin, putting her dimples on display as she bit her bottom lip. “One or two,” she said coyly.

“And your parents really never caught on?” Libby leaned forward until Reagan’s warm breath was falling lightly against her chin.

Reagan moistened her lips before smirking. “I made sure to be very, very quiet,” she whispered, resting her hand on Libby’s bare knee.

“Show me,” she pleaded before closing the tiny gap and capturing Reagan’s lips between her own.

Reagan broke away from the kiss to press her lips against her ear. With each slow breath against her lobe, Libby's desire grew until she reached out to cover Reagan's hand with her own and drag it up her thigh.

"Are you sure you can be quiet enough?" she whispered, making her entire body ache.

"Let's find out," she replied in a voice that was not her own. She'd never been accused of being adventurous and

would have never considered more than a chaste kiss in someone else's house.

Reagan smiled against her jaw before kissing her neck and eliciting a soft moan. "You'll have to do better than that," she warned as she ran her thumb slowly up Libby's inner thigh. It took every ounce of self-control not to part them and beg her to ease the pressure building painfully inside her.

A loud knock made Libby jump and fling herself on the bed. "Smooth," Reagan joked as she shook her head.

"Oye, come on," Grandma Aba shouted through the door.

"You can't hide in there. Your Cousin Gloria wants to ask Elisabeth about a guy she likes from work, but the ink hasn't dried on his divorce papers," she added with a chuckle.

Reagan dropped her head before she stood and straightened her sweater. "We'll be right out, Aba. I'm showing Libby the photo album from my quince," she shouted back.

If her grandmother thought that was a strange thing to do with the door locked, she

didn't say.

"You do not have to play matchmaker here," Reagan said as they used her mirrored closet door to rearrange themselves and reapply lipstick. Libby wished there was a quicker way to cool her overheated skin. She didn't understand the animalistic urges that manifested every time they kissed, but she hated the embarrassment that came after.

"Are you kidding? And miss the opportunity to look competent in front of your family? I'm happy to answer questions all night," she responded, without adding that it would keep her from turning into a cat in heat again.

Reagan cocked her head to the side and held Libby's face in her hands. "You don't have to jump through hoops, Lib.

They already like you because I like you. I promise. As long as you don't come out as a communist, you're in."

Libby swallowed the anxiety twisting into a ball in her throat. "It can't be that easy. Nothing is that simple."

"I promise it is," she said with such ease that Libby nearly believed her.

Emerging from the quiet confines of Reagan's bedroom, through the empty kitchen and back out to the chaos outside, Libby prayed no one guessed what they'd been doing. She was sure it was written all over her face, but as they talked and ate with Reagan's family, no one treated them like disrespectful heathens.

After a feast served on mismatched platters, half the family moved to the four domino tables set up on the grass at the edge of the yard. The others congregated on the paved part of the patio while someone turned up the music.

“Do you dance?” Reagan’s dad asked as he stood beside her and held out his hand. His body language indicated that it wasn’t really a question.

“You don’t have to—” Reagan started, but stopped when Libby took her dad’s hand and grinned.

“What good Cuban girl doesn’t dance to Celia Cruz?”

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

On the impromptu dance floor, Libby danced and laughed as she moved to the high-energy salsa music with Reagan's dad, then her grandfather. By the time she was covered in sweat and wishing she'd worn a sleeveless dress made of lighter fabric, her feet were throbbing and her heart full.

"You're a pretty good dancer," Reagan decided when she cut in.

Reagan's hand on the small of her sweaty back and other hand in hers came just as the music slowed to a ballad. Libby doubted it was a coincidence.

"You're not too bad yourself. I saw you twirling your mom around," she replied, before becoming self-conscious.

"Your family is okay with you dancing with me?" Libby didn't dare look to the sides. She was having such a wonderful time she didn't want it marred by a judgmental look or gossipy whisper.

Reagan's response was to hold her a little closer. "We're not doing anything obscene, Lib. I'd be closer if we were hugging."

Libby tried to relax in her arms and sway to the slow, romantic music like everyone else packed in the small space.

She dared to look around and was surprised to find Reagan was right. Everyone was busy enjoying themselves. There were no reproachful eyes trained on them.

"This is the best date I've ever been on," Libby confessed as she pressed her cheek

against Reagan's. As the sun dipped beyond the horizon and a breeze cooled her overheated skin, Libby wished they could stay with her family all night.

When the song changed to something faster, Reagan spun her in place. As she showed off her much more natural dancing abilities, Libby finally caught sight of someone staring. Reagan's parents had stopped dancing to watch them. Inst

ead of offense, her mother's face was dressed up in something more akin to pride.

CHAPTER 27

BACK IN THE SUV, Reagan tried to freshen up with a wet napkin, a little make-up, and her mom's perfume. "I shouldn't have danced so much," she said as she stared at her messy reflection in the small visor mirror.

"It was so much fun, though," Libby said as she glanced at herself in the rearview mirror.

Reagan raised her eyebrows. "That's a significantly more carefree attitude than I expected."

Chuckling, Libby shrugged. "Well, that's because we're still half an hour away from my grandma's house. Let me live my joy."

"Do you mind if I jump in the back? I really need to air this out. Cashmere was a terrible choice. I was thinking about your family's Thanksgiving way more than I was thinking about mine."

Reagan jumped between the two front seats and into the back the moment Libby nodded. "I should've brought a change of clothes," she said as she pulled the sweater over her head.

Libby stole glances at her in the rearview with the subtlety of a dragon tearing through some ancient forest.

Reagan knew better than to torment her, but she couldn't resist arching her back just enough to send her eyes darting

to the small, low-cut white bra. She yanked down her waistband a little, drawing her eyes toward her abdomen and down to her bellybutton. For a moment, Reagan wondered what Libby would do if she unbuttoned her trousers. If she peeled o her bra. Would she continuing watching, or would she pull over on the side of the highway and join her?

A car honked at the same time that Libby's car alerted that she'd drifted into the next lane and came dangerously close to another car.

"Sorry. I'm sure this is not a classy look," Reagan said as she straightened. "A definite dating rule no-no, but I think it's worse to be all gross when I meet your family."

Libby, her eyes trained on the road, shook her head. "I didn't expect to dance like that."

"They don't dance at your house?" Reagan asked as she trained all the air vents on herself to speed up the drying process.

Libby's response was a bark of laughter. "Definitely not.

Music is usually supplied by a small band. People listen and enjoy, but no one dances."

"Oh, okay. Well, that's cool too," Reagan replied when she didn't know what else to

say.

“We only have to be there a couple of hours,” she promised, the carefree ease gone from her face and replaced with tension. “We can go back to your parents’ house after.”

Reagan leaned forward, resting her hand on Libby’s shoulder. “It’s going to be great. Don’t worry.”

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

After a car crash kept them on the highway twice as long as anticipated, Reagan was back to her nearly perfectly composed state just in time to pull up to the young men in red vests standing outside an impressively stately home.

“Your family has valet service?” she couldn’t help but ask as Libby stopped the car and one of the guys sprang forward to open the door.

“Just for special occasions. My grandmother hates when cars get blocked in by latecomers, and she really hates the possibility of someone parking on her very high maintenance lawn,” she explained as they retrieved the remaining two packages from the backseat.

Reagan looked out at the sprawling front lawn. It was so perfectly green and soft looking it put high-end golf courses to shame. Walking up the long, stone driveway flanked by impressive rose bushes, Reagan followed Libby’s lead and didn’t reach for her hand. Judging by her surprise at her house, PDA was probably not the Cassanova way. Reagan ignored the irony.

“Do we get announced by a man with a horn and coat tails?” Reagan joked as they neared the large wooden double front doors. She wished there was something she could do to ease the palpable anxiety choking the life from Libby’s body.

Forcing a smile, Libby shook her head. “Not quite but do be sure and curtsy.”

Reagan rubbed the small of her back as they climbed the two steps up to the doorway. “It’s going to be okay, okay? I promise.”

“You can’t promise that,” she responded as she rang the doorbell.

Before Reagan could assure her that she could handle anything her family threw at her after having dated more than a few girls from highly conservative families, the door opened as if someone had been waiting behind it.

“Libby,” a middle-aged woman dressed in a simple black dress greeted them with a broad smile.

“Marta, so good to see you. Happy Thanksgiving,” Libby replied in Spanish as she bent forward and hugged her. “I want to introduce you to my . . . uh . . . to Reagan Soto.”

The woman’s face tensed as she regarded her, but Reagan tried her best not to drop her smile. “A pleasure,” she said in

Spanish as she extended her hand.

“Marta has been with our family for years. Since I was baby,” she added, her eyes shifting between the stoic woman and her.

After an eternity, the woman finally returned Reagan’s handshake. It was a cold, limp thing. “I’ve heard so much about you,” she said in such a stilted tone that Reagan was sure it was not meant as a word of welcome.

Stepping inside Libby’s grandmother’s house was like walking into a museum. Spacious and beautiful, but with the obvious message that nothing should be touched. There was no loud music, no family yelling over each other as they told stories or jokes. She could only describe it one way. Sterile.

Even the strip of black carpet that had been placed to guard against footprints on the

white marble floor extinguished any evidence of humanity.

As they passed a formal sitting room full of posh antique furniture Reagan was sure no one had ever sat in and a staircase more suited to *Gone with the Wind* than real life, they entered a sprawling kitchen. Instead of the gaggle of grandmas and aunts Reagan expected, she saw a catering crew all in white working in near silence.

Reagan kept her thoughts to herself as they followed the carpet toward a set of French doors but stopped when they reached another living room with a huge oil painting above a mantle. “Is that your family?”

Libby stopped but didn’t step on the carpet, so Reagan didn’t either. “Yup. My grandparents. My uncle and his wife and their twins, and my parents and my brother and that’s me,” she said pointing to the shortest person among everyone wearing white.

“You’re the only girl among the kids, huh? No wonder you’re so girly. They probably took every opportunity to dress you like a Barbie.”

Libby offered a half-smile in return. “You’re not wrong.

Come on. We can’t keep the Grande Dame waiting.” The dread in her voice was contagious.

Outside, Libby’s family was arranged around linen covered tables in a tented courtyard. At one end of the space was a long table filled with silver buffet servers kept hot by little cans of flameless heat underneath. At the end was a massive chocolate fountain right out of an 80’s movie. On the other side of the courtyard was a full band playing low while people listened politely.

Reagan gripped the box in her hand and regretted her choice of gift. She should’ve

gone with the fancy bottle of wine she'd initially selected. Libby's grandmother wouldn't appreciate the trinket.

Stepping out from under the weight of impending awkwardness, Reagan followed Libby as they headed straight for her grandmother's table. Recognizing the people from the painting, she noted that Libby's parents sat to her left followed by her brother, a woman she didn't recognize, and then Libby's uncle and his family.

At least we're ripping the band-aid o real quick.

"Happy Thanksgiving," Libby said as she approached the table.

Much like a record-scratch moment, the clan turned their attention on them all at once.

"Hey, baby," her mother, a carbon copy of her daughter, stood and kissed Libby's cheek before turning toward Reagan. "And you must be Reagan," she said before

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

kissing her lightly on the cheek too. “Happy Thanksgiving. We’ve been so eager to meet you.”

The rest of Libby’s family followed suit with varying degrees of tepid warmth until only the matriarch was left.

“Reagan,” she said as she rose like a gathering storm.

“Lovely to see you again, dear. Thank you so much for

looking after Elisabeth in my stead.”

Reagan smiled despite the tightening discomfort in her stomach. “My pleasure,” she replied, leaning forward, barely touching her as they kissed in greeting.

“What do you have there?” Mrs. Cassanova asked when they parted, and Reagan kept the wrapped box tucked under her arm.

Reaching for Libby’s gift and putting it on top of hers, Reagan shook her head. “Nothing. Just something for the hostess, but we can put it away somewhere until you have a chance to open it.”

“Nonsense,” Mrs. Cassanova countered with a flourish of her hand. “You were so thoughtful in bringing something, I wouldn’t dare insult your kindness.”

“Really,” Reagan gripped the boxes so tight her fingertips turned white. “It’s really nothing.” With all the fine pieces in her home, Reagan was sure the woman would be

o ended at having to pretend to like something she made. It didn't fit with any of her décor, and she kicked herself for being so naive.

“Sit while Mima opens it,” Libby's brother said as he stood and straightened his sharp blue suit. “I'll go get you guys something to drink. Um, I mean girls.” He blushed hard. “Women.” He continued frantically until his dad jumped up and put an end to his spiral by offering to give him a hand with some drinks for everyone.

“Yes, yes. How rude of me. Here, darling, sit next to me,”

Mrs. Cassanova said as she looked Reagan in the eye and patted the empty seat to her right. It was obvious she'd saved the two spots closest to her for them.

Without further protestation, Reagan took the seat between Libby and her grandmother. When she dared to glance to the side, she noticed all the color had drained from her face. Reagan's knotted up stomach clenched. Libby had

been right. She'd never had such a nerve-wracking experience meeting anyone's family and nothing had even happened yet. The tension in the air was just so extreme.

“Now let's see what we have here,” Mrs. Cassanova said as she unwrapped the brown paper covering Libby's gift. The rest of the family watched as if waiting for a bomb to be defused. When she opened the box, she nodded with approval. “Lovely, my dear, thank you,” she said as she pulled out the same olive oil and soap Libby had given her mother. “Marta will love cooking with this, I'm sure.”

Libby's response was a tight smile. Being considering what a unique present it was, and according to her quick internet search, expensive as hell too.

When Mrs. Cassanova reached for Reagan's gift, part of her wanted to excuse herself and bolt, but she took deep breaths and calmed herself instead. She would either like

it or she wouldn't. Either way she was sure she'd get the same gracious response before her present was tossed into the garbage as it didn't even have the benefit of being regift-able.

Yearning to reach under the table and hold Libby's hand as she waited for embarrassment to finally wash over her in earnest, Reagan dug her short nails into her own palm instead.

As Mrs. Cassanova peered into the gift box, Reagan stopped breathing. The elegant woman stared at it endlessly as if unable identify what it was.

Next time just bring some freaking wine.

"What is it?" Libby's dad asked as if it might be a severed head while he set wine glasses in front of them.

Mrs. Cassanova didn't respond. She just stared into the box, forcing Reagan's heart to race at an unsustainable level.

Was it really that bad? So bad she couldn't just say thanks, fake a smile, and move on?

By the time Mrs. Cassanova reached into the box and pulled out the miniature version of a tinajón, a wide-rimmed earthenware pot used to store all kinds of things but most traditionally rainwater, Reagan was on the edge of a stroke.

No wonder Libby was so tightly wound after a lifetime of walking on porcelain eggshells.

"It's our family crest," she said, finally responding to her son's question. Pulling the big-bellied pot from the nest made of shredded paper, Mrs. Cassanova turned it over

in her hand. With her fingertips, she traced the hand painted name above the blue and yellow crest Reagan contacted a genealogist to find. “You made this?”

Reagan nodded.

Mrs. Cassanova ran her finger around the lip before turning it over to see her maker’s mark. A rooster’s foot along with her initials. “It’s exquisite,” she said before clearing her throat. “Beautifully crafted.”

After exhaling for the first time in what felt like an hour, Reagan smiled. “Thank you. I’m so glad you like it.”

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

“Elisabeth told me you were quite the potter, and I can see she wasn’t exaggerating,” she said with something that nearly passed as a smile as she handed her son the jar for his inspection. “Tell me, what are your plans?”

“Mima, please. This isn’t the time—” Libby started, but Reagan flashed a smile in her direction.

“It’s okay,” she insisted. “For the last year I’ve been considering purchasing the pottery I’m in now. My landlord pretty much just breaks even with me in it, but it has so much potential,” Reagan said before explaining the sentimental value and connection she and her family had to the old place.

Mrs. Cassanova listened quietly as Reagan explained her plan to uplift the community and bring new life back to the

area. She also told them about wanting to offer more free classes to folks who needed the outlet but couldn’t afford it.

Libby’s parents and brother peppered her with the same kinds of questions Libby first had. None of them had been to Hialeah either. Reagan’s heart warmed when Libby came to the city’s defense before Reagan had a half a chance to open her mouth.

“Tradition and family are critical cornerstones. Without them things have no meaning,” Mrs. Cassanova decided after a long pause. “So you want to make enough money from your art to give things away for free?”

“That’s pretty close to it,” she replied. “Money shouldn’t be the deciding factor for

people to have access to creative outlets.”

Libby interrupted to tell her family about Freddie and his incredible talent. As she did, she pulled up the social media page Reagan didn’t know she followed and showed o his work.

As everyone looked at Libby’s phone, Reagan watched the eldest Cassanova. Her face gave away absolutely nothing.

Well after dinner had been served and eaten, Mrs. Cassanova leaned back in her chair. “Elisabeth, you should help her put together a fundraiser and create a marketing plan for her to implement. You’re so good at that. I’m sure you could get thousands of eyes on her work in no time.”

“That’s a great idea,” Libby replied, obviously taken aback by the unexpected compliment.

“I’ll talk to Emilio down at the TV station. I’m sure he’d love to showcase what you’re doing. They’re always looking for local human-interest stories,” Mrs. Cassanova added, and it was Reagan’s turn to be caught o guard.

After a pleasant conversation with Libby’s family, Reagan started to relax. On her dad’s prompting, they made a trip to the chocolate fountain.

“You know, I’ve never seen one of these in real life,”

Reagan confessed as she held a chunk of pineapple under the sweet cascade.

Libby laughed as she sipped the champagne she grabbed from the professionally tended bar on the way to the dessert table. “Imagine my disappointment as a kid when I learned the shocking truth that there wasn’t one at every party.”

Reagan popped the treat into her mouth before accepting the flute of bubbly Libby offered. “So . . . no one dances at all?”

Libby shrugged. “My grandpa always used to start the dancing. Ever since he passed away, I guess no one wants to be the first, or maybe none of us are as much fun as the Sotos.”

Reagan eyed the large, empty square in front of the band.

“So, it’s not really improper? You guys just stopped doing it?” Eyeing her suspiciously, Libby took a sip of her drink.

“What are you thinking?”

“Don’t worry,” Reagan said before draining her glass.

“I’m not going to weird everybody out by dancing with you.

Unless . . . you think that’s okay?”

“I wouldn’t tempt the fates on our first outing. They hide it well, but I’m sure it’s scandalous that I’m suddenly a lesbian.”

Reagan laughed at the unexpected drama in her tone.

“You’re ready to slap that label on there?”

Libby chuckled. “I know it’s a spectrum and the question of my identity is something I haven’t begun to consider. I know I like you and you’re a woman.” She smiled. “But that doesn’t mean my extended family isn’t wondering what Davis did wrong to make me switch teams.”

“Fair enough. Who would be easier to lead? Your brother or your dad?” Reagan asked with a smirk.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

Libby reached for another glass before she downed the champagne in one go. “If we’re going to revitalize this party, you’re going to need backup. You take my dad. I’ll go for my cousin Marcus. My brother has two left feet.”

When they first approached their targets, neither was willing to go, probably because it seemed like a poorly conceived joke. But with some prodding, Libby’s dad caved first, forcing Libby to forcibly yank her cousin out of his seat.

It took way longer than Reagan expected for other people to join them, but once an elderly couple broke the ice, it was a busted floodgate. The band played with new gusto once the energy jumped above morgue levels. Even though she never stood, Reagan was satisfied watching Mrs. Cassanova clap along while tapping her foot to the music.

On their way out, Reagan and Libby were even sweatier than when they’d left her parents’ house. After saying their goodbyes, Libby linked their pinkies and strode back onto the black carpet leading them to the front door.

Leaving the party they’d started behind, Reagan smiled as they passed the room with the oil painting. On the co

rnier of the mantle, she caught sight of the jar painted blue and yellow with the Cassanova crest.

CHAPTER 28

“I THINK I’m going to start calling you the Cassanova whisperer,” Libby joked

when Reagan pulled the SUV up to the studio.

“Yeah?” she laughed as she shifted into park and relaxed into the seat.

Libby ran her fingers through the messy, frizzy hair that had once been ironed so perfectly straight. “Because you almost moved the Grande Dame to tears,” she replied as if it should’ve been obvious. “I can’t believe you made my family crest. That’s an un-top-able gift. You realize that, right?”

The unfettered liberty with which she spoke made it obvious to Reagan she’d had a little too much to drink.

“Then I guess I’m gonna have to do something even more spectacular for Christmas.” She smiled. “Assuming I’m invited.”

“Invited? I think you’re the guest of honor,” she joked before reaching for her purse.

Reagan jumped out of the car and met her near the hood.

“Hey, do you want to stay over? Not to be a nag or anything, but I think it would be better if you didn’t drive. If you’re not comfortable with that, I’m happy to drive you home.”

Wrapping her arms around Reagan’s neck, Libby grinned.

“Is this your way of getting me into your bed?”

Reagan laughed. “I’m pretty sure I’m not the one who housed more than one bottle of champagne.”

“Details, details,” she whispered before pulling her down to her lips. The sudden

height difference between them made her realize Libby had taken off her shoes.

“You must be tipsy if you’re standing outside barefoot,”

she joked.

Libby looked down in shock. “Oh, God. My mom would kill me.”

“Don’t worry,” Reagan laughed as she slipped off her loafers and offered them. “I’ve got socks on.”

As soon as Libby slipped her foot into her shoes, she closed her eyes and relished the sensation. “How are these so comfortable?” she whined. “And why do I ever wear high heels?”

Reagan took her hand as she fished her keys out of her pocket with the other. “Maybe because they make your calves look amazing.”

Libby leaned against the door frame. “That must be it,”

she agreed before pulling Reagan in for another kiss.

“Come on before the neighbors see us,” Reagan joked as she unlocked the door and motioned for Libby to get inside.

“I’m sure the raccoons would love the show,” she replied, lingering by the entrance until Reagan flipped on some lights. “What’s under here?” she asked as she strolled toward the canvas-covered pieces in her private section of the studio.

“Nothing that’s ready for exhibition,” she said, taking Libby’s hand before she got a look under the sheet.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

Much to Reagan's relief, Libby allowed herself to be led away from the studio and behind the drying room where the steps were. "Mysterious."

Before Libby placed a loafer-covered foot on the stairs, she gave Reagan a wary look.

"What?" Reagan asked. "They're safer than they look."

"Where are you taking me, exactly?" Libby asked as she climbed with open hesitation as if looking for booby traps.

Reagan waited until they'd summited the stairs without plummeting to their deaths. "My bedroom, obviously."

"How many dates have we been on since we reset the counter?" she asked, looking around the modest apartment Reagan had carved out for herself.

"I didn't know we had reset it," Reagan replied, leaning against the wall near the stairs. "When did that happen?"

Libby turned away from the portion of her wall covered in sketches and reference images, a dream board for future projects. She hoped she wouldn't notice the dragon and ask about it.

"When we kissed," she replied with a grin.

"Oh, you mean when you kissed me?" Reagan asked, her eyes trained on the figure sauntering toward her.

Libby wrapped her arms around her neck. It was quickly becoming Reagan's favorite thing on Earth. Automatically, her hands found Libby's waist as she ran her palms over the soft, cotton material of her black dress. "Details, details,"

she whispered before pressing her lips softly against Reagan's mouth. "How many dates have we been on since then?"

Closing her eyes, Reagan allowed the warmth of her tongue and the sweetness of her lips to short-circuit her senses. Libby's kiss was a refuge like she'd never known before.

Running her fingers through Reagan's hair before grabbing a fistful at the back, Libby deepened their kiss.

Reagan groaned reflexively as she lost herself. Judging by Libby's smile, that had been the intended effect.

"By my count this is our second date," Libby said between breathless kisses. She hadn't expected to get her in

her bed quite so soon.

Without breaking their connection, Reagan walked her backward toward the bed. "Oh, come on," she said before kissing down the column of neck and skin made salty from sweat. "It's at least the third date. Meeting the parents counts for one each."

Libby threw her head back, pressing Reagan closer to her as she moaned. The sound set every nerve in Reagan's body on fire and sent her hands sliding lower and gripping her backside.

"Even if it was date number three," she said with a groan as Reagan nibbled her

clavicle and inched her closer to the bed. “I don’t want to rush this,” she finished before whimpering.

Extracting herself from the task of leaving a little red mark on her olive skin, Reagan straightened and took a step backward. “Oh,” she cleared her throat and willed her rising arousal to dissipate. “Right. Yeah. I mean your first time with a woman might be a little—”

“Hey,” Libby said, catching her by the wrist before she backed away any further and pulling her back in to her arms.

“It’s not because you’re a woman. I’ve never broken that rule with anyone.” Her face flushed deep red before she looked away and back again. “Though it’s only had to be implemented twice.”

Reagan tucked a strand of dark hair behind Libby’s ear.

“You don’t have to explain. Like Oprah says, no is a complete sentence.”

“I didn’t say no,” she whispered before pulling her back to her lips. “There’s a lot in between first base and third if you’re creative.”

Immediately lost in the lusty haze triggered by Libby’s probing kiss, Reagan was barely aware of her body moving until she landed on the bed with a bounce. In nearly the same

moment, Libby was on top of her and Reagan’s hands found themselves running up the bare thighs straddling her hips.

Libby’s body moved to the rhythm of some imaginary drumbeat as she swung her hips with slow, painful purpose.

“You make me want to do really bad things,” she confessed against her lips.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

Reagan gripped her thighs harder to keep from flipping her over and ripping o her dress. All their months together had felt like foreplay, and her resolve to honor her wishes was already weakening.

Libby continued grinding against her, undeterred by Reagan's pained silence. "I don't know what it is. You wake up something inside me I had no idea was there. I think about you like this all the time."

"You're killing me," Reagan confessed to the massive air ducts in the ceiling above her when Libby's mouth slipped down her jaw and over her throat.

When Libby pressed her body into her so she could feel her chest against her as she slid down her body, Reagan cursed before gripping her hips hard. Imagining the thin material of Libby's underwear was as wet as hers as she guided her down and hard against her trouser zipper, Reagan bit her bottom lip to keep from cursing again.

At the sudden pressure, Libby gasped and pressed down harder as she rocked her hips with a new frantic pace. With her hands on Reagan's shoulders, Libby threw her

head back and moaned.

Forgetting the layers of fabric that separated them, Reagan's body shuddered as she imagined the sensation of being inside her. If they continued this game for another few minutes, she wouldn't be able to pull herself back from the edge.

"Are you really going to make me be the one who stops this when I really don't want to?" Reagan managed between

the intense moments of pulsating desire obscuring her brain function.

Her words were a lasso plucking the floating Libby out of the air and forcing her back to reality. She landed next to her in a slightly intoxicated, sweaty heap.

“Maybe we can count all those other dates we went on,”

Libby said before pulling Reagan on top of her. “And all the times you came to my house when I was sick. That was after the kiss.”

As soon as Reagan’s thigh slipped between her parted legs, she closed her eyes and rolled onto the bed. “No,” she said, immediately regretting her nobility. “You’ve got rules and their good rules, right?”

Libby looked up at her with wide eyes and flushed cheeks.

Her parted thighs offering a view of smooth skin and delicious possibility.

“Come on,” Reagan insisted with her hand outstretched.

“Why don’t you take a shower and I’ll get you something comfortable to sleep in.”

Begrudgingly, they each took turns washing the night and a painful amount of pent-up desire down the drain. By the time Reagan had used the rest of the hot water, Libby was passed out on her bed wearing blue Hialeah High School basketball shorts and an oversized t-shirt. She’d picked them because old gym shorts and a free t-shirt from a Miami Heat game were the least sexy things Reagan owned, but on Libby their effect was as devastating as lingerie.

Reagan turned out the light as soon as she could, hoping it would be out of sight, out of mind, but as she slipped in behind Libby and held her warm body against hers, it

was her heart she couldn't control.

I should've had a hell of a lot more champagne, Reagan decided as she listened to Libby's heavy breathing with vexatious envy.

CHAPTER 29

WHEN THE LIGHT streaming in from the impossible to reach windows at the top of the industrial building urged Reagan awake, she turned over and covered her head with her pillow.

Normally she loved waking up with the first light, but she was too tired for sunrise today.

As she tossed and turned trying to fight her way back to sweet unconsciousness, she remembered that she wasn't alone. Reaching out across the bed, she was surprised to find it cold and empty.

Popping up like a gopher out of a hole, Reagan sent her pillow tumbling to the floor.

Did she leave?

Reagan glanced around the room for evidence of her presence. Once she spotted the dress hanging on her clothes bar, she relaxed.

She wouldn't leave without it, right?

In nothing but a muscle shirt and long boyshorts, Reagan crept down the stairs to find Libby snapping pictures of her students' work littered all over the studio and making notes.

“What are you doing?” Reagan asked as she approached, still rubbing the sleep out of her tired eyes.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

Libby finished taking a photo of one of Freddie's sculptures with her phone before she turned toward her and

grinned. "What does it look like? My grandmother was right.

You should have a marketing strategy that involves periodic fundraisers, the first of which we need to start planning."

Reagan hugged Libby from behind and nestled her nose in the crook of her neck, soaking up the scent of her skin. In the moments they'd been apart, Reagan had already started to miss her. "Is that an appropriate fourth date activity?"

Libby chuckled as she covered Reagan's arms with hers and willed her to squeeze her tighter. The gesture sent a flutter up Reagan's stomach which lifted her heart into her throat. It was the best feeling she'd ever experienced. If this was what drugs were like, she could see how people got hooked.

"Is every time we see each other going to be a date?"

Libby joked before spinning around and pulling her in for a kiss.

"I think every time we walk in and out of the room it should be date," Reagan decided before kissing her softly.

Libby laughed against her lips, sending Reagan's heart racing. "I guess that's only fair if we're going to spend a day together." Her green eyes, bright from the light streaming in and illuminating her face, shifted. "Unless you have something to do

today. . . I was thinking maybe we could work on the fundraiser,” she added, showing a flash of the tightly wound woman she hadn’t seen in hours.

“There’s nothing I’d rather do than spend this day with you,” she confessed before bending and kissing her again.

Smiling, Libby held her tighter as if relieved by her response. “Good. So, how about you make us some cafesito?”

“Yes, ma’am,” she replied before stealing another kiss and striding away. “What do you know about selling art anyway?”

“Girl, please. I sell hope and intangible promises of future happiness for a living. A sculpture people can see and

understand and know exactly what they’re getting? No challenge.”

Libby’s confidence was hot as hell, and Reagan couldn’t stop grinning as she turned on the coffee machine she’d set up at the back of the studio at Peggy’s behest.

“I’m pretty sure we can fit like a thousand people in here,” she shouted so Reagan could hear her.

Reagan popped a little plastic cup in the machine and wandered back to Libby while the water heated. “And what exactly do you plan to do with a thousand people?”

Without looking up from where she was taking notes on her phone, Libby shrugged. “First one is the easiest. Have another art sale,” she said before grinning. “Except this time, you’re going to target people with money to spend, not just your students’ friends and families. You can only pull from that well so many times.” Libby’s eyes were radiant when she shifted her focus to her and away from her screen.

“And we’re going to get you out there. Find some auctions where you can give away classes, run ads on your social media posts, and I have a friend at the Miami New Times.

When I send her what you have and tell her all the great things you do, I’m sure she’ll want to run a piece on you.

Also, more classes for people who can afford to pay you.”

It was obvious there was more on her list, but Reagan couldn’t stop herself from diving into her lips and cutting her o . “You’re really sexy when you’re all wound up about business-y things,” she confessed after releasing her lips.

Libby laughed, cupping Reagan’s face and keeping her close. “That’s what you call a plan for growth and success?

Business-y things?”

Reagan smirked. “Mm hmm, and it’s even cuter when you say it.” Lost in her soft face and wide eyes, Reagan’s heart pounded so hard against her chest it was impossible to take a normal breath.

“I minored in business, you know?” Libby said before running her thumb over Reagan’s bottom lip. “People would pay good money for my expertise.”

“I don’t doubt that for a second,” she agreed. “Name your price and you’ve got it. Except I’ll warn you, and this might be obvious, but seeing as you’re helping me raise capital,”

Reagan tried her best to sound serious, “I don’t have a lot of liquid assets on hand.”

Pretending to give her words due consideration, Libby tapped her chin. “I’m sure we can come up with a mutually beneficial arrangement.”

The sweet act caused Reagan’s chest to seize up. She dropped the game and turned to lean against the table holding a bunch of her trademark coffee mugs. “You really don’t have to do this. I know you’re super busy and have a tremendous amount of pressure on you.” Reagan smiled.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:41 pm

“I’ll tell your grandma you left me armed with a plan to raise enough money to buy this place and do the free lessons.”

Libby dropped her phone on the table and parted Reagan’s legs with her foot like she was about to do a strip-search before stepping between them. “No more lies,” she said, wrapping her arms around her waist. “Not a single one ever again.”

Raising her eyebrows, Reagan was struck by how quickly the levity in Libby’s mood dissipated. “Never? Not even a little white one? Not even to say you’re right around the corner when you’ve only just left the house?” she joked, desperate to bring back the light, flirty energy she’d been basking in since the day before.

“Nope. Not even to say that I accidentally fell asleep when really I just wanted to bail on a social engagement,” she replied, slipping her hand beneath Reagan’s shirt and running her fingertips lightly over her spine. “All these little white lies I’ve told thinking they’d never hurt anyone have

been closing in on me.” She glanced down before her eyes returned to Reagan’s face all wide and watery. “So, nope. No more lies, not even seemingly harmless ones.”

Reagan cupped her face and ran her thumbs over her cheekbones. The words she didn’t dare speak swirled in her chest as she stomped them down and nodded. “Well, I can tell your grandmother that I refused your help, which could be true.”

Libby shook her head. “I want to help you.”

“I believe that, but I can’t pile on to everything you already have going on, Lib.”

“I’m not as busy as I used to be,” she confessed as her jaw tightened. “This could be a nice distraction from running on my own hamster wheel.”

“What do you mean? People have jumped ship despite all this?”

Libby dropped her shoulders. “I don’t really want to burden you with this. It’s definitely not fourth date material,” she joked, obviously willing the moment away.

Reagan held her closer. “You really haven’t dated a woman before.” She smirked. “By now I should know the names of all your exes, why you broke up, know your credit score and most of your childhood traumas, and have a key to your house. A little business stuff isn’t going to sca

re me away.”

Instead of responding immediately, Libby let her head drop into Reagan’s chest. “I’ve lost about a third of my clients, and a bunch of others have placed their search for love on hold indefinitely. There’s been a few new clients to replace them, but not nearly enough. If it wasn’t for what I make from my YouTube channel, I couldn’t stay afloat with how insanely high our overhead is. At this rate, I’ve got about nine months before I have to start funneling my

savings into the business to make ends meet, and I’m starting to worry.”

Reagan took a deep, cleansing breath before crushing Libby in a hug. “I’m sorry you’ve been going through that.

Have you asked your grandma for advice? I’m sure she’s weathered more than a few storms in her day.”

“No.” She snuggled into Reagan’s shirt. “I can’t tell her I’ve messed up so badly. She’ll

take the business from me and never give it back. More than once she's said she'd rather see it end with dignity than die a slow death."

"Oof. That's an insane amount of pressure," Reagan acknowledged. "But, what about no more lying?"

"I better hope she doesn't ask me outright." Libby tried to laugh while Reagan dried her tears.

"Maybe we should work on something for you, Lib. Get the blood pumping in Cupid's quiver." She shook her head.

"That sounded weird. Anyway, you know what I mean. Your current business is more important than my aspirations, okay? What if we did like a speed dating thing? You can have some inclusive events. I'm sure there's a whole untapped market of non-heteros looking for love."

"I like that you call me Lib. No one's ever called me that.

I've been Elisabeth, El, Eli, and for one misguided summer in my teens, Sabeth," she said before kissing her softly. "Thank you so much for caring, but I'd really rather let it sit for a minute. It's only been a few months. And December is usually a busy month for new clients." She smiled. "No one wants to come home alone for the holidays. Let's give it a little time, and if in the new year things aren't better, I promise I'll accept your help. Right now, I really could use the distraction of a new challenge, okay?"

"No lies, right?" Reagan said holding out her pinky finger.

Libby hooked her pinky with Reagan's and kissed it. "No lies. Now, where the hell is my co ee, Ms. Soto? We've got work to do."

CHAPTER 30

THANKSGIVING THURSDAY STRETCHED into a solid four days of Libby staying at Reagan's studio. When she'd had to teach pottery classes, Libby camped out upstairs in her little apartment and worked from her phone. It wasn't the world's best set up, but she hadn't wanted to leave their bubble even to go get her laptop. In her entire snobby life, Libby never thought she'd seek solace in a former ceramics factory in Hialeah while living in her female lover's comfortable clothes. She certainly wouldn't have expected to love every second of it.

By the time they'd made it to lunch on Sunday, they'd racked up over a dozen dates. Reagan had convinced her that each meal counted separately, and she shouldn't be penalized for the fact that all the meals happened in her studio while they'd been continuously together.

Sleeping together started o tricky. Libby always considered her sex drive to be on the low side. At least that's what Davis constantly complained about. She was always too disinterested. Too quiet. Too prudish. Too conservative. But now, she had to constantly remind herself that the no sex rule was there for a reason. The euphoria of that level of intimacy would cloud her judgment. They needed more time

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:42 pm

to get to know each other before complicating things with sex. Restraint was agonizing. Another in a long series of firsts was Libby's realization that unsatisfied arousal really did hurt like hell. Things had gotten a little less painful once she started keeping her hands to herself before bed. Reagan was also barred from wearing anything that showed any skin.

Libby felt a little guilty that the sweatpants and baggy long t-shirt made for a sweaty night, but she couldn't take any chances.

As the sun set on Sunday, the sound of chatter and a faucet downstairs signaled the end of Reagan's last class, a group of incredibly hyper and rambunctious kids that made Libby question her desire to procreate.

Their leaving was bittersweet. It meant that after dinner, she'd be gone too. Libby's chest and stomach ached like she'd been filled with bees stinging her everywhere at once.

No part of her wanted to leave, but with the long weekend drawing to a close, she couldn't find any way to justify her continued presence. Reality wasn't just knocking; it was kicking down the door.

When the coast was clear, Libby trotted down the steps wearing a rugby shirt and sweats. She'd miss the comfort of Reagan's clothes, too. And the warmth of her body wrapped around hers. And the earthy scent of wet clay that clung to just about everything in the studio.

"Need a hand with that?" Libby asked as she studied Reagan, who was struggling

with a few buckets at once.

Reagan looked up at her. The sight of her big, bright eyes and dimpled smile was a sucker punch to Libby's heart. How was she going to spend a whole day without her tomorrow?

Get it together. Don't be pathetic or clingy.

"Help with recycling used clay?" she asked with a skeptical expression before swinging her head around to get

the long side bangs out of her face without using her clay-covered hands.

Libby shrugged. "Why not? I'm sure people in your position have assistants, don't they?"

"And that's what you want?" Reagan laughed. "To be my assistant?"

The idea of role playing forced an uncontrollable smirk on her face. "Maybe," she said, inching closer until all she could see were Reagan's soft lips. "What would I have to do?"

"Well, you could help me collect these," she replied, gesturing to the buckets in her hands. "Or," she dropped the buckets with a loud crash before pulling Libby in and leaving clay handprints around her waist, "you can help me clean up. I've got clay everywhere."

As soon as Reagan pressed her forehead against hers, Libby gripped the back of her neck and pulled her in. It hadn't been more than a couple of hours since they'd last kissed, but her body already ached for the return of her touch.

"Do you have a hose outside or something?" she asked between hurried kisses.

"I do," Reagan agreed, "but I don't know what the raccoons would think of that."

The image of Reagan's body dripping with water invaded her imagination and set Libby's body on fire. "I wonder if that shower you have upstairs could help on an occasion such as this?" Her hands were already starting to untie Reagan's apron.

Reagan bit Libby's bottom lip as she groaned in pain.

"You have no idea how much I want to take a shower with you," she whispered as if confessing a sin.

Her tone didn't make it sound like an invitation. "Why does it feel like there's a but in there?"

Reagan sighed. "There's not on my part," she said before leaning back to look Libby in the face while she spoke. "Is there on yours?"

Being slammed with reality doused her flame. In her gut, she knew it was still a little too soon. They'd been wrapped up in the bubble of Reagan's place with no perspective. No distance.

"There's nothing wrong with wanting to wait," Reagan said, dropping her arms from around Libby's waist and cupping her face before bending down to pick up the buckets she'd so hastily discarded. "It's a big deal to take a step like that with. . ." She looked away as if looking for the right words. "With me."

Libby cocked her head to one side. It wasn't the first time Reagan had expressed a kind of hesitation about her readiness for physical intimacy. It was starting to feel like an accusation. Instead of letting herself get wound up, she took a breath. "Why do

you say it like that? Did you need to sleep with a woman before you knew you wanted to?" As soon as the words left her lips she knew they were too ha

rsh, but she was starting to get self-conscious about Reagan's concerns.

"You know you're not some kind of extremely early mid-life crisis right?"

Reagan set the buckets on a worktable and went for the sink to wash her hands. "Why is my being understanding making you defensive?"

Crossing her arms over her chest, Libby resisted the urge to snap. "Maybe because it's coming o like you think I don't know what I want. Or like I'm stalling because I don't want to go further than kissing and touching a little side boob."

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:42 pm

The tension dropped from Reagan's shoulders as she laughed. "I didn't know I was making it seem that way.

That's not my intention." She dried her hands and returned

to hold both of Libby's hands. "I'm just trying to be empathetic."

As soon as they touched, Libby relaxed too. "I'm not trying to pretend I know exactly what I'm doing, but technical skill has very little to do with satisfying a partner."

Reagan smiled. "I'm glad you feel that way. There's nothing worse than getting all in your head about that."

"But it is a big next step emotionally. At least for me," she admitted as her stomach churned. "I don't want to freak you out by throwing the L word out there, but I know myself enough to know that I personally can't engage that part of myself without it." Libby rested her head against Reagan's shoulder. "And I'm still a little terrified of getting hurt again.

Sometimes I worry I'll never be able to fully let go."

Warmth flooded her body as Reagan wrapped her arms around her and held her so tightly it was like nothing in the world could get to her. Libby wanted more than anything to live in this space. In the safety and all-encompassing happiness of being with Reagan.

"Relationships are chaos and risk by definition. I'm sure you know that well. We can

never truly know another person's thoughts and intentions with a hundred percent certainty. When we hand over our heart and say please don't break it, we do it with no guarantee that the person we've entrusted it to won't be negligent or cruel or grow bored.

Anything that comes with such a loss of control is inherently terrifying. Not to mention it's hard to hand it over once it's been mistreated."

Libby's closed eyes welled up with tears. "That's so beautifully put. Maybe you should be a love guru."

Reagan's chuckle rumbled in her chest, vibrating against Libby's body like thunder in a cloudy sky. "Nah, I leave that up to the experts. But I will get you some dinner. There's a

Thai place on Main Street that's pretty good. We can get something to eat, walk around, maybe get some ice cream."

"That sounds really nice," she agreed before looking up at Reagan's soft expression. "But I think I want to stay in your sweats as long as humanly possible. How about we make something?"

There was no hiding the dimpled smile that sprouted on Reagan's face. "I thought you didn't really cook."

"I don't. Maybe your kitchen inspired me," she replied, unable to hold her poker face for longer than a few seconds.

"Ha! Yeah right. My tiny kitchenette really makes you want to stretch your Julia Child muscles," she joked.

"Maybe I want to make something for you, okay? Don't be so difficult," she responded, feigning irritation.

"Okay, okay. I won't look a gift horse in the mouth. Let's go see what I have."

A few minutes later, Reagan was in the shower alone and Libby was trying really hard not to picture what she looked like. Showers had been particularly tempting over the last few days, and she had to talk herself out of slipping in behind her every time. Now, as she prepared a frozen pizza in a tiny oven which totally counted as cooking, it was especially hard not to give in to her desires.

Looking for a spatula to rotate the pizza browning on one side, Libby opened a couple of drawers in the makeshift kitchen. She wasn't expecting to find a handful of checks stashed on top.

"What the heck?" Libby picked up the familiar papers.

They were checks she'd issued pursuant to their agreement.

She flipped them over. None of them had been signed.

Confused, Libby grabbed her cell phone and pulled up her business bank account. Ignoring the lower than usual balance, she filtered for certain check numbers. It only took a minute to confirm her suspicions. The checks hadn't been

cashed. The only ones Reagan had deposited were from the very beginning. Libby searched her memory. Based on her guess, she'd stopped getting paid sometime after the gala.

Waiting for the water to finally shut off, Libby paced the small apartment. By the time Reagan emerged from the bathroom, she was nearly ready to pounce.

"Why haven't you cashed these?" She waved the checks in Reagan's face, which was covered in the water droplets dripping from her wet hair.

"Do you think I can get dressed before you interrogate me?" Reagan asked, not appearing particularly bothered by the question.

Libby turned around to let Reagan change from towel to the shorts and t-shirt she'd set out. The tiny bathroom was too small to dress in.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:42 pm

"I wasn't snooping," Libby clarified when she turned back around.

"I didn't think you were," Reagan replied as she towel-dried her hair, looking even cuter than usual. "I guess I should've told you before unilaterally changing the agreement." She spoke in her very diplomatic way. "It just didn't feel right to cash them after I'd stopped pretending."

Reagan's words cut straight through Libby's chest bone and struck her heart like a well-aimed arrow. "But these are for a bunch of months. Even before we kissed."

Reagan smiled, flashing her irresistible dimples. "What can I say? You hooked me pretty early on. My feelings for you have been real for . . ." She glanced at the checks in Libby's hand. "For however long that is."

Lunging forward, Libby wrapped her arms around Reagan's neck and kissed her. Keeping her mouth occupied was the only way to stop herself from blurting out that she loved her.

CHAPTER 31

RESTING her head against the window of her SUV as she waited in bumper-to-bumper traffic, Libby thought of Reagan. An eternal, sleepless night in her own bed had left her groggy and cold. She'd longed for the earthy scent of Reagan's makeshift apartment. The constant warmth of Reagan's body pressed against hers. The heart-stopping music of her laugh.

Libby's heart ached. They hadn't been apart twelve hours yet, but she needed to hear

the sound of her voice. Her grandmother's voice in her head was deafening. Even the most exquisite ingredients will be ruined if the recipe is rushed.

She resisted the urge to reach for the phone.

You're so pathetic, she chided as she reached for her tumbler of coffee instead. Not even the jet fuel inside did anything to brighten her mood.

Maybe if they had definite plans to see each other again she wouldn't be so consumed with nausea and dread. When they'd lingered by Reagan's door the night before, they'd whispered promises to see each other again soon. On Libby's drive home, Reagan had kept her company on the phone.

They'd talked about nothing for hours until Libby started yawning and they noticed the time. As soon as they'd hung up, Libby wanted to call her back. Like a lovesick teenager,

she wanted to stay on the phone with her all night and instantly regretted leaving her bed.

Now, inching along the city streets, Libby had to actively stop herself from turning her car around and heading for the highway toward the old manufacturing district she never imagined might contain her future.

Shaking her head, as if that could actually dislodge the thoughts and desires taking up all the room, Libby sat up straight.

"Let's use this traffic time wisely," she muttered to herself and fished her phone out of her purse.

Without letting herself feel disappointed that a message from Reagan wasn't waiting

for her, she snapped her phone into the holster on her dash and played a short, five-minute meditation. She only made it a little under a minute without thinking about Reagan, but she took it as a win.

In the slivers of time between unstoppable daydreams, Libby thought of something to occupy her mind while she crawled to work. Turning o the meditation, she opened her dictation app and started brainstorming a new blog idea.

“Ten ways not to be clingy when you’re kind of lovesick and all you want to do is be with the target of your a ection even if it means forgoing all other responsibilities and ending up living under a bridge.” The title would be refined later, but getting her feelings out moved the ache in her chest to a flutter in her stomach.

“This is awful,” she decided. “Why do people want to feel this way?”

The unease and anxiety were nothing like what she’d experienced with Davis. She’d always been happy to see him and attracted to him when he was being particularly charming. When they were apart, she thought about him and wanted to see him again. But it was just that . . . a want. What

she felt now was more like a physiological high jacking of her brain and nervous system.

After another sip of overly acidic co ee, Libby started again. “One, meditate. It can be as easy as concentrating on one full breath. Then another.”

Taking her own advice, Libby took a few cleansing breaths.

“Two, plan some time with your friends,” she said before making a mental note to set up a virtual happy hour with Zena later. They’d been playing phone tag since her visit, and Libby hadn’t been doing her best to keep up her end of the game.

“Three, move your body! To the extent you’re able, get some exercise. If you can’t, just a little change of scenery could help keep you distracted. Go outside and be present.

That reminds me. I should definitely book a Pilates class,”

she muttered before asking Siri to call the studio she hadn’t visited in months.

By the time she’d brainstormed a few more ideas she intended to use for herself, the crushing discomfort she’d woken up with had been mitigated to a milder condition.

She’d just pulled into her building’s p

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:42 pm

arking garage when her phone dinged.

Reagan: Good morning . . . just woke up thinking of you. How'd you sleep? Me? I slept horribly without you. Thx for asking.

All the progress she'd made disappeared with a single text. Her heart raced and her stomach knotted. She was both too empty and too full in the same moment. Before she could compose a text that sounded the right amount of interested without being desperate, Reagan texted again.

Reagan: It's so cold without you.

A photo followed of Reagan laying on the right side of the bed. Her messy hair covered part of her face as she pouted

and pointed to the other side. The empty side Libby had been sleeping on.

"God, you look so cute in the morning," she whined, wishing she was under her sheets and buried in the warm nape of her neck. Late autumn was proving to be so much colder than she was used to, or maybe she'd become dependent on Reagan's body heat.

Libby: I miss you too.

She sent the text before she could overthink it. Reagan had found the wherewithal to be open and vulnerable with her, the least she could do was reciprocate.

Reagan: I'm sure there's a rule, but when can I see you again?

Is lunch too soon?

Libby laughed too hard, earning a questioning glance from one of the first-floor bankers who'd parked next to her.

Instead of being embarrassed, she waved at him, only increasing his confusion. People talked a lot about New Yorkers being rude. Those people have never been to Miami.

Friendliness between strangers was usually a sign that someone was going to try and pull something shady.

Libby: I have meetings all day, but how about dinner?

Reagan: Done. Do you want to meet somewhere? Or I can go to your place? I can make you a frozen pizza this time. lol.

Libby: Or I can pick something up from that little French place?

Bring it over?

Reagan: You and Coq au Vin??? Count me in! I'll get us a bottle of that red blend you liked.

Libby: Okay, but after dinner we have to talk about the fundraiser. I'm going to have some things to show you later.

Reagan: I sure do hope you have some things to show me. It's already been too long since I've seen them.

Grinning, Libby's face turned hot. She was going to have to limit herself to one glass of wine or their relationship was going to take a massive leap forward tonight.

Libby: Don't be terrible! I'll be there at 9. XOXO

Still blushing, Libby tossed some things in her bag and started for the elevator. After ascending all the way to the top floor, her phone buzzed again. She couldn't help hoping it was another picture of Reagan in bed, but it wasn't.

Jennifer Borgmann: Hi Libby, I'm sorry to reach you like this. I just tried calling but it went to voicemail. I need to tell you ASAP

that I quit the matchmaking program. I guess text is better since the terms of service indicate I should give my notice in writing.

Libby made it as far as the waiting room before she dropped into one of the white leather chairs. Anxiety ripped through her system. Jennifer and Gale had hit it so well.

Against her advice, they'd even taken a trip for the holiday.

In a panic, Libby pulled up a web browser on her phone and searched for her name. What new theory had surfaced about her? Or worse. What new truth?

As she scrolled through page after page, she didn't find anything new. Even the negative press she'd gotten a few months ago was buried behind her popular videos, blog posts, and TV appearances.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:42 pm

“Libby, is something wrong?” Taylor asked when she broke away from a pack of other sta and sat down next to her. “I don’t know,” she whispered. “Did Jennifer Borgmann tell you why she was leaving?”

Her thin eyebrows scrunched together. “Not at all.”

“And you haven’t heard anything new or negative about me this morning?” She talked around the massive boulder in her throat.

Taylor shook her head. “No. Nothing. And the first thing I do while I make co ee every morning is check.”

“Then why is she dumping us?” The question was really aimed at herself.

Libby: I’m sorry to hear you want to leave. Finding love isn’t a simple proposition. It often takes a few matches before we find the perfect fit. If you’re willing to give us a chance, I’d love another opportunity to match you. We had a number of other excellent candidates.

Jennifer: There’s just nothing else I think you can do for me.

Fighting the wave of nausea that burned the back of her throat, Libby reminded herself that she couldn’t cry in her waiting room in open view of half her sta , even if Jennifer leaving her felt like the straw that took down the camel. She was definitely the camel. If she couldn’t keep a new client who’d come to her without being skeptical that a woman loving woman could match people of any gender, she had no hope with the others already hanging on by a thread.

A photo popped up on her phone of Jennifer and Gale cuddled up in front of a roaring fire in a very cozy looking cabin.

“What is it? What did she say?” Taylor asked, her cheeks and neck bright red while every other inch of visible skin turned milk white.

“I don’t know,” she replied.

“May I?” Taylor grabbed the phone when Libby was too stunned to respond and zoomed in on the picture.

Taylor’s horrified faced burst into tears. “They’re engaged!”

“What? No! What?” Libby snatched the phone back. She hadn’t really noticed they were holding their hands out.

Though, to be fair, she’d been stuck on the whole getting fired part to really study the image.

“It’s a little soon, but I guess when you know, you know,”

Taylor said, still crying as she laughed.

Libby’s pent-up anxiety manifested into uproarious laughter. They needed the win.

They moved into the conference room to call Jennifer and get all the juicy details. When they were finished, Libby stopped Taylor from leaving the room.

“You did a really amazing job, Tay.”

She smiled and shifted under the weight of the compliment. “All I did was sort some

people out.” She shrugged.

“You put Gale at the top of the pile, exactly where I would have put her. I’m really impressed. You were a big part of changing someone’s life, and I want to celebrate that.”

“Well, I learned from the best,” she said, her skin flushing again.

Libby replied with a hug. “I’m so proud of you.”

Taylor wiped away another tear when they separated.

“Just for the record, I did not think they were getting engaged.”

Libby smiled. “When you know, you know, right?” The image of Reagan popped up in her mind. “Hey, do you have time to help me with something? I want to do an art sale fundraiser thing.”

“For Reagan?” she asked with a knowing smirk as they left the conference room and headed for her office.

“Maybe,” Libby replied coyly.

“Count me in.” Taylor lingered at her door for a moment.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:42 pm

“Also, maybe it’s time to call Janice and thank her.”

Libby nodded. The talent agent’s instinct had been impressive. “I’ll call her now. Will you send her a basket?

One of the big ones with champagne and caviar.”

“What should I write in the note?”

Libby sat in her chair and turned on her desktop. “Tell her she’s got a job here if she ever wants to moonlight.”

“You got it. I’ll be back with happy ending paperwork too.”

When Taylor was gone, Libby pulled up her phone.

Ignoring other messages and a missed call from her grandmother, she returned to their earlier exchange. After reading her texts a few times, she pulled up the picture of her in bed and stared at it. Her heart raced.

“When you know, you know,” she muttered.

Ah, shit.

C H A P T

E R 3 2

A WEEK AND A HALF LATER, it was all hands on deck for Reagan's fundraiser. They'd decided on early December because short notice was better than competing with Christmas.

Libby had a crazy number of things to plan and favors to call in, but the all-nighters she'd spent with Reagan had been a nice reward. For her part, Reagan and her students were up to their ears in clay. Apart from purely artistic ceramics, they'd worked together to create impressive functional pieces for homes and gardens.

Armed with two huge to-go carriers of coffee, Libby banged on the massive metal door of Reagan's studio with her foot.

"Good morning, Libby!" Freddie greeted her with a broad smile and an apron covered in paint and colored glazes. "I finished my set of four bowls. Do you want to see?"

"Help her with the coffee first!" Peggy yelled over the noisy roar of a dozen conversations.

"Sorry," he said, taking the sleeve of paper cups under her arm and the bag full of sugar and creamer crammed under the other.

"Thanks for your help." Libby smiled as one of the other students took the heavy coffee containers. "I can't wait to

see what you all have been so busy working on!"

Freddie beamed and talked excitedly about having painted a pair of coffee mugs using slip, which he explained was a colored liquified clay. Libby listened attentively as she prepared two coffees. One for Peggy and the other for Reagan.

Once she'd seen everyone's progress, she made her way through the maze of workstations. All ten tables were filled with two or three people working diligently. With just a couple of days before the event, most of the work was decorative, but some pieces were still being given shape. If they could get a reasonable sum for even half of the hundreds of pieces, it would be a huge success.

As she neared the back where the huge industrial kilns were, Libby wondered where Reagan was keeping her work.

Despite her many subtle and not so subtle inquiries, she still didn't know what her girlfriend was making.

Girlfriend. The term caused a fluttering in Libby's stomach. They hadn't exactly used any official terms or talked about exclusivity, which was against her advice that people be clear about their expectations to avoid hurt feelings, but they felt official. Libby shook off the thoughts and focused on the moment. She was happy. Her needs were being met. That's all that mattered. Defining their relationship could wait until after the event. Or the new year.

Or maybe Valentine's Day.

The heat from the overworked kilns made the air thick as Libby approached the back. She was happy to tolerate the stuffiness in exchange for the thin layer of sweat covering Reagan's exposed arms as she stretched to retrieve pieces on the kiln's highest shelf. Never did Libby expect to be attracted to a human in denim overalls, but there she was openly gawking at Reagan and her newly dyed blonde hair with intentionally exposed dark roots.

"Don't drop that or Freddie will kill you," Libby joked as Reagan carefully pulled a set of plates out of the kiln. She recognized the design.

Reagan flipped her humid hair out of her face. “Don’t I know it.” Her dimpled smile had an amnesia-inducing effect. All that existed in the world were her gleaming brown eyes and heart-stopping lips. “Is that for me?” she asked, glancing at the little paper cup in Libby’s hand.

“Oh, yeah.” She laughed a little more nervously than she intended. “I figured you all could use the fuel today.”

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:42 pm

Reagan kissed her on the cheek before taking the coffee.

“Thanks. You’re a lifesaver. T minus thirty hours and I think we’re all freaking out a little bit.”

“Even you?” Libby quirked her eyebrow.

Reagan took a deliberately long sip of her coffee instead of responding.

“Wow.” Libby exaggerated her disbelief. “The coolest cucumber on the planet is nervous?”

“Well. This cuke has never tried to sell like a thousand pieces in one day to a room full of strangers.”

“Don’t you worry about selling,” Libby said, inching forward and grabbing her overall’s straps. “You don’t have to do any selling. All you have to do is mingle, walk around, and be your usual charming self.”

Reagan grinned before setting her cup down on her cart full of bone-white ceramics and wrapped her arms around her waist. “What did I do to get so lucky, huh?”

Libby wiggled her eyebrows before planting a chaste kiss on the corner of her mouth. “You haven’t even gotten lucky yet.”

Reagan squeezed her tighter. “I’m not sure I can handle any more luck,” she whispered against the shell of her ear.

Running her fingers over the soft, newly buzzed hair at the base of her neck, Libby grinned. “Oh, come on. I’m sure you can handle me.”

“Why don’t we go upstairs, and you can fuck me as much as you want?”

The prospect of slipping away to her apartment and ripping each other’s clothes off was painfully tempting, but they’d made it this far already. She didn’t want their first time to be a rushed tryst with a packed house.

“I have to record for the channel today,” Libby responded with a frown. “I can’t mess up my hair,” she added before pretending to fluff her wavy ‘do.

Reagan slumped her shoulders. “All right. I guess I won’t hold you up. I have a ton of stuff to get out of the kilns and all the final things to fire.” Reality broke them apart, and Reagan picked up her coffee cup. “Thanks for driving all the way out here to bring reinforcements. I’ll walk you out.”

“Are you going to show me what you’ve made?” Libby asked as they passed her private work area where things of varying sizes were covered in canvas and tarps.

Reagan slipped her hand in Libby’s and smiled. “You’ll see in thirty hours.”

“How can I hype it up if I haven’t seen it?”

Laughing, Reagan pushed open the front door and dragged her along. “I thought you could sell anything. Aren’t intangible concepts your stock-in-trade? Help me build a little mystery.”

“Fine,” she agreed with a sigh when they reached the driver’s side door of her SUV.

“Trust me,” Reagan leaned forward, pressing Libby against the door before slipping her thigh between her legs.

The contact produced an immediate jolt of desire. “It’ll be worth the wait . . . but not nearly as much as you are.”

The words, warm and wet against her skin, made Libby’s head reel and her body ache. “I’m so ready for you,” she groaned as she snaked her arms around Reagan’s torso.

Reagan stifled. “I wasn’t trying to rush you, I was just

—” Her dark eyes were huge and filled with worry.

Libby bit the inside of her cheek before interrupting her.

“You’ve been exceedingly patient and respectful,” she assured her. “And I’m ready to take the next step with you,”

she confessed, surprised by her own words but feeling the truth at her core.

“Not to go all high school on you here, but does that mean we’re in GF status?” Reagan asked, her forehead wrinkling adorably.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:42 pm

Libby's chest tightened to near snapping. "Do you want to be?"

Reagan laughed as her cheeks flushed bright red.

"Obviously! Do you?"

"Obviously!" she echoed with a hammering heart. All she could do was dive into Reagan's lips and seek refuge in her kiss until the adrenaline eased from her body.

"Well, those were the most terrifying few seconds of my life," Reagan confessed after spinning her around and setting her back down again.

"You can't possibly think I'd say no, right?" she asked, still as jittery as if she'd pounded both boxes of coffee she brought.

"I don't know," she replied, her dimples cutting deep into her cheeks from the uncontrollable, broad smile. "You might not be ready for all that."

Libby cocked her head to one side. "This means what?"

"That we're exclusive and announcing an intention to commit to exploring a future together?"

"A bit clinical, but I think that about sums it up," Reagan agreed.

Libby cupped her face before kissing her again. "I know we've done this all out of order. I mean you've already met my family and I've sort of come out to the world

before

realizing I had feelings for you, but I want everything with you.”

“Even if it doesn’t follow any of your time-honored rules?”

Libby laughed. “Maybe especially because of that.”

After kissing so long that Reagan had to physically pull herself o of Libby and stand a foot away or she’d never leave, Libby ached for the return of her touch.

Libby willed herself into the car. “Do you want to come over to my parent’s house for dinner? I can’t blow them o again or my grandma might ambush me at home.”

“I wish I could, but the girls are coming over tonight with pizza to help me figure out the whole display situation. I’ve never had to account for so many pieces and I might have more stands and stu to build.”

Libby tried to keep her face neutral. Another one of the things they’d done wrong was fail to meet each other’s friends. It had been her fault. Between wanting to stay locked in their bubble and being intimidated to meet them, she’d pushed it o .

“When do I get to meet them?” Libby asked, trying to sound upbeat.

“At the fundraiser. They’ve all agreed to work for free.”

Libby smiled despite feeling queasy.

Reagan stepped back into her gravitational pull and held her hands. “Don’t worry. They’re going to love you.”

The way Reagan held her in her gaze made it obvious there was more to say. Maybe it was because Libby was holding back the same sentiment.

“I . . .” The words couldn’t break free. “I’ll miss you.”

Reagan smiled but Libby noticed the momentary disappointment in her eyes. “I’ll miss you too.”

After Reagan insisted she didn’t need her to come over after dinner to lend a hand, they said their final farewell. As

she watched Reagan slip back inside the building, she was sure neither of them said what they were really thinking.

SITTING ON THE FLOOR WITH SUE, KIMBER, AND IMANI EATING PIZZA was the first time Reagan had taken a break since Libby had shown up with co ee over fifteen hours earlier. With everyone’s help, including almost all of Libby’s sta , they’d transforme

d the sprawling space into an organized gallery.

At the entrance they’d placed all of the tableware and arranged it to look much like a high-end store. The studio space had been cleared of all the workstations and pottery wheels and been divided into sections using colored fabrics draped from the ceiling. After a few di erent configurations, they’d decided to organize the areas by kind of piece rather than by individual artist.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:42 pm

A sculpture alcove led into a zone full of vases and similar vessels, and so on until guests were funneled out to a rarely used courtyard that had been transformed into a magical garden full of fountains, pots, and a hundred little lawn ornaments. Reagan's work was displayed together and hidden behind a massive black curtain suspended from the rafters for added drama.

"Everything really looks incredible," Sue said with a mouthful of pizza. "It was a shit-ton of work but totally worth it."

Kimber agreed as she reached for another room-temp beer, but it was Imani Reagan was watching.

"This was a good idea," Imani finally agreed before taking a sip from her can. "You've been talking about this for so long, I can't believe you actually did it."

"Wow, that almost sounded like a compliment," Reagan joked as she leaned back on her elbow. She was too tired to

get up o the floor.

"Don't push it or I'll comment how we're here and the Pillow Princess isn't," she replied with a laugh.

"Don't call her that," Reagan snapped.

"Chill out, I'm playing. Though it's funny that you don't dispute it."

When Reagan's jaw tightened, Kimber interrupted.

"Okay, okay. Let's not do this. Can't we just relish the feeling of a job well done?"

Imani rolled her eyes a little but didn't argue.

"But where is your new lady love?" Sue asked.

"She's been here all week and she was here this morning," Reagan replied, her mind drifting back to the taste of Libby's kiss.

"I'm shocked she hasn't moved in the way she's got you all dreamy-eyed," Sue joked, snagging the last slice.

"Straight girls don't move that fast," Kimber replied with complete confidence.

"But it's been like a year, right? Though I guess it's hard to remember how long they've been together when we haven't met her." Imani's eyes were trained on her. She was always so good at sniffing out when things weren't quite right.

Reagan's stomach tightened but she didn't tell them the truth. She wanted to tell them the story. To share the excitement of falling head over heels and how they'd taken another step forward that morning, but she kept her mouth shut. Being unable to share her feelings was a small price to pay for feeling them.

"Well, you'll all get to meet her tomorrow. She's really looking forward to meeting you too," Reagan said after sifting for kernels of truth.

Imani looked like she wanted to say something else but took a sip of her beer instead.

"I think she looks really nice in her videos," Sue decided.

“And she seems to really know what she’s talking about when it comes to dating. Maybe she can hook your besties up with some ladies.”

Kimber shoved her. “She’s not a Hollywood Madam.”

Laughter evaporated the tension that had rushed in and chilled the room.

Sue clutched her imaginary pearls. “Come on, that’s not what I meant!”

They talked and laughed a while longer until Reagan’s energy level finally reached its end. Once she was alone, she dragged herself into the shower and then dropped on her bed like a corpse. Despite being totally exhausted, she couldn’t sleep and turned to her phone.

Libby: Come onnnnn send me pictures of how it turned out!

They’d been texting about her progress, but Reagan continued to refuse photographic evidence. After all her effort, she wanted to be rewarded by Libby’s amazement when she walked into the fully transformed space.

Reagan: You’re the one who decided to be a good girl and see your family tonight! If you hadn’t, you’d be here right now seeing it for yourself.

Libby: I’m pretty sure you set me up for multiple pervy responses, but I’ll leave them alone and say that I do wish I was there right now.

Page 90

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:42 pm

Reagan: Me? Little old me?? Set you up?? Never! For real though, I wish you were here too. . . I can't believe I've gotten so used to sleeping with you.

Libby: Tell me about it. . . I've been trying to figure out how exactly I became addicted to you.

Reagan: I know exactly what you mean. . . maybe you can spend the night tomorrow and stay through the weekend? Or we could go to your place? I'm sure you're sick of my small bed, crappy shower, and lack of a real kitchen.

Libby: No. If it's all the same to you, I really like being at your place. It feels more like home.

Reagan: And I love having you here. . . as long as you're not hiding another family at your place or something. lol.

Libby: Where would I keep them? You've been to my house!

Reagan: Maybe you sent the kids to a babysitter for the night and concealed the evidence of their existence. I don't know your life! Libby: lol is it so hard to believe that I'd rather be at your house than mine?

Staring at her text, Reagan let the sentiment settle over her like a blanket just out of the dryer.

Reagan: So, is that a yes for the weekend?

She made the offer of a sleepover despite how painful sleeping with her could be. Reagan had never struggled to control herself before, but she'd also never waited so long to sleep with someone she'd been sharing a bed with.

Libby: I'll pack a bag this time.

Her heart filled like a helium balloon inflated to the point of near bursting. She had to resist the urge to ask her to come over right then.

Reagan: And deprive me the opportunity to see you in my clothes??? Fine.

After a little while, Libby stopped responding and Reagan drifted off with the phone pressed to her chest.

CHAPTER 33

"THANK you so much for meeting me so early," Libby said as she met Mary at the door of her shop half an hour after sunrise.

The seamstress smiled as she unlocked a series of locks.

"I'm happy to help and the free publicity isn't bad." She laughed.

Libby smiled. The banner advertising Mary's dress shop and other local ventures hadn't cost much and added some much-needed color to the studio's drab exterior.

"Rising tides lifts all boats, right?"

"Reagan has infected you with her obsessive love of Hialeah, hasn't she?"

"What can I say? It's impossible to resist," she agreed.

“Don’t I know it,” Mary replied with a laugh as she pushed the door open and jogged to the security panel to disarm it.

Inside, she followed her through racks of hand-tailored clothes to the dressing room. As she waited for the outfit she trusted Mary to design without her input, Libby sent texts like a machine gun aimed at three targets at once. Her grandmother’s caterers had come through on very little notice, but she was left with the B team, which required more micro-managing. The party rental place couldn’t find

the location to set up the tent, and she had to send them step by step directions.

“Ready?” Mary asked as she approached with a black garment bag.

Libby nodded before tossing her phone on her purse and peeling o her jeans and sweater. Mary was so used to seeing people in their underwear she didn’t even flinch.

“You think it’ll be okay even without time for a fitting?”

Libby regretted having only considered her outfit at the last minute. All she’d had time to do was call Mary and show up at the break of dawn so she could take her measurements.

“I doubt you’ve changed much in three days,” she joked before hanging the dress on a peg and unzipping the bag.

“Oh, wow. Mary.” The blood-red jumpsuit with plunging neckl

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:42 pm

ine was stunning. “This is gorgeous,” she said, running her fingertips over the finely crafted garment. “It’s so edgy and so sexy. I can’t pull this o .”

Mary waved her away as she pulled the jumpsuit o the hanger. “Get outta here with that. Come on. You’re going to have to lose the bra. It’s going to compliment what I made for Reagan so well.”

Before she knew what was happening, Libby was dressed in the long-sleeved jumpsuit showing more cleavage than she’d ever revealed before. After being prompted, she slipped into pointy nude heels.

“You look stunning. Reagan is going to die,” Mary decided excitedly. “What are going to do about your hair?”

Libby glanced at the mirror. “What’s wrong with my hair?” She stroked her waves.

Mary stood on a stepstool and pulled Libby’s hair back.

“This outfit is all about drama. We need to pull this into a painfully tight bun and darken your eye makeup. Trust me.

You’re going to be a knockout.”

Turning her head from side to side to get di erent angles, Libby agreed to trust her judgment. Half an hour later, her dark hair was styled in an elegant, low bun and her dark green eyes were popping against the smokey eye makeup and bold, red lipstick Mary talked her into.

Libby had never felt like a bigger imposter in her life, but as her morning worn on and she received compliments from the various vendors she met, she'd started to believe she didn't look as uncomfortable as she felt.

It was near sunset when she turned the familiar corner toward Reagan's desolate corner of the world. This time, instead of driving alone down the winding road through empty factories and dilapidated warehouses, she was one in a long line of cars inching toward the massive tent in the distance.

Libby popped several antacids as she waited her turn, though part of her wanted to pull privilege and drive around to the front of the line. It wasn't entirely her fault she was late. Three times she'd set out for the studio, and each time she was forced back by an emergency. Now, with a trunk full of dry ice, several cases of wine, and more garbage bags than anyone could use in a lifetime, she was finally minutes away from the main event.

"Ms. Cassanova," the valet that had worked her grandmother's parties for years eyes widened as he opened the door. "Wow."

Libby smiled as she stepped out of the car. "Thanks, Mike. You look pretty sharp yourself," she said, pointing at the paint-splattered vests.

"Pretty cool, right? Mrs. Cassanova didn't think too much of Reagan's idea," he replied as he jumped into her SUV.

Standing frozen, Libby opened her mouth, but it was several seconds before any sound came out. "My grandmother is here?"

"Yes. And your parents. And your brother," he said with a furrowed brow as if judging her for not knowing her own family was in attendance.

“Can you pull it around back? The caterers need what’s in the trunk,” she managed to squeak out before he closed the door.

As Libby sauntered up to the tent, she projected as much confidence as she could muster. Though she was grateful Taylor ran up to her before she got more than halfway up the walkway.

“Holy smokes! Is that from Reagan’s friend’s place? She made this?” Taylor took her abruptly by the hand and spun her around. “You look like you just walked out of a fashion magazine or something. Come on, I promised the reporter from Telemundo you’d do a little thing for her as soon as you got here.”

As they rushed toward the tent where hundreds of people were helping themselves to food and drink, Libby protested.

“Tay, I’m not here as a guest! I have a ton of stu to do!”

“I know, I know, but I made a ton of promises to get her to come. And her being here is how I got, like, half the other people to come,” she explained as Libby tried not to lose her balance while on razor-thin heels.

Taylor wasn’t exaggerating when she said she’d made a lot of promises. It took Libby nearly an hour to fulfill them all and then another twenty minutes taking pictures with guests at the step full of sponsor logos.

She was nearly free to find Reagan when the Cassanova Clan started making its way toward her like a pack of wolves circling weak pray. Libby straightened and jammed her hands in the convenient pockets Mary made.

As the Alpha, her grandmother walked ahead of the others. Libby smiled despite her fear of disapproval. While her grandmother eyed her silently, her parents hugged her

and complimented her look and the party. No one mentioned how they were invited.

“Hola, Mima.” Libby took the initiative and hugged her grandmother. “What do you think of the event?”

“Where did you buy that?” she asked, giving away no hints as to whether she liked it.

“Reagan’s friend is a seamstress. Mary Mercado. She just opened her own shop and made this for me in no time. She’ll be here tonight.” Libby hoped her grandmother would be gentle if only to refrain from being rude to a guest by criticizing her.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:42 pm

Her grandmother reached out and felt the fabric of her sleeve before turning the cover over and looking at the stitching. “Very fine work. Please introduce me, or shall I ask Reagan since she’s the one who hand-delivered our invitations.”

Without telling me!?

“I’m just so glad everyone could be here on such short notice,” she replied graciously. “Have you been inside yet?”

“Yeah,” her brother responded. “And bought a couple things already. I think you guys are going to have a huge hit on your hands. I really wanted one of the mugs, but there weren’t any left.”

His genuine disappointment filled her heart. “I’ll get you one.” She smiled. “I happen to know the artists.”

Libby smiled and glad-handed throughout the tent until she finally broke free, checked on the caterer’s tent, and then bolted for the studio. Despite the brisk evening, she was sweaty and happy to get into the building kept cool by industrial fans.

“Wow,” Libby gasped when she stepped inside. Electronic dance music thumped just loud enough to be heard above the roar of the crowd. The fabric panels blocked her view of most

of the space, but it sounded like a least a million people were talking at once.

Antique furniture was interspersed between big metal displays. Everything was full of the most beautiful plates, bowls, cups, and mugs. Most of them had been tagged with red squares bearing names and phone numbers.

“See anything you like?”

Libby turned at the sound of Reagan’s voice behind her.

Her tight, red and black patterned pants hung low on her hips. On top, she wore a loose black shirt and a long pendant with a big chunk of jade at the end. Her sideswiped blonde hair added the perfect complement to her sexy, roguish appearance.

With sweaty palms and a dry mouth, Libby forced herself to speak. “You look gorgeous.”

Reagan pulled her in and kissed the side of her mouth to avoid messing up her lipstick. As she did, Libby found that she liked the slight height advantage her shoes offered despite being hideously uncomfortable. “You look devastating,” she whispered against the shell of her ear before taking her hand.

“I can’t believe you did all this.” Libby gawked at her surroundings in open astonishment.

“I most definitely didn’t do it by myself. Your sta was a huge help and my friends helped with the final push. They’re all armed with tablets and running around taking payments now. I think you should give them a few days o after this.”

“Don’t worry, they’ll get some very generous paid leave.”

Libby smiled as she was led through a crowd and into a section filled with whimsical

lanterns. Half of them already had red tags on them.

“I can’t believe you’ve sold so much of this,” Libby said as they crossed into a space full of geometric animal sculptures.

“Freddie is over the moon. He had some color flyers printed up with his work and they’re flying off his little stand. I think he’s already got a couple of commissions lined up.”

Libby’s chest filled with pride. “You remind him that I’m still his number one patron.”

Reagan chuckled, her dark eyes gleaming under the soft light emanating from one of the hundreds of industrial floor lamps scattered around the place. In that moment, it took Herculean effort not to confess the emotion bursting from her chest.

“Reagan!” a disembodied voice shouted over the ambient noise. “Code three!”

“What’s that? What’s code three? Is that bad? Why don’t I know the codes?” Libby’s hurried words reflected the anxious energy bubbling up in her body.

Reagan smiled. “Don’t worry. I invited the landlord and that just means he’s here. I’m going to go meet him. Do you think you can make your way to my little corner?”

“Of course, I’ll head that way now,” she replied, figuring she could only get so lost before finding it.

In a flash, Reagan was gone, and Libby was alone in the throng of people she’d barely noticed before. She’d gotten about halfway through the exhibition when a beautiful woman holding a tablet approached her.

“And you must be Elisabeth,” the woman said as if they’d already been speaking.

“Hi, I’m sorry. I don’t know your name,” she said, holding out her hand.

The woman glanced at her hand for a full second before taking it rather limply in hers. “Imani Igwe,” she said, looking Libby right in the eye. “Reagan’s ex-wife.”

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:42 pm

Despite her surprise, Libby refused to look as thrown as she felt. “I’ve heard so much about you. What a pleasure to

finally meet you.”

Imani didn’t return her smile. “Have you seen the courtyard? It’s so much quieter out there. I’d love to show it to you.”

Libby’s stomach churned as her eyes darted toward the opposite side of the room. How long would Reagan take with the landlord?

“Come on,” Imani insisted. “I’ll be quick.”

As Libby followed the strange woman that had once shared her life with Reagan, she knew Imani had no interest in showing her anything. She was, however, sure that she was about to get a piece of her mind.

“I

didn’t even know this was out here,” Libby confessed against her will when they stepped outside. The u-shaped courtyard was covered in obviously new artificial turf and was beautifully decorated with fountains and string lights.

“Listen, I’m not trying to ambush you here, but I’m not one to waste time, and I know Reagan’s been waiting for you to do her big reveal,” Imani started only a moment after darting for an empty corner where they’d have some privacy.

Libby clenched her jaw and waited with raised eyebrows.

Imani's face softened, but only a little. "Obviously, I don't know you other than what I've found online, which is surprisingly a lot of flu and very little substance. That fact alone raises about a dozen red flags for me. Why haven't we met you?"

The question was a punch to Libby's gut. Was she accusing her? Had she figured out the holes in their story?

The last thing she wanted to do was tell another lie, and while she formulated some way to respond with a truth that wasn't incriminating, Imani spoke again.

"I'm not some hateful or intolerant bitch," she explained in a low voice when someone new entered the courtyard.

Libby knit her brows together in confusion. "I know there's

such a thing as being bisexual, obviously. Or some people figure out who they are a little later in life. And maybe you're the kind of straight, or formerly straight, girl that falls for the person not their gender." Imani waved a hand in the air.

"None of that is any of my business."

"What are you trying to ask me exactly?" Libby's tone was harsher than she intended, but Imani was all over the place and confusing as well as mildly terrifying.

"What I'm saying is," she paused in open irritation, "I don't know what your particular deal is, but I know Reagan."

When she falls, she falls too hard and too fast. If you asked her to stay a secret all this time that y'all were supposedly together, then she would've done it for you whether it

put her back in the closet or not.”

Libby opened her mouth to dispute the facts, but she couldn't without confessing. The weight of the secret continued to pull her further into the depths of a bottomless black lake.

“Like I said, I'm really not trying to learn the details. If I haven't gotten them from her, I don't want to go behind her back to get them from anybody else. All of this is to say that you need to protect her even if it's from herself. She'll give you the world, and you have to be so careful not to take it.”

Imani's voice cracked and her eyes filled with unshed tears.

“She'll never put the oxygen mask on herself first, and if you love her, you'll always be watching for that.”

In that moment, Libby was able to see that behind the caustic delivery was a person who cared about Reagan very much. She relaxed her shoulders and nodded. “I promise,”

she said, meaning her pledge with every fiber of her being.

“Libby! Reagan's looking for you! She wants to pull back the curtains,” Taylor shouted from the doorway before disappearing inside.

After reaching what Libby hoped was an armistice, she followed Imani through the crowds to where Reagan was standing with a microphone in front of a massive black curtain suspended from the ceiling. It was her private space where she'd kept so many pieces under wraps and away from prying eyes.

When she caught sight of Libby standing at the front of the densely packed crowd.

She grinned and then tested her sound. While Reagan greeted everybody and acknowledged just how many people had come together to make the event possible, Libby's eyes drifted to the side. She'd intended to see how Imani was looking at Reagan, when she noticed her family was standing with Reagan's family.

Oh God. What have they been talking about?

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:42 pm

Libby's blood turned to ice and her stomach nearly dropped out of her body. Grabbing the phone from her pocket, she started to text Taylor until Imani gave her a chilling side eye. She wanted to explain that she wasn't just messing around on her phone at such an important moment, but interrupting Reagan's speech would only make things worse. Libby donned her most serious expression and slipped her phone back in her pocket.

I guess the damage is done anyway.

"I don't mean to be too precious about it," Reagan joked as she strode to one side of the curtain and looked right at Libby, "but this collection really has my heart. I hope you all love it as much as I do."

In response, Libby's entire body ignited with heat. Her chest ached and it was all she could do not to break free from the crowd and tackle her. Thankfully, Reagan drew back the curtain before she leapt.

There were a dozen pieces of various types on pedestals arranged in a semi-circle, but all Libby could see was the enormous dragon at the center. It was easily as long as she

was tall, and its serpentine body curved in a huge s-shape. It was so delicate and so huge she couldn't fathom how Reagan made it without it breaking. Painted dark blue with a design along its belly, it was easily the most fantastic thing she'd ever seen.

As Libby neared it with a group of other guests, she realized that it was the Miami skyline as viewed from her balcony against the night's sky complete with the swirling

Miami River as the Dragon's belly.

She rushed to Reagan and wrapped her arms around her neck. "I have no words for how amazing you are."

Reagan's response was a chaste kiss. "You inspire me."

All of the sound and chaos melted away. Libby was lost and hoped no one would send a search party.

"Libby, can I get a few with you two?" Her reporter friend from the New Times interrupted as she snapped a picture of them in each other's arms. "This is a nice show, and I want to add a little human to my piece."

"Yeah," Libby cleared her throat. "Of course."

After the interview, Libby made a beeline for her family, who was still mingling with the Sotos. Despite her apprehension, they were getting along rather well. She stayed with them until her grandmother decided it was time to leave just in case.

When she was free again, Libby found Taylor. "Here." She slipped her the black American Express card in her pocket.

"Please buy everything that's left, but first get me the dragon," she whispered into her ear.

Once the food and booze ran out, the crowds thinned and some of their volunteers promised to return in the morning to set everything back in order. Reagan and Libby refused with the utmost appreciation for the offers. Everyone had worked hard enough.

As Reagan went to lock the door, Libby retrieved the bottle of wine she'd stashed and

waited for her in the courtyard to properly thank her for the heart-stopping dragon.

CHAPTER 34

SITTING on a stretched-out tarp on the artificial grass with the sound of fountains and crickets filling the night's sky, Libby poured two glasses of wine before peeling the tight shoes off her swollen feet.

"I am wiped," Reagan said as she collapsed onto the floor next to Libby.

"I'm surprised you didn't lose your voice! That was a schmoozing marathon," she joked before taking a sip of red wine and offering Reagan the glass she'd poured for her.

Reagan sat up, resting her weight on the arm stretched out behind her as she eagerly took the plastic cup. "You know it's kind of all a blur. Did you have a good time? I'm sorry I couldn't spend more time with you."

"Please, don't apologize for that. You were working and so was I. Plus, it gave me a chance to talk to the ex-wife I didn't realize you were quite so close with."

Reagan winced. "I'm sorry. I should've given you the heads up. I know this sounds weird, but sometimes I forget we were married. It was so brief compared to how long we've been friends, but still, that must have been awkward. That's my bad."

Libby shook her head. "It was fine. I can tell how much she cares about you."

"Oh no, did she give you a speech about not hur-

ting me or she'd hunt you down?"

“Not quite such an open threat,” Libby chuckled, “but I would definitely be afraid of a crowbar to the knee if I broke your heart. I’m not sure if that was more or less surprising than seeing my family here.”

“I forgot to mention that too, huh?” Reagan asked coyly.

“At first I thought it would be a nice surprise, and when I realized I should tell you, I got so caught up in preparations it slipped my mind.”

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:42 pm

Libby set her cup down before turning her full attention to Reagan. “What are we going to do about this sudden memory loss? Your memory wasn’t suffering when you painted my skyline.”

Reagan grinned before moving her cup off to the side of the tarp. “How can I forget a night like that?”

“A night like what?” She inched closer, the heat from her body warming her side.

Reagan’s lips twitched into a retrained smile. “It was the first night I was sure this wasn’t going to end well for me.”

“That’s not what I was expecting,” Libby confessed.

“Well, it’s the truth. I knew right then when you were standing so close to me on that balcony that I was going to hobble away from you in multiple pieces. I had never wanted to kiss anyone so bad in my whole life, and I couldn’t read you for anything in the world.”

“I wanted to kiss you too,” Libby confessed, her eyes drifting to Reagan’s lips, stained red from wine. “Scared me to death.”

“Don’t be scared of me.” Reagan reached up and held Libby’s face, urging her down to her lips.

Hovering just above her mouth, Libby couldn’t contain what she’d been holding back for an eternity. She knew it was too soon, knew it was a risk, but it ripped out of her

heart and floated from her lips. “I love you.” The deafening words were hardly a whisper.

For an agonizing second that lasted three lifetimes, nothing happened. Reagan’s bright, brown eyes were practically incandescent as they looked into her, penetrating her on a cellular level.

Oh, God. She didn’t hear me. Shame and humiliation flooded Libby’s body until all she could think about was jumping to her sore feet and running all the way home.

Then, Reagan smirked. “What took you so long? I’ve been waiting forever for you to get here with me.”

Confused, Libby furrowed her brow.

Reagan’s smirk blossomed into a full-fledged grin. “I love you too. And for so very long.”

Libby’s nerves devolved into a tangled mess of murky thoughts and trembling hands as she closed the gap between them and kissed her. She’d intended to be smooth and romantic, but in a clash of teeth and wine-wet lips, she failed. Not that Reagan appeared to care.

With her hands perched on Libby’s waist, Reagan pulled her on top of her. Their kiss was rushed and frantic as if one of them had only minutes to live. It was more like Libby had only started living and desperately wanted to make up for lost time.

Slipping her hand underneath the soft silky material of Reagan’s black shirt, Libby indulged in the sensation of her abdominal muscles tensing as she raked over them with her fingertips.

“Is this okay?” Libby whispered against her lips as she halted her advance at the bra’s underwire. “Not too fast?”

“I’m very ready for absolutely anything you’re ready for,”

Reagan replied before taking Libby’s hand and moving it over the thin, satiny material of her bra.

Desire tore through Libby hard and fast when Reagan responded to her touch with a nearly imperceptible gasp. The tiny, quick inhale of breath robbed Libby of all self-control.

Touching Reagan through a fabric barrier wasn’t nearly enough. As she kissed her lips, Libby pulled up Reagan’s shirt, disconnecting from her lips only for as long as it took to remove the offending shirt all together.

With an unstoppable desire she’d never felt before, Libby clawed at Reagan’s back. Finding the clasp, she was desperately searching for, Libby tried to unfasten it as she held herself up over Reagan’s body with the other. Every failed attempt only increased her resolve to get it off, but it was like the damn thing was glued together.

Rescuing her from her fumbling, Reagan smiled against her lips. “Let me help,” she whispered. “It takes a little practice.” She reached back and unhooked it herself.

In any other moment, Libby would’ve been embarrassed at failing or made a mental note to learn the technique later, but all she could process was Reagan’s body. Her smooth skin was unblemished except for the colorful rooster sleeve tattoo on her arm. Her small chest and defined muscles were the hottest things she’d ever seen.

“You’re staring.” Reagan interrupted her gawking.

Libby smirked. “Oh, I’m sorry,” she replied trying to sound sincere. “Do you mind?”

Reagan showed o just one dimple and shrugged. “I suppose I don’t mind being ogled by you.”

Libby kissed her again. “As long as it’s just me,” she demanded before sliding down Reagan’s lips to the column of her neck, leaving a combination of bites and kisses as she traveled to her collarbone.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:42 pm

In response, Reagan's hands were all over her back, pressing her closer as her breaths shallowed. Emboldened, Libby slid her open palm up her waist, over her ribcage and to the swell of her breast as she sunk her teeth into the nape of her neck.

Reagan's back arched, lifting her off the tarp as she groaned and dug her nails into Libby's shoulder blade. The pain was worth it to feel Reagan's writhing beneath her.

Eliciting such responses was addictive, egging Libby on, urging her to go further.

Leaving Reagan's purpling, tortured neck behind, Libby continued her descent down her chest. Hovering over the sensitive peak, she waited for Reagan to open her eyes and look at her. As soon as she did, Libby made a show of extending her tongue and slowly circling Reagan's hard nipple with the tip.

"Shit," she groaned, gripping the back of Libby's neck, pressing her closer until she used her entire mouth. "I'm pretty sure you're not supposed to be so good at this yet."

Libby offered a wicked grin in response before turning her attention to her other breast. "Maybe I've thought about this so many times I've perfected the technique."

Reagan bit her bottom lip before cursing again. "Tell me," she said with a moan as Libby cupped her chest and ventured lower down her torso.

"Tell you what?" she asked innocently before kissing a line to her belly button. "Tell you about all the nights I spent lying in bed unable to sleep?" Sliding her splayed hands down Reagan's belly, Libby started to unfasten her belt with deliberate

slowness.

Propping herself up on her elbows, Reagan watched her with lust-filled eyes. “Tell me, please,” she begged, and Libby did her best not to smile with self-satisfaction.

With her belt hanging open, Libby unbuttoned her pants and pulled them down just enough to reveal Reagan’s hipbones. Running her tongue from the edge of her waistband to the side, Reagan shuddered and groaned.

“Do you want to know what I thought about?” Libby asked, pulling her zipper down one click at a time. “Because I don’t think that’s what you really want to know.”

Reagan’s response was unintelligible as she grabbed fistfuls of tarp at her sides.

“I think you want to know what I did while thinking about you,” she guessed as she sat up on her knees to yank o her pants. “The first time it happened, I’d just watched these videos of you throwing huge pots on the wheel.”

With her pants gone, Reagan was in nothing but a tiny pair of black boyshorts. Libby bit back a curse. Her dreams paled in comparison to the perfection of Reagan’s body. She wanted to stop the teasing and get lost in her, but her concerns about her technical ability didn’t let her. If she raised her arousal enough, then she’d be able to get away with having no idea what she was doing.

Bending down to kiss the thin fabric with just enough pressure for Reagan to feel it but without providing any relief, Libby was shocked to find the material was soaked through. She cursed as her body exploded with heat and ached with desire.

“Tell me,” Reagan pleaded, pulling Libby back from the edge.

Libby wasn’t strong enough to play anymore. “You want to know how wet I was, or

how I barely had to touch myself before having an orgasm while thinking of you?”

“You’re killing me,” Reagan confessed before reaching out and pulling Libby on top of her. Her kiss was frantic and sloppy and was nearly enough to send Libby teetering toward the edge as she slipped her bare thigh between her pants.

“Take this o ,” she demanded as she searched for the jumpsuit’s fastener.

Scrambling to her feet to keep from tearing Mary’s beautiful creation, Libby found the zipper at her back and

slipped out of the garment.

“You’re so beautiful,” Reagan said as she got up on her knees and kissed her soft belly and ran her hands up the back of her thighs.

Libby wanted to say that she hadn’t had any time to work out and was a lot less toned than usual, but the words died in her throat as Reagan urged her to stand with her legs parted.

Despite the cool night, Reagan’s hands were so warm as they slid up and down her body, kneading her soft flesh as she peppered her lower half with kisses. Each one was a sizzling nail in her self-control co n.

Libby looked down to watch Reagan slide her underwear down her thighs. When they hit the ground, Libby stepped out of them, but Reagan splayed her hand on her inner thigh to keep her from closing her legs again. No one had ever looked her like that. Like they were beholding a work of art.

When she couldn’t stand another moment of it, Libby reached down and tangled her fingers in Reagan’s hair and pulled her in. The moment Reagan’s lips grazed against

her, she knew she wouldn't be able to remain standing very long.

Teasing wasn't nearly as much fun when she was on the receiving end. Each feather-light touch was as painful as it was exhilarating. Even R

eagan's breath against her achingly sensitive flesh was excruciating. She couldn't stand it a second longer.

Making a fist in Reagan's short hair, she pulled her away before dropping to her knees and kissing herself o her lips.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:42 pm

“No more games,” she said, hating that she’d been the one to wave the white flag.

Reagan nodded enthusiastically before easing herself back on top the tarp and bringing Libby with her. Instead of settling in next to her, Reagan slid down, and in the same moment parted Libby’s thighs like she was a mechanic rolling under a car.

Unsure what to do, Libby lingered awkwardly on all fours until Reagan’s tongue slipped inside her. She shot up, resting on just her knees as she reflexively sought more contact with Reagan’s mouth.

Grinding against her inexorable tongue as Reagan wrapped her arms around her thighs, Libby was already close. The anticipation had been building too long.

For the first time in her life, Libby was trying so hard not to have an orgasm. She’d always had the opposite problem.

Her progress was broken when Reagan moaned into her as her ministrations fell out of rhythm.

Glancing back, Libby noticed why. Beneath her underwear, Reagan’s fingers were moving furiously. The sight alone nearly sent Libby unraveling, but with a painful, white-knuckled grip, she kept herself on the edge.

“Let me,” she demanded in a deep hoarse voice she barely recognized.

Reagan stopped at her command.

“Take them o .”

Reagan complied and with her knees bent, held herself open for her. It was over for both of them. Once Libby reached back and felt that Reagan was dripping with desire, her thighs trembled until her entire body was shaking with unstoppable force.

With the heel of her palm pressing down in time with Reagan’s grinding, Libby slipped the tips of her fingers inside Reagan. She’d lasted only seconds after that, which was at least one second longer than Reagan. She took it as a win before she collapsed at her side.

LISTENING TO REAGAN BREATHE SO DEEPLY AS SHE SLEPT WAS

calming, but it couldn’t keep Libby calm. Her conscience

simply would not let her sleep. Slipping out from under the covers, she threw on a t-shirt she found on the floor and crept downstairs.

The studio was an even bigger mess than she remembered, but she put on blinders as she tip-toed to the dragon. Running her fingers over the tongue hanging out of its open mouth, she marveled at just how delicate it was.

Wispy whiskers were so long and thin it was a miracle they didn’t snap o . Libby removed her hand just in case.

A heart created by two women bending backward was her second favorite. She didn’t dare touch the fragile, white porcelain statuette and hoped she could find a way to keep it safe as she displayed it. Taylor hadn’t confirmed, but she was sure her trusty assistant had gotten her what she wanted. These pieces weren’t going to anyone but her.

When she was done examining the art, Libby grabbed a piece of tarp and sat under the dragon's head. Looking at the phone she'd brought with her, she realized that subconsciously she wanted to be surrounded by Reagan's love when she did what she had to do.

Reading the confession she'd penned what seemed like years ago, Libby couldn't help the tears streaming down her cheeks. It was the most honest, unpolished, and visceral thing she'd ever written. Her chest ached. Bringing the shirt collar to her nose, Libby found comfort in the scent of Reagan's perfume made unique by her body chemistry.

If she lost her legacy, could she lose Reagan too? Libby pushed the thought aside. Fear of losing her business was how she'd made the poor choices she'd made.

When she'd chosen to hire a fake girlfriend, Libby never imagined how much heartache it would cause others. It made Reagan's friends think she'd been keeping a secret from them, and worse, that she'd been hiding her identity at Libby's behest. The idea made her stomach churn until it

tied itself in knots. Libby's family, and probably Reagan's too, had been wounded by the alleged secrets. But they weren't secrets. They were lies. So many lies.

She never counted on how many lies she'd have to tell.

Each one was a hydra sprouting an infinite number of heads until it threatened to devour her whole. It had to stop no matter the cost.

Libby's thumb hovered over the publish button. Am I being shortsighted and selfish again?

The thought of coming clean to the world without giving her loved ones the heads up

was too similar to the hasty act that started her predicament.

Tomorrow. I'll dismantle my life tomorrow.

CHAPTER 35

“GOOD MORNING,” Reagan whispered against the shell of her ear as she snuggled her sweaty body against her.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:42 pm

Libby smiled before she opened her eyes. “Good morning.

How’d you sleep?”

“Amazing since it was next to you,” Reagan replied before throwing her leg around her and pulling her in like an octopus capturing prey.

Libby laughed as she nestled into her warmth. “Don’t set my expectations too high or I’ll expect every morning to be like this.”

“Every morning you wake up next to me, I will tell you just how much I love you.”

The L word sounded even better in the weak morning light than it did under the full moon.

She looked at Reagan. “You promise?”

Reagan moved a strand of dark hair out of her face. “I swear.”

Libby’s chest ached as emotion welled up in her eyes.

“Hey,” Reagan cupped her face. “What’s wrong?”

“I want to come clean. About everything. About how we met and all the lies I’ve been telling,” she blurted before she could change her mind.

Reagan’s sleepy eyes widened. “Who do you want to tell?”

“Everyone. I’ve written something. Will you read it? I know it makes you a liar to your friends and family, and I really don’t want them to hate me more than they do, so if you don’t want me to post it I won’t.”

Reagan shook her head. “I don’t need to read it, Lib. I trust you and I’ll back you up on whatever you want to do.

Are you sure you’re ready to do this? Have you thought about the repercussions?”

“I have to do it despite the repercussions,” she decided.

“How can we build anything with this huge lie hanging over us.” “Isn’t it enough to just tell the people we care about? You don’t have to confess to the world,” Reagan suggested as she ran her hand up and down Libby’s nude back.

“If you’re hesitant, I totally understand. This is a lot more drama than I’m sure you’re used to and if it’s going to negatively affect your brand—”

“Hey, all publicity is good publicity,” Reagan interrupted.

“Do you think I’ve ever gotten that many people with disposable income in here? I couldn’t have done that without you and your connections.”

Cupping Reagan’s face, Libby ran her thumb along her jaw. “Getting them here wouldn’t have mattered if you didn’t have all that amazing stu to sell. You and your artists are the reason for success.”

“I didn’t get a chance to tell you last night...” Her cheeks flushed with color as if remembering their night under the stars. “We sold out completely.”

Libby winced as her stomach knotted. “Would you be mad if I told you I bought

everything that was left?”

Reagan laughed. “Oh no, I told everybody before we started that your money was no good here. We really did sell everything.”

The news was a cold knife slicing her heart in two. “Oh,”

she tried to conceal her disappointment but couldn’t. “There were things I really wanted.” She averted her eyes from Reagan’s gaze.

“You mean like the things I made for you?” Reagan asked with a little smirk.

Libby looked up at her.

“You think I’d sell those?”

Shrugging, Libby bit the inside of her cheek

. “Maybe.”

Reagan shook her head before kissing her forehead. “I don’t know what you’re going to do with that big ass dragon, but it’s yours.”

Libby chuckled. “Good,” she decided before wiggling her way beneath Reagan’s arm and resting her head on her bare chest.

“By the way, my friends don’t hate you. I know you were thinking of Imani when you said that. She’s gonna be annoyed that I let an NDA keep me from telling her the real story, but once she’s got all the holes filled in, she’ll stop trying to figure out what we’re hiding and get to know you and love you like I do,” Reagan explained with enviable confidence while running her fingers through Libby’s hair.

“I don’t know... you didn’t see how pissed at me she was,” Libby replied as she traced shapes on Reagan’s belly with her fingertip.

“Trust me, okay?”

Libby nodded. “I wish you could tell me my grandma was going to take it in stride.”

“Me too,” Reagan agreed before giving her a squeeze and kissing the top of her head.

“I had my chance to be honest with her at the start of all this and I blew it. There’s no way she’s going to understand why I did what I did.” Fear crept up from her chest and threatened to crush the air from her lungs.

“Don’t be so hard on yourself. All you can do is open up and be honest. You have no control over what she does with that.”

“That’s not exactly encouraging,” she replied, wishing she could skip past the conversation and be done with it.

“Well, it’s the truth. Plus, I think Mrs. Cassanova loves you more than you realize. Under that tough exterior is a woman who just wants what’s best for you.”

Libby shot up in bed. “Are you sure we’re talking about the same person here? What do you know that I don’t? Are you two secret besties or something?”

Reagan laughed as she reached up and dragged her back down to her lips. “You know I try and look beyond the surface, okay? Call it a gut intuition.”

Libby kissed her until her stomach rumbled and demanded to be fed. “Come on, Ms. Gut Intuition. Why don’t you buy me breakfast? I’ll confront my nightmare after some pastelitos.”

CHAPTER 36

IDLING in her grandmother’s driveway, Libby stared at the front door as if they were the fiery gates of hell. Does hell have gates? She’d always imagined it more like an open pit.

Libby forced her focus back to the present and away from the brimstone. “Okay, one foot in front of the other.” She tried to swallow the lump in her throat, but it was unmoving.

“Let’s just get this over with.”

Jumping out of her SUV, Libby's knees trembled so hard that for a moment she wasn't sure they'd hold her. Each tentative step was like walking the plank into shark-infested waters. Nothing had worked to calm her, not Reagan's encouragement or a full hour of meditation. All she could see was her grandmother's justified rage.

Ringling the doorbell instead of running back to the safety of her car, Libby was surprised when her grandmother answered the door herself.

"I was wondering when you were going to come in rather than sitting out there like some cut-rate private investigator," she said in greeting rather than a traditional hello.

"Hi, Mima," Libby said before giving her a peck on the cheek. "Where's Marta?"

"I sent her to the store when you told me you wanted to come by," she replied, closing the front door behind them.

Libby wanted to make a joke about how ominous it made her visit sound, but her grandmother wasn't one for jokes and she was right to sense the need for privacy. She followed her to the informal living room without comment, where the sight of Reagan's creation still on the mantle gave her strength.

"I didn't expect you were here to hand-deliver the pieces I purchased last night," her grandmother said as she sat on one end of the very stiff sofa while Libby sat on the other.

"So, don't keep me in suspense. What do you want to tell me?"

Her grandmother's forthrightness was usually o -

putting, but in that moment, Libby was grateful to cut to the chase. This was a band-aid that desperately needed to be ripped off, even if it did take half her body hair with

it.

Libby started from the very beginning while her grandmother sat motionless and listened to the reality of her relationship with Davis, how he'd dumped her but she'd pretended to still be engaged for nearly a year, and how she ended up hiring Reagan to be her fake girlfriend before actually falling in love with her.

When she was done, Libby dried her tears and handed her the draft of what she planned to release later that day. It not only exposed all of her lies but explained that she'd done it out of a misguided fear of disappointing her grandmother and ruining the family name. Then, completely depleted, she sat back and waited for her grandmother's verdict.

"I could do with a little less cursing," was the first thing out of her grandmother's mouth. She read her confession a few more times before she leaned against the backrest.

They stared at each other in unnerving silence for so long, Libby was sure she was going to pass out under the weight of

her scrutinizing gaze. She held strong.

"When my mother took over for my grandmother, they had a terrible fight," her grandmother started as she folded her hands over her lap. "Back in those days, there was no dating. It wasn't even really courting. A young man would approach a girl's father, or whatever living elder male there was in the family and declare his intentions. In most families, a girl would have a say in the match, but the informed nature of that opinion was suspect," she said as if to herself. "She would really only spend a few hours with him and that would be under the watchful eye of her entire family. Not too many personal conversations happening that way. People worked hard manual labor back then. It was a huge sacrifice for everyone to put on their Sunday best and surround two kids in a living room for an hour. A couple was very fortunate if they managed two or three of these meetings before deciding to spend their lives together. And remember, divorce wasn't like it is today. For the most part,

this really was ‘til death do them part.”

Libby cocked her head to one side. She’d heard the stories before but didn’t understand how they applied to her confession.

“My mother came up with an idea. Once a month, she’d rent out the church hall in town and provide young couples with a place to get to know each other. No music or dancing, and with more than enough chaperones, of course,” she added with the hint of a smile.

“And what happened?” Libby had never heard this detail before.

“My grandmother had a conniption. To hear my mother tell it, she was afraid the old woman was going to have a stroke.”

Libby furrowed her brow. “Why? That sounds totally reasonable to me.”

“To our modern eyes people just having a place to sit and talk while sitting several feet apart across a table in a church being watched by half a dozen old ladies itching to find sin is as benign as it gets.” She chuckled. “To my grandmother, who had ten kids but never saw my grandfather in his birthday suit, it was like she’d suggested they open a house of ill repute.”

“What did they do?”

“Nothing. She made my mother swear on her eternal soul not to get any more ideas and never change a thing. My mother kept that promise. It wasn’t until I took control that we even started serving anyone other than Catholic Cubans.”

Libby nodded. She remembered her grandmother saying with pride how diverse they were. She’d been thinking race and religion but missed various groups of people.

“What you might not know is that I had to wait until my mother died to do it.” Her grandmother’s eyes watered, and her well-powdered nose turned pink. “I don’t want to have to die before you can spread your wings.”

At the unexpected display of emotion, Libby’s heart raced.

Forgetting herself, she lunged forward and hugged her so tight that the gardenia perfume would linger on her clothes for hours. Or at least she hoped it would.

“I want to make you proud, Mima,” she said between a rush of tears. “I want what generations have built to last for so many more generations to come.”

Her grandmother embraced her with her entire body.

“Then give me a great-granddaughter while I’m still young enough to enjoy her.”

After a little while, Libby made them some chamomile tea and they talked about her plans. Her grandmother had taken it so well, part of her wondered if she already knew. Instead of tearing her a new one, she told Libby that if fleeing a communist dictatorship with nothing but the clothes on her

back hadn’t spelled the end of Cassanova Matchmaking, neither would this.

Calling her parents and asking them to come over for the news wasn’t nearly as hard as she expected since she had the Grande Dame in her corner.

As she left later that evening, she hoped it had gone equally well for Reagan and her family. Or that they at least didn’t hate her.

IT WAS LATE IN THE EVENING WHEN LIBBY ARRIVED AT HER EMPTY

office. She strolled through the lobby and sat behind the reception desk where she'd started as a teenager working after school and during vacations. The cubicles where she'd been promoted to were nicer than they'd been a decade before, but she sat at one anyway. Libby continued through the office until she ended at the big corner office she'd dreamed of inhabiting her entire life.

Sitting at her desk, Libby turned on her computer's camera and hit record. After some introductory comments, she read her confession aloud and tried not to let her emotions overwhelm her in case she was accused of trying to garner sympathy.

When she was done, she uploaded the video to every outlet within her control. She even forwarded it, along with her written confession, to everyone she knew in the media.

On her personal stationary, she penned a letter to her staff, promising to take care of them no matter what happened.

They were part of the Cassanova family and would never be left out in the cold.

Then came the more difficult task. Opening a file on her computer, Libby

printed the name and address of every currently active client. One by one, she wrote each of them a

note asking them to stick with her despite the disclosure they'd soon learn about. She promised to make herself available to address any concerns they might have and encouraged them to call the office and make an appointment next week to talk in person.

Hours later, she had a tall stack of envelopes to deliver. As she turned out the light in her office, she had the nagging fear it wouldn't be hers forever. As Libby took the elevator to the basement, she expected to be the only person in the garage. After midnight on Saturday, the only people around were some of the law offices, but even their spots had been empty when she pulled in.

When she saw Reagan's orange pickup truck parked on the other side of the closed gate, she immediately guessed something terrible had happened.

"What are you doing here?" Libby asked as she approached the gate.

Reagan was sitting in her driver's seat with the window rolled down and apparently half asleep. Clearing her throat as she sat up, Reagan rubbed her eyes. "Waiting for you, obviously."

"Obviously," she echoed with a soft smile.

“Come on, get in. I’m sure you’re exhausted as hell. No reason for you to drive home alone.”

“How are you this thoughtful?”

“I don’t know, but it’s a terrible habit I’ve been trying to break.” She smirked as she responded in what had become a customary exchange. “Are we going to stand here all night or are you going home?”

Libby cocked her head to one side. “Well that all depends, doesn’t it?”

Reagan quirked a dark brow made even darker by her blonde hair. “On?”

“On whether you mean your home or mine.”

“They’re both yours,” Reagan replied before motioning for her to get in.

“Then to the pottery it is,” she decided before holding her access card up to the little black box to open the gate so she could slip out and leave the crushing weight of fear behind.

CHAPTER 37

WAKING up in Reagan’s arms with her phone switched o was the first time since Libby was a child that she’d been free of crippling pressure and expectations. The light streaming in from the studio’s high, cloudy windows was as beautiful as ancient stained glass. Everything was full of hope and possibility. She turned on her side to look at Reagan. Angelic in the soft light.

Libby wondered how different everything would have been if Janice hadn’t sent her over. Devoid of other options, Libby would have chosen one of the acceptable guys

whose headshots she'd taped to her conference room windows.

Where would I be now?

Brushing blonde hair out of Reagan's sleeping face, Libby's heart jumped. She couldn't remember whether she truly believed in destiny before Reagan, but she had no doubt about its existence now. There would've been no other way for them to cross paths without conspiratorial fates.

At her touch, Reagan's eyes fluttered open. "Everything okay?" she murmured groggily.

"Mm hmm," she replied, placing soft kisses on her throat.

"Don't leave me another hickey. I can't throw pots while wearing a turtleneck," she grumbled, running her hands

along Libby's nude back.

"Or . . . I can promise to leave it somewhere below your neckline," she countered.

Reagan squirmed in approval. "I didn't know you had such an animalistic need to mark me."

Libby continued sliding down Reagan's body. Judging from the strength of her desire, she'd been dreaming about wanting her.

"I have a lot of needs," Libby replied as she slipped between her thighs, wrapping her arms around them like Reagan had done to her. She'd read some articles about techniques for doing this, but she figured there was no replacing practical experience.

“Then I guess I have to do my best to meet them,” she replied, her hips digging into the mattress before Libby had even touched her.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:42 pm

When Libby pressed her lips to the soft stubble, Reagan immediately reacted by jerking her pelvis up. The realization that she wanted her to taste her as much as Libby wanted it produced a hard pull of desire deep in her body.

Unsure of where to start, Libby took a long swipe with her tongue, like keeping an ice cream cone from dripping on her on a hot summer day. It was an apt comparison based on Reagan's arousal.

Reagan's hips jerked up again in response, causing Libby to grip her tighter to keep her in place.

"Stay still or I'll stop," Libby warned before continuing her exploration.

"I can't help it," Reagan warned, her breath ragged and her chest flushed.

Libby suppressed a satisfied grin. That had to be a good sign, right? "Try harder," she demanded sternly.

When Reagan broke loose from her again, Libby sat back on her knees and crossed her arms over her chest.

"Are you really stopping?" Reagan screeched. "Come on, I can't help it."

"You have to learn I don't make empty threats," she said without an ounce of playfulness in her tone.

Reagan's lip twitched, instantly picking up that they were playing a game. "What's

my punishment then?”

“Turn over,” Libby demanded, shocked at her ability to play at being dominant. For a moment she considered that she wasn’t playing, that she’d always wanted to tell a partner what to do but never felt comfortable enough to try.

It had been easier, if not unsatisfying, to be a passive participant.

Doing what she was told, Reagan flipped onto her stomach. Sitting on her lower back so she could feel just how turned on she was, Libby leaned forward and bit her shoulder.

Reagan groaned and squirmed, but Libby didn’t stop until she’d left another respectable red badge on her back. It really was animalistic, but Libby couldn’t find the will to care. It felt so good to claim her.

With her palms splayed on Reagan’s muscular back, Libby swung her hips slowly. She started grinding against her just as a tease, but as her desire grew, the contact inched closer to actually satisfying. It felt so good she had to stop or the game would be over.

Slipping o her back, Libby stared at the humid spot she’d left on her tailbone. She had a wicked urge, but what if she weirded Reagan out rather than turned her on?

Only one way to find out, she decided before leaning forward and running her tongue along her tailbone. She barely tasted anything but Reagan’s skin, but it had the desired effect. Reagan cursed and groaned.

Drunk with erotic power, Libby grabbed Reagan’s hips and lifted them until she was on all fours. From behind,

Libby continued to rocket out of her comfort zone and plunged inside her. In the new configuration, it didn't matter if Reagan squirmed. It only appeared to help.

In minutes, Reagan was tightening around her fingers as she moaned and panted. When she fell forward onto the bed, Libby followed, feeling as satisfied as if she'd had an orgasm herself.

"What was that for?" Reagan asked as she pulled the covers over their entangled bodies.

"Because I love you," she replied nestling into her chest and loving the light perspiration coating her cheek. "And now I want to take a nap."

Reagan chuckled, her voice still hoarse from sleep. "But we just woke up."

"Mm hmm, and now I'm sleepy again. When I wake up, I'd like to do that again, thank you," she said, her relaxed body growing heavy.

"Is that your plan for today? A sleep-sex cycle?"

"No," she said, drifting away. "I'm probably going to want to eat something other than you next time."

When she fell asleep again, Reagan was holding her close and running her fingers through her hair.

"YOU SAID YOU WERE GOING TO TURN IT ON AFTER DINNER," REAGAN said, her eyes on the phone sitting between them in the bed.

Since sunset, they'd already showered, eaten leftover hors d'oeuvres, and had se

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:42 pm

x. Twice. It wasn't that Libby was stalling exactly; it was that she didn't want to come down from the high. She was stalling.

Reagan scooted over to her on the bed until their legs were touching. "Do you really think it's better to wait until tomorrow? You might have a bunch calls and stu coming

into the o ce. It might be better to at least know what you're dealing with so you're not ambushed."

"What if it's cataclysmic and these are my last hours of happiness?" Libby countered, trying her hardest not to whine.

"You think your happiness is tied to the outcome of your business?"

Libby shook her head. If she really believed that she wouldn't have confessed her sins in the first place.

"Listen, I think if it was really horrendous, someone would've called me, right? And all my friends had to say was that we owe them dinner and the real story of our love a air.

And my parents thought it would make a great Hallmark movie." Reagan's tone was optimistic, but it wasn't enough to soothe her fears.

"Yeah, but your friends and family are kind people.

Internet trolls aren't exactly reasonable. And I can't buy them all dinner." Libby

pressed down on her churning stomach. She shouldn't have inhaled the smoked salmon p u s.

Reagan put her arm around her shoulders. "You've already done all the hard parts. The truth is out there and all you have to do is ride the wave."

Libby picked up her phone and stared at her reflection in the black glass. "You make it sound so easy."

"No matter what's on the other end of that phone, you're not alone. Not only do you have me, but you have your whole family's support. There's nothing you can't take on with that."

Dropping her head onto Reagan's shoulder, Libby closed her eyes and hit the power button. "How bad is it?" she asked after a minute, unable to look for herself.

"Well . . . someone named Zena has left a dozen voicemails. Taylor has left a bunch too." The phone dinged.

"A lot of messages are coming in. You're probably gonna have to look at this."

Libby sighed. "Any chance I can get a glass of wine to make the medicine go down?"

Reagan kissed her cheek. "You got it."

Once alone, Libby centered herself and then braced for impact. She started with the easiest task and texted Zena.

Libby: I'm sorry I lied to you, Z. Can we video chat tomorrow? I know you must have a million questions.

Zena: My main question is ARE YOU OKAY?

Libby: I don't know yet . . . but I think I will be.

Zena: I couldn't believe everything you said in your video!!

Maybe it's not the right time, but I'm so relieved knowing you're human and suck at love like the rest of us mortals.

After scheduling a video date, Libby moved on to what would undoubtedly contain the worst reactions. The YouTube comments she'd forgotten to disable.

Reagan returned with a bottle and two glasses. "How's it going?"

"Oh, you know, I've been called a fraud, a fake, a drama queen, and those are the nicest terms being thrown around.

Plus, I've lost several thousand subscribers already, though I suspect that's only the beginning, and some ad sponsors are gone."

"Why the hell are you reading the comments?" Reagan snatched the phone and closed the window.

"Because then I don't have to read the message from Taylor listing the clients that have already dropped me." She took a gulp of red wine.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:42 pm

Reagan scrolled through the phone. “Shit, Lib. This is a lot of people. Are you going to reach out to them?”

Libby drained her glass before responding. “I don’t know.

If they’re upset at the mess I made and I lost their trust,”

she shrugged one shoulder, “I can’t begrudge them that.”

Reagan flared her nostrils. “But how does your personal life have anything to do with your job? What does it matter?”

“It’s part of what I’m selling,” she replied, pulling her down to sit next to her. “If my judgment led me down this road, they probably feel like I can’t make good decisions for them either.”

A vein in Reagan’s temple she’d never seen before pulsed.

“But that’s a false equivalency, and you did it because—”

Libby cut her o with a soft smile. “I’ll try and salvage who I can, but even if everyone leaves me, I’m not quitting.

If my grandmother could start from scratch in a new country and in a new language, then I can surely rise from the ashes after this. Plus, this is my own fault. If I’d been honest from the beginning, I wouldn’t have so much to clean up.”

Searching her face, Reagan's expression softened. "Come on," she jumped to her feet and held out her hand. "What's say we take a break and I show you how to use that pottery wheel again."

Libby glanced at the phone. There were over 400 emails unchecked and waiting in her inbox. They can wait just a little longer, she decided before taking Reagan's hand.

EPILOGUE

ONE YEAR LATER

RUSHING OUT of her office elevator, Libby cursed herself for being late. Leave it to her to make it all the way to the highway before realizing she had to turn back.

Crossing through her waiting room, once cold and sterile but now full of colorful art, she made sure not to bump into the massive blue dog Freddie made for her the year before. It was still her favorite among the dozens of pieces scattered around the office, and at least once a month someone tried to buy it.

Once in her office, she went for the desk drawer right under the misshapen bowl she made at a speed dating event they'd held at Reagan's studio. At least the event had been much more successful than her creation, which she'd intended to be a vase.

Snatching what she needed, Libby passed a long line of Reagan's art on pedestals lining the hallway and made a beeline for the stairs. In the middle of the day there were way too many people heading down for lunch and she couldn't risk any further delay.

As soon as she emerged from the stairwell sweaty and breathless, her phone went off.

Taylor: Where are you, she's waiting...

Libby: Stall please!!! Twenty minutes tops.

Twenty minutes to get all the way across town during the day on a weekday was optimistic, but she was going to try her best. As if she'd jinxed herself, Libby merged onto the highway and immediately into bumper-to-bumper traffic.

Shit.

Biting her bottom lip, Libby took her life into her hands and started weaving in and out of traffic, earning honks, curses, and more than a few flipped birds as she cut people off and generally behaved like a maniac.

"Sorry!" she shouted as if they could hear her while she threw her SUV in front of them and claimed space that wasn't hers.

Nearly an hour later, she pulled off the exit and took the familiar road through the industrial district. Once dilapidated and deserted, more than half the buildings were now occupied.

Reagan refused to take credit for the renaissance, but once they'd bought the pottery together with the money she'd raised and the funds from the sale of Libby's condo, new places opened by the month. At first it was just other artists, but soon it was restaurants, clothing stores, and unexpectedly, a few florists. It was like their grand re-opening had breathed new life into the rusty husk. There was so much new activity that the city was forced to repave the roads, a fact Libby was newly grateful for as she raced over the fresh asphalt without needing to dodge tire-shredding potholes.

Pulling around the back of the craft brewery that opened at the corner of their block, Libby was met with the face of her very displeased grandmother.

"We've been waiting for over an hour," she announced as soon as Libby jumped out

of the car. “Are you going to leave the engine running?”

“Don’t worry, mija,” Reagan’s dad shouted when Libby turned toward the SUV. “I got it.” He leaned in and killed the engine.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:42 pm

“You look beautiful,” Libby’s mom said as she rushed toward her and pulled her into a hug.

Reagan’s mom was right behind her wearing a mischievous grin. “You really do, honey. And don’t worry,”

she paused and beamed, “she doesn’t suspect a thing.”

Libby tried to take a deep breath and steady herself, but it was impossible. Her adrenaline was off the charts.

As her family and Reagan’s all said very nice things Libby couldn’t process, Taylor stuck her head out of the brewery.

“We’re ready.”

Libby’s grandmother reached for her hand. “Come on.

Let’s get one step closer to giving me another little Cassanova.”

As conspicuous of a mob as they were, Libby was shocked no one stared as they walked toward the completely renovated space christened Soto Ceramics. It wasn’t everyday three grandmas, a grandpa, and two sets of parents marched down the street together.

On the way, they passed the formerly empty brick building that was now home to a coffee shop on the first floor and KMQ Matchmaking on the second. It was the more

modern wing of the Cassanova empire and helped attract clients who found downtown too stuffy. It was still losing more money than it made, but they broke close to even by leasing the ground floor to the coffee shop. Even if it wasn't flying on its own yet, it was her legacy, something she'd built for herself. Libby was grateful it existed at all. After the initial mass exodus of established clients, she often doubted there would be anything left. Working nonstop to attract new clients and win back a small fraction of the old, they'd

managed to survive with the help of a huge loan from her grandmother she was still paying back.

"Ready?" Reagan's dad put his arm around her shoulder, his face radiating pride, when the mob stopped in front of the pottery.

Libby glanced at her grandmother, who replied with a curt nod.

"As I'll ever be," she decided before opening the heavy metal door.

Instead of stepping directly into the studio, Libby walked into the bri

ghtly lit gallery space where Reagan had started selling her work. With each step toward the back, Libby's heart raced until it was nearly impossible to breathe.

Against the wall dividing the gallery from the workshop sat handmade lanterns Libby had commissioned under a pseudonym, one for each of them except Libby. Once they were all lit, she texted Taylor. A moment later, the lights went out in the back and music played through a wireless speaker she'd stashed in one of the workstations that morning.

When they stepped through the door, Reagan was standing with her hands on her hips as if trying to figure out why her students were suddenly lighting the lanterns they'd

been painting.

As soon as she saw Libby, her eyes widened. Maybe because she didn't expect her in the middle of the day, or maybe because she was flanked by their candle carrying family like a freaky ritual was about to go down.

"What's going on?" Reagan asked, her voice husky and barely audible.

Oh good, she's as terrified as I am.

Libby reached into the pocket of her mustard-colored blazer and pulled out the little box that had caused her such

a headache that day. As soon as Reagan saw it, her wide eyes grew watery.

"Oh my God," she gasped, putting her hand over her mouth. One of the best things she'd learned about Reagan was her secret love of romantic movies and all things mushy.

The candle lit circle grew larger as Imani, Kimber, Sue, Mary, and Janice emerged from the back followed by Taylor, who was already crying.

Libby reached out and took Reagan's trembling hand in her own shaky one. "From the moment we met, you turned my life upside down in the most amazing and unexpected ways. I was barely living half a life before you came along and woke me up. You're the most generous, supportive, loving, and unique soul I've ever known." She flicked the box open with her thumb like she'd practiced a thousand times over the last three months. "I promise to devote my life to loving you and supporting you if you'll do me the honor of

—""Yes!" Reagan shouted before she'd finished asking, lunging forward and

tackling her in a tight embrace. It was only then that Libby realized she'd been trembling even harder than Reagan as her entire body shook in her arms.

In a fit of nervous laughter, Libby squeezed her back as hard as she could. "Really?"

Reagan wiped her tears. "Yes, really! Let me see the ring!"

As their friends and family cheered and walked in closer to get a look for themselves, Libby placed the white opal that shone with flecks of pink and turquoise on her ring finger.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 1:42 pm

In a blur of hugs and tears, Libby and Reagan were at the center of a love bomb that somehow got them outside to the courtyard. With a lot of work, they'd turned it into a proper garden, and her massive dragon guarded it from his place at the center.

"I didn't plan this part," she confessed against the shell of Reagan's ear as they were led to two chairs set out in front of the dragon.

Reagan slipped her hand in hers. "I know," she smiled. "I did."

Dropping on one knee, Reagan took her own little box out of her apron pocket. Libby shot a look at her family. No one was surprised, and it was Libby's turn to cry. Double agents.

"Lib, you are without a doubt the best thing that's ever happened to me. You've taught me that anything is possible," she said as her voice cracked under the weight of her restrained emotion. "You made me want to work harder and stay focused. You have literally made my dreams come true in every way. For that, I owe you my complete and unconditional love. Plus, I promise that every now and again, I'll be the one to pick up the frozen pizza at the store."

Overwhelmed with laughter and tears, all Libby could do was nod emphatically until Reagan slid the teardrop shaped garnet onto her finger.

"I love you," Libby managed before kissing her lips made salty from tears.

"I love you too," Reagan replied, returning her kiss before picking her up and spinning her around.

When they'd calmed and the plastic cups full of champagne had been passed around, Libby's grandmother cleared her throat as she tapped on her cup to get everyone's attention.

"I think you all know I'm not a woman of many words, and I hadn't intended on making any great speeches, but I do want to say something. My Elisabeth is my pride and joy."

She raised her glass as Libby tried and failed not to start crying again. "She deserves the very best," she said so sternly Libby worried about what was coming next. "And

Reagan, my darling, I believe she has found that in you.

Welcome to our family."

"Thank you, Mrs. Cassanova," Reagan managed, her voice still trembling.

"You'll be my granddaughter soon. Call me Mima," she said much to everyone's shock. "Hit it, Taylor," she said, giving some kind of signal.

After a few moments, slow instrumental music filled the courtyard.

"What's this?" Libby whispered as she leaned into Reagan's space.

"I honestly don't know," she replied.

"This is my engagement gift," her grandmother replied before clearing her throat and starting to sing *Con los Años Que Me Quedan*, a Gloria Estefan ballad Libby hadn't heard since she was a kid.

As her grandmother sang in the most beautiful voice she'd ever heard, Libby's jaw dropped. In her life, she'd never heard her grandmother so much as hum. She had no

idea what an incredible voice she had.

“Would my fiancée care to dance?” Reagan asked, extending her hand.

Libby couldn’t feel anything below her knees, but how could she resist? As her grandmother serenaded them, everyone else joined them for a slow dance.

Hooking her arms around Reagan’s neck, Libby stared into her gleaming brown eyes. “I can’t believe I got so lucky,” she said as she swayed to the music.

“I’m the lucky one,” Reagan replied, taking her by the hand and giving her a little twirl before holding her close again.

Libby wanted to stay in that moment, forever surrounded by the love of all the people they cared about. In her heart

she vowed never to take a single day spent next to Reagan for granted.