



# With Love, Alex

**Author:** *Harlow Layne*

**Category:** Romance

**Description:** Thirty-year-old single mom Alex Sloane is ready for a simple life after her divorce from her verbally and emotionally abusive ex-husband.

One night out with her friends Alex meets Colton Patrick, a Hollywood movie star from her hometown and his friend, Matthew Ryan. Letting go, having fun, and drinking too much leads to what she thinks is a one-night stand.

But when her one-night stand starts calling and texting, Alex decides to give him a chance and start living her life. Now out from under her ex, Alex is starting to become the woman she once was, but he's always in the background determined to ruin her at every turn.

Seeing the good and bad sides of the dating world, she must overcome her doubts and fears and learn to trust herself.

But can she? Or will the past haunt her forever?

**Total Pages (Source):** 20

## Girls Night Out

“Are you sure I look,all right?” I asked, looking down at the barely there black dress I had on. It was more revealing than anything I’d ever worn before. The short dress showed off my legs and my heels made them appear longer. I’d never shown as much skin as I did that night, but I was going to live a little. I dressed for comfort, but there was something to be said for dressing up every now and again. It gave me confidence and made me feel beautiful.

“Alex, girl, you look hot as hell,” Shelli stated as her eyes trailed from the tips of my very high, black heeled sandals to the top of my head. My dress was so short I was afraid to do anything but stand, or I’d show my very skimpy, black lacy underwear. Right underneath each breast and in the middle, were diamond cutouts showing my tanned skin. Mostly it looked like a bra attached to a shirt from the front with wider straps. It was the sexiest thing that I’d ever worn.

My friend, Dawn, who I’d been friends with since high school, had done my hair and makeup. She’d stated that although I could do my face and hair nice enough, I needed a little extra oomph for my first night out and she could give it to me. She was right, Dawn had done a fantastic job. I’d stared at myself in the mirror for a full two minutes not believing that it was me before I could speak a word. My blonde hair was down, blown-out, and curled where it fell down my back until it almost touched my bra strap. My makeup flawless, highlighting my dark blue eyes.

Decker would get jealous if it looked as if I tried too hard with my appearance, and

after a while I stopped, hoping it would make him happy. In the end, it didn't matter what I did; I could do nothing right. Since Dawn was almost six feet tall, and I was quite a bit shorter at five feet four, there was no way I could wear any of her clothes that was why she asked her friend Shelli to help me out in the wardrobe department. We were roughly the same size except for her legs, breast, and ass were all larger than mine and Shelli liked to show off her assets as much as possible.

“I know that look.” Dawn's eyes flashed before narrowing. “Do not let him have control over you any longer. You're as free as you can be with having a child with an asshole ex like him. Tonight, is for fun.” She clapped excitedly.

“I know it is, but...” I let out a frustrated breath. “It’s hard after hearing only negative things for the last ten years. You know how skinny I was in high school and I even had a guy reject me because I was too skinny.” Frowning, I thought back to the boy saying if I had more meat on my bones, he’d be more interested. If I only knew then what I knew now I would have told him to fuck off.

“True, you were crazy skinny back then, but it’s not like you had any control over it. You ate like crazy and never gained a pound. Look at you now,” her eyes traced over my body with a smile. “You’ve got boobs and an ass. Now that you’ve started going to the gym you’re all toned up.”

“You look hot,” Shelli piped in from in front of the mirror where she was touching up her makeup.

“You do. Why can’t you see it?” Dawn questioned with her brows furrowed.

Shaking my head, I wrung my hands together. “I find it hard to believe that I’m hot when I’ve never had a guy hit on me. Ever.”

“You’re oblivious to the way men look at you.” Her voice turned serious as she

continued. "You know I never liked Decker, but I hate what he's done to your self-esteem. It's like you've got blinders on when you look in the mirror. You need to wake up and see yourself for who you really are. Not what he made you think you were."

Dawn handed me a tissue when she saw the wet start to well up in my eyes. "Do not cry." She said trying to sound serious, but instead it came out sounding like she pitied me.

Taking a deep breath, I willed the tears away and smiled.

"Better." Dawn smiled back at me. "Now, when was the last time you went out and had fun?"

"So long that I can't even remember," I replied, a bitter laugh escaping me before I hung my head. "I'm letting you know now that it's entirely possible that I'm hopeless."

Placing a hand on my shoulder, Dawn spoke with a soft smile, her words gentle. "Sweetie don't talk like that. I swear that asshole brainwashed you. You're one of the most kind-hearted people I know. He took advantage of you and the circumstances you were in, but no more." She shouted the last. "From this moment forward, you are not going to let all those poisonous words he spewed at you for over the last decade dictate your life. If there's anyone in this world, who deserves to be happy it's you." Shaking her head, she continued. "If Taylor were here, she'd be saying the exact same thing. If any doubts creep into your head tonight, tomorrow or ever, you call or text one of us, and we'll set you straight. Do you hear me?" She tilted her head with her hands on her hips, this wouldn't be over until I acknowledged her.

Easier said than done, but I nodded my head and murmured an affirmative.

Clapping her hands as she walked out the door, Shelli called out, "Great! Let's get this show on the road. Momma needs to loosen up."

Dawn and I both looked at each other before busting out laughing while we grabbed our purses and followed Shelli out to the garage. Dawn's car was the most fun out of the three of ours. It was a cute, little all black Mini Cooper convertible with the top already down for the night.

"I call shotgun," Shelli smiled as she opened the passenger side door.

Dawn shook her head as she settled into the driver's side. "Shelli, leave her alone. You know you've got to sit in the back. We don't need Alex throwing up before we even get to the restaurant."

"I swear sometimes I think you make up that you get car sick just, so you can sit in the front," Shelli complained from the backseat with her arms crossed.

Dawn glared at her through the rearview mirror. "Trust me, I've been there, and it isn't pretty."

"So..." I drew out the word as I glanced over at Dawn. "What's the plan for tonight? You never told me where we're going. You can at least tell me what restaurant we're going to. You know I'm up for just about anything."

"Well..." she replied, also drawing out the word with a sly smile on her face. "I thought since all the good bars and clubs are downtown we'd eat down there."

"Did you pick someplace you know I won't like any of the food?" I could feel my forehead wrinkle as my brows drew down in confusion. "I don't understand why you're keeping it a secret. I don't know any of the places downtown. The last time I was there was when I was sixteen to get my driver's license. Did you invite someone

I don't like?"

"Why would I do that?" Dawn looked over at me giving me a crazy look. "I want you to have fun, not get all pissy and want to go home early."

"Then why the secrecy?" I asked shaking my head.

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It wasn't like Dawn to keep anything from me, and there were times where I wished that she would keep some of the details of her 'dates' to herself. One could say that if you wanted to live vicariously through anyone's sex life, Dawn's was the one to choose.

"It's kind of expensive, and I didn't want you to shut down the idea."

"I wasn't planning on being cheap tonight," I snapped with more bite than I intended. There was nothing wrong with trying to save money so that I could provide a better life for me and my son. Instantly I apologized adding, "I want to have fun tonight, and unless it's crazy expensive where I'm paying over fifty dollars for one meal, then I won't care. Promise."

"Look I know you're saving money to buy a new house. I don't fault you on that, but you're making good money now, and it's only going to get better the more people recommend you."

We were stopped at a traffic light, Dawn looking over at me. "I'm proud of you. I know life's been tough on you and Mason, but every day it's looking brighter and brighter, and that's all because of you and your determination to give both of you a better life than what you've had. Think of tonight as a celebration."

"I will. Thank you," I answered as I gave her a brief hug before the light turned green. "Now can you tell me where we're going?" I asked with a laugh.

"Il Bacio. The food is so, so good," Shelli piped in from the back making a moaning sound that was very orgasmic causing me to let out a laugh which then brought the

whole car to roar in laughter.

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As we walked down the sidewalk, there were people everywhere. The club they decided on, Flux, was beyond what I thought any place in our little town of Fairlane would look like. It was dark like you'd expect a nightclub to be, but the decor was something you'd expect from a club in Vegas. The walls and ceiling were LED with cool designs that were constantly changing and moving. Throughout most of the building, there were these weird but cool silver strands hanging down that had lights on the ends ranging in different lengths.

The girls wanted to dance. Hell, I wanted to dance too, but I also didn't want to blow chunks all over the dance floor after eating too much during dinner, so we sat at a little-curved booth away from all the action. The place was packed, and I shouldn't have been surprised. The music was loud but good, making me sway in my seat to the beat.

Dawn and Shelli let my dinner settle and finish my drink before they both jumped out of the booth the second I placed my glass on the table, grabbing me, and pulling me out onto the dance floor. Feels by Calvin Harris was playing as we found a spot big enough for the three of us to dance. I smiled at Dawn as my body started to move to the music all on its own. It didn't take long for me to lose myself to the song, closing my eyes, and forgetting everything but the way my body felt as I let loose. Songs came and went, each one a favorite as if the DJ had played them just for me and I didn't stop until I was a hot, sweaty mess, and about to collapse from dehydration.

"I've got to get something to drink," I yelled and did the universal drink sign to both Shelli and Dawn. It seemed they were feeling just as thirsty as they smiled big and followed me to the bar. We waited impatiently for the bartender to take our order and bring back our drinks. I couldn't remember the last time I'd been so thirsty. In the

meantime, I cursed my kick-ass but not fun to dance in heels. They may have looked impressive, but I was not used to wearing any type of heels and adding a four-inch heel was doing no favors for my now throbbing feet.

“I need to sit down for a while.” I pointed down at my feet, their eyes following. “My feet are killing me.” They both nodded, and I followed as they looked for a place to sit.

We were quiet as we drank and cooled off. Their faces were lit up from their phones as I looked out into the crowd. They were probably commenting back and forth on social media about our night. I had a smile on my face from having a great night out with my friends and letting out a long-held tension on the dance floor. It morphed into a shocked ‘O’ approximately two-seconds after Shelli shrieked, “Oh my God, is that who I think it is?”

2

Star Struck

“Holy fucking shit balls,” Dawn cried out before clapping a hand over her mouth.

I would have laughed if I hadn’t been in shock. Luckily no one heard either of them since the music was so loud, and even if they could, I didn’t know if it would have registered to anyone because walking across the dance floor was none other than Colton Patrick.

The Colton Patrick. As in, Colton Patrick the famous Hollywood movie star. In all the years that I’d lived in Fairlane, never once had I laid eyes on him until that night. I’d heard after he left town to become a big Hollywood movie star that he’d been here visiting his family, but never did I think I’d actually see him in person. Throughout the years, I’d watched every movie he’d been in and swooned when he started to date

Anna Jenson, who was now his wife. They were perfect together. He was the dark to her light. Colton was the Hollywood hunk every woman wanted to screw, and Anna was the girl next door that you wanted to be friends with.

The first time I laid eyes on Colton Patrick aside from any TV or movie screen, and it looked as if he was walking right toward us. He looked left and right for a moment only to then come straight to our booth. I was sure we looked like a bunch of idiots with our mouths hanging open. Without a doubt, I had to have been dreaming because there was no way a real-life movie star could be coming up to us while we looked a hot mess from all our dancing.

“Excuse me.” He flashed his Hollywood smile at us from the end of our table. I think I heard all of our ovaries explode as his white teeth gleamed in the low lighting of the club. “I hate to interrupt you ladies, but there doesn’t seem to be any seating left and me and my friend.” He indicated to a man standing behind him. “We’re wondering if you ladies wouldn’t mind sharing your booth with us until something opens up.”

“Please join us.” Shelli cooed, pushing her breasts out. Her eyes sparkled at the same time Dawn moved closer to Shelli, leaving space for one on her side and one next to me. I wanted to roll my eyes at her.

Colton sat next to Dawn, a smirk on his face. He knew exactly what he was doing to us and to just about every woman he encountered on the planet.

“I’m Colt.” He introduced himself like we didn’t know who he was, but it made me like him even more. With his looks alone, women swooned as he walked by, add in his movie star factor and I couldn’t imagine what it was like to have that much appeal to the female race. “And this is Matt.”

Blushing from the insane experience of being in the company of two hot men, I spoke, and it came out so quietly I was sure no one heard me, “Hi.”

Dawn and Shelli didn't seem at all phased by our new company. They acted as if they met drop-dead gorgeous men every day and had conversations with them. I, on the other hand, hadn't talked to a man not related to work or shopping related in so long. I had no idea what to say. No one cared about my boring life, anyway. Dawn gave introductions all around. I wasn't sure if they could understand her with how loud the music was, but they nodded as if they did. With Colton on the other side of the table I couldn't hear what he was saying, but I got a kick out of watching Dawn and Shelli hang on his every word.

"I'm sorry. I didn't catch your name," Matt said from beside me. I knew they couldn't hear when Dawn introduced us.

Looking over at him, I noticed a small smile on his face. He was handsome, but he was no match for Colton. Where Colton was probably around six feet tall, Matt was shorter, but I had no idea by how much. I'd only glimpsed a look at him when he was standing behind Colton. Both were dressed in dark jeans and t-shirts that they both filled out nicely. Where Colton had a bulkier build, Matt's body was athletic; sleek and firm. His full lips tipped up as I took him in, causing me to blush once again. Luckily, I was pretty sure that because of the low lighting of the club no one could see my cheeks pink up.

"I'm Alex." I finally replied, holding my hand out. Instead of shaking it like I expected him to, he caressed the length of my hand before bringing it up to his mouth and placing a soft kiss on the back of it.

I'd never had anyone kissed my hand, leaving me with no idea how to act or what to do. Tilting my head to the side, I caught Dawn smiling at me. When she caught my eyes, she gave a slight head nod, silently telling me to get with the program and talk to the hottie next to me. Pulling my hair away from my face, I smiled shyly back at him. "And your Matt?"

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“Matthew or Matt. Whatever you want to call me.” He answered back with another smile. “Would you ladies like another drink if we can flag down a server?” he asked loud enough for the whole table to hear.

“I don’t think you’ve got to worry about finding someone to help.” I indicated the three different waitresses who were begging for the chance to wait on Colton Patrick.

Matt looked over at the waitresses waiting and let out a small chuckle. “I guess you’re right. Want to help us out man?” He gave a chin nod to Colton.

As if he hadn’t noticed the line of people to his left that were dying for him to give them even the smallest amount of attention, he turned his head and gave one lucky waitress the go ahead to approach. She had a tentative smile on her face with her shoulders slightly hunched. With long, black hair that matched her outfit of a tank top, short skirt, and heels, I watched it sway with each step she took.

“M-m-may I help you.” She stuttered. I couldn’t blame her either. I don’t think I would have had the courage to even take a step toward him, let alone talk to him.

“Sure, darlin. We’d love to order some drinks. I’ll have a Jack and Coke. What would you lovely ladies like?”

Dawn, Shelli, and Matt all ordered beers, while I ordered a Malibu with pineapple juice. As I watched, I was impressed with the way Colton was gentle with our shy waitress. I had a feeling he picked her from the others because she didn’t think she was hot shit like the other two waitresses who had been panting on the sidelines. He wanted her to feel special, and maybe he was doing the same to us.

After taking a few sips from my new drink, I figured I should talk to the man sitting beside me. I was sure he thought he got the wrong end of the stick being stuck by me, someone who had barely said two words to him since he'd sat down.

"So, how do you know Colton?" I asked as an ice breaker even though once the words had come out of my mouth I realized how lame they were. I might as well of asked him how he liked the weather, but I didn't know what else to say.

"His wife, Anna, and my ex-wife have been friends for years, so eventually we became buddies." He answered with his mouth so close to my ear, I could feel his hot breath with each word. I felt a tingle at his closeness. If he moved any closer his lips would brush against the shell of my ear and for the first time in a long time, I relished the attention from a man.

"Really? That's cool. Who's your ex?" I asked, my body turned his direction, but I was nowhere near as close to him when I spoke.

"Sophia Kerridge," he answered, this time he kept his distance.

"The Sophia Kerridge?" I asked with way too much enthusiasm. It was obvious he didn't want to talk about her from his stiff body language.

"Yeah,theSophia Kerridge."

"Oh, wow," I started to reply, but he interrupted with his own 'wow' which came out sounding highly annoyed. I could tell he'd misunderstood my wow, and I wasn't sure if I should try to clear up the misunderstanding or try to find something else to talk about keeping the conversation easy.

"Go on and say what you want to say." Matt said after a few tense moments of silence.

Closing my eyes, I prayed to say the right thing. I was really blowing it with this guy. I hoped he'd give me a chance to explain. "I said that because I didn't know who you were. It's so dark in here. I didn't recognize you with your hat on. You're Matthew Ryan, right?"

Not talking about his ex-wife and recognizing him seemed to appease Matt, at least going by the easy-going smile that crossed his face once I mentioned his name.

"You really didn't recognize me?" he asked with a smirk on his face. One that I found slightly annoying. Did he need his ego stroked?

"Until tonight, I'd never laid eyes on one movie star, let alone two. It never occurred to me that you might be someone famous. It makes sense since you're hanging out with him." I indicated Colton across the booth from us.

"It's cool. I guess I've spent too much time in LA where everyone knows everyone, or so it seems with the paparazzi following every move you make. I forget what it's like to be out amongst the rest of the world." His arm slipped behind me as he inched toward me. "This is my first time here, and I understand why Colt likes coming here. Even if people know who you are, they aren't constantly yelling your name, asking for an autograph, taking pictures of your every move, or following you. Don't get me wrong, I don't mind the fans who genuinely want to meet me. It's the people who are making money off trying to catch me making an ass of myself or anything gossip worthy. If we were in LA right now, there'd be pictures all over the internet of us sitting here by now. They'd say how we're sleeping together, or how you're my girlfriend, or more than likely how I'm a manwhore." He shook his head in disappointment, making me feel sorry for him.

I'd seen the gossip magazines and I knew what he was talking about. There were people out there who believed everything they read just as I knew there were people out there who lied about what they wrote to scandalize whoever the article was about

and make money. I'd hate to be under the microscope the way they were. I'd seen some of the things that were written about both Colton and Matt. Most of what was written about Colton was good since he had dated and was now married to America's sweetheart. As for Matt, he had a lot of negative press about him in the recent years.

Mostly it was about how it was his fault that his marriage to Sophia Kerridge had disintegrated. Supposedly, he had an affair with the leading lady while on location for a movie. I'd only known him for a few short minutes, but he seemed nice enough. I didn't know if any of what was said about him was true or not. I sure as hell wasn't going to ask him. It didn't matter anyway since I doubted I'd ever see him again. Unless it was on the big screen. I was going to enjoy my time in the company of two movie stars who had chosen to sit at our booth. Not think about what I'd read or heard about them. This was a once in a lifetime experience. I was going to make the most of it. Starting now.

Shape of You by Ed Sheeran came on making my body start to move in my seat and Matt chuckle next to me.

"Would you like to dance?" he asked as he moved out of the booth taking my hand to help me out. It seemed Colton, or the club had told our waitress to keep our drinks coming because every time one of our drinks started to run low a new drink was put in its place. Whichever it was, the alcohol was flowing, and I was undeniably feeling the effects after the few strong drinks I had with dinner.

"Yes," I yelled back with my arms in the air as we made our way to the dance floor. Looking back over my shoulder, I saw both Dawn and Shelli laughing as they made their way over to me.

I didn't care who I was dancing with by that point. With each move or turn, I had one of the three around me as my partner. Dawn and I always thought our height difference was funny when we saw ourselves in the mirror. Tonight was no different.

Dawn may have been almost six-foot-tall, but she still wore crazy high heels causing me to be eye level with her cleavage. I repeatedly stumbled into it either from the drinks or the heels. Her hand held me there making it look like I was motorboating her. She laughed, and a loud cheer came from the surrounding men. I hadn't noticed we had an audience until I heard and then felt the heat from the crowd. Letting me go, Dawn started to dance with a guy who had stepped up to take my place. I couldn't help but laugh as she pushed him away when he tried to motorboat her.

Matt's hands grasped my hips from behind as I kept dancing to the beat and watched my friend as she took over her new dance partner. I felt Matt's face against the side of mine as the front of his body met my back. Slowly one of his hands shifted to wrap around my stomach and pulled me further against him. If the alcohol hadn't been in my system, I probably would've pulled away, but I was feeling its effects and enjoying the feel of a man as he moved with me and made me feel sexy.

As the songs played on and we danced together, Matt's hands wandered, but nothing too inappropriate. I could only smile as I stepped back into Matt and ground myself on the side of his leg. Matt took that as a sign to move on from his innocent hands over my dress to kissing up my neck and making his way to my mouth.

At first, I was in shock, I hadn't been kissed in years. I'd stopped kissing my husband when he started smoking, hating the taste of cigarettes. When he asked why I simply told him the truth. He didn't stop smoking or even bother to brush his teeth or wash out his mouth, which ended our kissing and eventually our marriage according to him. Matt tasted of beer, which I wasn't a fan of, but it was way better than cigarettes. He was gentle in his kiss, probing to make sure I wanted it as much as he did. Once I felt his tongue caress against mine, my body met his move for move with the beat of the song. The kiss was something I'd been missing and didn't even know it until that moment when it wasn't harsh and wild with fury, but soft, wet, and lush.

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“Oh my God,” I heard Shelli yell somewhere beside me as Matt’s hands made their way down my back and cupped each ass cheek, pulling me closer to him. I could feel he was hard, giving me a heady feeling. Something I hadn’t felt in a long time. I felt desirable, wanted, and wanton all at the same time causing me to pull back enough to look up at him. I wanted to see his face instead of being caught up in the moment or the music, and saw the desire I felt pressed against me.

“You ready for another drink?” he asked, his lips brushed the shell of my ear, causing me to shiver even though I was hot from all the bodies around us and from the constant dancing. Yes, I was ready for a drink to cool down my heated body, but also my libido too.

“Hey, we’re going back to the table.” I yelled to first Shelli and then Dawn when I found her a couple of feet away grinding against a man and a woman. Both gave me a thumbs up. I wasn’t sure if it was in acknowledgment of hearing me or in praise for letting myself go with Matt. I had a feeling it was for the latter.

Colton had stayed at the table slowly sipping his Jack and Coke while we’d all been off dancing. I smiled at him as we sat in the booth, and I hoped he understood my smile for what it was. Colton Patrick was a cool guy.

We scooted around until I was next to Colt and not all the way across the table. He’d been by himself for quite a while, I didn’t want him thinking I didn’t want to talk to him or didn’t like him.

“Are you here visiting family?” I asked lamely. What was with me? I kept channeling Baby and her ‘I carried a watermelon’ moment. He was probably used to people

making a fool of themselves around him or at least I was going to tell myself that to make me feel better.

“I had some time off and wanted to see my family. I don’t see them enough as it is. Anna couldn’t make it, so I asked Matt if he wanted to come and get away for the weekend. How about you? Do you live in Fairlane?” he asked once again flashing his movie star smile.

“I’ve lived here all my life. When I was in high school, I wanted to get away from here and moved to a big town, but...” I shrugged.

“What happened?” Colton asked with genuine curiosity. Matt took my hand underneath the table and folded his fingers with mine.

“I was a typical, stupid teenager and thought I was in love. I got married instead.” It was embarrassing to tell my story, but I wasn’t going to lie even if I’d never see them again.

“You’re not still married, are you?” Matt asked from beside me, his eyes slightly narrowed. He’d moved to where the whole left side of his body was against mine, but at the mention of marriage he’d inched away. Even the small distance now between us made me glance over at him feeling defeated. I didn’t like that he’d made me feel anything resembling what Decker had made me feel in the past. After all, I’d went through with my ex-husband I wasn’t going to let anyone make me feel less than ever again.

“No,” I answered, fighting an eye roll. “Tonight, we’re actually out celebrating my one-year anniversary of being divorced.”

“I’m guessing the divorce was a good thing,” Colton said before taking another sip of his drink and looked over it to Matt. They shared a look. What it said I wasn’t sure,

but I thought it was Colton telling Matt to chill out. It wasn't like he could talk, he was divorced too. His had been splashed all over the tabloids and it had been ugly.

“Very much so. Let's not get into that though or I'll lose my buzz.”

“We wouldn't want that now would we.” Colton motioned to someone off to the side, and a moment later a new drink was in my hand.

“That's last call,” A new waitress said, eying Colton up and down in a blatantly suggestive manner, causing my eyes to widen at her audacity.

“Thanks, I think we're good,” Colton replied dismissing the waitress. Dawn and Shelli walked up to the table as the waitress left. Dawn sat next to Matt and Shelli was next to Colton beaming. “I guess the place will be closing soon. I always forget how early everything shuts down here.”

Matt looked at his watch frowning. “It's only one a.m. What does everyone do when the bars close?”

“Go to a place that's open twenty-four hours and eat, to a party, someone's house, or go home.” Shelli answered counting them off on her fingers.

“Well, I'm not hungry. How about we go back to your place Colt and hang out?” Matt placed his arm around my shoulders, pulling me into his side.

Colt thought about it for a moment before agreeing. “If that's cool with the ladies, it's cool by me. Did one of you drive?”

We'd all drank way more than we expected to, and I wasn't sure what we were going to do with Dawn's car.

“I drove.” Dawn answered, her phone out. “I’ll get us an Uber, and, in the morning, I’ll come back to get my car.”

“You don’t need an Uber. I can drive, I only had the one drink,” Colton replied. “If you want to head to my house and hang out for a little while then you can call an Uber to take you home.”

Shelli’s eyes glazed over at the thought of going to Colton’s house. I wasn’t sure it was a smart move in letting us know where he lived. I wouldn’t do anything with the knowledge, but I wasn’t so sure about Dawn and especially Shelli.

“Are you sure?” I asked expressing my concern with both my voice and eyes. Luckily Dawn and Shelli weren’t paying attention to me or they’d probably gotten mad, but seriously as someone famous you couldn’t let just anyone know where you lived, and we hadn’t talked or known each other long enough for him to think we were remotely trustworthy.

“Yeah, when we get there I’ll have to excuse myself and call my wife, but Matt can entertain you all.” Colton explained as he signed the bill. I knew it wasn’t as much as he would have been paying if he was in a club in LA, but I still didn’t want to know how much the bill was either after all the drinks we’d had.

“That’s okay,” Shelli exclaimed as she stood up. She was ready to go, and I had a feeling that after tonight, life was never going to go back to the simplicity I had been living. “Let’s go!”

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:21 pm*

“Good morning.” An unfamiliar voice rasped against the back of my neck at the same time a hand wrapped around my hip and pulled me against a very hard appendage poking me in the ass.

My eyes flew open as last night came back to me in spectacular technicolor as did the headache from hell.

I was never drinking again.

The night before, we went back to Colton’s house in a gated community I’d only driven by a few times. It popped up several years ago, but no one knew anyone who lived there. Now I knew that Colton Decker had bought an enormous piece of land on the Southeast side of Fairlane and had houses built for his family and a few friends. From what I could tell in the dark, they were all the nicest homes in Fairlane. They sat up on a hill overlooking a manmade lake and most of town. The entire area was gorgeous even late at night. I knew it would be even more so during the light of day.

Once we got inside his house, Colton took off for his room and locked the door so that he could call his wife, stating that Matt could show us around. Matt took us for a limited tour since he’d only been there the one time and didn’t really care about the decor or layout. Dawn, Shelli, and I ate up our surroundings, we’d never been in a movie star’s house before. It was naturally gorgeous, but I was surprised that it wasn’t flashy or in your face wealthy. I never would have guessed one of Hollywood’s heartthrobs lived in it if by some twist of fate, I walked through it. We ended up in the kitchen where Matt made us all drinks and shots. By that time, I had no idea how many drinks I’d had only that I’d never drank so much in my life. My inhibitions were as low as my dress rode high up my thighs which Matt had taken a

liking to, if my memory served me right. As his hand trailed up the inside of my thigh close to reaching the promised land, Dawn and Shelli excused themselves and made themselves scarce. I had no idea where they went only that I didn't see them for the rest of the night. In all truth, I didn't see much else of anything as Matt led me to the room that he was staying in, each of us with yet another drink in hand. By the time my back hit the mattress my inhibitions were nonexistent, and so were my panties.

What had I done?

One night out and I slept with some guy I'd only just met. I was going to have to do the walk of shame and in front of Colton Decker, no less. Another first. I couldn't believe I had sunken so far on my first night out in forever. I couldn't make this a pattern with an impressionable six-year-old at home. Not that he was going to know about my night of debauchery. If it were up to me, no one would find out, but I didn't think I would get my wish seeing as Dawn was very likely still here and Taylor was probably sitting by her phone waiting to hear from me about my disastrous night out.

Scrambling out of bed, I wrapped the sheet I had luckily snagged in the process around my body as I looked around the room for my clothes. I kept my eyes away from the man in bed as much as I could. Since I'd stolen the sheet, he was naked and not one bit ashamed of his body. It was hard not to notice his tanned, muscular physique that was on display or his hard on that was sticking straight up saluting me in all his average glory.

If I remembered last night correctly, Matt had jackrabbited me to his completion. I can't say that's how I imaged the first time I had sex in years to go. To say it was disappointing even from the fog of last night and my almost debilitating headache was an understatement.

"Could you please cover up?" I asked in desperation to find my clothes and get the hell out of there with as much dignity as I could. Which seemed to be next to

impossible.

“You took the sheet, sweetheart.” I could hear the smile in his voice.

Where the hell had the comforter gone? It didn’t matter he could cover up if he wanted to with a pillow or one of his hands. He didn’t want to, and he was enjoying how uncomfortable he was making me.

“Why don’t you come back to bed. When we’re done, I’ll make you some breakfast?” My eyes darted toward him only to see he was stroking himself.

Heaven help me.

Look away! Look away!

It took all my self-restraint to pull my eyes away. Finding Matt stroking himself was enticing to watch.

“I can’t. I have to get home. I’m sure my friends are waiting for me,” I sucked in a deep breath and peeked over at him. “I don’t do this. As in never.” I let out a sigh of relief when I found my underwear underneath a chair and shimmied my way into them from under the sheet.

Arms wrapped around my waist as he tried to tug the sheet loose, but I held firm. Taking a few steps away, I turned to look at him. Matt let out what sounded to be a frustrated sigh. “Hey, relax. I didn’t think you were the type of girl who...”

“Who what? Has sex with anyone she meets? Sleeps with a guy the night she meets him?” I whispered-yelled so no one else could hear me.

“No,” his eyes went wide. “I didn’t thinkanyof those things. My only thought was

that I met a beautiful girl last night and had the privilege of having a nice night with her. The rest was just a bonus.”

Bonus. That was a nice way of putting what we’d done last night. It was my turn to sigh as I said his name. “I don’t know what you want from me. At this point in my life, I don’t know how to do anything except be a mom.”

“I’d like to get to know you better. From what I do know about you, I really like you, and I don’t know,” Ryan replied with a shrug. “We can see what happens if you want. I’m leaving. Later today actually. If you give me your phone number, we can keep in contact.”

“So, you want to be friends?” I asked uncertain what he wanted or the entirety of the male population, for that matter. I’d been out of the game for too long and was feeling hopeless in the man department. Maybe what little time I spent with Matt could teach me a little something about the dating world or maybe I was just fooling myself.

“I’d like to be more than friends, but if you’re not feeling it, then I guess we can just be friends.” His shrug was nonchalant, and I had to remember he was an actor. Did he really not care if we were only friends?

Was I being naïve to think he wouldn’t play me or had my time with Decker jaded me into thinking the worst about all men in any romantic sense? One of my best friends was male. Ryan had shown me that men could be good, great even, but I hadn’t seen him with any woman in a romantic sense since high school. Hopefully, he was better with the ladies now than he was then.

“What do you want?” he asked pulling me out of my musings.

What did I want?

I wanted to get on with my life. I had a strange feeling that the man in front me giving me his sad puppy dog eyes was the answer. Matt was still naked, and I was trying not to look at his erection that was still very happy to see me as I took him in with the morning light. In the light of day, I could see that his hair was brown with blond ends, short and curly even though it was cut short all around except for the top which was a little longer. Matt was cute. Very cute, in fact. I wouldn't say he was handsome, but he knew how to use his looks to get the ladies. I wasn't sure if I wanted to be one in the long lists of women that had been in his life. I didn't read gossip magazines, but I did love to look at People magazine in the checkout line. From what I had seen, Matt had not let his divorce bring him down. He was taking advantage of being a single man out on the town. The question was would Matt take advantage of me or would I never see or hear from him again after he left today.

"I'll give you my number," I finally answered. His satisfying smile told me he liked what I'd said. Never mind the still present erection that was pressed against my hip. Dipping his head, Matt placed a soft kiss on my lips before he started to grind into me. "But I really do need to leave and find my friends."

Matt gave me a look of disappointment and nodded his head. "Let me get dressed. I'll walk you out."

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\* \* \*

“So, did you give him your number,” Taylor asked after I had given her the rundown of everything that had happened last night and that morning. She was quiet the entire time except for a few noises. It was starting to make me nervous. I didn’t want my best friend in the whole world to think I was a slut.

“Yes,” I whispered into the phone before head-planting face first into my couch cushion. I was beyond embarrassed to tell her of my maybe one-night stand with Matt. What had I been thinking? Oh right! I hadn’t been thinking. I let all the alcohol I had consumed that night make my decisions for me.

“Good for you,” Taylor exclaimed making all my worries about how she’d perceive me go away. I still had plenty of other things I needed to talk to her about and figure out. “You’ve got nothing to be ashamed of. There’s nothing wrong with a one-night stand.”

“How’d you know?” I asked, closing my eyes.

“Because I know you.” She answered back softly. “You’ve got to forget all those things Decker implanted in your head.”

“I know, I do.”

“Something else is bothering you. What is it?” she asked, knowing me too well.

“Why didn’t Dawn or Shelli stop me? Dawn’s known me since junior high. She

knows I'd never sleep with some guy I'd just met. If anything, she encouraged me. I'm so stupid." I turned to stare up at the ceiling. "Why did I have so much to drink especially when I hardly ever drink? Do you think she's getting back at me from when she found out about Ryan and me?" I groaned at the thought. Would Dawn really do that to me after all these years of friendship?

"I don't know," Taylor answered back sadly. "She's always seemed a little off to me. You know I've tried to be her friend but she's never really let me get to know her. I know she didn't know about you and Ryan at first, but not why." Silence hung on her end as Taylor waited for me to explain how I'd betrayed my friend all those years ago.

"When I first met Ryan, Dawn was interested in him, but they weren't going out. I'd only met him a few times before I started going out with one of his friends, Mark. I don't know why I went out with Mark because I wasn't attracted to him in the slightest. It was probably because he asked me, and I was desperate to have a boyfriend. We didn't go out that long before I broke up with him. For some reason after I broke up with Mark, I went to Ryan's house, and after that, we started to hang out together as friends. I'm not sure what happened with him and Dawn because she never talked about him or initiated us hanging out with him after those first few times. One day we were at my house, and Ryan kissed me. After that, we were boyfriend and girlfriend, you know how it was when you were a teenager."

"Don't remind me," Taylor laughed.

"I don't know if we discussed it or if we just knew that we needed to not tell Dawn about us or what, but we kept it a secret. My explanation as to why Ryan was around so much was that I had no money and Ryan was willing to pay for the gas for us to go out, and that's why he was always tagging along. I was more stupid and trusting back then and told a mutual friend of ours about Ryan."

“You’re not too stupid or trusting. You’re just right. That’s why you’re my best friend,” Taylor said softly, but with conviction.

Tears welled up in my eyes, and I sniffed a few times. “Thank you. I love you, my sweet friend. I wasn’t looking forward to telling you about last night. You’ve made me feel so much better. I only wish we could’ve done it in person instead of over the phone. Mason and I are going to have to come and visit you soon because we miss you guys so much.”

“Now you’re going to make me cry,” she sniffed. “We miss you too, and we’d be happy to have you anytime you want to come. Let’s plan a weekend soon.”

“Sounds like a plan.” I sniffed again, missing my best friend even more.

“Now finish telling me about your secret romance with Ryan,” she laughed. Taylor had seen Ryan and me together numerous times, and she knew there was zero spark between us now. She thought it was funny that we’d once been a couple.

I took a deep breath and a sip of my water before I continued. “I believe that it was obvious that I liked Ryan way more than any friend should when he went out of town for a couple of weeks. I was a typical love-sick teenager; depressed and didn’t want to do anything. I quit my summer job and stayed in bed the whole time. He called me once while he was away. You would have thought I won the lottery or he told me he loved me for the first time. I was flying high from one silly phone call,” I laughed bitterly into the phone. “Anyway, I was surprised to learn from our friend, Laura, that Dawn had lost her virginity to this guy that I hated because he was a cocky asshole and-” I paused for effect because what best friend keeps that information from the other. “She had also had sex with another guy. I was shocked and didn’t feel too bad about not telling her about Ryan and me. Then one day Dawn, Laura, and I were all in my car and for some reason, I don’t know what it could have been, Laura said something about me having sex with Ryan. So, I fessed up to Dawn and told her, but

I didn't tell her that I knew about her having sex with those guys and she never told me. Ever. Not once did she ever mention having sex with those guys. Now that I think about it, it seems strange.

"Our friendship was a little strained when I started to date Decker because Dawn didn't like him at all, but she never gave me a reason why. After a bad breakup with her boyfriend senior year, we got close again, but never as close as we'd once been. As a friend, I'd hope she'd be looking out for me and not encouraging me to drink beyond my limits and leave me with a man when I was too drunk to know how stupid I was being." Closing my eyes, I took a deep breath and then let it out with a sigh.

"I don't know what to tell you, sweetie. I hate to say that maybe Dawn isn't over you not telling her about Ryan. Maybe she's jealous that in the end, Ryan chose you and not her and that you two are still friends. Have you talked to Ryan about her?"

"No," I answered shaking my head even though she couldn't see me through the phone. "But maybe I should see what he has to say about it. It's been a couple of weeks since I talked to him, so he's due for a phone call. I should do it before Mason gets home tomorrow night though."

"I know how you hate it when he's at his dad's, but at least it gives you a little time to do something for yourself and you deserve it. Maybe tonight you can take a nice relaxing bath and read. I'm actually surprised Dawn got you to go out since you usually binge read almost the entire time Mason's gone." she laughed, and it felt good as I laughed along with her.

"It was a struggle to not whip out my phone and open my Kindle app and start reading last night, but I managed. How stupid am I?" I asked my best friend.

"Not stupid at all. Time will tell about Dawn and maybe going out last night was a good thing if it shows you she's not the friend you thought she was. Plus, you went

out and finally had sex,” she shrieked and then started to laugh. “I know you’re not happy about a casual hookup, but you got out there, met a man, and did the dirty. Not only did you do the dirty, but you did it with a Hollywood hottie. I won’t even get started on how jealous I am that you got to meet Colton Patrick. You didn’t by any chance get a selfie with him?”

It was my turn to laugh. “Sorry to disappoint, but there were no selfies. I have a feeling that if there were ever a moment when one could have been taken, Dawn and Shelli would have seized the moment. I’m not going to lie, I was in shock and fangirled on the inside, but they were so obvious about it. I’m still surprised Colton had us back to his house.”

“Me too,” Taylor agreed. “It’s still cool though.”

“I’m sure he wouldn’t have if the neighborhood wasn’t gated. There’s no way for them to get even remotely close and he definitely didn’t share his code. I wish you could’ve seen his house it was gorgeous,” I told her wistfully. “If I could pick a place for Mason and me to live it would be there, but I’ll never have that much money. Wherever I do move, I want us to be neighbors when you move back.”

“Oh my God, Ben, and Mason would love that and of course, so would I. Have you been looking at houses?”

“Yeah, but I haven’t found one that I love yet, and I still need to save up some more money. I can’t believe Dawn didn’t want to tell me where we were going last night because she thought I’d turn her down. Am I that cheap?”

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“No, you’re not cheap at all. You want to move to a nicer house, and unlike Dawn, you don’t have a stepfather to buy you new cars and houses. Don’t listen to her. Damn it,” she sighed, her breath hitting the phone’s microphone. “I’ve got to go. Jack’s calling for me. I love you and let me know when you want to come.”

“Okay, thanks for everything! I love you too. We’ll make plans to see each other soon. Bye.”

“Bye.”

Not knowing what to do with myself except be sad that my best friend was over seven hundred miles away, I called Ryan to let him weigh in on Dawn.

“Hang on a second,” Ryan answered before covering it up with what I assumed was his hand. I could hear muffled noises, but that was it. After a couple of moments, he got back on the phone with me. “Hey! How are you?”

“Okay. How are you?” I asked back.

“I’m better now that I’ve heard from you. You sound kind of down. What’s up?”

“What were you doing when I called?” I asked putting off telling him about last night.

“Stalling, huh?” he chuckled. “Okay, I was fixing Amber’s car, and now I’m leaving. Heading back into town. Do you have any plans for tonight?”

“No, why do you ask?”

“Want to hang out or go to dinner?” Ryan asked with a smile in his voice. It was rare that he was ever in a bad mood and just talking to him could always put me back to rights with myself.

“I’d love to hang out. Maybe we can get some Chinese and eat it here or at your house. Whichever you prefer.”

“I need to grab a shower so how about you call in the order, and I’ll pick it up on the way home, and I’ll see you when you get there.”

“Sounds good. Hey, Ryan?” I called before he could hang up.

“Right here,” he called over the line.

“Thank you.”

“You don’t have to thank me. What are friends for?” As if he were right in front of me, I knew he was smiling again. Both his mouth and his eyes always smiled back at me, and I loved that about him.

“I’ll see you soon,” I replied before hanging up and calling to make our order.

Letting myself in, I took out all the food containers and placed them on the kitchen counter. I had started to make my plate when Ryan walked into the room running a towel through his wet hair.

“Are you going to tell me what’s up? You sounded kind of down on the phone,” he said as he came up and gave me a side hug. Going by looks, Ryan was my ideal man. He was tall, six feet exact, with blondish-brown hair, and blue eyes with thick arms

and legs that were built from hard work. For some reason, I had a very specific type of man that I found attractive. I wasn't one of those women would like the tall, dark, and handsome unless you were substituting dark for blond. Ryan hit all the right marks, but he'd been in the friend zone for a long time and he was never moving out of that category.

My ex-husband looked nothing like what I was attracted to and maybe that was why I had a very distinct type now. He was tall, but that was the only characteristic I could check off my list. Instead of blond his hair was black, and his eyes were almost as dark as his hair. In truth, now that we were no longer married, and he couldn't control me the way he liked, he scared me. I wasn't sure what he was capable of. I only knew that he wanted to ruin my life in any way that he could. If he couldn't be happy than no one should.

"I'd just got off the phone with Taylor. I miss her and Ben. I'm going to look at my schedule and plane tickets tomorrow to see when I can go visit her. Do you want to come?"

"Let me know when you're thinking, and I'll see what I can do. Anything else?" he asked, knowing that wasn't all that was bothering me, as he started placing heaping pile of food on his plate.

"Yes," I grumbled as I took a seat on his couch. "How can you read me so well? Am I that easy?"

"Nah, I don't think you're easy to read. Actually, I'd say the exact opposite is true, and the only reason I can tell is that I've known you since you were sixteen. I've had plenty of practice reading you, but if you don't want to talk about it, I'm sure I can find a movie for us to watch." He looked over at me and smiled letting me know that no matter what I chose to do it was okay with him. Probably because he knew that I would eventually spill.

“To start off, I went out last night with Dawn and Shelli.” I paused looking over at him with noodles hanging out of his mouth.

“Did you have fun?” He asked once he didn’t have a massive amount of food preventing him from talking.

“I guess.” I shrugged. “There’s lots to tell. First, we went out to dinner, and that was fine, and then we went to Flux.”

“Fancy,” he replied before his brows furrowed and he asked, “Do I need to kick someone’s ass?”

“Not unless it’s my ass that needs to be kicked,” I half-joked.

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“I think you need to tell me what happened.”

“You will not believe who we met,” I said knowing I had a huge smile on my face reliving the moment in my head.

“Of course, I’ll believe you.” Ryan brows snapped together as he twirled his finger in the air signaling me to continue.

“We met Colton Patrick and Matt Ryan last night at Flux.” My words came out in an excited rush.

“No, shit,” He exclaimed, his eyes bright.

“No, shit. I couldn’t believe it either. I thought I was in a dream.”

“Do you often dream about Hollywood movie stars?” he asked with a laugh.

“No, but it seemed impossible. They came and sat down at our booth because there were none open and then they talked to us. Have you ever seen Colton Patrick out and about town?”

“Can’t say that I have, but you never know. I’ve heard he comes back to visit his family multiple times a year. Did you get any juicy details?”

“Nope, but we did go back to his house once the club closed,” I answered with a nervous smile.

“You went back to his house?” Ryan asked rubbing his chin.

Letting out a deep breath, I answered, “More than that.”

“Damn it, Alex, what happened? Are you okay?” he asked, forehead creased.

“I’m okay. I was just stupid and drank way too much. I don’t even know how many drinks I had. You know I don’t drink much. Let’s just say it loosened my inhibitions a little too much.”

“Yeah, I know exactly what too much alcohol will do to your inhibitions. That’s how I got you to go to third base with me when we were at that party.” He fumed and abruptly stood to take his plate to the kitchen.

“Please, don’t remind me. God, I was such a prude back then. I don’t know how you put up with me. Hell, maybe I’m still a prude.” How embarrassing. I couldn’t believe he had brought that up.

“I loved you is why I put up with you and trust me, you were no hardship. In fact, you were probably the easiest girlfriend I’ve ever had with the exception that my mom hated you and didn’t want us together. I swear I was grounded more that summer than I ever was before or after that.”

“I never understood why she hated me so much.” I mumbled to myself. It had been obvious from the moment I met her that Ryan’s mom hated me, and I had never at that point done anything to make her feel that way.

“I think at first she saw how much I liked you and was more interested than I had ever shown in a girl. Plus, you were driving, and I couldn’t yet. There were plenty of bad things for us to do in that car of yours. Then I think she knew how I felt about you. She knew before I did. She was just a mom looking out for her boy. You’d do

the same thing with Mason.”

“Hell, yes I will. He’s never dating as far as I’m concerned.”

Ryan laughed throwing an arm around my shoulders. “Keep telling yourself that. Do I want to know what happened at Colton Patrick’s place last night?”

“Probably not. You’ll be disappointed in me, and I don’t want that.” I frowned up at him, but I what I really wanted to do was pout.

“Just tell me,” he huffed.

“I got plastered and had horrible sex with Matt Ryan.” I pulled out from under his arm and started rinsing his plate in the sink. My plate was still in the living room since I’d barely taken a bite of my food.

“You’re not the first person in the world to have a one-night stand. Honestly, it’s about time. You’re thirty years old and need to start living.”

“Are you shitting me? Having a one-night stand is not getting out and living. It’s not something I ever wanted to do. I’m not happy about it.”

Seriously! I could not believe him. How? I whipped around to look at him smiling back at me.

“You said that so I won’t feel bad?”

“You’re too hard on yourself. You can’t punish yourself forever because you married an asshole,” Ryan said before he started laughing so hard he bent over with a hand to his stomach. I had no idea what he could possibly think was funny. While he laughed, I went back into the living room and finished up my Chinese, rolling my eyes at him.

“You’re starting to piss me off. Why the hell are you laughing? Because I was stupid and married Decker?” I asked irritated and ready to leave if he didn’t start talking.

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“Bad sex with Matt Ryan?” He half asked, half stated with a laugh still in his voice.

“From what I remember and that’s probably a good thing,” I answered with an irritated sigh. “It was jackrabbit sex.” I scrunched up my nose from the thought of it. “That’s not the way to impress a girl. Although he wasn’t half bad with his mouth.”

“TMI! TMI!” Ryan cried out, covering his ears with his hands. “I do not need to know that much about your sex life. Feel free to never tell me anything else about it ever again.”

“Are you shitting me? After all the times, I’ve heard about your one-night stands, I can’t tell you about my horrible sex experience. I barely told you anything, and you’re freaking out. Do you know how long it’s been since I had sex?”

“I thought you were a virgin,” he answered back with a small smile.

“Wow,” I laughed. “You really don’t want to hear about it. So, I guess you’re pretending Mason came from immaculate conception and nothing ever happened between us. If you’re going to be like that, then I don’t want to hear about you and any more of your women.”

“I’m sorry I’m being a hypocrite, but it’s weird hearing about you with another man. Not that I want you with me. Don’t misunderstand me. I guess I never thought about it until now how it might make you feel to hear about me with other women. If you want me to stop, then I will.”

“Honestly, it’s never bothered me. I mean I don’t want so many details that it makes

me feel as if I was right there. If I ever have sex again, I know not to tell you about it.” I wanted to laugh, but I could tell that he was serious.

“It’s weird. It’s kind of like you’re my sister.”

“Oh my, please stop talking. You didn’t feel that way when we were together did you?” On the inside, I was cringing. I couldn’t stop thinking he felt like what we had together when we were teenagers was incest. I was horrified by the thought.

“God, no,” he cried, eyes wide. “I’m sorry I said anything,” Ryan cringed. “I didn’t mean it like that. It’s just weird let’s leave it at that.”

“Forgotten. Now that that part’s out of the way, I want to talk to you about something else.”

“Please,” Ryan begged.

“I was talking to Taylor about last night before I called you. The thing is I felt like Dawn was encouraging me to drink and spend time with Matt last night. She knew that I hadn’t been out in forever. If I was in her position I would’ve been looking out for her, not pushing her into doing something that she might regret in the morning. Plus, she’s known me for a long time, and she knows that I would never have sex with a guy I’d just met. I’m not saying one-night stands or the people that have them are bad, they’re just not for me. I’m not equipped that way. For me, I need to have feelings for the guy.” I looked over at Ryan to see him with a sympathetic and knowing smile on his face.

“I know you do and there’s nothing wrong with that. I also know that you don’t judge like that. Don’t worry. Where are you going with this, anyway? Are you mad at her for not looking out for you?”

“Kind of. I mean I know I would’ve been looking out for her and I know that you wouldn’t have let me get so drunk that I’d do something I’d regret. You know that we’ve never been as close as we were in high school before she found out about us-” I looked away. “What if she’s not over that? Before I met you, she was kind of obsessed with you, and then one day she stopped talking about you and didn’t want to hang out with you anymore.” Looking back over at him, I frowned. “It was pretty weird. I know you two don’t speak anymore and only see each other every once in a while, at my house. Do you have any insight?”

Clearing his throat, Ryan looked uncomfortable as he eyed me from his side of the couch. “Do you remember when you and Dawn spent the night at my house? She was in my room, and you and Ollie were out on the pullout couch?”

Yes, I remembered that night, and I didn’t like where this was going. Instead of answering, I could only nod my head as I pulled my knees up to my chest and wrapped my arms around my legs. We’d all been drinking that night and were pretty smashed. I’d spent the night fighting off the unwanted advances of his friend.

“Okay, so that night Dawn and I had sex. Afterward she started saying how we were boyfriend and girlfriend and pretty much started planning out the rest of our lives together. This is going to make me sound like an asshole, but I told her I didn’t want that and that I liked someone else. But I never told her who I wanted,” he said quickly.

Resting my head on my knees, I looked away from Ryan before he could see the tears that were about to start down my cheeks. This explained a lot with how Dawn acted after that night and after she found out about Ryan and me. That wasn’t why I was upset though. It was because I felt like I had been living a lie for the last fourteen years. I thought they were my friends, and they’d both kept this from me. Would I ever be able to trust or forgive either of them again? I already knew after last night, Dawn was out of the picture especially with this new insight. The real question was

Ryan?

“I need to go. I’ll... talk to you later,” I stood up and slipped on my flip-flops.

“Wait,” Ryan called out in shock as I made my way to the door. “Are you upset? Please, turn around and let me look at you.”

Turning around quickly, I hastily wiped away the tears that had fallen and were making their way rapidly down my cheeks. “Am I upset? Are you kidding me? Yeah, I’m fucking upset! I just found out that two of my friends have been lying to me since we were in high school and one of those is my best friend. I won’t even get into the fact that I thought I was your first. Did you think you were my first?” I questioned, my voice high and piercing.

“I know I was your first,” Ryan answered quietly.

“Really? Because up until today, I knew that I was your first!”

“I never told you that you were my first,” he tried to explain.

“No, you were a fucking fifteen-year-old boy. I didn’t think you had sex with my then best friend only a couple of months before me. Tell me, how many people were before me?”

My idea of Ryan and I had been a lie. It felt like everything else was a lie too. I didn’t know how to feel about that except betrayed.

“Alex, I’m sorry. I don’t know how many. It was so long ago. A few at least,” he licked his lips, his eyes darted away.

“A few? Wow. I can say that I’ve had sex with a few people and I’m thirty-fucking-

years-old. You were already ahead of my game at fifteen. I'm going to leave before I blow a gasket and say something that I'll regret."

## Page 10

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Shakily, I opened the door before looking back at Ryan. Tears shone in his eyes, but in that moment, I didn't care. I couldn't. My world had been rocked upside down, and I didn't know which way was up. I was sick to my stomach from what I had learned of my once boyfriend turned best friend.

"You were my first," Ryan called from the doorway just before I was getting into my car.

"No, I wasn't," I whispered to myself.

"Even at fifteen, I knew I loved you and that I always would. You were my first love. Please come back so we can talk about this." Desperation dripped from his words, but I was just as desperate to get home and crawl into bed and not come out until Mason was home and all was right in my world, as he was to talk.

"Goodbye, Ryan."

I wasn't sure if I said those words out loud or only in my head as I got in my car and drove away not knowing if I'd ever come back.

4

Sorry

"Alex, please call me back. You can't ignore me forever." Ryan left his fourth voice mail of the day. From the sound of his voice, I could tell he was sorry, but the problem was I wasn't ready to talk to him. I knew it was probably silly that I was

upset that he wasn't a virgin when we'd had sex all those years ago, but I couldn't help how I felt. Taylor had told me that my feelings were valid both when I had talked to her on the phone the next day and when Mason and I went to visit her and her family in Florida the next weekend.

Actually, I was pretty confident I could ignore him forever. It had already been two weeks, and we still hadn't spoken about the bombshell he let loose the last time I saw him. Strangely, I hadn't heard from Dawn meaning that either Ryan had talked to her, or she'd exacted her revenge and was done with me. I wanted to believe it was the former rather than the latter because that meant she'd been holding a grudge against me for all those years about my short-lived romance with Ryan. And if she could hold a grudge for that long, our entire friendship for all these years could have quite possibly been fake on her part.

Although truth be told, I wasn't regretting my night out now. Matt had been messaging me every couple of days and had even called twice. It was nice to have someone to talk to at night now that Ryan and Dawn were out of the picture, and it wasn't possible for me to speak with Taylor that often on the phone especially when her family was home. It was different during the day when Jack was at work and Ben was off to school, but during the day, I had to work, so we didn't get to talk all that often especially now that she was so far away. It had been great seeing her for the weekend, but it wasn't the same as when she lived in Fairlane.

The doorbell rang, pulling me from my thoughts.

Who the hell could be at my door?

Everyone knew that I didn't like unexpected visitors since my ex-husband, Decker was typically the one ringing my doorbell when he was drunk and either being an asshole or begging me to come back to him. If it were him, then it might be the former if he remembered his last visit. It didn't really inspire me to want to answer

the door, but I knew I had to especially when I heard Mason's little feet running down the hall wondering who was at the door.

"Do you want me to get it?" Mason asked as he rounded the corner and came into the living room catching me half-sitting and half-standing unsure of what to do.

"That would be great," I answered him. His sweet face lit up at the idea of doing something so grown up as answering the door.

"Mom, its Uncle Ryan!" Mason yelled from the door even though I was only a couple of feet behind him and could see Ryan standing on the other side.

"Hey, buddy." Ryan greeted him as he walked inside taking me in as I stepped up behind my son, wrapping my arms around his shoulders.

"You missed dinner." Mason pouted as he looked up at Ryan assuming he'd been invited. "It's time for me to get ready for bed."

"Sorry to miss dinner, buddy, but I need to talk to your mom for a few minutes. Do you think you could be a big boy and go get ready for bed, and your mom will be in to tuck you in, in just a little bit?" Ryan smiled down at Mason, ruffling his hair.

Ryan had always been great with Mason treating him better than his own father had. Being the best uncle he could be to my son.

"I'm a big boy," Mason replied, his shoulders squared and if he could I bet his little chest would have puffed out.

It brought a smile to my face until he ran from the room headed to the bathroom to brush his teeth and Ryan turned to me; his blue eyes intense.

“I figured this was the only way I could get you to stop ignoring my texts and phone calls,” he said from his spot when I continued to stare at him. I wasn’t sure if I was ready for this or if I ever would be, but I had to deal with it now that he was in my living room and Mason was in the other room.

“Please,” Ryan pleaded as he took a step toward me. “I didn’t mean to upset you. I thought... I assumed you knew. I mean what did you think I was doing with her the night you all stayed?”

“I don’t know what I thought, okay? I was naïve, and the thought had never crossed my mind. I mean, maybe, I thought you guys messed around, but that’s the extent to what my young mind thought could be happening between you two. You were so young, and I was so stupid.” I whispered as tears filled my eyes. “Ryan, I’m not ready for this. I’m not sure if I’ll ever be ready, but I don’t want Mason to see me crying or to think you’re the cause of my tears. I need you to leave. Please,” I begged, curling my arms around myself.

Looking up at him through my wet lashes, I could see his eyes were glassy and eager for us to try to resolve this, but also resolute in the knowledge that we didn’t have the time.

“Can I stay and wait until Mason goes to bed then we’ll talk some more? I miss you,” he hung his head. “You’re my best friend, and I hate knowing that I’m the one causing you pain. Let me stay, and we’ll talk. Please.”

He was desperate, and I knew that if I didn’t talk to him tonight, then he’d continue to show up night after night until I gave in.

“Fine,” I huffed placing my hands on my hips. “But I’m not going to rush Mason’s bedtime routine because you’re here.”

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“I wouldn’t ask you to,” he replied a small smile tipping his lips. It only furthered to piss me off. He was acting as if all was forgiven when I was nowhere near close to being over this. I didn’t bother saying anything else as I made my way down the hall. First by the bathroom to see water all over the sink and counter, but no Mason and then to his bedroom where he was sitting on his bed patiently waiting in his pajamas with a book beside him. I wasn’t going to say anything about his shirt being on backward since he’d gotten himself ready for bed and looked tired. Instead, I lifted the blankets for him to scoot under and then tucked him in nice and tight before I laid down next to him. Mason might have been six, but he loved to listen to me read and he was beyond listening to me read him little boy books as he liked to call them, so I’d been reading him Harry Potter.

Tonight, I read until he fell asleep and then continued to stay in his room taking my time making sure he was tucked in and the blankets were up to his chin and his hair out of his eyes before I made my way back to Ryan.

Stopping off in the kitchen to stall a little longer, I refilled my ice water. I was surprised that I hadn’t heard the TV on, but as I made my way into the living room, Ryan was sitting on the edge of one of the two chairs that flanked the couch with his knees bouncing up and down and his hands clasped together.

“Thank you for not throwing me out,” Ryan said with a hint of relief in his voice once I sat down on the couch on the opposite side of him. “I know you hate it when people drop by unannounced, but I felt I had no other choice. Hell, if you worked at an office I probably would’ve accosted you there. I know I probably should have come when Mason was at school, but I honestly thought this was my best bet to get you to talk to me. You can be so damn stubborn sometimes.”

“I’m sorry that I reacted so badly to finding out that two of my friends had been keeping a secret from me for the last fourteen years and that I thought that the boy I gave my virginity to was also a virgin, not some man whore at the ripe old age of fifteen,” I replied back with every bit of sarcasm I could muster. “I understand you’re a man and for you, if the situation were reversed it wouldn’t matter, but I can’t get over the fact that I feel as if you’ve lied to me all these years. It wasn’t like our relationship was purely physical. We talked all the time, got to know each other before we even started to go out. It kills me to know that what I thought was something special between us wasn’t.” My voice cracked on the last word, and I turned my head so that he couldn’t see the tears building. I hated anyone seeing me cry, and I was about to let loose a stream of tears over the loss of something that I once held precious only to find out it was a lie.

Moving to sit on the couch beside me, Ryan murmured softly taking my hand in his, “Hey, I don’t think you’re a hypocrite. I’m sorry I hurt you, not telling you about Dawn and me. I truly thought she’d told you. I figured she told you when she found out about us. I never meant to hurt you. You have to know that.” Ryan blinked rapidly, his eyes wet. “You’re one of the best friends I’ve ever had, and I’ve loved you for so long that it kills me to know that you feel like I’ve betrayed you. Will you please forgive me? I’ll do anything. Anything at all.”

I knew he was telling me the truth and that it deeply hurt him to know that he’d hurt me, but could I forgive him? I wasn’t sure I could get over what I’d found out, but Ryan didn’t deserve to be thrown out of my life. Until that day happened, I would have to work a little harder to not let their lie build a bigger wedge between us.

“I’m not going to keep you out of my life, but it’s going to take some time for me to get over this. I want to be your friend, to be able to talk to you, and hang out. You’re going to have to give me some time to let this go. Can you accept that?” I asked looking into his kind eyes that only a few moments ago were so sad but were now shining with hope.

“I can do whatever you want. I promise. Thank you for finally talking to me,” Ryan replied with a hitch in his voice, he crushed me to him in a big bear hug.

Loosening his grip, Ryan held me in his arms. “The other day, I called Dawn and told her you knew the truth and called her out on taking you out and getting you smashed. In all honesty, I don’t think she was even a bit sorry. She was a huge bitch on the phone and ended up going off on me about how it was my job to tell you about her and I having sex.” Giving me a squeeze, he continued. “I tried to reason with her that after we broke up that even though we saw each other and talked some, we didn’t really hang out or anything until you separated from Decker. Once I realized nothing was going to come from me talking to her, I got off the phone with her. Shit, Alex, I really am sorry. If I’d known that you thought I was a virgin, or that you didn’t know about Dawn and me, I would have told you a long time ago.”

Nodding against his chest, I fought not to cry. “I believe you, and she should’ve told me. It wasn’t until she went off to college that she started to tell me her sex stories, but I knew that she’d had sex with two guys back in high school and she never told me. I don’t know why she didn’t.” I shrugged. “Well, maybe one of the guys because he was a huge prick, and she probably knew that I’d have asked her what the fuck she was thinking even though I did know that she liked him. The other guy was a guy we barely knew. Maybe she was embarrassed.” I shrugged in his hold. “I don’t know, but I should’ve learned my lesson then that she wasn’t a good friend. From now on, I don’t plan on having her in my life. She hasn’t called or texted once since that night. Hell, she barely spoke to me the next morning when she drove me home.”

“She was probably jealous you had sex with a movie star. Who knows what was going through her head.”

“All I know is that I can’t trust her, and she doesn’t have my best interest at heart.”

“Sadly, I think you’re right,” Ryan said from the top of my head.

Pulling away, I looked up at him giving him a small but sad smile. It was rare that we ever fought, and this had been the longest we'd gone in the last two years without talking to each other.

"Thank you for coming over here and making me talk to you."

"Anytime. Now that we're talking when were you thinking of going to see Taylor? I'd like to go with you to help you out on the trip?" Ryan smiled, eyes glowing.

I hated telling him that we went without him, but I had no other choice. I couldn't take another break from work.

"Mason and I already went," I informed him. "I'm sorry. I know you wanted to go, but I needed to get away and spend some time with Taylor."

"I understand. I do," Ryan said nodding his head. "Did you set another date for when you'll go visit her or when they're coming here?" He asked as the light in his eyes died a little.

"No," I pouted.

"When you have an idea let me know. I want to come with you and Mason. I hate to think of you both alone driving. What if you had car trouble or got the attention of some crazy person?"

"I highly doubt we'd find a crazy person on the road who's going to try to do anything to us or follow us." I laughed. The tension from earlier gone. "I know Taylor wouldn't mind if you came to visit her. She always likes seeing you although I should probably warn you that she's not too happy with you right now." I felt like I should feel bad that Taylor was now mad at him, but I wasn't. Ryan deserved it.

He pursed his lips. "I imagine so. Maybe the next time you talk to her, you can let Taylor know we talked and you're going to try to forgive me one of these days, hopefully in the not too distant future." Ryan stood, a hand held out to help bring me to my feet and led me to the front door before giving me a small smile.

He looked both happy and sad at the same time or maybe I was reflecting what I was feeling in that moment. I was happy to have my friend back, but we weren't the same Ryan and Alex anymore, and we might never be, making me mourn our friendship even as he stood in front of me.

"Good night, Alex. The next time I call or text, you better answer," he said playfully, but there was still a hint of sadness in his eyes.

"I will. I promise. Good night, Ryan," I said as I started to close the door. I watched as he made his way down the sidewalk to his truck before he turned around and took a step toward me.

"Sorry." It was the only word he spoke, but his eyes flashed with a thousand words that he wanted to say, and I forgave him just a little more.

It was a start.

## Page 12

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Booty Call

My phone pinged with an incoming text.

Matthew: I want to come visit you this week.

Was I ready for a visit from him?

I needed to start living my life and stop being afraid.

Alex: Okay. Mason will be here all except for when he's at school. It's too early for me to introduce you to him. I hope you understand.

Matthew: I understand. Remember I have two kids of my own.

Matthew: So, your cool with me coming? I can stay at Colt's house and see you during the day. Maybe I can come over when Mason's asleep if you're comfortable with that?

Alex: I think I can make that work. What day are you thinking?

Matthew: Wednesday?

Alex: Are you staying the weekend? Is Colt coming with you?

Matthew: If it's okay with you, I'd like to stay the weekend. Will you have Mason this weekend?

Alex:No, he'll be at his dad's Friday night through Sunday morning.

Matthew:It's just me coming but Colt said I can stay at his house anytime I want.

Alex:I need to get done with this project if you want to see me while you're here. Can I talk to you tonight?

Matthew:No problem. I'll text you my itinerary once I book my flight.

To say I was shocked that Matt was coming to visit me was an understatement. Hell, after that night, I never thought I'd hear from him again. He's a hot Hollywood actor that could get any girl he wanted. What could he possibly want from me? Not that I thought I was ugly, but no one would mistake me for a Hollywood actress or Victoria Secret's model. I'm short or what I considered short at five foot, four inches and I rarely wore makeup or fixed my hair beyond throwing it up in a ponytail. I dressed for comfort in either sweats or yoga pants.

Of course, when Matt saw me I was dressed up with my makeup and hair done, looking better than I had in years. I couldn't remember the last time I wore anything but my standard attire. He saw me at my best. Even when I woke up the morning after, I undoubtedly looked better than I had in the last year or more. What would he think when he saw me again? I didn't want to be fake with him by wearing clothes I wouldn't normally wear. I wanted to be myself, but maybe a little better version of me.

What would he think of my house? I was sure he lived in a mansion. Anything would be compared to my little ranch house. It was three tiny bedrooms with one being used as my home office. I didn't have super nice furniture, but it wasn't horrible either. Mostly because I didn't have the money after the divorce to buy all new stuff and I had a six-year-old son. There was no point unless I wanted to stress over Mason and his every action on any nice furniture. Our house was cozy. We were happy with

what we had and that was all that mattered.

Was he expecting sex? I wasn't sure I was ready to have sex with him or anyone for that matter. It was different when I had been too drunk to know better. What I really needed to do was call Taylor and see what she had to say. Hopefully she could stop all the thoughts and self-doubt swirling in my head.

Heading to my desk, I grabbed my phone before I started to look over my notes for the account I was working on. I only hoped that I would be done before Matthew got here. Four days didn't give me a lot of time, and if I didn't get done then he'd have to understand that I had a job that needed to get done.

Once I had a couple of hours of work under my belt and I was on auto-pilot with what I was doing, I called Taylor.

"Hey," Taylor answered brightly. It hadn't been long since we'd last talked on the phone. Maybe a few days, but it had been close to a month since my visit after the whole Ryan and Dawn debacle. Ryan and I were talking again, but things still weren't back to normal with us. They were close, but I knew when he looked at me, Ryan could see the hurt still in my eyes just as I saw the sadness in his over hurting me. Taylor, of course, knew that I couldn't or wouldn't stay mad at Ryan for long, and supported my decision to have him in my life even though I wasn't totally over him lying to me.

"Hey, I miss you," I answered back. It was a pretty standard greeting for the both of us now that she lived hundreds of miles away instead of the two that had separated us when she lived in Fairlane.

"I miss you too, but we'll see each other soon. Christmas isn't that far away, and by then I'm sure you'll be sick and tired of the cold and happy to spend the holiday on the beach."

“I love the beach. You know I do, but I’d never visit the beach again if it meant you lived here. I’d move there if I could, but you know that Decker will never agree to let me leave Fairlane, let alone leave the state with Mason. I don’t have the money to fight him and he knows it.”

Taylor sighed on the other end of the line. “I know. I wish I could tell you that this case Jack is working on is going to be over soon, but from what he can tell me, it’s going to be a very long case. Once it’s over though, we’re moving back even if we have to move in with you.”

We both laughed knowing that I would eagerly open my home to them anytime.

“Anything new going on?” She asked as I heard her shuffling around what sounded like some sort of store. She was probably grocery shopping while Ben was at school. I knew that if I had the choice, I’d always choose to go alone instead of with Mason tagging along asking if we were done yet.

Exhaling a deep breath, I told her what had been on my mind since my text with Matt. “He wants to come here on Wednesday and stay the weekend. I’m pretty sure he’s going to want sex. Right?”

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“Probably,” she chuckled. “I mean if you hadn’t already had sex then I’d say he’d want it, but not expect it. Now, I’m sure he’s going to want to and expect some nookie. It’s a pretty long-distance booty call, so he must like you. What are your conversations like?”

“I don’t know. Normal, I guess,” I answered and then laughed. I hadn’t really thought about it. I assumed that once the allure of a small-town girl was gone, he’d stop texting and calling me. I had nothing to offer him from sixteen hundred miles away and I knew that he had no problem getting women. It wouldn’t be long until he gave up.

“Normal? Define normal?” Taylor asked before excusing herself to someone else.

“I don’t know,” I glanced up at the ceiling as if it could give me all the answers. “When we talk on the phone, it’s pretty short. Just random stuff like how our day was, or what did you do. Now that I think about it, it’s pretty generic. I don’t talk about Mason, but he talks about his two kids. How he doesn’t see them very often since he’s gone for work so much, but when he’s in town, he has them every other weekend. Sometimes I feel like he only talks about his kids because he wants me to talk about Mason. He mentioned may be coming when Mason’s asleep, but I don’t know. It makes me uncomfortable. Am I crazy?”

“No, you have to do what feels right for you and Mason. Neither one of us knows what it’s like dating with children. This is your first time attempting dating or whatever you’re doing,” she added with a laugh. “I don’t envy you. No matter how many times I complain about Jack, I don’t want to think about having to date now that I’m in my thirties with kids. I still can’t believe I let Jack convince me to get

pregnant again,” Taylor cried out and quickly softened her voice. “Especially when we’re so far away from friends and family and he’s gone all the time working on this case.” I could hear the sadness in her voice from thousands of miles away. Maybe I should text Jack and tell him that he needed to do something special for her this weekend.

“I know and I’m sorry. I hate how much you’re alone. I shouldn’t be calling and laying all this on you. You should be the one telling me all your pregnancy woes and complaining about Jack.”

Taylor scoffed. “Don’t think like that. I want you to tell me your problems no matter what’s going on with me. What kind of friend would I be if I didn’t at least listen and try to help? That’s what friends are for, anyway. I know you’d do the exact same thing for me and it keeps my mind off my own problems.”

I would do the same for her no matter the circumstance.

“So, what do you think I should do then?”

“Do what feels right. How much of your life have you told him?”

“Not much. He knows I have a son named Mason, and that I’ve been divorced for a year,” I answered back. Pushing away from my desk, I gave up on my work for the time being.

I heard her hum into the phone, unsure if it was for me or something else. “Does he know that you hadn’t had sex in a few years? That you don’t do one-night stands?”

“I’m pretty sure that it didn’t come up in conversation that night and I sure as hell haven’t told him since. That would be so embarrassing,” I cried out. “I did tell him I don’t have one-night stands.”

“It’s not embarrassing. Plenty of people have bad marriages and don’t have sex. He’s divorced so I’m sure he understands more than you give him credit for.”

“I doubt he’s ever gone very long without sex. You’ve seen him. Even if he wasn’t as good looking as he is I’m sure he still wouldn’t have a problem using his movie star status.”

“I’m sure not. I think the only way to make it so you’re comfortable while he’s there is to tell him more about yourself and that you might not be ready to have sex again when you’re not drunk.”

“He’ll be on the next flight out,” I added with a bitter laugh.

“If he is then that’s on him. He’s not worth your time. You deserve happiness and maybe this guy is it and maybe he’s not but have some fun and give him a chance.” Her next words were spoken softly. “Whatever you do don’t have sex with him again if you’re not ready. If you don’t want to explain to him right away, then see how the day goes and how he treats you and then if you’re still not feeling it you should probably tell him what’s going on if you want to see him again.”

“You give good advice. There’s a good possibility, I might be calling or texting you a lot when he’s here for more of it.” I laughed for a moment, but it quickly turned into sadness as how much I missed Taylor sank in. “Thank you. You’ve pulled me from the ledge and now I’m ready to walk the tight rope.”

Taylor laughed her tinkly little laugh making me smile. It didn’t matter what kind of mood I was in, anytime I heard her laugh it brought a smile to my face. “Don’t be so dramatic. You’ve got this and remember to have fun. Don’t let all the shit Decker put in your head ruin any more of your life.”

“You’re right as always. Maybe I’ll even buy some sexy lingerie just in case.” In all

actuality, I needed some new bras and underwear that weren't all cotton and boring. I had a feeling that if I started to wear underwear that was a little sexier, even if it was underneath yoga pants and a t-shirt, it would make me feel better about myself. I needed to get rid of what Decker had ingrained in me during our marriage.

"You definitely need to buy some if you plan for him to see you undressed," Taylor joked. She was always giving me a hard time about my ugly bras and underwear. "I'm going to need to let you go. I've got to get all these groceries in my van and then go pick up Ben from school. Keep me updated and I can't wait to hear all about your weekend."

"I will. I promise. I need to get off here too, so I can pick up Mason in a little bit. Love you and talk to you soon." Making a kissing sound, I waited for Taylor's goodbye before I hung up.

\* \* \*

"Hey," I greeted Matt with my best smile as I opened my front door and smoothed down my billowy peach shirt. It had long sleeves and a deeper V than I was used to wearing, but by the appreciative look Matt gave me it was worth it. I also had on a new pair of jeans that were loose fit and bare feet. One day after I dropped Mason off at school, I had made a trip to the mall and splurged on new clothes of every variety. Now I had more than just a couple of pairs of jeans, yoga pants, and t-shirts. I looked like a real adult who had on very sexy underwear underneath her clothes. I even went to a salon and had my hair trimmed and highlighted. The last time I felt this good about myself was in high school. It felt good to feel like my old self again. It was amazing that the right clothes could boost your self-esteem so much, but they had. I felt deserving of moving on with my life and being happy, and I was going to make every attempt to do so with Matt that weekend.

"You look great," Matt greeted me with a kiss to my cheek. Stepping back, he asked,

“Did you decide where you wanted to go for lunch? I don’t know about you, but I’m starved.”

“Thank you, let me grab my purse quick and we can go. I was so caught up with trying to finish my project that I haven’t eaten yet today.” As I said the words my stomach let out a noise that rivaled any monster in a horror movie. “Did you want to drive, or do you want me to?”

“I’ll drive. I’m not sure you’re capable with how loud that rumble was,” he answered with a chuckle as I stepped inside and quickly slipped on my flip-flops, grabbed my purse, phone, and keys. I wasn’t used to going out the front door since I always used the garage to come and go so it took me a little too long to try to lock the door from the outside. “Do you need any help?” Matt’s words caressed the back of my neck causing a shiver to work its way down my spine as I finally got the lock turned.

“Nope. I got it.” I jumped as I dropped my keys into my purse and turned around only to find Matt a few inches away with a knowing smile on his face.

Walking with his hand on the small of my back, Matt guided me to his rental car and even opened the door for me, waited until I was fully in my seat before closing the door, and made his way around the car and into the driver’s seat. Once the car was started, and we had been sitting in my driveway for a full minute, I turned to see Matt with a smirk on his face.

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“Are you going to tell me where we’re going?” He asked with a low chuckle. I hadn’t noticed it the night we met, but in the subsequent times we had talked, I realized that Matt had a Boston accent. I loved accents, and it made me more attracted to him than I would have been otherwise.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know where my mind was. I guess I’m too used to driving and knowing where I’m going. Do you want me to give you directions or do you want to put it into your GPS?” I asked because I knew men could be weird about driving and taking directions.

His eyes sparkled with amusement as he replied. “You can give me the directions if you don’t mind.”

“Do you like Italian?”

“Love it,” he moaned in the back of his throat. “My grandmother’s Italian, and it’s been too long since I’ve had one of her home-cooked meals.”

“Well, now I’m not so sure about my choice of restaurants. You obviously know your Italian food. I hope you’re not too disappointed with the restaurants in Fairlane, we have some pretty good food, but I’m sure they’re nothing like the restaurants you’re used to.”

My hands twisted together in my lap as we made our way to eat. I hadn’t thought out my choices of where we’d eat very well. I probably should have asked what he liked to eat. I’d made a trip to the grocery store to make something fancy I saw on a cooking show that looked amazing, but now I wasn’t confident in my choice.

“Don’t worry about it. I promise I’m not a food critic and I don’t want you to be stressed about what we eat all weekend. I came to see you, not eat the best culinary food in the country.” Matt tried to reassure me, but I was nervous about the entire weekend. If I couldn’t get what we were going to eat right, I was going to be a disaster. Maybe if I would’ve Googled him, I would’ve known Matt had an Italian background. Going by his light brown hair and blue eyes, you would never guess that his grandmother was Italian.

Once we were seated and Matt had looked over the menu, I caught him peeking over it as I took a bite of their delicious freshly baked bread.

He placed his menu down and sliced off a piece of bread for himself. “They’ve got a good selection. I can see why you chose this place. Do you know what you’re going to get?”

“Each time I come I try something different, but every time I order the zucchini frittes. They’re so good and almost a meal in themselves. I normally take the rest home and heat them up later for a snack either that night or the next day.”

“We’ll definitely have to order the zucchini then. Do you have a favorite?” He pointed to the menu.

“Not yet.” Shaking my head, I looked over the menu to see if anything stood out to me. “Everything is excellent as far as I’m concerned. I don’t think you can go wrong with anything you order. If it was evening, I’d say you have to try the dessert because their cheesecake is out of this world.”

“Maybe we’ll have to come back one night this weekend and try their cheesecake.” Matt winked at me as his foot found mine underneath the table.

Unsure how to act, I blushed and felt silly for being so inexperienced at the age of

thirty. The last time I could really remember Decker showing any public display of affection had been in high school and after almost a decade of marriage with him, I was unused to flirting. Instead of getting mad about my past, I decided to give Matt the best me I could be and enjoy my time with him.

6

## Time to Have Fun

“I’m assuming your weekend with Matt went well if you’re packing to visit him in LA,” Ryan said through the phone.

It’d been three weeks since Matt had come to visit. When he first asked me to come out to visit him and go to a Halloween party with him, I wasn’t sure I should go. Then Taylor pointed out that Mason would be with his father that weekend and it would be good for me to get out of the house and have some fun.

I was so used to being a parent twenty-four, seven that when Mason was gone I didn’t know what to do with myself even after over a year of him going to his father’s every other weekend. Binge reading, or working had become my way of life while he was away. I needed to remember to have fun and live my life and that’s what I was going to do.

“It went well. I was so nervous for the first couple of days, but I finally relaxed and had some fun.”

I finished packing my clothes and went into the bathroom to gather everything that I would need to look my best at a Hollywood Halloween party. That meant I’d gone to Sephora and bought all new makeup, moisturizer, and hair stuff. Enough to put a dent in my bank account. It wasn’t every day that a girl from Fairlane went to a Hollywood party, and I wanted to look my best. I’d tried to nonchalantly ask who

would be there only for him to answer that anyone who was anyone would be there. I couldn't wrap my head around who all that would entail. At least I didn't have to worry about a costume since Matt said he had it covered, but he wouldn't tell me what we were going as.

"Did you cry this morning dropping Mason off?"

"Of course, I did, but only after he was in his classroom. Are you still on call in case I need you?" I was worried that something would happen while I was in California and wouldn't be able to get to Mason quickly.

"You betcha. I won't let you down. I'll have my phone by my side all weekend long until I hear that you're both safe at home."

"Thank you," I sniffed trying to not cry while on the phone with him. "It means a lot to me knowing that you'll be there for Mason."

"Always," he vowed. "I've got to get back to this job but call me if you need anything. And remember to have fun!"

"I will. Thanks."

\* \* \*

"You want me to wear that?" I asked in a half-shriek, half-panicked voice. Being dressed in Shelli's skimpy dress when I'd met Matt and Colton was coming to bite me in the ass. When Matt had come for the weekend, I'd dressed nicer than I normally did, but nothing was skimpy. In Hollywood terms I was sure I looked like a conservative prude since I wasn't comfortable flashing skin while out in public.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:21 pm*

“What’s wrong with it?” Matt asked his forehead puckered.

Did he truly not see anything wrong with the costume he’d picked out? Matt was going as a doctor, dressed in scrubs and tennis shoes, while I was his nurse counterpart who was supposed to dress in the skimpiest of skimpy nurse uniforms. It looked like an outfit for role playing in the bedroom, not something you’d wear in public. I knew Halloween costumes for women were skimpy, but what he’d chosen was not something I’d ever seen in any Halloween costume shop.

“You can pretty much see everything I have to offer,” I replied before taking a deep breath and facing him. During the times I’d been with Matt, he seemed to like my body going by his enthusiasm, but I was not ready for this outfit. “Where did you even get this getup?”

“Getup?” He chuckled before taking the barely there piece of fabric off its hanger and handing it to me. “At a perfectly respectable costume shop.”

“I highly doubt that,” I countered, my eyes narrowed. “It’ll barely cover my tits and ass, and those... those shoes... I’m not sure I can even walk in them they’re so tall. I’m more of a flip-flops and UGG’s type of girl if you hadn’t noticed.”

“Those shoes will make your legs look fantastic and you can hang on to me all night if you need help walking.” The corner of his lip lifted. “I didn’t think it’d be a problem. The night I met you, you had on some sexy high heels. What’s the difference?”

“The difference is a couple of inches. I could barely walk that night it had been so

long since I'd last worn heels. I'm serious about the possibility of not being able to move without falling."

Looking down at the heels of the shoes he'd gotten me, he rubbed the back of his neck, "Did you bring any other heels with you?"

"I brought one pair that are a hell of a lot shorter and not as sexy. I didn't know what the plans were for the weekend except for the party and you told me you'd take care of our outfits." Walking to my suitcase, I took out my very short heeled shoes that weren't nearly as nice as the ones he'd provided. Matt or someone had gone all out and gotten Christian Louboutin heels for me to wear. They were gorgeous and lethal by the looks of how tall the heel was. "I'll try them on and see if I can walk, but I'm not making any promises. I might have to wear the heels I brought."

"That's okay." He replied with a shrug. "I want you to be comfortable and your legs will still look great so whichever you go with will be fine."

I kind of wanted to slap him. If he wanted me to be comfortable, then he should've thought about that when he chose my outfit. My boobs which were not that big would be close to hanging out of the top and I'd be lucky to not have a nipple slip sometime during the night. Not wanting to ruin the weekend and make the entire trip awkward, I decided to not say more on the costume Matt had supplied.

"How long do we have until the car picks us up?" I asked as I continued to look at what I was supposed to wear. Maybe it would cover more than it looked once I put it on, I tried to convince myself as I bit my tongue.

"A little over an hour," Matt replied with a sly smile as he ran his hands up my jean clad thighs.

"An hour?" I jumped back out of his reach, grabbing up the offending garment and

shoes before heading into his bathroom. “Why didn’t you tell me we had so little time? I’ve got to do my hair and makeup while still trying to figure out how to make this.” I shook the nurse costume in the air, “Cover up all the necessary places and then there are the shoes!”

Matt cocked an eyebrow at me as he started to undress out of his athletic shorts and t-shirt. Instead of saying anything which was probably wise, he continued to strip out of his clothes and then put on his scrubs. I watched him from the mirror as I put on my foundation. Although Matt wasn’t what I would normally choose for myself, he was attractive and built. I couldn’t help watching as he took everything off except for his boxer briefs. Once he was done, Matt came into the bathroom where he proceeded to brush his teeth and put on deodorant. And just like that he was done. Men had it too easy.

Since I didn’t usually wear makeup but did like to watch videos and read articles about makeup, I tried to do what they called a night look. Either I didn’t do the smoky eye thing right, or it wasn’t a good look for me. It was way too dramatic, but I figured for a Halloween party it would do. I added a dark red lipstick that I hoped would stay on my lips and not on my teeth before I tackled my actual costume.

\* \* \*

I couldn’t stop pulling the front of my skirt down as our limo slowly made its way up the hill that was packed with cars on each side. It was the week before Halloween and everyone in the neighborhood had some sort of decoration up for the holiday. Some only had simple fall flowers or pumpkins out while others went all out with their decorations. From the looks of the house we were slowly pulling up to Becca Matthews had outdone any house I’d ever seen decorated for Halloween. I wondered if it was her favorite holiday or if she always went all out for each one.

Becca Matthews was the child of Helen and Russell Stone, two actors that had been

together for almost forty years after filming the romantic comedy, *Rough Shot*. They were one of the few golden couples of Hollywood. If they ever split up the world would be devastated and stop believing in love. Even seeing them in pictures you could tell they loved each other beyond measure and were happy no matter where they were if they were together. Their love was what fairytales were made of. Sadly, Becca hadn't had their same luck in love. She'd been married twice producing one child from each marriage. Neither had worked out.

Her long, sprawling two-story house had ghosts and goblins hanging from the trees, tombstones in the yard, spiderwebs stretched here and there with different sized spiders residing in them, smoke was rising out of a cauldron where a mechanical witch stirred and cackled, while a red light glowed on the front of the house made it look as if it was dripping blood. There was a line of people all dressed up waiting to be let into the party with their costumes ranging from superheroes and children book characters to scary and scantily clad. Even though I was still uncomfortable in my outfit seeing that there were people dressed in way less on than me did settle my nerves. Somewhat.

After about thirty minutes of waiting in line, doing some serious people watching on my part, and showing our invitation to the bouncers at the door, we were finally let inside the party. Nerves about my outfit were long gone and replaced with new ones about all the celebrities that were sprinkled throughout the house. It was packed and everywhere I looked I saw someone I'd either seen on TV, the big screen, or a magazine. I knew my nerves were unfounded especially after meeting Colton and Matt, but I couldn't help myself. It wasn't like if I made a fool out of myself that I'd ever see them again. The possibilities of that were slim to none, but I'd thought that once before.

A DJ dressed as the devil played music in the corner as we made the long trek to the kitchen to get a drink. Matt didn't say much except to point out who he thought I might be in celebrity awe of, which I thought was funny since I hadn't acted that way

in the slightest the night I met him. He held my hand firmly in his as we zigged and zagged through the crowd, bumping a few shoulders along the way. His affection, which was something I wasn't used to, was easy and seem to come naturally to him, making me like him all the more. It wasn't until we were away from the music and people swaying to the beat that he stopped to greet a friend. Dressed up as Batman with his face covered, I had no idea who the friend was until Matt introduced us.

“Alex, this is my good friend, Reeves Jenner. Jenner, this is Alex,” Matt grinned from beside me, a gleam in his eye as he introduced me.

There'd been no discussion about what we were. We lived too far away from each other to see the other much. I'd only asked that if we were going to have sex that I be the only person he had sex with even though we were using protection. Matt didn't seem to have a problem with that even if it did mean being exclusive.

“Alex, hey,” Reeves voice boomed as he shook my hand vigorously. “It's so good to finally meet you. I have to be honest here, I thought Matt was making you up when he started talking about you.”

Why would he think I was made up?

“All good things I hope.” Putting on my best fake smile, I looked at Matt from the corner of my eye to see his cheeks slightly pinked up.

What had Matt been saying about me?

“Too good to be true.”

Clearing his throat, Matt asked, “We were headed to get a drink. Want to join us?”

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“Yeah, sure Poppy went to the bathroom at least ten minutes ago but hasn’t come back yet. I’m tired of standing around waiting for her.” Reeves turned and started to plow through the crowd with his wide shoulders and tall frame. He was at least six foot and towered over both me and Matt making a path for us to follow.

As we waited our turn at the bar, I stood and listened to Matt and Reeves talk as I did more people watching. I knew there were plenty more celebrities under the masks and paint, but unless I was introduced, I’d never figure out who they were because some of the makeup jobs I swore they must have had a makeup artist do their makeup they were so astounding. It made our doctor and nurse costumes seem weak and lame in comparison. I knew that if there was a contest we’d definitely lose unless it was for most unimaginable. Not that I would say any of that to Matt. I’d already expressed my dislike for what he’d picked out for me. At least the crazy killer shoes weren’t as bad as I thought, and they did make my legs look hot. If I did say so myself. It would have been a tragedy if I couldn’t have worn the Louboutin’s the only chance I had.

“Matt,” A girl shrieked from behind us, her heels clacking on the floor in rapid succession.

Turning around I was shocked to see Becca Matthews headed our way with her arms outstretched. She wasted little time as she engulfed first Matt and then Reeves in a big hug. Becca was gorgeous even dressed as a zombie bride with eye defying makeup that made it look like she had a few chunks of skin missing.

“Who’s your date?” she asked, batting her eyelashes.

“Becca this is Alex. Alex, this is my friend and the host of the party, Becca

Matthews.”

Instead of saying hi or shaking my head, Becca gave me the same hug she’d given both Matt and Reeves.

“Let’s let these boys talk and I’ll show you around. I’m in need of some girl talk,” she said after placing a drink in each of our hands. Hooking her arm through mine, Becca pulled me away as she whispered who the couple in the corner were. They were as close to having sex without having sex in public as they could be. They were putting on quite a show, so much so I didn’t stop looking until Becca dragged me into the next room giggling and pointing out more celebrities.

An hour later, I’d met more actors, directors, producers, models, and pop stars than I thought possible in one room. Becca seemed to know everyone, and she’d invited them all to her party. I still wasn’t happy with my costume, but no one had looked at me or treated me badly so that was a plus. Instead they were all (okay not all, but almost all of them) very nice and didn’t act like the divas I thought they would. The media portrayed them out to be a lot different from the kind, sweet, and funny people that I’d met. I think a lot of it had to do with the people that Becca had invited. She was very down to earth to the point that you’d label her a hippie or bohemian and I loved her instantly.

Becca’s house was clean and crisp while at the same time very homey once we got out of the parts that had been heavily decorated for the party. Most of her furniture were either white or a very light grey, which I thought was trouble having two kids and huge parties like the one she was throwing. I wasn’t sure how she kept it so clean. On second thought, I was sure she had someone or multiple someone’s clean her house. It was easy to forget that she was a big Hollywood actress with how easy it was to talk to her and how open she was. It felt as if I’d known her for years and not an hour. Her and her family weren’t Hollywood royalty, but they were pretty darn close. Even with her down-to-earth vibe there was something wild simmering

underneath creating an even more enticing allure.

“I don’t think they’ve left their spot the whole time we’ve been gone,” Becca murmured loudly in my ear. Unless you were shouting, you couldn’t hear the person next to you the party had gotten so loud with the music and the amount of people.

“Doesn’t look like it. If I don’t get a chance to tell you later, you throw a great party. I have to admit I was nervous when Matt mentioned it, but you’ve made me feel more than welcome. Thank you.”

“Oh, you.” Becca swatted her hands in my direction. “You don’t need to thank me. I’m just happy to see Matt out and about and looking happy. Ever since his divorce he’s seemed-” she paused and looked back at Matt for a moment before she continued. “Lost. I guess is the word to best describe him. He’s partied too hard and kind of became a man whore, but after he met you, Matt called me and told me that he’d met a sweet girl that he could see himself with while he was in Missouri. I think he’s enamored with you and it’s so sweet,” she beamed at me. “He needs a good woman to keep his head on his shoulders.”

“I’m not sure if that’s me.” I told her truthfully. “We live so far away from each other and it’s all so new. With my history with my ex-husband, I have no clue what I’m doing.”

“Well, whatever you’re doing it seems to be working. He’s the old Matt that I used to know, and I desperately want him to stay that way or I don’t see good things in his future. Many people think that if you’re a celebrity, you can do anything and still get hired in the business, but that’s not true. I know he’s been turned down on quite a few jobs that he wanted, and he wouldn’t listen to me that he needed to clean up his act. No studio wants a liability on their hands and I’m sad to say that Matt has turned into a one.” Her mouth set in a hard line as she eyed him from our spot.

The music had stopped, and we were in a corner where we could see Matt, but no one could hear us talking. I was shocked Becca was being as open with me as she was. She really must've been worried and thought I'd done something to warrant her trust. Becca hadn't told me everything, but what she had told me kind of scared me. It sounded like Matt had been out of control. It might not have been in the media, but executives and producers seemed to know what he had been up to.

"I really should get you back to him. I've taken you away for long enough and I should probably make sure no one is trying to burn down my house or anything like that." Becca laughed as if it were a real possibility or that it'd happened once or twice. Once again, she hooked her arm through mine as we made our way.

The moment Matt spotted us, his face lit up with a beaming smile. It'd been a long time since anyone but Mason looked happy when they saw me. I couldn't remember when or if Decker had ever lit up like Matt, had just done. Warmth flowed through me and I could feel my lips tip up as I smiled back at him.

Leaning down to greet me with a soft kiss, Matt smiled as his eyes trailed over my face before he spoke against my ear. "Hey."

"Hey," I replied back softly against his cheek.

"Did you have fun with Becca?"

"I did. Her house is gorgeous. My head's spinning, she introduced me to so many people. She's really sweet."

Interrupting with shaky words, Reeves asked, "Did you by any chance see Poppy?"

Giving Matt a strange look, Becca's demeanor instantly changed as she looked back to Reeves with sadness in her eyes. "No, I'm sorry. Didn't you say she was headed to

the bathroom earlier?”

“Yeah, I don’t know what could’ve happened to her. In case she came back through here looking for me, I haven’t moved from this spot in-” Reeves stopped to look at his phone. The smile he had been wearing the whole night vanished. “Two hours. It’s been two hours and nothing. Not even a single text message. What the fuck,” he yelled, frustrated.

There was a slight pause in the surrounding chatter, but with one stern look from Becca, the crowd quickly went back to what they were doing.

Resting her hand on his arm, she replied. “I’m sorry, honey. If I see her, I’ll let her know that you’re looking for her. I’m sure she’s catching up with someone she hasn’t seen in forever and didn’t realize how much time has gone by. I hate to leave you like this, but I need to go mingle and check with my guests. If I don’t see you again before you leave it was great meeting you, Alex. I’ll get your number from Matt when I have my phone with me.” Becca gave me another hug.

“Sounds great. They don’t seem to make costumes with pockets for phones. Although, I don’t know where you would put one on mine,” I replied looking down at my barely there nurses costume.

“Next time don’t let Matt pick out your costume. Call me and we’ll figure out a good one for you two to wear.” As she stepped back into the crowd, Becca blew us kisses before turning on her heel and disappearing into the mix of people.

Turning back to Matt and Reeves, my heart broke a little for Reeves and his sad expression. “Have you tried calling or messaging her? Maybe Becca was right, and she got lost in conversation with someone. I know it’s happened to me before especially when I’m with a good friend. Trust me, we ladies like to talk. A lot.”

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Reeves body slumped forward as his eyes skimmed through the crowd. He didn't believe a word I had said. I wasn't lying though. When Taylor and I got together, we could talk for hours and it would only seem like minutes. When I looked around and fully took in the scene, I wasn't sure there was a place in the house where it would be easy to talk with all the people around or the loud music. Still, I wanted him to feel better, and I hoped that was what had really happened instead of something else, but if the look Matt and Becca gave each other were anything to go by, it would seem that Poppy was off doing something that she shouldn't be doing.

After standing around for another half an hour with no Poppy in sight, Matt hooked his arm around Reeves shoulder and gave him what looked to be a forced smile. "Why don't you come back to my place and we can hang out?"

If I had to guess this wasn't the first time that Matt had tried to take Reeves mind off his wife. With another unanswered text, we all got into the back of the limo Matt had hired to drive us. I wasn't sure how Reeves and his wife had gotten to the party, but I wasn't going to ask. The word Poppy wouldn't come out of my mouth for the rest of the night.

7

Never Again

"Are you fucking shitting me," Matt yelled as he passed a string of cars in the left lane going at least twenty miles faster than everyone else that was on the road.

My hand clutched the handle above my window. I was starting to get scared. Matt

had been shouting at me for the last thirty minutes and with each minute that passed by, he got more angry and erratic. At first, I stayed quiet. I was used to being yelled at. Decker had gone off on me more times than I could count because something or someone would set him off and he always took it out on me. Instead of fighting back and making the situation worse, I had learned to say as little as possible so that I didn't escalate the matter at hand.

Nothing seemed to be working with Matt though. If I was quiet, he raged, and I was made out to be guilty. When I tried to explain myself, Matt accused me of cheating. The only thing I wanted in that moment was to be on a plane back to Missouri and to never lay eyes on Matt Ryan again.

"When did this start?" Matt growled as he once again zipped from the left lane to the right and back again. Where were the police when I needed them? Being pulled over and a police escort to the airport sounded very good in that moment.

Gripping the handle above the window even tighter, I answered. "I told you before that Jenner and I started talking after the Halloween party. You were sitting right there on the couch when he asked for my phone number. I've been trying to help him figure out what's going on with Poppy."

It had been two weeks since the Halloween party and when Matt asked if I would come back out to LA for the weekend, I had no problem saying yes. We hadn't talked or even texted much in those two weeks while I was home, and I thought Matt had moved on. I was a little shocked he wanted me to come back, but I'd agreed to visit him. In that time, Jenner and I'd talked on the phone almost every night about his wife and tried to speculate what she was doing when she wasn't at home which seemed to be near constant. Whatever she was doing wasn't good. She was rarely home at night once Jenner got home from a day on set and she never left a message where she was, what she was doing, or when she'd be home. The writing was on the wall, but it didn't seem as if Jenner was ready to read it quite yet.

Grounding his teeth together, Matt gripped the steering wheel even tighter making his knuckles turn white. “An unlikely story,” he said, jaw clenched.

“How is that unlikely? You probably know more than either one of us what’s going on by the look you shared with Becca at the party. Why are you freaking out about me talking to him anyway?”

“He shouldn’t be calling you,” he roared, his face turning bright red.

“He only wanted to see me while I was here. What’s the big deal? You were with me every second I’ve been here.”

“You. Are. Mine,” he snarled. “I will not have you disrespecting me like this.”

My hands up in surrender, I narrowed my eyes. “Hold up there, buddy. In no way am I disrespecting you nor am I yours. I’m simply being a friend and trying to help. I thought you’d like it that Jenner and I were becoming friends.”

“Stop calling him Jenner.” His jaw ticked. “Only his friends call him Jenner. You call him Reeves.”

Inwardly I rolled my eyes. He was being ridiculous, and I wanted no part in his tirade.

Sputtering angry curses, Matt grew silent for a moment while his face turned a dark shade of red. It was like watching him turn into the devil himself. If I hadn’t been so angry I might have been concerned. Instead I felt my blood pressure rise. I wouldn’t go down this road again. I didn’t need another Decker in my life.

“What makes you think you can cheat on me with my best friend?” Matt thundered as he tried to overtake a car in the right lane.

I watched as if the whole thing was in slow motion instead of the hundred mile an hour that we were actually going. The SUV we were traveling in didn't clear the car, Matt had tried to pass. The rear bumper nicked the other car and if we had been traveling at a much slower speed, it might have made a difference, but we were going way too fast for Matt to react in time. The SUV spun around in a three hundred degree turn before veering toward the concrete median on the highway. As the front passenger side hit the median, a large red truck came barreling down the lane and smacked right into the back-driver's side. My seatbelt dug into my stomach and shoulder bruising me as the air bag burned my arms, face, and chest.

Looking at Matt over the airbag, I wanted to yell at his stupidity for driving so recklessly instead I saw a semi coming straight at us. The trailer was traveling sideways taking up multiple lanes, skidding with its tires locked up. We'd been lucky the surrounding cars had miraculously bypassed crashing into us, but our luck had run out and was now barreling down the road straight at us. I tried to undo my seatbelt, but my right arm wasn't working the way I wanted it to. When I looked down to see why I couldn't pull it around and in front of me, I saw a bone sticking out in two places. One at my wrist and the other just below my elbow where blood was oozing from the break in my skin. Not having time to dwell on my arm, I tried to grasp the seatbelt with my left hand when the semi hit the SUV with enough force to whip my head into the passenger side window.

Pain and darkness were all I knew as I heard glass breaking and metal crunching. Everything hurt. There wasn't a single place on my body that didn't hurt, but my head was the worst. If it got any worse, I was sure my head would explode. I could feel the beat of my heart with the pounding pain that was tightening against my skull.

I wanted to cry and scream.

I wanted to be home with Mason.

I wanted this to all be a dream.

Just when I thought I couldn't take one more beat of pain, it started to melt away. The sounds from all around me faded into nothing.

Until I was nothing.

\* \* \*

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:21 pm*

The beeping of machines was the first thing I heard when I came back to consciousness. My pain had lessened, but it was still there. Everything was in a fog or was that just my head. My eyes tried to blink open, but they weren't cooperating.

Whatever the hell they'd given me I was thankful. I would take my world in a fog instead of the agony I'd been in after the crash.

How long had I been out?

Had I missed my flight?

What about Mason?

My eyes popped open, and I tried to take in the sterile hospital room. My neck was in a brace making it difficult to turn my head. The room smelled of urine and bleach with its white on white on white decor. It didn't take me long to spot Matt sleeping in a chair by the window. He had a big bruise on his forehead, but otherwise seemed fine.

Someone squeezed my left hand pulling my attention away from the cause of our wreck. Slowly turning my body, I peered to my left to find Reeves with a small smile tipping his lips. His forehead was creased with worry as were his eyes.

"How long have I been out?" I croaked. Trying to sit up while clearing my throat proved too much as my neck spasmed even while being in the brace and my arm ached painfully. Looking down, I noticed I had a pink cast that started at my fingers and ended just after my elbow. My first broken bone.

Pulling out his phone, Jenner quickly looked at it then put it back in his pocket before he replied. "A little over six hours."

"I guess I missed my flight." A tear slipped out. I could feel my eyes drooping heavily. Sleep was calling me and even with the drugs I still felt enough pain to happily give in.

Jenner squeezed my hand, chuckling. "You could say that."

Poor Mason. He was going to be so worried.

Even in my drug induced haze my mind was riddled with questions as I was slowly drifting back into the darkness.

Where was Mason?

Was he still at his dad's?

How could I have been so stupid to come to LA and visit a man I barely knew?

How would I get home now?

"Don't worry about it, little mama. Your phone was recovered, and I called Ryan to let him know what happened. He's going to pick up Mason and take him back to his place."

"Thank you," I murmured as sleep started to pull me under.

From across the room, I heard what sounded like Matt speak. "Is she awake?"

"She was," Jenner answered back gruffly. "You're so fucking stupid man. What were

you thinking?”

When he was closer, Matt spoke again. “Don’t start in on me. You don’t think I feel bad enough as it is?”

Their voices faded with each word spoken to the point that I wasn’t sure if I was dreaming or not. No longer were they speaking in whole sentences, but a word here and there.

Asshole.

Phone.

Friend.

Texting.

Out.

Something soft touched the fingers of my broken arm and my knuckles feather light before my hair was brushed back from my face and a soft whisper was murmured in my ear.

“I’m sorry.”

8

### Moving On

“Now that the kids are off playing with all their new toys, we can finally talk,” Taylor said peering at me over her coffee cup.

Unsure what she wanted to talk about, I took a sip of my coffee stalling. It’d been close to two months since the wreck, and I was still rocking my pink cast. Taylor knew everything that had happened that weekend. Once I got home and assured Mason that I was fine and that nothing bad would ever happen to me again, we snuggled the rest of the day and night. My words hadn’t reassured Mason in the slightest, every night I found him sneaking into bed with me and holding my hand as he fell back to sleep.

The guilt of not being able to be there when Mason got home still ate at me. The worry that had been in his eyes for a full week straight and that I still got a glimpse of every now and then wrecked me. We were a team, and I’d let him down.

Needless to say, Ryan and I were back to one hundred percent. He was there for Mason and me when no one else could. Actually, all my friendships blossomed as I had to rely on my friends more in that first week than I ever had before. It made me realize that asking and having to accept help wasn’t such a bad thing.

Jenner and I had become great friends. Once I finally woke up in the hospital and could stay awake longer than a couple of minutes, one of my doctors informed me that they’d be keeping me overnight since I had a concussion and that it would be

advisable that I didn't fly back home. That was not what I wanted to hear. The only thing I wanted was to be home with Mason, so I may have freaked out and panicked until Reeves came to the rescue offering to drive me back to Missouri. I wasn't sure then or now how he managed to convince the production of his movie to let him off for the week, but somehow, he succeeded, and I loved him dearly for it.

After the first time I woke up, Matt never came back to the hospital, and I hadn't heard from him. At first, I thought it might have been a dream, but when I asked Jenner, he grudgingly confirmed Matt had been there.

"That cup isn't going to refill itself." Taylor laughed, her voice tinkling as I tipped my cup draining it of the one drop that was left.

"I don't know what you want to talk about. You know everything." And she did, so why was she giving me a look that said I might not know everything. I wasn't sure how that was possible since it was my life and she lived so far away. What could she know that I didn't?

Peering into the living room to see Jack and Ryan watching whatever football game that was on, Taylor turned her attention back to me with sad eyes. Getting in late the night before, we hadn't had a chance to talk, but we'd talked every day on the phone since my accident. I'd been cleared to fly from my doctor, but I wasn't ready to fly just yet, so Ryan and I had split the driving and entertained Mason as we traveled the thirteen hours it took us to get from Missouri to Florida. It'd been a long day, and I was happy that we were staying for a week instead of having to drive back in only a couple of days.

"Have you been on the Internet much?" Taylor asked nibbling on the side of her finger. Right away, I knew she was nervous. Nibbling on the skin around her nails was something Taylor only did when she was anxious.

“No,” I answered shaking my head. “You know how the month of December is. In my free time, I’ve been shopping or wracking my brain trying to figure out what to get Mason and everyone else for Christmas. Or I’ve been on the phone with you, Jenner, Anna, or Becca.”

“I still can’t get over the fact you met and became friends with Anna Jenson and Becca Matthews. I hate what you went through with Matt, but if it weren’t for him, you’d never have met them or Reeves. It blows my mind that while I’ve been stuck here, you’ve been hanging out with celebrities. If it were anyone else but you, I’d hate them.” We both laughed at that. Taylor didn’t hate anyone. She was one of the nicest people I’d ever met, and I didn’t think it was in her to hate a soul.

“I think they feel sorry for me. Why else would they befriend me?”

“Because you’re awesome. I mean come on why wouldn’t they? Just because they’re famous doesn’t make them any different from you and me. Except for their paychecks.”

“I know that, but I only met them the once. Anna spoke only a few words to me at the party. Now she’s calling or texting me every other day. It’s surreal.”

While I’d been married to Decker, I had no friends until Mason had started kindergarten and I met Taylor. Shortly after we separated, Ryan and Dawn came back into my life. I’d never had a lot of friends growing up and suddenly, I had more than ever. It was hard for me to accept that for some strange reason a couple of elite celebrities wanted to be my friend. It wasn’t that I was in awe of them because of their status when getting to know them I felt sorry for them and what they had to deal with on a daily basis. It was that it didn’t make sense. I knew there were plenty of people out there that would die for the chance to be their friend and I was sure they had plenty without me being a part of the mix.

“They are calling you now and seem to be genuine because you’re you, and who wouldn’t want to be friends with you.”

“You’re buttering me up, and I want to know why. Spill it.” I joked with her, but the strain on her face told me I’d hit the nail on the head.

“So,” she drew out the word and refilled her coffee. “The other day while I was waiting in car line to pick up Ben, I got there a little early from being out shopping. Since I had some time to kill, I thought I’d see if there were any more pictures of you on the internet. Did I tell you I’ve been saving them to my computer?”

How many were there that she thought she should possibly start saving them?

“No, you never mentioned it. I know about the Halloween party ones. Are there more?”

“There was one from when Matt picked you up at the airport the last time you were there, but that’s all I found,” Taylor answered before she started to chew on her finger once again.

“That doesn’t sound bad.” I shrugged. “What else was there?”

“Everywhere I looked the media, press or whatever you want to call it only had nice things to say about you.”

That was a good thing, but no reason for her to chew her finger down to the bone.

“Did you see something bad about me? If so, I don’t think I want to hear about it right now. Maybe in a couple of months when I’m not still kicking myself about going there in the first place.”

Leaning over, Taylor wrapped my hand in hers while giving me a sympathetic smile. “Honey, you’ve got to stop beating yourself up. How were you to know anything would happen let alone that you’d get in a wreck?”

“I shouldn’t have risked it. Not over a guy I barely liked. I was stupid and desperate to move on with my life. I could be dead right now, and Mason would be stuck living with his father.” Even now, every time I thought about it my eyes would threaten to tear up, but I willed them back. I didn’t want Mason to see me crying on Christmas Day.

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“We’ve been over this, and that’s not what I wanted to talk to you about. When I was online looking to see if there were any more pictures of you, I came across something else.”

“Taylor,” I laughed because how much longer could she draw this out. “You’re killing me here. Whatever it is I can take it just tell me.”

“There were pictures of Matt with another woman,” she answered, looking down at her sock clad feet.

“That doesn’t surprise me. I haven’t seen or heard from him since I woke up in the hospital.”

“No.” She shook her head, while wearing a frown. “It was after the Halloween party and before your last trip there. At first, I thought it was just gossip. You know how celebrities can’t be seen with anyone or they’re automatically fucking them?” she eyed me from across the counter. “That’s what I thought this was until I looked at a few more sites. He was caught outside a club lip-locked with some woman with his hand up her skirt. I think it was only a few days after you visited.”

Blowing out a breath I didn’t know I was holding; I closed my eyes. “I wish I’d known this before. If I had there’s no way in hell, I would’ve visited there that second time.”

“I know and I’m sorry. If I’d known I would have told you.” Taylor promised.

“I know you would have. Was she at least pretty?” I asked because if he was going to

make me look like a fool, I hoped whoever she was, she was pretty.

“She was okay I guess. I can show you if you want.”

I stood from the stool where we’d been sitting across from each other. Whenever we were at Taylor’s house, we were always in the kitchen. Normally we started off by eating or making our kids something to eat and never left. That day was no exception.

“If I don’t look now, I’ll always wonder what she looked like, and I don’t need any more what if’s or doubts in my life.”

Giving me a sideways hug, Taylor and I moved over to the area where she had her laptop set up on her kitchen counter. It didn’t take her long to find the website. She had it bookmarked making me wonder how many times she’d looked at the site. On it, there were multiple pictures of Matt with a tall Victoria’s Secret model. I guess if you were going to get kind of cheated on she was the one you wanted it to be with. There was no competition. Her legs went on for days, and her body was tanned and toned with her hair and makeup perfectly done. We looked nothing alike. Where I was short, blonde with blue eyes. She was tall with black hair and grey eyes. Whoever she was, she was gorgeous. There were pictures of them going into the club together hand in hand and as they left where he’d pushed her up against a building with his tongue down her throat and hand up her skirt.

Below the pictures there was a rundown of when the paparazzi had first sighted me with Matt as we made our way into a restaurant the night before Becca’s Halloween party, to seeing us outside her house as we waited to get into the party, and as we left with Reeves. They even had a shot of when Matt had picked me up at the airport just as Taylor had said. Underneath the time line of pictures and their speculation of when our relationship started and ended was a blurb that reinforced I was stupid to think of giving Matt a shot in my life.

‘We’re not sure what to say about this. We were all hoping here at Weekly

Enforcer that this small-town girl was going to be the one that settled Matt Ryan down. We had hoped, and we hate to say it but, “We told you so.”

“Ouch.” I couldn’t hide my flinch as I reread and looked over the pictures from Weekly Enforcer’s website. Not only had Matt almost killed me, but he also cheated on me. Why the hell had he wanted me to visit him if he was already fucking someone else? Was that why he had freaked out about me talking to Reeves?

It didn’t matter anymore. I would never see him again. If I did, I was going to punch him in the face.

It was true I’d heard the rumors that Matt had cheated on his wife and that was why they’d gotten a divorce a few years ago, but they were only rumors. When Becca talked about the way Matt had been acting and that she was concerned for him, to me that didn’t scream that he’d cheated. For me, it said that he had wanted the relationship. It wasn’t as if when I met him, I was planning on having any kind of association with him or even sleeping with him. We’d never talked about his marriage only his kids and that he didn’t get to see them as often as he liked. Knowing all this I was happy that I hadn’t opened up about Mason or my marriage. Not that I talked to anyone who I came upon about what an asshole my ex-husband had been.

“I’m sorry, honey.” Taylor rubbed my back as she closed the laptop preventing me from reading the article a third time.

When Ryan walked into the kitchen, I was still in Taylor’s arms with her rubbing my back. I felt like a big baby and stupid for being upset, but that was how I felt, and I was going to have to deal with it. Luckily, I was with my best friends when I found out.

“What’s going on?” Ryan asked looking around to see if he could find a clue as to what could possibly be wrong.

“Taylor showed me an article on the Weekly Enforcer that was about Matt.” I tried to explain as I pulled away from Taylor.

“And? Did he say he was sorry for being an ass?”

“No, and I doubt he ever will. Instead, it showed him out with another woman while we were together.”

“You know you can’t believe everything you see, and they’re always trying to make it something it’s not.”

Laughing bitterly, I smiled sadly. “There’s no misinterpreting this. He had his hand up her skirt and his tongue in her mouth.”

His eyes widened for a second before he hid his shock. “No, shit?”

Laughing bitterly, I replied. “No, shit.” Shaking my head, I grabbed my cup and poured myself another cup of coffee and doctored it until it was just the way I liked it. It was either that or booze, and it wasn’t even noon yet, so I thought coffee was the safe bet. At least for now.

“What a fucking asshole.” Ryan looked me over with a cautious eye. “Are you okay? I know you were done with him, but it’s still got to be hard to see that shit.”

“It sucks that I look stupid, but I’m not going to dwell on it. I did learn a thing or two from my short time with Matt, but that part of my life is over, and I need to move on.”

Holding up her coffee cup, Taylor clinked it against mine. “To moving on.”

“To moving on.” We cheered.