



Hooked on Lane (Hooked #1)

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Category: Romance

Description: She prefers her men like her coffee, tall, dark and strong...

Jennifer Jenkins has always followed the no fraternization policy, but when her new boss walks in the door and hands her a cup of coffee, she almost falters. Isn't that her job?

Lane Kneeland, a Harvard Grad, agrees to the partner position on one condition: he gets to keep Jennifer on staff. He needs the "Master Scheduler."

They both try to play by the office rules, but from time to time rules have to be broken...

Total Pages (Source): 26

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 8:07 am

Chapter One

Jennifer

The sun's glare was turning down as I finished my final touches while getting ready for my date with Peyton. Laura let me borrow her green dress, as I didn't have the chance to purchase a dress after work. It paired perfectly with some black chunky heels to complete the look. She was a lifesaver.

My small New York City apartment wasn't anything spectacular, especially with my minuscule salary, but it allowed me to live in the city and close to work. I put my hair in an uncomplicated but stylish twist and my jewelry shone brightly against my neck.

As I grabbed my small clutch and purse, my doorbell rang. I checked the clock, noting how punctual Peyton was, and opened the door. Outside, Peyton stood tall in a gray sweater, black chinos, and a white dress shirt underneath, holding a bouquet of daisies, which he shyly offered to me.

"Happy anniversary." He pulls me in for a quick kiss. "You look gorgeous. Is that a new dress?"

One thing that I truly appreciated about him was that he was always giving me compliments, something I wasn't able to experience with my previous partner. I smiled, taking the daisies from him and grabbing a vase to put them in before we head out. "You didn't have to get me flowers, babe." I nudged myself into his chest and his chin rested on the top of my head. "So, where are you taking me?"

“It’s a surprise.” He shut the apartment door behind me and I grabbed his hand.

It had been six months since I met Peyton.

He walked toward my table, smiling wide, and the sun lit up his blond hair while he took my order.

My best friend Laura gave me crap about it all night, because every time he came out of the back, my eyes would wander over to him.

By the end of our dinner, he came over and asked if I would be interested in getting together when he got off, and even though Laura told me he could be a serial killer, I said yes.

I hadn’t expected to meet someone and have an instant connection, but that’s what happened.

We talked all night, and by the end, he was the missing piece of the puzzle to my life here in New York City.

He was the first semiserious relationship I’d been in since arriving in the city ten years ago, and I was almost afraid to say it out loud, but the two of us were perfect for each other.

“Can you believe it’s only been six months? I swear it’s like we’ve been together for ages.” He opened the the door for me and I slid inside.

He was acting strange, like something was bothering him. With no words exchanged, we drove until we reached the restaurant. I forced a grin on my face as we settled in at the small table. From the moment we left my apartment, he had not even glanced my way. He seemed to avoid making eye contact.

“Is there something bothering you?” I asked as the waiter approached, and we each ordered a glass of wine. “You just seem tense. Did something happen at work?”

Peyton had been having a dispute with the proprietor of the restaurant he worked in, and he'd been discussing it for quite a while. Two weeks ago, he thought about walking out, but like everyone else in this city, bills had to be paid and finding a job wasn't as easy as one would think, even in New York City.

“It's been a crap day. Honestly, I just want to chug a couple of glasses of wine and forget about it.”

Great. Our anniversary was ruined by work problems. This day was about us. Not his fucked up boss who doesn't take any of his ideas seriously.

“I need to talk to you.”

“Yes, just get tell me what's going on. It'll make you feel better.”

“I don't know how to say this, but I think it's time we go our separate ways.”

Wait, what? He was breaking up with me on our anniversary? What kind of man does that? I tried to subdue my temper, but it just kept increasing.

“It's not you, it's me. I just... feel like maybe we want two different things right now. You deserve the husband, house, and kids... and I'm just not ready to commit to that.”

Why couldn't he have told me this before we left for dinner? There I was, all dressed up, and he knew he was going to break up with me before we even left my house.

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

He brushed his hands along the back of his head as his eyes glowered at the table. “Jennifer, listen... no need to cause a scene, okay? Things happen. People grow apart. It’s a fact of life. I could’ve just strung you along another two years and wasted your time. Would you rather me do that?”

Oh, Peyton was testing me, and I had been careful not to share my anger yet, but that glass of wine sitting in front of him deserved to be plastered all over his face.

“So, what you are saying is... for the last six months, you have known you had no intention of getting serious, yet never once mentioned it to me?”

My biological clock was getting louder and louder, and when I met him, we talked extensively about this being serious. Serious enough to end in marriage and the whole shebang. This wasn’t a new development. He played me and wasted my fucking time.

“It’s not you. It’s me. This relationship isn’t right for me. I love you, but I’m not in love with you. That spark I need in a relationship to commit to marriage isn’t here. Isn’t that what you want? The whole husband, kids, dog, and a white picket fence?”

I had to avert my eyes, the tears stinging my vision. He knew how to crush a girl's heart. My hands would look great around his neck, but that wouldn’t solve anything.

“I’m so sorry,” he said, reaching out to touch my arm.

I brushed away his hand. “Save your apologies for someone else.” The wineglass was taunting me, telling me to throw it in his face, but causing a scene wouldn’t be for my benefit. I took my last sip, pushed the chair back, and left. Peyton didn’t even try to come after me.

Tears streamed down my cheeks, and my shaking hands fumbled with my phone as I tried to text my best friend.

Me: 911. Meet me at my apartment.

My arm was flailing around like crazy in the sky to get a taxi, and I left the restaurant without looking back. My best friend was the glue that helped me put the broken parts of my heart back together many times before. And I need her now.

When the taxi pulled up to my apartment building, she was standing outside with two bottles of wine. She acted as if she already knew. I swear she was psychic or something.

“You have no fucking idea what a shitshow that was.” We walked up to my apartment and took my place on the couch.

She opened the bottle of wine and she poured two glasses.

“So, spill. What the heck happened? You interrupted my weekly dose of my favorite hospital drama . I wasn’t sure whether I needed to grab bail money. Who are we getting rid of today?”

She handed me the glass. “Peyton broke up with me.”

“Oh, that little... He wasn’t worth a crap. You deserve so much better than him, Jen.”

“Yes, you’ve told me many times, but I loved him. He said he wasn’t ready for commitment. Can you believe that? We literally discussed wanting a serious relationship on our second date. So what the hell changed?”

“Typical guy. When the stakes become too high, they usually decide to take a step back and run away from it. You’re going to get through this. He wasn’t going to give you what you need.”

Despite being aware of the signs, I brushed them off, convincing myself that I was being overly cautious. “How could he do this to me? He just threw away everything we had built together. How could he be so heartless?”

Over many hours, I spoke aloud my fury and distress. She listened as any good best friend would do. “Just remember to be resilient. Your life may feel like it's crumbling, but you'll find the man of your dreams.”

The more we talked, the more I realized it was for the best. Despite the anger and hurt I felt, I was also grateful to have the situation end. I'm too old for someone with commitment issues.

Is my ideal man even out there?

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 8:07 am

Chapter Two

Lane

My office desk had various case files piled high despite it only being eight thirty in the morning. Nothing like coming in to four days worth of work needed to be done in one. I fired up my computer and took a sip of coffee while waiting for it to boot up. “Morning, Lisa.”

She stopped in my doorway. “Yet another day of chaos. Being chug that.”

After her laughter subsided down the hallway, I started working on the current case.

The hours I put in as a lawyer were extensive, and the pressure was intense, but it rewarded me with the satisfaction of helping people.

I rummaged through my desk, searching for McNaugh case files.

Ten years at this firm, and my office had never been fuller.

At twelve thirty, I had made considerable progress, so I hustled to the diner to get some food before my one thirty call with a client. We got fresh cases almost every week, so I had to make sure that I understood everything and typed up notes for myself.

Once I had scarfed down my burger and fries and finished my client call. The afternoon got away from me. The stack of papers on my desk had dwindled, but it

was time to go home. My eyes were starting to cross. I clicked off my computer, and locked the filing cabinet.

As I walked down the hallway, my boss called me into his office. Mr. Stephens, an older gentleman with silver hair and kind blue eyes. “I need to talk to you about something, son.”

The endearment hit, knowing my father wouldn’t be calling me that anymore. “I was just headed out. What’s going on? New case?”

“No, this is a personal matter. Are you still interested in a partner position?”

“Yes, sir. Have you reconsidered bringing on a partner?” This was confusing because when I started here, Mr. Stephens said he wasn’t bringing on any partners.

Had he changed his mind? The firm was growing, and we needed to at least bring in another lawyer.

We were drowning in our cases right now as it was.

“The firm isn’t ready to bring in a new partner yet, but I found you a great opportunity.”

My eyes roved around the room. “I’m not understanding, sir. What are you saying?”

“I have spoken with Mr. Curren and he would like to offer you a partnership in New York City. He wants to bring on someone who isn’t afraid to put in the work to get things done. Apparently, they have been having issues. When I told him about you, he was eager to bring you on.”

Wait, did he say New York City? Being a couple hundred miles from my mother was

one thing, but thousands of miles?

With her health, it wouldn't work. Mr. Stephens doesn't know about my personal life, and I liked to keep it that way.

So, I couldn't fault him for trying to seize this partnership for me.

"Listen, they are open to doing a year trial run and will even lease an apartment for you so you don't have to spend a dime. You should at least consider it, Lane. You're going places and I can't be the stumbling block. If it's not to your liking, you are still welcome here."

Mr. Stephens handed me an envelope, the weight of which felt heavy in my hands. "This is the official offer. Consider it over the weekend, but they need an answer by Monday. They want you to be in New York City by then because the person you are replacing is retiring. Think about it."

"Thanks, see you on Monday." I took the envelope and turned around to leave.

"No offense, but I hope you're on a plane instead. Have a good weekend."

A top-notch law firm offered me a partnership position in New York City. I should be elated, already accepting, but my mother needed me. When my father passed, her health declined, and now I'm all she had.

As I held the offer letter in my hands, I wanted to seize this opportunity, but now was not the time to be selfish. My mother made so many sacrifices for me growing up, and I owed her the same. She was my biggest supporter, and if I moved away, I could only visit her, what, twice a year.

Turning it down was the right decision. My mother needed to be my priority.

Experience had taught me that sometimes the greatest things in life were not the things achieved or gained, but the people we could love and care for.

There was no definitive time frame for my mother's Parkinson's.

The symptoms would continue to get worse over time, and every weekend I could like this one, I made the drive out to Sikita to visit.

On the road trip over to her, I listened to a playlist my dad sent me before he passed.

It was all his favorite songs and the easiest way to honor his memory with every trip.

The three-hour drive went by in a flash and I pulled into the Home Away from Home center.

If my mother was coherent today, she would wait by the door for me.

The first couple of times, the night care nurses made a big deal since it was late, but when they heard about my situation, they apologized.

When I pulled in and got out, I saw her waiting by the entrance. So today's a good day. "Hey, Mom." She enveloped me into a hug that was so tight I could feel her heartbeat against mine. She held me for a moment and then pushed me back to get a good look.

"Let's go to your room. It's late." I grabbed one of her hands and led her toward her room so we wouldn't wake anyone.

As soon as the door closed, she started in. My mother always wanted to know how the job was going, if I had met anyone yet, typical mother fashion. "No, I'm still single. Who has time to find someone? I spend most of my days in the office and then

sleep when I can.”

“Oh honey, you need to remember that your life is going to go by, and you will wake up one morning, old and gray, and regret all the things you wish you had done.”

“I’ll have more time to focus on my personal life soon. Speaking of, I got an offer to become a partner. Don’t worry, Mama. I’m not taking it.” I opened a bag of chips from the gas station as my stomach growled.

“Why would you do that? You have been working yourself to death.”

“It’s a wonderful offer, but you mean more to me than any partnership ever will. New York City is too far away. I’m not leaving you behind.”

The effects of her Parkinson’s had worsened, and she sometimes could not leave her bed. I would love to scoop her up and take her with me, but it wasn’t an option. Especially if I didn’t know if it was going to end up being permanent. She loved this home and the nurses. I couldn’t do that to her.

She held my gaze for a few moments before a faint sigh escaped her lips and she shook her head.

“Son, don’t hinder your life because of me.

You will have a whole life after I’m gone and you shouldn’t be sidestepping opportunities like this because of your sick mother.

Go chase your dreams, just like your daddy taught you. ”

I gripped her hands in mine. “Daddy wouldn’t have wanted to leave you alone here. I already hate living hours away, and if I take it, I can’t come visit every weekend like

now. It's thousands of miles away."

"I can handle knowing you are living your dream, son. I was stuck in that small town all my life and you have the chance to go to one of the best cities... please take it. If not for you, then for me." She wrapped her arms around me.

"I'm so proud of you, son. Even as a young boy, you had the dream of becoming an excellent lawyer and making partner one day.

Your daddy would be so proud of you. Go pack your bags and book your ticket. I'll see you again soon."

She shoved me out of her room, and a dutiful son never argued with his mother. With purpose in my step, I walked out to my car and dialed the number on the offer, leaving a message that I was ready to accept and booked my flight the next day.

New York City, here I come.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 8:07 am

Chapter Three

Jennifer

I sprang from my chair, yellow Post-it notes rustling in my hands.

“Good morning, sir. I left your messages for you on your desk.” My boss stood with a younger man in a navy suit and spoke without taking his eyes off him.

“Jennifer, this is Mr. Kneeland, who will replace me. I’m ready to hang up my hat. ”

My stomach tightened, and I fought to keep my fear from showing on my face. Why is he just now telling me? I put on a polite smile and offered him my hand. “Nice to meet you, sir.”

The man’s dark-brown eyes scanned over my body as if he were undressing me with his gaze.

His rough hand grasped mine, and a smirk tugged at the corner of his lips as he said, “Pleasure is all mine.” I saw something pass between him and my boss before he handed me a white paper cup.

“I know how hard assistants work, so I brought this for you.” My gaze flicked over to Mr. Longford, and I tilted my head.

Coffee was a way into this girl’s good graces. Most of the workers here had their coffee delivered, but it was so expensive. “Thanks. I’ll leave you guys to work. Don’t

forget your meeting at noon, sir. I'll have the conference room set up by eleven thirty."

Mr. Longford smiled, revealing a set of straight white teeth.

"See, Lane, you won't have anything to worry about, because Jennifer has things covered.

I've never had to write her up. She's a keeper.

" He winked at me, and Lane's eyes followed my every move as I walked behind my desk.

My cheeks burned as I sat down in my chair, but then a wave of sadness washed over me as I thought of Mr. Longford's impending departure.

Every Friday morning, he would have breakfast delivered to the office, and we'd settle in for an hour and go over the schedule for the upcoming week, and sometimes even share stories about our weekend plans.

He listened to my ideas, and he had become like a father figure.

The firm was lucky because he had a knack for calming down even the most difficult clients, and he knew which cases to refer to the newer partners who were looking to impress.

I hoped Lane could carry on that same tradition.

Confusion and uncertainty bubbled in my chest as I tried to make sense of what this meant.

He mentioned retiring before but hadn't been specific about when.

Whoever held the answers needed to provide them soon, so I could begin planning a retirement celebration worthy of his thirty-five-year legacy. An accolade he more than deserved.

The steam from the creamy latte warmed my hands as I slowly sipped it.

I had a flutter of surprise in my stomach as I saw my name written on one side of the cup.

I couldn't be the only one who thought it was weird Lane brought me coffee.

And he didn't just get any coffee; this cup was from the best café around—Coffee Chaos—the best coffee within a five-mile radius.

Everyone loved to fuss over the national chain that charges an arm and a leg for some fancy coffee, but they weren't even close to being as good as Coffee Chaos.

The small family-run café was a preferred spot by many of the locals.

I liked my coffee to be bold and robust. The barista was always willing to accommodate my desire for extra shots of espresso, something that must have baffled her as she watched me leave the counter each time.

I tapped away at my computer, attempting to get through my never-ending email inbox.

Despite my best efforts, the task seemed insurmountable.

My eyes darted over to Laura, my best friend who had been stuck with Mr. Curran

since day one.

He was notorious for losing his temper, especially when the job wasn't going perfectly, and he loved to yell right outside his office door in front of the entire staff.

His office door slammed open almost every day as he bellowed criticisms of her work, regardless if she'd done anything wrong or not.

He stomped around, face red with anger and spit flying from his lips.

Everyone else averted their gaze to avoid becoming a target themselves. He was a complete menace.

Mr. Curran perched behind his desk since dawn, wearing a pair of glasses on the edge of his nose and a deep scowl that never seemed to fade.

Laura stayed until late in the evening to keep up with him, her eyes heavy and back aching from hours of sitting at her desk.

Her hours were much longer than mine. Hell, Mr. Curran doesn't believe in work-life balance.

If there was work to be done, they were staying until it was completed.

Whereas, my boss strutted in a bit before eight in the morning and left by six every day, never staying past seven.

My gaze shifted from one end of the inbox to the other, watching as the number of emails dwindles from over a hundred to thirty-four.

I knew what was coming—Mr. Longford was going to announce his retirement to the

clients.

His replacement would need to be briefed to take over all his ongoing cases.

I could just imagine competing firms bidding their time and waiting for this news so they could swoop in and try snatching up our corporate clients with lucrative offers once they got wind of his retirement.

It was such an underhanded move, but part of the game.

I read two more emails marked urgent, archiving them in a folder before standing up and walking over to Laura's cubicle.

We were like sisters, but right now her focus was on her computer—her fingers typing away as she bit down on her lower lip.

“Did you know Mr. Longford is retiring?” She looked up, pausing from her work with a small shrug of her shoulders. “Yes, didn't you?”

I waved my hands in frustration as she was still typing. “I'm his assistant! You would think I would be the first to know.”

Laura's slender fingers stilled on the keyboard, and she grinned. Her eyes sparkled, as if it was a secret shared only between us. “Can you believe our luck? A guy that looks like that graces us with his presence. You are so lucky!” She wiggled her eyebrows before turning back to her computer.

Her sharp wit and quick tongue made me chuckle every time.

She made me laugh even in the darkest of days at work, which was no small feat, considering most of the men had a permanent scowl on their face.

Some of the newer partners were good-looking, but their attitude was less than desirable.

It was all about how much money they were bringing in and they rejected any other topics of conversation in favor of self-aggrandizing stories about their achievements.

They overestimated their worth compared to their salary.

I rolled my eyes and took a drink of my lukewarm coffee. “He’s just like all the rest,” I muttered under my breath. “I’ve got enough work to keep me busy for a year, and now I’ll have even more. But what choice do I have? Gotta pay the bills somehow, right?”

She leaned back in her chair. “Look, I don’t want to be negative Nancy, but Mr. Longford’s replacement is going to have it rough.

The last three new guys flamed out within a month, and I’m stuck picking up their slack every time, because you know how my boss loves to work eighteen-hour days.

” She glanced toward her boss’s office behind her.

“It’s exhausting. If I didn’t have to worry about bills, I’d be out of here faster than you can say ‘overworked and underpaid.’”

Her computer chimed, the familiar sound of receiving a new email.

Laura shook her head and continued typing.

“Mr. Curran is on a warpath today. I swear he has emailed me twenty times already, and I haven’t even had time to finish my first cup of coffee.

Why can't he be the one retiring?" She patted her leg and leaned back in her chair.

"Oh wait, there is always a chance I would get stuck with someone even worse."

Mr. Curran strolled out of his office and his eyes landed on me.

His pinstriped suit was immaculate, his expression scary.

The disapproval was radiating off him as I sat on the edge of her desk.

Laura peered up as his eyes shifted between the two of us.

I chose my words and met his gaze without flinching.

"Anyway, I'll get out your hair." I stepped away from her desk and his stern gaze followed me until I was back in my chair.

I contemplated all the changes that would come with his departure. Laura had been working longer days and I would soon be in her shoes.

As his assistant—oh, wait... Stupid me, I just assumed I was staying on as his assistant, yet I hadn't even thought to confirm that with them.

Surely they wouldn't be letting me go? My fingers tugged at the hem of my shirt as I thought about my future with this company.

What if he already had his own assistant? There would be no room for me.

I took a deep breath and tried to swallow the anxiety bubbling up in my throat.

Years of experience had taught me to expect the needs of my boss.

As Mr. Longford's assistant, I was his scheduler, excuse maker, even wedding gift sender when necessary.

I knew everything about his personal life, including what groceries he ordered.

Pathetic, right? I started thinking about Mr. Kneeland.

He was in his late thirties, had brown hair, a bit of scruff, and big brown eyes.

Judging by his looks, he had no problems getting attention anywhere he went, and that worried me.

Dealing with crazy ex-lovers or clingy one-night stands was not my thing. That was where I drew the line.

I stared at my computer, clicking away as emails and phone calls flew in from every direction. Suddenly, Mr. Longford and Mr. Kneeland emerged from the conference room, laughing uproariously. They walked right past my desk without stopping and went into his office. I took it the meeting went well.

My mouse pointer drifted over the home icon on my desktop before I double-clicked and brought up the shutdown option.

I detached my phone from its charger, slipping it into my purse as I grabbed my keys.

My work day was done, unless Mr. Longford had a last-minute request. I was looking forward to a long soak in the tub.

The chair squeaked as I rolled it beneath the desk.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

He called out to come in.

I stepped in, my eyes shifting around the room. He was sitting at his desk with a pile of paperwork in front of him, his glasses perched on his nose. He waved me forward until I was standing next to Mr. Kneeland, who was sitting in a chair in front of his desk.

“Things going well today, sir? You seem more chipper than usual.”

He removed his glasses. “It’s all because of this guy. You’re going to like him. He has an old soul despite his young appearance.”

Well, there went my worries. “So, you are keeping me on as your assistant, then?” My eyes landed on his.

“I wouldn’t dream of anything else. Taking over his spot are some big shoes to fill, but hopefully you can keep me grounded. The master scheduler, he calls you.”

Before I started here, Mr. Longford had an assistant who couldn’t for the life of her keep his schedule straight.

She kept overbooking him for meetings, and when they let her go, he found my application.

“I’m great at making sure you don’t have to be in two places at once.” Mr. Kneeland was staring at me, and I didn’t dare meet his eyes. “Well, it was nice to meet you.”

“I’ll see you in the morning with another cup of coffee. I stop on my way to work, so I can save you a trip. Mr. Longford said your favorite is a venti mocha with extra whipped cream and two extra shots of espresso?”

A grin crept onto my face. “Precisely, sir.”

“Oh, and don’t call me sir . No offense to my partner here, but I’m not a sir. You can just call me Lane.”

He wanted us to be on a first-name basis after one day?

“Understood. See you tomorrow, Mr. Longford and Lane,” I said, shutting the door behind me before grabbing my purse off the floor and racing for the elevator.

Tomorrow should be interesting...

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 8:07 am

Chapter Four

Lane

The sunrise poured into my penthouse. It had been difficult since arriving to get used to all the noise of the city.

I grew up in Amesbury, a quaint, sleepy town where even streetlights dimmed after a certain hour.

But here in New York City, the world was always open.

Even at three in the morning, you could get a hot coffee or fresh pastry on practically every corner.

Initially, I was uncertain if it was the ideal match for me, but trying it out for one year was beneficial for both of us. I needed to take the risk of trying something new.

I slowly rose, my feet sinking into the exquisitely soft carpet beneath me.

In the past, I could only just about make do with my average salary, so this was definitely not something I could normally afford.

To ensure I had enough to cover the must-haves, I allocated a sufficient amount and the rest I put away in my savings accounts.

The apartment came fully furnished as a package deal which was one less thing for

me to worry about.

I stepped into the bathroom and twisted the knob of the shower.

The hot spray washed away all my thoughts as I closed my eyes, enjoying a moment of solace before the chaos of New York began again.

I tilted my head up toward the stream of water, humming softly.

As I lathered the shampoo in my hair, the smile on my mother's face came to the forefront.

Without her pushing me to accept, this wouldn't even be happening.

I emerged from the shower, grabbing a towel, and was ready to get started on my day.

After getting all ready, I knew I was extremely lucky to be in this position.

Mr. Longford had so many clients. If I wanted to be up to speed before he left, I would have to study the files right away.

Already I could feel the next few hours slipping away as I headed out into the hallway.

The city was bustling with people and cars as I stepped out.

Every corner practically had a coffee shop but I was headed straight for Coffee Chaos.

I joined the line of eager customers, musing over what I would choose.

When it was finally my turn, I ordered my go-to flat white espresso with micro-foamed milk and a mocha topped with extra shots of espresso and a generous dollop of whipped cream.

The woman behind the counter lifted her eyebrow. “It comes with two shots, so you want an additional two? It wouldn’t be for Jennifer Jenkins, would it?”

I curved my lips into a satisfied smile and gave a slight nod. “Yes, that’s right. She’s my new assistant.”

After paying, I stepped back and waited.

People occupied all the tables, typing away on laptops in their little bubbles.

A few had notebooks open and were scribbling away at the pages.

Toward the other end where orders were picked up, there were a few comfy leather chairs around a small coffee table with stray newspapers and magazines.

How could they possibly stay so focused with the chaotic bustle of the café all around?

The room was overwhelming to me, but that was most likely because I hadn’t adjusted to the big city yet.

The coffee grinder was going, employees calling out names, the ding of the cash register.

All together, it practically made my head throb.

She called my name and handed me two steaming cups. “Thanks. See ya tomorrow.”

Stepping back out onto the street, I took my first sip, savoring the blend. New York City definitely had better coffee. Hell, it better be for \$7. I needed Jennifer and I to get along. Especially after the glowing review he gave her.

I stepped into the Weston, Crawford and Curran and snagged an empty elevator.

“Hold the door, please.”

It was Mr. Longford. He stepped in and asked me how my morning was going, and the smile that lit up his face when he saw the second cup of coffee in my hand was one I would remember for a long time.

“You know, if you bring her coffee every morning, you are gonna move mountains. That girl is obsessed with it. Sometimes she has five cups.”

Mr. Longford told me about her love for coffee from that local café, but since it was so expensive, she only had one cup a week. The rest of the time, she was forced to limit herself to drinking the breakroom’s disgusting filth. I agreed, it’s nothing compared to the brews at Coffee Chaos.

Mr. Longford and I got off the elevator on the eighth floor and he went straight to his office, offering me a smile over his shoulder as I stopped right in front of Jennifer’s desk.

My eyes took in the royal-blue pencil skirt and the black blouse she was wearing, and the way the bob haircut hit right under her chin.

She didn’t even notice me for a moment, too busy looking through some paperwork on her desk, but when her eyes met mine, she had the sweetest smile.

“You didn’t have to do that.” She took the cup from my hand and shook her head.

“I was serious about bringing you a cup. Even braved the barista for the two extra shots of espresso and she knew who you were by the order.” This was more than just a cup of coffee.

This was a gesture of appreciation, a token of connection with a colleague.

After everything we would go through for the next year together, it was the least I can do.

She laughed, took a sip, and her eyes rolled to the back of her head. “It’s so good.”

I smiled as my hand slid over my chin before walking into my future office. “I’ll talk to you later.”

Mr. Longford’s office was a sleek. It was soon to be mine.

It was filled with light from the floor-to-ceiling windows, making the sleek chrome accents and the black and blue accents around the room pop.

They arranged his desk in the center of the room, covered in papers, folders, and manila envelopes.

There were a few books on the shelves and some framed photos of his family.

Directly across from his desk was a corner of the room that held two armchairs and a coffee table. I took a seat in the armchair and he took the other, the two of us facing each other.

“So, I’d like to know a little more about the guy who is taking over for me.

My clients aren’t needy, and I have been working with most of them for years.

Some of them are older than me. Taking over for me, you will be in a good place.

Most of the new partners get stuck taking the cases no one else wants, but you'll be busy with my workload, so I doubt they will assign you many extra ones. "

Hard work wasn't anything new to me, so if they needed to give me more cases, I'd handle it.

I was in a new city where I didn't know anyone and that meant I'd have no life.

There was no reason to make friends if I might move back to Texas in a year.

Although, even in these two days, New York City was growing on me already.

He nodded. "Next time, you can pick me up a cup, too."

"Oh... I would've..."

"I'm just kidding. You don't have three hands and I'll be out of your hair in no time."

He was a personable man. I could see why Jennifer had stayed so long. Most lawyers were jerks, especially the seasoned ones. But he was different.

"Alright, let's get to work now, shall we?" He flipped open a folder that was sitting on the desk and pulled out some paperwork. He explained the project to me and asked me if I had questions. I asked a few, and he answered them all, giving me more information than I asked for.

"Well, if you can do me a favor, and even if you get caught up in the next few days, give this old man until the end of next week before you boot me out of my office."

My jaw tightened as I cringed. “Sir, I would never do that. When you are ready, I’ll take over. In the meantime, it’s an honor to work with you.”

Listen, I knew I was here to replace him, but respectfully. Jennifer being underneath him for so long showed he was a good man and an even better boss.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 8:07 am

Chapter Five

Jennifer

I took the last sip of the coffee Lane brought me, then tossed it into my trash can with a satisfied sigh. Glancing up, I saw Laura in the doorway, looking anxious.

“We need to talk.” I could see her trying to peer around the corner, making sure her boss was still out of his office.

Mr. Curran despised gossip and would punish anyone caught.

Laura gestured for me to follow her, and I obliged, following her down the hall.

We hid in an old storage closet. “So, did Lane get you that coffee?”

I gave a quick jerk of my head.

“He’s got a thing for you, you know.”

I rolled my eyes, not believing her for a second. “What are you talking about? That’s ridiculous.”

She shook her head. “Come on now, don’t be so naïve. You’ve been here long enough to know how these things work. He’s into you.”

I let out a cackle that made my sides ache.

Who wanted to date someone they worked with?

That was just asking for trouble... especially when your bosses were as strict as Mr. Curran!

I had no desire to stay and listen to her any longer, so I hurried out of the closet, my heart racing when Lane emerged from the office, and I made my way back to my desk.

The way he carried himself with an air of confidence and poise and the gray suit he was wearing which seemed tailored to his body gave him a certain appeal.

Laura nudged me in the ribs and raised her eyebrows. "Can you feel it? I think he's giving you the 'I want you' vibe."

My cheeks burned as I glanced away, not wanting to give away my excitement. He stepped closer, and my heart raced. His gaze was intense, and he seemed to size me up. I was afraid he could sense my nervousness, but I refused to turn away.

"Hey. I'm sure you are already on the ball, but have you arranged a party for Mr. Longford yet?"

I leaned on my left side. "He's been so busy with you, I haven't really sat down with him yet."

"It's next Friday. If you need any help, let me know." His eyes raked over me again, and I was glad I wore my four-inch pumps today because it gave me a bit more height, making us almost at the same level.

"Sure will. Thanks."

When Lane walked away, Laura nudged my shoulder again. “I told you—total ‘I want you’ vibes. Please tell me you picked up on it too?”

Okay, so maybe she wasn’t crazy because I caught him checking me out at least three times since he arrived, but I didn’t want to call attention to it.

Laura had no shame. After everything that happened with Peyton, I wasn’t ready to jump back into a relationship, anyway.

Men weren’t anything like in the movies.

They weren’t romantic and definitely didn’t sweep us off our feet.

Instead, they thought paying for my dinner meant they got dibs at the end of the night. Sorry, not sorry .

My past relationships had only brought me bad luck and heartache. Nope, I had to remain guarded and protect myself from any further pain. That was my only option.

A couple of hours later, Laura came back over with a stack of papers in her hands.

“Can you believe he is making me work late again tonight? It’s like he knows I don’t have a life.

I still have Sex in the City episodes to binge.

” She glanced toward her boss’s door as if she were saying it straight to his face.

“Well, if it makes you feel any better, it’ll be me and you both after Mr. Longford leaves.”

She sat on the edge of my desk. “Get a move on with party planning.”

“I’ll start planning tonight after a glass of wine. I’d invite you over, but you will be here. Bummer.”

She nodded, her face softening, leaving as he walked out of the office behind me. I kept my eyes glued to Lane's every movement.

“You guys headed out?” I asked, hoping they said yes so I could leave early too.

“Well, Mr. Longford said we have a long day tomorrow, so we are busting out a tad bit early today.” His eyes scanned the floor. “Where is everyone? It’s like a ghost town here.”

A smile crossed my face. “Most of the assistants left hours ago. It's just you two and Mr. Curran here.”

He shifted his stance and scratched the back of his neck. “Well, what are you still doing here?” He popped his head back into the office. “Hey, everyone else is gone. I’m sending Jennifer home early.”

I flashed a tight smile. “Well, that’s sweet of you.

Thanks.” He watched me as I shut down my computer, unplugged my phone, and grabbed my purse.

A flush ran through my body, knowing he might be staring at my ass right now.

I couldn’t blame him. This skirt was one of the best ones for that.

I glanced over at Laura, who was mouthing ‘go for it.’ “Oh, I still need you to add me

to your Google calendar. If I'm going to be working for you, I'll need access so I can get it situated with my style of work. ”

“You have a style? Like isn't a calendar just that? You input text, date, and time? I'm confused.”

Oh gosh, don't embarrass yourself in front of him. Get yourself together, girl . “I'll get it all switched over and set up, and then I'll explain it to you.”

He bit his lip, leaving a tinge of red. “Sounds perfect. Well, good night, Jennifer. See you in the morning.”

When he walked toward the elevators, my chest heaved. It was unprofessional to get hot and bothered by my boss, but tonight I might need my battery operated buddy.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 8:07 am

Chapter Six

Lane

After leaving Coffee Chaos, the winter air bit into my skin.

I had a mission ahead of me: to get through thirty case files today.

Jennifer was going to be a wonderful asset and having someone of her caliber by my side would make things easier.

What I didn't expect, the magnetic pull to her which was dangerous.

As much as I found her attractive, she was my assistant.

As I rounded the corner, I spotted the building where my life was going to be for the next year.

I opened the bulky glass doors and proceeded to the elevator.

The door dinged as it shut and I pressed the number eight.

I walked into the office and stopped in front of Jennifer's desk.

She gave me a polite greeting and thanked me for the coffee, but something was off.

She wouldn't make much eye contact and seemed distracted. Did I do something

wrong?

“Did you get to do anything enjoyable after you got off yesterday?”

Jennifer didn't answer immediately. Instead, she stared at her computer and tapped on the keyboard. “I had a glass of wine. I also redid your calendar.”

She wasn't being her usual self, but I shrugged it off. “Oh, what does HAFH stand for? I need to color code it.”

Honestly, I didn't even think about her having access to that. “It's an acronym, but I'd rather explain it to you in private. Do you want to come into Mr. Longford's office?”

Jennifer hesitated before getting up and slowly walking in.

I took a deep breath and told her HAFH stands for “Home Away From Home” and explained that my mother had Parkinson's.

Her eyes softened a bit, and she was finally making eye contact with me again.

I didn't want anyone's pity. My mother might have it, but she wanted to live life until it was her time to pass.

“After my father passed, when it got to the point she couldn't take care of herself, I almost moved back, but she refused.

Instead, she found HAFH and asked if I could get her in. ”

Jennifer crossed her arms and looked at me. “So, why did you move to New York City?”

“My mother told me to. She’s a big part of my life, even though she can be quite particular about what she wants.”

“Aren’t all mothers? My mom thinks what I do is a joke, yet I work more hours than most. Heck, Laura spends almost twice as much time here as me. This job is no small feat.”

My mother’s symptoms, the tremors and the rigidness, were getting worse. The amnesia had just started rearing its ugly head.

“So, the fifteenth is when you pay them? I can put it under financial, then. I apologize if it seems like I was being intrusive.”

“No, it’s okay. Don’t be sorry.”

Her hands pulled to her sides, and I stepped closer. “That’s the one weekend a month I tried to visit her before I moved out here. Now, I’ll be lucky to see her at Christmas.”

“We’ll make sure you get out there, don’t worry. The firm usually closes down for the week between Christmas and New Year’s. It’s the only week everyone is off.”

That’s good to know . With having Parkinson’s, she was more prone to falls and pneumonia. Keeping her healthy was my top priority.

“I put it under financial. Do you want to see what I’ve done? I can explain it to you really quick if you have time.”

I stepped closer. Her lavender perfume causing me to roll my eyes back in my head. When she tapped the stylus on my chest, I smiled and paid attention to the screen. She completely transformed my previous calendar. She arranged the series of

appointments and tasks neatly and added colored tabs.

“So red is for urgent, yellow is cases, blue is for personal, and green is for financial.” She flipped through my calendar and now I could see firsthand what Mr. Longford meant. She took her job seriously and was very particular. Who am I to step on her toes?

I thanked her as she closed the iPad.

“I’ll be taking some time today to finalize the plans for his retirement party next Friday. Will he be in today?”

“He wasn’t feeling great this morning and was going to get an extra hour of sleep. I’ll just be using his office and going through case files if you need anything.”

She nodded and walked out of the office.

This was soon going to be all mine. All of my hard work, eighty-hour workweeks, and sleepless nights were catching up to me, and my dream was coming true.

New York City might not have been my first choice of places to live, but getting the offer from this firm spoke wonders about my reputation.

Jennifer’s mother might think her job was a joke, but that was typical. Assistants didn’t get enough compliments, but not under my watch. She would know just how much I appreciated her every day, but besides coffee, how could I show my appreciation?

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 8:07 am

Chapter Seven

Jennifer

Laura and I sat on the couch, refilling our wineglasses. This was the first night Laura had been off before eight in weeks.

“So stop thinking and spit it out. What’s going on?” Laura asked.

She knew exactly what I was freaking out about. “Why did you have to say anything? Every time we are around each other, I feel like he’s taking me in. He’s my boss, and as much as it makes me feel sexy, it’s wrong on so many levels.”

Laura raised her eyebrows. “You think? Sometimes those are the best relationships. The risk... the adrenaline coursing through your veins every time you sneak away into a coat closet to get a quick kiss.”

“Dear God, come on. This is real life.” I took a sip of my wine. “There has to be a reason he isn’t married already.”

Laura put her glass on the table. “Wait. Think about what you are saying... You are only at max seven years younger than him. It’s difficult to find your person, and using that logic against him will not benefit you.”

She was right. Age shouldn’t matter. I’m thirty-three and still undoubtedly single. “It’s just this feeling I get when he looks at me. Like... like he’s interested.”

Laura's cheeks flushed. "Oh, believe me, do you forget I by you? I see every interaction and he might not act on it outright, but he finds you attractive. But heck, what man wouldn't? Look at you."

I ran my fingers through my hair before throwing it over my shoulder with a bright laugh. "The wall Pilates is doing wonders. My butt has never looked so good."

My mind thought back to that royal-blue pencil skirt, Lane's eyes wandering down me.

There wasn't much that made me shy, but his gaze did.

I had always been confident, but a man like him gave me a thrill.

He took care of his sick mother, which meant he was caring and cared about more than just climbing his way to the top of the firm. But he was my boss.

"Girl, listen. Every woman in the office wants him. He's hot with a capital H , and fresh meat in this office is scarce."

I flexed my fingers around my wineglass. "He's so charming, and he has that amazing smile. Why couldn't I have met him outside of the firm? It's like life wants to show me who's in control... and it's not me."

"Mm-hmm," Laura replied. "I give it a month before they will remove the company policy. It's a total double standard. Men get praised for messing around with their assistants, but the women... Leave it to the lawyers saving their own hides."

God, she is so right. "Listen, he's hot, we both agree, but I'm not the type of girl to do anything more than have a harmless crush." My gaze shifted to the window.

There was a knock at the door, signaling the takeout arrived. I got up to answer it. After handing the guy cash, I shut the door and set the bag down on the coffee table. “I am so hungry!” I picked up a container of fried rice and dished it onto a plate.

Laura followed suit, eating as she gave me the scoop on her life. “Maybe you’ll get lucky and Mr. Curran will retire early.”

“Surely the world won’t screw me twice. I’m so ready to have a boss that gets off at a decent time. My looks are taking a real hit from the lack of sleep.”

Laura wasn’t the model type, but she was hardly ugly.

Her bright-red hair and green eyes gave her an allure.

She was as feisty as her locks, and everyone knew.

Whoever ended up being her new boss was in for a treat.

She was an extremely dedicated assistant—even Mr. Curran knows that—but sometimes she didn’t quite know when to think before she spoke.

“We will reinstate Happy Hour nights. Remember when we used to go to that bar on sixth? What was it called? The Boardroom... that’s right. Girl’s night and do karaoke. God, it was a blast. I miss that.”

Laura took her last sip of wine and refilled the glass without missing a beat. “Going out and enjoying myself is going to be the first thing on my list. Hopefully, he doesn’t wait too long because I’m ready.”

Laura got paid more than I did, but she also worked a lot more hours. She deserved it, and even though Mr. Curran was as evil as they come, he gave her a decent raise

every year.

“Why don’t we do that tomorrow? Maybe Mr. Curran will leave early so we can enjoy ourselves.” I wiggled my eyebrows.

“If it happens, I am totally down!”

As the night went on, Laura had a little too much wine, going all out for her first early night, and passed out on my couch. I didn’t have the gall to wake her, so I threw a blanket over her and headed to my bedroom where Lane would most likely invade my dreams.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 8:07 am

Chapter Eight

Jennifer

A bunch of clients caught wind of Mr. Longford's retirement before he reached out to everyone, so the phones had been nonstop.

"Alright, that's the last call you had to return. Looks like we are all caught up." I plopped down in the chair in front of his desk. Lane was using one of the side tables as a workstation.

Mr. Longford took his glasses off. "At least my week has been busy. I'm gonna miss this place."

Many of his clients were sad to see him go, but they got to meet Mr. Kneeland today, and he won them over. Seeing him in his element was nice; he was confident, charismatic, and very personable. He maintained one of the main things people loved about my current boss: personality.

"Looks like I have my hands full with all of your clients. How do you keep up with all of them?"

He was on retainer, but that didn't mean he worked for them every month; he was just on standby if needed. Sometimes I wondered if I should have gone to law school so I could get paid like them.

"Listen, let's all go to lunch today. The next few days are going to be a blur, and I'd

like to have lunch with you two before I leave. Are you free?"

"Sure," Lane and I said in unison.

Mr. Longford nodded. "I'll have a car come pick us up at one."

I walked back to my desk to get some more work done before we left.

Laura was typing away on her computer. Earlier, she came over to tell me that Mr. Curran just took on three more clients and that she asked for tonight off.

He wasn't happy, but since she was never able to take all her vacation time every year, he didn't decline.

When she caught my glance, I mouthed 'girls' night' and she smiled.

We both needed it after a day like this one.

By one, I had answered sixty emails, got four case files put away, and was ready to go when they stepped out of his office. "Let's hit the road."

I grabbed my purse and followed them into the elevator. Mr. Longford continued the conversation they previously had from the elevator all the way until we pulled up to the restaurant.

"Sounds like you are getting everything together," I said to Lane, and he looked down at me. "I don't know how you do it."

"Just imagine doing all this without an assistant. That was me before this firm."

I was his first assistant? Now I understood why his calendar was so out of whack.

They quickly escorted us to our seats.

Mr. Longford beamed at us. “I’m so glad you both could make it.”

I had never been in a situation like this before—being invited to lunch with two influential and successful men. As long as I had worked for Mr. Longford, we had never been out to lunch together. We always had it delivered to the office.

The server brought out a menu and Mr. Longford talked about his plans for the following week while we looked it over.

“You seem to be quite knowledgeable about everything, Jennifer,” Lane said. “Mr. Longford here has been lucky to have you as his assistant.”

Mr. Longford chuckled at the comment and glanced at me. “She’s been a godsend. It’s good to have someone competent around to make life easier. God knows I have had my fair share of horrible assistants, but Jennifer here deserves another raise or two.”

Lane nodded. “It’s important to make sure the people who make our lives easier feel appreciated. It keeps them happy.”

My face flushed. Is there something hidden behind those words? Is he trying to tell me something? He seemed to keep his eyes on me most of the time during lunch. Just as I was about to ask myself if I was reading too much into things, Mr. Longford cleared his throat and changed the topic.

“This lunch is to get one last pleasant meal in with you guys before I go,” he said with a sad sigh. “My wife and I have been planning a trip to England, and I figured it was time to do it before I get too old.”

My heart sunk, and I asked if he was all right. “I don’t want everyone talking about it,” Mr. Longford said with a wave of his hand. “But my health has taken a turn for the worse, and I’m afraid this is the best choice.”

Lane nodded and patted the older man’s arm. “We’ll definitely miss you.”

“There are some things that I would like to see continue after my absence. Jennifer and I always get breakfast and coffee delivered on Friday mornings. We go over the agenda for the following week. Could you continue that?”

Lane smiled. “Of course. It’s a tradition, after all.”

My mind raced thinking of spending every Friday morning in his office. Laura was going to have a field day with this information.

Mr. Longford and Lane made the lunch more friendly than work related once they brought the food out. They were going back and forth, telling their best jokes. By far, Lane won, but I didn’t tell him that. Instead, I sided with Mr. Longford because I only had him in my life for such a short time.

“What about you, Jennifer? You have any funny jokes?” Lane asked, taking a sip of water while the server brought the check. “Let’s hear it. Everyone has at least one.”

He’s wrong! I didn’t have one. The only joke I knew... “Why did the bicycle fall over?”

Lane and Mr. Longford looked at each other and then shook their heads.

“Because it was two tired.”

They both chuckled, and I was sure it was just to make me feel better about having

one of the lamest jokes ever. It looked like I would need to do some research for some funny jokes to have on standby. Apparently, they both thought they were comedians.

“Alright, gentlemen. It was nice, but I need to get back to work. I’m behind schedule and can’t stay late today.”

They stood with me and followed me out, hailing a cab, and riding back to the office with me. I ended up in the middle of the back seat, and it forced my leg to rub against Lane’s.

When the cab pulled up in front of the building, Lane hesitated getting out, and his hand landed on my thigh to brace himself. When he realized what he was doing, he removed his hand and locked eyes with me. “I apologize. Um... that was inappropriate and won’t happen again.”

As he extended his hand to help me out of the cab, I walked right into the building without looking behind me. This man was sending mixed signals, and he knew just how this could affect both of our careers.

I was so ready to go grab some drinks and sing some karaoke tonight. Laura would fish for information, like she always did, and at least I would have something good to tell her.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 8:07 am

Chapter Nine

Lane

As I emerged from the law firm, day done, my phone started to vibrate in my pocket. Home Away From Home showing on the screen. A chill ran down my spine. The exhaustion of the twelve-hour day peeled off me as I answered, but the cheerful voice of my mother was on the other end.

“Hey, sweetie. How’s New York City treating you?”

“Is everything okay? Why aren’t you calling from your phone?” Something was wrong.

“I fell, but I didn’t break anything. I’m okay.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?” My mother had always been less than forthcoming with her health. It wasn’t until I started going with her to the doctor appointments that I realized how much her Parkinson’s had progressed without me realizing years ago.

“I’m fine, sweetheart. Just take a few deep breaths.”

I inhaled deeply and let the air fill my lungs before slowly blowing it out. The tension in my body melted away. “I love you, Mom. Please be careful. You know you can call me anytime. My assistant knows to always put your calls through.”

“Assistant, huh? Watch out, New York. My son is finally getting the recognition he

deserves.”

She had always believed in me. Especially in what I wanted to do as a career, but I knew us being far apart wasn't easy for her. “Ma, I'm only here for a year. That's the contract.”

“Yeah, yeah. Love you. I'll call you tomorrow.”

“Love you too.”

I opened the door to the dive bar. A single light flickered in the corner while country music played from a jukebox in the back. I claimed a stool at the Bar. A woman with cropped dark hair, and a deep set of wrinkles came to take my order. “What'll it be?”

“Bud Light, please.” She turned around, popped the top and placed it in front of me.

I put eight dollars on the bar and turned around to take in the rest of the bar.

I was the only guy in a suit in a room full of pool tables and neon beer signs.

It wasn't until I'd been watching the baseball game on the giant television for two hours, sipping my beers slowly, that people started to trickle in.

Soon enough, it was packed. Then my eyes found Laura and Jennifer.

They were in evening wear, laughing and smiling, enjoying a carefree night out. Of all the nights and all the places in NYC, they had to come to this one on the night I was here. Go figure, that's my luck.

Turning back around, I tried to make myself invisible, because if they saw me, then they would leave. Who wanted to hang out with their boss after work? Jennifer

commanded attention in her black halter dress and red pumps. My throat tightened as I tried to avert my eyes.

The ladies had taken a seat at a table and were in the middle of a conversation when a tall, dark-haired man made his way over.

I fixed my eyes on Jennifer as he sauntered closer, talking loud enough for the entire bar to hear.

Without thinking, I crossed the room and took my place beside her, planting a swift kiss on the top of her head. “Hey, babe, you need another drink?”

The man's voice had a hard edge. He jammed his hands into the pockets of his fashionable jeans. It was clear he hadn't shaved in days. Jennifer's eyes darted back and forth between us like she was trying to detect a trap. She leaned close to my ear. “What are you doing?”

The man clenched his jaw, making a visible effort not to say a thing. He cast one last look of longing at Jennifer before delivering his critique. “So you have moved on already?”

Jennifer snuggled into my side. “He's more of a man than you will ever be. Go handle your commitment issues and leave us alone.”

As I watched him lumber out of the bar, the bitter taste of jealousy filled my mouth. My hand fell from Jennifer's shoulder and she slowly looked up at me.

“Why did you do that?”

Offering an explanation seemed futile, but I tried anyway. “I thought he was bothering you. Figured I could help.”

Laura chimed in. “That was her ex that just broke up with her... and now he is totally seething with jealousy.” The corners of her mouth twitched upward.

This was dangerous. I was jealous. No, it couldn’t be—I was not pining over my assistant. The alcohol made the world feel hazy and malleable.

“What is it about men and having what they can't have? As soon as Lane here sat down, now men are flocking to you. Come sit by me,” Laura said.

“If your ex was dumb enough to let a woman like you go, then let him suffer. They should worship you.”

Jennifer shook her head slowly as she stirred her bright-red mojito. “There are thousands of single girls in New York City. Men just move on to the next. It's all a game to them.”

I leaned back. “What? You don’t think you're a catch? Please tell me some man hasn't ruined your confidence because you are gorgeous.”

A slight smirk crept up the corner of Laura's lips. Her best friend was enjoying this. She popped a maraschino cherry into her mouth. “That is the nicest thing she has heard this week.”

I stayed right where I was, next to Jennifer, soaking up her lavender perfume.

Laura ranted about Jennifer's ex-boyfriend Peyton, and the girl next to me was holding back tears that threatened to spill from the corners of her eyes.

Laura declared he wasn't worth the time of day.

I sipped my drink in silence and watched the game on the big-screen TV, not wanting

to intrude.

"You deserve better."

Jennifer's gaze locked with mine, and suddenly we were both blushing. "Thanks."

The conversation moved on to other topics, but I couldn't help but still think about what I had said earlier.

It had felt different from just a platonic comment between colleagues; it had been more personal than that.

And it seemed like Jennifer had felt it too from how she had looked at me afterward.

The announcer came on and called Jennifer's name. She walked up to the stage and took the microphone in her hand. And then she did something that totally took me by surprise. She began to sing in French. It was beautiful.

What other talents did my assistant have?

Chapter Ten

Jennifer

As I finished my last karaoke song, Lane walked toward me, making my heart sink.

He held out his hand, and I took it. We started dancing together, and I felt as if we were the only two people in the room, moving to the music.

When we made our way back to the table, Lane undid his tie, and unbuttoned the top two buttons of his shirt...

he was getting comfortable, which meant he wasn't going anywhere.

Laura was eyeing me, and I knew exactly what was running through her mind... she better not.

"Can you believe the jerk had the audacity to break up with her on their six-month anniversary and say that he wasn't ready for a commitment? I mean, look at her. He's an idiot." Laura's hands waved in the air.

I thought we were done talking about Peyton. Wasn't tonight supposed to be about fun?

He nodded. "Some men don't know what they have until it's gone. Looks like that's the case with... what was his name again?"

I laughed. “Peyton.” Surely it was wrong to be sitting here next to my boss, looking this good while he was in such an intoxicated state. His eyes had been drinking me in since he had sat down, and my whole body was on fire.

“You look stunning tonight.”

“So, Lane, where are you from anyway?” Laura asked.

I swatted at her under the table. Right now wasn’t the time to be asking personal questions.

“I’m from a small town in Montana called Amesbury.”

He didn’t look like a guy who grew up in a small town, especially looking so scrumptious in that suit and tie.

“It’s the perfect place to be during the holidays. Everyone says Times Square is awesome, but nothing beats our Christmas Square.”

The way he talked about his hometown made it sound like a place I wanted to visit someday.

“Laura, it’s your turn for the mic.”

She jumped up. “I’ll be back.”

Lane and I locked eyes. “So, what are you doing here, anyway?”

“Mr. Longford gave me the name of this place as a recommendation. My mom had a fall today and after getting the news, I thought I could use a beer.”

He seemed too good to be true—too perfect. Everyone had flaws, so where were Lane's? I took a sip of my beer to give myself time to think.

“I don't talk about it often, but sometimes I can be a bit of a workaholic. I get wrapped up in my job and forget what's important in life.”

It was the flaw that I needed to see in him—that humanizing element that made him real instead of just some perfect Prince Charming who had just stumbled into my life.

Suddenly all the walls that I built around my heart came crashing down for this man who was looking at me with such depth and sincerity that no other person had done before.

I'm falling... and I don't even know that much about him.

Chapter Eleven

Lane

I should've left when I saw Laura and Jennifer but...

I stayed. Over the next couple of hours, I learned a lot about her.

Jennifer had grown up in Dallas, Texas, with her parents and two sisters.

She'd spent her childhood in the city, with all the advantages.

She was a self-confessed city girl who wanted to experience the hustle and bustle of life in a bigger city.

After she graduated college, she moved to New York City, much to her parents' dismay.

They weren't happy with her decision, but she did it anyway.

I knew I couldn't act on my feelings, but it didn't make them subside.

The more I got to know Jennifer, the more I wanted to show her how a woman should be treated.

Yet I knew once Mr. Longford left, my life was going to be chaotic, and we would spend a lot of time together at the office.

Maybe for now, I'd bide my time, have her as a friend, and one day when all was right with the world, maybe I could ask her out...

but she was looking for her happily ever after.

"You got any plans for Thanksgiving?" Laura asked.

"No, I can't make it home to see my mother, so I'll probably just order in."

"I'm having a Friendsgiving with Laura. You should come. No one should be alone."

I hesitated for a second. "Are you sure?"

She waved her hand. "We'd love to have you. Besides, it's always more fun with more people."

I smiled. "Well, in that case, I'd love to join you guys. Thanks."

It was safe to assume why she wasn't going home for the holiday if she and her family didn't get along. No matter what, I was making it out to see my mom for Christmas. I talked the center into letting me take her home to Amesbury for the holidays. The small town wasn't for everyone, but she was a small-town gal and always would be. It was a surprise, so my mother doesn't know, but I had to clear it with the director before I planned anything.

I stood up slowly and brushed down my shirt. "Well, it's time for me to head home. My ride is here."

"Alright, see you at work."

As I opened the door, I glanced back at Jennifer one last time, who was smiling.

Tonight was amazing and getting to know her on a better level would indeed help our professional and personal relationship. But the problem was, I wished that the personal relationship could come first.

Page 12

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Chapter Twelve

Jennifer

The throbbing in my head was like a hammer.

I quickly grabbed the bottle of Tylenol from my bedside table and swallowed a couple with a gulp of water.

Today was Mr. Longford's last day at the office, and I knew it was going to be a bittersweet day.

Not the best day to be hungover, but we had a blast last night anyway.

I heaved myself out of bed and shuffled to the bathroom to wash the grime and sweat of the night before. I dried off and threw on a shirt and pants, feeling more alive with each passing minute. I gave myself a little pep talk and headed to the office.

I ordered blueberry scones and coffee, Mr. Longford's favorite.

It was going to be our last breakfast together.

As I waited for the delivery, I thought about all the years I had spent with Mr. Longford.

I had seen a lot of changes. Mr. Longford had kept every single client of his over his reign at the firm.

He had dedicated so much of his time and energy to the company, and I admired him for that.

When the delivery arrived, I took the food and coffee into his office and set it down on the table. I was determined to show my appreciation. When Lane and Mr. Longford finally strolled into his office, it was almost nine.

Lane looked like he had a rough night. It wasn't my business to keep track of how much he drank last night, but it was a hefty amount. Yet he stayed in control, didn't act inappropriate, and got home okay. What happened last night would stay in the back of my mind.

Mr. Longford stood at the office window, hands clasped together behind his back. He had been standing in the same spot for a few minutes. "We're going on a seven-day cruise to Cozumel next week. Can you imagine? I've never been on a cruise before. I'm so excited."

He deserved to enjoy his retirement. The man had worked so hard for decades.

"My wife has always wanted to travel the world, and I told her she'd have to wait until I retired. Now that I have, we decided a cruise was the perfect way to start. We plan to go all around the Caribbean and then maybe head out to Europe this fall."

I decided to get started on my work, leaving them to go over the last of the cases. The workday went by in a blur. Paperwork and emails kept me busy, but I didn't want the day to end because that meant Mr. Longford would leave for good.

"We better go," Laura whispered. "People are gonna start showing up soon."

We moved the retirement party into one of the bigger rooms because some of his long-term clients wanted to come and celebrate with him today. Thankfully, we did

because people were already showing up and with all the firm's employees too, the other room wouldn't have sufficed.

I placed the microphone on the podium and made sure everything was set up correctly when the hushed conversations come to an abrupt halt and all eyes were on me. Mr. Longford arrived in the room, so I rushed back up to the podium.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” I whispered, my voice shaking.

“I’m so pleased to welcome you here today to honor Mr. Longford's many years of dedicated service to this firm. Mr. Longford has been part of this firm since its creation and has been an integral part of its success,” I continued.

“Without his vision, dedication, and hard work, none of what we have today would have been possible. He has been a mentor and a friend to many of us here and for that, we thank him.”

There was a loud cheer from the audience and I took a step back, letting Mr. Longford step up.

He cleared his throat and looked out at the crowd.

“I’m overwhelmed by the number of people here today,” he began.

“Being part of this firm for so many years has been a great privilege.

I've seen it grow from a little family business to what it is today, and it's been a substantial source of pride for me.

Thank you to everyone here for all the hard work they have put in over the years to make this the success it is today.

I also want to take a moment to thank my assistant, Jennifer.

She's been an absolute rock and I don't know what I'd do without her.”

Mr. Longford thanked all the partners at the firm and then introduced the new partner, Lane. Lane raised his hand in the crowd and there was a round of applause.

“It's been an absolute pleasure working with all of you, and I will miss our time together, but I know the firm is in excellent hands and will continue to thrive. So thank you, and I wish you all the best of luck.”

I teared up as I watched Mr. Longford step away from the podium.

Everyone was happy for Mr. Longford, but we all knew it would never be the same.

Despite my sadness, I couldn't help but smile as I watched Mr. Longford beam with pride.

He deserved this moment, to be surrounded by the people who had worked with him for so many years.

When the party ended, it was time for us to say goodbye. I hugged Mr. Longford tightly. “Keep in touch and send pictures when you go traveling.”

“Of course. Just because you won't be my assistant anymore doesn't mean I won't be checking in on you.”

I watched Mr. Longford step into the elevator. A lump rose in my throat as the elevator doors closed. I had to fight back tears. Laura stepped closer to me, putting her arm around my shoulders. Despite the pain I felt, I smiled at her.

“It’s going to be okay. Lane will be a great boss,” she said. “And Mr. Longford deserves to retire.”

She was right, but it didn’t make it any easier to watch him leave. It may be an ending, but it was also a new beginning.

In all my years in New York City, Mr. Longford had been the one constant in my life, a friend, mentor, and confidant—someone I could turn to when things got tough.

I didn't normally get attached to bosses, but he was like a father to me and to see him walk out of this building for the last time broke my heart.

Now it’s time for the new boss, Lane, to live up to his legacy. Despite the sadness of having to say goodbye to my old boss, I had to admit that I was curious to see what Lane had in store for me. It was a new beginning, one that I was both nervous and excited to see where it would take us.

Chapter Thirteen

Lane

Friendsgiving was tonight and honestly I was nervous.

Jennifer and I had been strictly professional since that night at the bar and it felt like there was a wall between us—a wall that made sense for both of our careers.

Even so, her lavender perfume lingered in my mind, and as each moment passed, I wished I'd met her before I started working at the firm.

I ventured into the grocery store and grabbed a freshly baked pumpkin pie. Red or white wine? They seemed to like red, so I threw one in my shopping basket. My mother taught me never to show up to a gathering empty-handed. A little liquid courage wouldn't hurt either.

I hugged my long wool coat tight around me as I trudged through the freshly fallen snow to Jennifer's apartment building and I paused outside.

It was a nondescript building on the Upper East Side.

Taking a deep breath to steady my nerves, I opened the front door and headed into the elevator.

After finding her apartment, Jennifer opened it with a smile, her face framed by her brown locks and bright-blue eyes.

She was dressed in a sweater dress, her long legs finished with edgy black thigh-high boots with a small heel.

Her eyebrows rose slightly in surprise at seeing me, her gaze flickering between the pumpkin pie and the bottle of wine before settling back into an understanding smile as she welcomed me in.

“You didn't have to bring anything.”

I shrugged, my hands growing clammy as I looked down at pie and wine tucked into my arm. “My mom taught me better than that.”

Jennifer stepped aside and opened the door wider. “Come in.”

The apartment was small and cozy. The savory smell of something cooking in the kitchen was an immediate comfort.

“I'm glad you could make it. There will be plenty of food. Laura is going a bit overboard. She's in the kitchen. We are still cooking, but you can put those on the counter.”

I stepped into the kitchen and was surprised by how tidy it was.

Especially when making a thanksgiving meal.

Jennifer and I huddled around the sink, potatoes falling into the strainer from the boiling water.

We sprinkled in heaps of butter and sour cream, topped with diced onion and bell pepper for a little color.

We whisked it all together. And then it was on to the next dish.

She worked quickly to mix the stuffing—tearing up bits of stray onion and celery stalks by hand.

Laura told us about the time she and her family spent Thanksgiving with her grandmother in Mexico, while Jennifer recounted her favorite childhood Thanksgiving memory.

By the time the dinner was ready, I had almost forgotten how much I dreaded the evening.

We put the finishing touches on dinner and the three of us stood back to admire our work.

We finally took our seats at the dinner table and soon plates were piled high with the most delicious dishes I had ever tasted. They shared stories about all the places they had visited.

“Have you ever played Cards Against Humanity before?” Laura asked.

I shook my head. “Can't say I have.”

She grabbed it off a shelf and plopped it onto the table, almost spilling my glass of wine. Laura explained the rules of the game while she was shuffling the white cards and gave us each ten. They did not know how badly I sucked at card games.

“So, whoever's turn it is to read the black card, the other two pick one of their white cards that fits the best.”

After picking up my white cards, I almost doubled over laughing. These were dumb.

Laura read the black card. “Having problems with blank, try blank. So for this one, you choose two white cards.”

I sorted through my cards and put my two down. Jennifer looked like she was struggling. “Oh, come on, it can't be any worse than mine.”

She laughed and put down two cards.

Laura picked up our two sets. “Having problems with your pet, try peanut butter.” She looked straight at Jennifer. “Having problems with the hiccups, try shutting up.”

Wasn't this supposed to be funny? Maybe we should play a different game, but I was just a guest. So, instead, I kept sipping my wine and playing along. The longer we played, the funnier things got.

Jennifer read the black card: The year is 2150. The president is____. I looked at my cards and put one down. These are ridiculous. She read out loud the cards we played.

The president is eating cat food and binging Law and Order SVU .

The president is returning all its money to the rightful owner, Bezos.

Literally neither of them made sense, but whatever.

I guess that was the point of the game. For the next two hours, we played this game, and by the end, they crowned me the winner.

“Thank you for inviting me. This was much more fun than ordering in and binging some random tv show.” Jennifer and Laura both walked me to the door.

“We do this every year, so standing invitation,” Jennifer said.

“See you at work. Goodnight.”

It had been a while since I last enjoyed myself so much.

As I walked home, my mind wandered back to the Cards Against Humanity game we played.

We all laughed hysterically at some answers that were read out loud, but it wasn't just about the funny answers; there was something else as well.

We were connecting on a deeper level than we usually did and it made me realize how much I needed this kind of interaction.

As I walked, I made a mental note to take more time for myself in the future.

Chapter Fourteen

Jennifer

My laptop open with a half-finished spreadsheet when Laura stumbled over, her face glowing.

“So I’ve been thinking about what I’m going to do for Christmas this year and I’ve decided I’m going to go back to New Hampshire to be with my parents. They still have the old house in the countryside, and I’m sure they’d love to have me come home and spend a few days with them.”

So maybe I was a little jealous of her relationship with her parents.

Here I was, stuck in the city for yet another holiday season.

My mom had been on my case about throwing my life away, staying with the firm this long.

She thought my job was useless and when they let me go, I wouldn't be able to find another job. Why didn't she have any faith in me?

So instead of going home and listening to that for a few days, New York City, here I stay .

Laura smiled and put her hand on my shoulder. “Hey, why don’t you come with me?” she suggested. “They’ll treat you like family. It’ll be so much fun.”

“That's okay. Your parents don't like me that much and if I wanted peering eyes on me, I'd just go home to my own family.”

Her parents came into the city three years ago for the holiday and thought I was the bad influence. It made me laugh because if anyone knew Laura, they would agree that it was the other way around.

Lane walked out and his eyes locked on mine. “Sorry to interrupt, but you shouldn't have to be alone during the holidays. This might be totally overstepping, but Amesbury is beautiful this time of year.”

“Amesbury? Like your hometown?”

“Yeah, I am going back to visit my mother and it's a great getaway. The lodge will be the perfect place for your binge-reading sessions. They even have a fireplace.”

Laura didn't even give me a chance to reply. “Yes, she'd love to.” My eyes flicked to hers. “She needs to get out of this city and enjoy her holidays. Being cooped up in her apartment is no way to spend Christmas.”

Laura excused herself. She knew exactly what she was doing, and she would hear about it from me later.

“Why don't you come into my office and we can get a flight booked for you.”

I followed behind him but did not sit down once inside. We had been very good about keeping things professional since the bar, and even though Amesbury sounded wonderful, I wondered if this was a mistake.

“Are you sure this is okay? I mean...” I didn't lift my eyes. The burn on my skin told me he was looking my way.

“Don't worry, I will not cross that line. You made it clear, but that doesn't mean you should have to sit at home when you could enjoy yourself.”

Wait? I made it clear? So did that mean he wanted to be more than just colleagues? This man was sending me too many mixed signals, and it was hard to keep up.

“So, the best flight would be the first one out. It'll get us to Missoula in time to get one of the earlier buses to Amesbury. I'll be able to get you settled in at the lodge before I have to go get my mom in Sikita.”

So, now we were staying in the same place? As much as everything in me yelled to say no, I nodded. “That'll be perfect.”

So now, instead of curling up on my couch, I would be stuck in a small town at a lodge with my hot boss. What could go wrong?

Chapter Fifteen

Lane

O kay, so maybe it wasn't the smartest idea to invite the assistant I had a crush on to my small hometown for Christmas, but what else was I supposed to do?

I couldn't leave her alone in the city. She had invited me to Thanksgiving, and now it was time for me to do the same.

I booked the first flight out of New York City so we could make it to Missoula in time to take a bus to Amesbury.

We could take a cab, but it would cost a fortune.

Jennifer was going to love the scenic route it took from the airport to my town.

It had been five weeks since I took over for Mr. Longford permanently, and chaos ensued.

Clients were nervous about letting someone else take their cases.

I have had to be more hands-on and accommodate their worries, which made me work longer hours.

Being a good boss, I didn't require Jennifer to stay past six. Just because I had to stay didn't mean she should have to. I wasn't Mr. Curran.

It was a few minutes past seven when I closed out of my email and headed over to the dive bar.

Christmas lights hung from the ceiling. I ordered a draft beer and took a seat near the big-screen TV, watching unnoticed as the other patrons laughed and clanked their glasses together.

I sipped my beer and let the worries of the day fade away.

There was a light tap on my shoulder, and when I spun around, there she was. “Guess you had the same idea, huh?”

“Work has been so hectic these last few weeks. I’m here to meet Laura, but she's running late... again.” She took a sip of her wine and set it back on the bar.

I nodded. “Yeah, Mr. Curran sure keeps her busy.” I cleared my throat, feeling an uncomfortable itch crawl up it. “At least you have me as a reprieve, right?” I tried to laugh, but it came out sounding forced even to my own ears.

She motioned to the bartender for another glass of wine and slid onto the barstool next to me.

“So, I don't want you to think...” I trailed off when my voice quivered, not sure how to phrase what I wanted to say without sounding too forward.

“The trip to Amesbury is purely so you can get away from here if you want; there is no pressure on you to join us for Christmas or anything else.

If you'd rather hole up at the lodge by yourself, that's totally fine.” I swallowed hard and waited for her response.

“I’ve been stalking your town online,” she confessed. “You have one of those town squares, like something out of a fairy tale or a Christmas movie.” Her eyes lit up as she described the main street with its old-fashioned shops.

It warmed my heart to see her excited about the trip. “It’s not for everyone but for those of us who can appreciate a rustic main street, it’s one of a kind.”

A man’s voice rang out, his words dripping with venom. I turned to see Jennifer’s ex-boyfriend Peyton, who had obviously had too much to drink, standing in the doorway. He jabbed an unsteady finger in my direction.

“You know this place only because I told you about it. Take your new boyfriend somewhere else.”

My hands balled into tight fists. I had always kept my cool, but I was getting angrier by the second. “You think you can just show up here and push her around? She’s welcome anywhere she pleases, and you’d do well not forgetting that.”

“You think you are a tough guy? She’s not worth it. You’ll find out soon enough.”

The air was heavy with tension as the ex-boyfriend’s words echoed through the bar. I could feel my rage boiling beneath my skin and before I knew it, I lunged forward and landed a powerful punch.

The bartender, Helen, let out a laugh. “Finally, someone got him to shut up. Don’t worry about it, Jen. He had it coming.”

Two of his friends grabbed him by the arms and yanked him off the floor. They obviously knew he was in the wrong.

Jennifer crossed her arms. “You didn’t need to step in.”

I rubbed the back of my neck. “He needs to learn that he can't talk to you like that—or anybody, for that matter.”

As she sat back down, her hand fell to mine with a soft thud. She grabbed it and examined the wound on my knuckles—a deep cut caused by hitting one of his teeth. “You should put some ice on that before it swells. Don't think you want your mother to see that.”

“On the contrary,” I replied, a faint smile playing on my lips. “She was the one who taught me to stand up for women. She would probably give me a high five.”

She wrapped a napkin around my injured hand as if she had done this many times before. “Can we get some ice for his hand, please?”

I longed to feel her body against mine, her lips brushing against my own. I wanted to tell her she had a special place in my heart and show her how much I valued her, but then the wall was back up—professionalism. Something inside me broke, and my heart was telling me to be patient.

I wish this wasn't so god damn complicated.

Chapter Sixteen

Jennifer

Maybe, I was overthinking this whole trip. This doesn't mean anything. He was just being kind. Plus, the pictures of the town were gorgeous. And honestly, I hadn't been out of the city since moving here. Small towns always had a different vibe. Slower pace. And I loved it.

"I really hope this doesn't turn out to be a massive mistake. It's all your fault."

Laura turned toward me. "You can't get mad at me."

I packed my warmest clothes. I had never been to a place like this before and wasn't sure what to expect. Laura seemed to think we were going to come back married, but we weren't going to Vegas.

"You and Lane are meant to be together." She pressed her lips tight. "This could be the trip you need to figure it out, away from all the stress and chaos of work." Her eyebrows wiggled.

I folded the last shirt and packed it. No matter what happened on this trip, it was going to be an experience that would stay with me for a lifetime. I heaved it off the bed and carried it across the room to the door.

"Seriously, stop all the anxiety. You're single, and you get to spend the next week with a handsome man for Christmas. Stop acting like you're headed off to prison."

I rolled my eyes and took one last look around the apartment, making sure I hadn't missed anything. "Alright. Chill. It's all your expectations that are giving me jitters. Just let me have a good time... Can't that be it?"

"Yeah, whatever."

My phone vibrated, signaling that the cab I ordered was waiting out front. Laura, who had to board her flight an hour after mine, grabbed her suitcase and followed me out the door. "Let's go have the best Christmas ever."

The taxi driver put our suitcases in the trunk and we didn't say a word the whole drive. Something about being in the car with a complete stranger made me anxious. Always had. But finally, we arrived at the airport, grabbed our bags and went inside.

"Alright, I'm going to check my bag. Too bad we didn't book with the same airline. Anywho, text me all the deets."

Gathering my courage, I followed suit until I saw him. He came right up to me. "I already checked us in, so let's drop our bags off with TSA and go through security."

My gaze lingered on him as I took in his new look—tight black jeans, a leather jacket, and scuffed combat boots.

He was usually all buttoned-up at the office.

He had a rebellious edge that I hadn't noticed before.

I wondered if this was how he usually looked outside of the office, a far cry from the pressed slacks and crisp white shirts.

Maybe there was more to him... It was the right week to find out.

Chapter Seventeen

Lane

The gate was almost full and the board showed we would be boarding soon. I leaned closer to her, our shoulders touching as I took in the waft of her shampoo. She deftly maneuvered a finger across the glowing screen of her phone. “Planning something?”

“Just looking at a few places in Amesbury.”

She was such a planner, and I loved that about her. Her long black joggers were tucked into her shoes, and her oversized cream sweater hugged her. This was going to be harder than I thought. A whole week with her.

A cheery female voice came through the speakers, announcing the beginning of boarding for Delta Airlines Flight 2122 to Minneapolis. I stood up, and she peered at me. “What are you doing?”

“They’re boarding. First class.”

She gaped as it dawned on her. The smiling ticket agent glanced at our phones, scanned the boarding passes, and we were going down the jet bridge. This must be her first time flying in comfort.

“You really didn't have to do this.”

“It wasn't that much extra, and you get free drinks. Plus, our bags were free.”

As the flight attendants began their safety demonstration, my eyes flickered to Jennifer.

The drone of the engine pulling away from the gate was hypnotic and I got lost in thought again.

Peyton and that other guy hurt her so deeply, leaving her scared to be vulnerable again.

But as I looked at her, all I wanted was for her light to shine brighter than ever before.

The plane lurched forward, engines roaring as it raced down the runway.

Jennifer squeezed my hand. I looked out the window, watching fields and buildings shrink beneath us.

The cabin lights flickered off, and soon we were suspended in a sky of pure blue.

At some point, I fell asleep until the Captain announced our descent.

The plane touched down in Minneapolis with a jolt, and Jennifer and I hurried along with the other passengers to our connecting flight.

We found our seats and settled in. Jennifer leaned against me, her eyes fluttering shut almost instantly.

She smiled into my shoulder, her soft breaths tickling my skin.

For the next three hours, I watched my movie on mute while Jennifer slept peacefully beside me.

As the plane began its descent, she woke up, and looked out the window. “We are close!”

“Laura said you liked to read. Caffeinated Bliss is just down the street from the lodge. And don't forget to pick up a cupcake from Frosted! I can tell firsthand that it's some of the most delicious cupcakes in town.”

We stepped off the plane and onto the jet bridge, stretching our legs and followed the signs to the baggage claim.

The bus would be a scenic route. The carousel turned on and we grabbed our suitcases and shuffled out to the bus.

We were among the first in line, so we chose a seat at the very back of the vehicle.

As the engine roared to life, we watched the city fade away in a blur.

I fondly remembered the camping trips I used to take with my dad. “This is where I got my passion for hiking with my dad. Although, I don't have much time for it nowadays, especially being in New York City.”

She looked up at me through her lashes. “You're so lucky to have had a close bond with your dad.”

I hated the fact that she was distant from her family.

I listened as she talked about her father spending all his time at work and when he was home, he would just sit in his old brown recliner watching sports on the television.

Her shoulders slumped in defeat as she recounted all the reasons to stay away from

her family home over the holidays.

My heart broke. Being stuck in the same room, watching her parents bicker like a tennis match or having to sit at the dinner table and listen to their disapproval of her chosen career path—too often the conversation ended with the suggestion that she move back home.

A single tear rolled down her cheek as she shook her head and muttered.

“It would be more of a burden than a vacation.”

I put my arm around her. “I hate that for you.”

She asked me about my mom, and a lump formed in my throat. “Born and raised in Amesbury. She used to work at the Hideout diner until she got sick. She and my father met in high school and were together until he passed a couple of years ago.”

The shuttle bus rolled to a stop, and the doors opened with a loud hiss.

We stepped out into the unforgiving winter weather and onto the slushy street.

Surrounding us were brightly painted storefronts, decorated with Christmas twinkle lights.

A few steps ahead of me, Jennifer spun around. “I can't believe I'm staying here!”

After getting our bags, we shuffled down Main Street.

An old Ford truck sat outside Woodall's car repair, its hood propped open and a pair of oil-stained hands reaching into the engine.

The windows of the vintage clothing store were filled with mannequins wearing colorful hats and flowing skirts.

But then, the smell of roasted coffee beans hit me when we passed the café.

We finally reached the three-story cabin-style building at the end of the block.

Jennifer's eyes took in the property. "This place is just like a Christmas movie... I can't believe you grew up here."

There was a lot about me she didn't know, but this trip could be the key to unlocking it all.

Chapter Eighteen

Jennifer

A mesbury was nestled in the rolling hills of Montana.

The Sterling Lodge was an aged Alpine-style building blanketed in a fresh layer of snow.

Colorful icicle lights twinkled around the porch, and a welcome wreath hung from the door as Labe opened the door.

The lobby was large with high ceilings, and a fireplace.

At the front desk, a woman with thin gray hair pulled back in a tight bun, with thick glasses perched on the bridge of her nose, her fingers pounding against the keys of the computer until she noticed us.

She then rounded the corner of the desk, her arms opened wide, ready for a hug.

“Jennifer, this is one of my mother's friends, Carina. She owns the place.”

Carina hugged him. “I can't believe you're back! And for Christmas... how's your mama doing?”

Lane smiled. “It's nice to see you, too. Once I get Jennifer here settled, I'll be heading to get her.”

“How wonderful.”

She walked back around the counter and after a few seconds handed him two keys. “Room 212 and 213. Let me know if you need anything at all.”

Lane grabbed my bag, taking the stairs two at a time. I followed him up to room 212, where he gently set my belongings on the floor. “This is your room. I’m gonna put my stuff away and then head to Sikita to grab my mom. You have my number if you need anything.”

I nodded my thanks, opened the door, and stepped inside. A king-sized bed and... I went to the window and pulled back the sheer curtains to reveal a stunning view of main street—perfect for watching the sun set.

It was time to explore the town. I fumbled for my phone.

Me: Made it. I’ll send you pics. This place is as cute as you thought.

She would be so jealous. Anyone knew her obsession with Hallmark movies year-round, and this was something she would gaga for in real life. So with a snap of my camera to show the view from my room, three little dots appeared on the screen.

Laura: You have to be kidding me! Maybe I should ditch my parents and join you and Lane. =)

I rolled my eyes and slipped the phone and room key into my back pocket before hefting my backpack onto my shoulders.

I descended the stairs and stepped out. My first destination was a small café bookstore.

It looked like an older building that used to be a small bank and was converted.

I chose a table by the window and looked out at the snow-covered streets.

This place reminded me of Coffee Chaos because of the spaced-out bistro tables.

They were almost the exact same tables. The Christmas tree sat right in the corner by the front door, making it the first thing you noticed when you walked in, giving it just that extra oomph of Christmas vibe.

The shelves overflowed with books from floor to ceiling, and in the back of the shop was a small counter where two men were busy making drinks for customers.

I scanned the bookshelves of the small café, patiently waiting for my turn in line.

I spotted Amy Stephens' newest novel and my heart raced.

Sparkling pink and teal lettering adorned the cover, declaring a romantic comedy involving a precious pup—it was perfect.

Eagerly, I snatched it off the shelf and held it close to my chest like a priceless treasure as I approached the counter. I'm so in! Take my money.

"Next!" the man shouted from behind the counter.

At the sound of his gruff demand, I looked up. He was tall, with broad shoulders and a chiseled jawline that reminded me of one of the hunks in that romantic comedy Laura and I watched last year. He wore a red flannel shirt tucked into dark jeans. His name tag identified him as Cole.

"I'll take a mocha, hot please," I managed to squeak out, feeling my face flush.

“That’ll be four dollars.” His large calloused hand extended to collect the five-dollar bill. His eyes flicked over my outfit. “I don’t think I’ve seen you around here before.”

“Nope, brand new. Just checked into the lodge up the road.” I glanced around his store, taking in all of its charming details. “Can’t wait to see what all you have here.”

“Do you intend on paying for that?” he asked, pointing to the book clutched in my hand.

My palm hit my forehead. “Oh my God, of course. Here.” I handed him another twenty-dollar bill and motioned for him to keep the change. His face softened as he took it from me and immediately bellowed out, “Next!”

Okay, that was my cue to get the heck out of his way so he could tend to more customers. Message received. He must be the broody type.

As I waited for my drink to be ready, I opened my book and nestled back into the armchair. The pages depicted a romantic scene in a park, where two characters were slowly falling in love as they watched their dogs play together in the sunshine.

“Mocha!” the man yelled, and I made my way up to the counter to grab it and his eyes peered at me. Maybe they didn’t like outsiders. Hmm...

The first sip of coffee was always the best, and it didn’t disappoint. Once again, another small store beat Starbucks by a long shot.

Chapter Nineteen

Lane

My mother grinned from ear to ear as she took a few steps out into the sun.

She looked very much like the woman I remembered.

Her eyes sparkled as we walked toward the car.

She clapped her hands in joy, the wrinkles on her face deepening.

A warmth filled me, knowing How lucky was I to give my mother the Christmas she wanted in our hometown?

I pulled the car up to the nursing home entrance and loaded my mother's bag into the back seat. "Come on, let's get you settled in the front seat." I opened her door and helped her in the passenger seat. "Amesbury, here we come."

We drove for an hour, taking the more scenic route out of Sikita. Every time I looked over, she had a smile on her face. This was a breakout that she desperately needed. Her smile only got bigger with each passing mile.

The nurses in the nursing home kindly warned me about what to expect when I took care of my mother over the holidays.

The memories of her doctor's appointment when she received her diagnosis was still

fresh in my mind, and I remembered how he described every symptom she might succumb to due to her condition.

I spent months researching and consulting with her doctor.

That day she told me, “Giving up your life to take care of me isn't what I want.” The weight of her words hung heavy.

She knew how hard I worked. My journey to pass the bar exam, the years of long hours and sleepless nights I spent preparing for it.

Not using my degree would be detrimental to any future career, and she reminded me of that.

I was willing to let it all go to take care of the woman who gave up so much to take care of me.

Dad's playlist was bringing joy to this trip, a tribute to all the times we took trips to Missoula.

So many memories were embedded along with the songs playing, and by the looks of it, Mom agreed.

Like the time when Dad had to pee so bad and there wasn't a gas station for miles, so he pulled over and stepped behind a tree in a meadow.

Mom and I heard screaming, and then my father was running with his pants down, swatting at the air.

Turns out, there was a beehive above his head.

Mom made fun of him the rest of the trip after getting him some Benadryl.

We never did make it to our destination, instead we turned around and went home.

Dad felt so bad for ruining our trip to the zoo.

Truth be told, it wasn't about the places we went, but the time I got. As long as I was with them, I had fun.

My mother turned down the radio. "So, you've been there for a while now. How are you liking it? You never seemed like the big city type."

I looked over toward her, letting go of the steering wheel with my right hand to take hold of hers. "Honestly, it would be better if you were there. Walking around Times Square just isn't as fun when you are alone."

She smiled and pinched my cheek. "Oh, Lane, baby, you need to get a good woman. A man as amazing as you are shouldn't be lonely."

If only my mom knew about Jennifer. It wasn't like I could tell her because then she would spend the next few days trying to push us together, and that could be uncomfortable for my sassy assistant.

"Focusing on my career will always be lonely, but that's okay.

Someday, the woman of my dreams will say yes, and lonely I'll never be again."

I turned the radio back up, so she didn't pry into that subject any further, because if there was one thing I wasn't good at, it was lying to my mother. She could spot it a mile away.

As I rounded the corner, the Amesbury sign came into view and I took a right turn, approaching the town that held so many memories for us both. Being surrounded by her friends that she had known all her life might do her some good.

As we pulled into the lodge's lot, Mom couldn't wipe the smile off her face as I went around and helped her out of the vehicle.

“I honestly never thought I'd see this place again. I can still get around... but I'm slower.”

I wafted my hand at her and grabbed her bag from the back seat. She took off toward the front door, and I got there just in time to open it for her. “In you go.”

Carina's face split into a wide grin when she saw my mom.

“Leanne!” After a brief hug, Carina gushed about how long it had been since they last saw each other; they had known each other since elementary school.

Carina handed me the room key so I could get her bag into her room while they caught up.

Thankfully, it was on the first floor, close to the lobby, so she wouldn't have too much difficulty getting around.

When I returned, they were still talking, lost in conversation.

Mom released a yawn. “I'll stop gabbing now. Son, let me change out of my jammies and we can go grab a bite to eat.”

“Okay.”

I watched her silhouette disappear and looked around the lobby for Jennifer.

She must be out exploring. She didn't seem like the type to hang around in her room.

This town was amazing during the holidays, and I truly hoped she would enjoy herself.

Her parents put so much pressure on her, and she wanted to make them proud, but if they didn't see what an amazing woman she was, they were idiots.

If they couldn't appreciate her for who she was, then maybe she didn't need their approval after all.

Chapter Twenty

Jennifer

I reclined on the bed, immersed in Amy Stephens' novel, when my phone vibrated against the nightstand. Startled out of my trance, I saw that two hours had passed since I began reading. With a sigh, I picked up the phone and unlocked it.

Lane: Mom and I are going to the diner for dinner. Wanna come? No pressure.

I laid on my stomach, feet crossed at the ankles. There were apparently only two places to eat an actual meal in this town.

Me: My stomach says yes, but my brain wants to finish this book I grabbed at the café today.

The meet-cute was always the part I needed to read before committing to buying a book.

Amy was a professional at nailing the best of them.

I picked up the book and read another couple pages before my phone vibrated again.

No matter what, I needed to finish this by tomorrow midmorning so I could pick up another one from the café.

Lane: So you checked it out? Amazing, right? It reminds me of Coffee Chaos in a

way. A small part of the city in this small town.

I smiled and bit my lip. The café might be my favorite spot because of the coffee and books. Being a small town, I thought it would be a tiny selection, but it was quite extensive.

Me: The coffee was delish!!!! Guess I know where I'll be going every morning. The guy that works there was kinda off-putting, though.

Lane: If he was wearing flannel, then it must be Cole. He and his brother own the place. He's a good guy, just got a lot on his plate. Cut him some slack.

Once again, it slipped my mind that this was his hometown. He knew everyone. Heck, he and Cole probably played together when they were still in diapers.

Lane: If you want to join us, we will leave in five.

I put the phone down on my bed, grabbing my brush to get out any tangles, and then threw my hair up in a ponytail. There was no sense in changing since he already saw me in this. I threw on my winter coat, slipped my room key into my back pocket, and headed to the lobby.

As I rounded the corner, Lane and his mother were waiting.

"Mom, this is my friend Jennifer." His mom gave me a once-over.

"Nice to meet you. Glad you could join us."

We walked slowly down Main Street while his mother recounted stories about how the Hideout Diner used to be the place to be after every football game.

Lane heaved the weathered door open and ushered us inside.

The small booth seats were tucked in by the smudged windows, which looked out onto Main Street.

“I’m loving the checkered floors. So on par with a small town diner, right?” I picked up the menu and once I saw breakfast, my decision was made.

A young woman approached our table. “What can I get for you guys tonight?”

We all ordered the breakfast sampler, and then the conversation began. Leanne seemed very interested in me, and Lane looked scared.

“So, tell me about yourself, young lady. My son said you are the best assistant he's ever had...”

“I’m the only assistant he's ever had... but I'll take it as a compliment, anyway. There’s not much to tell. I live in the city, work my tail off, and love to read.”

Gosh, my life sounded so boring. No wonder I was still single. Leanne probably thought the same thing.

“Well, my son here needs to settle down. Find himself a good woman, so be sure to keep an eye out for him. I'm not getting any younger.”

“Mom, Jennifer doesn't need to know all about my personal life. Some things I'd like to keep private.”

The dynamic between Lane and his mom was amazing.

They had a strong and healthy relationship, and I was jealous.

A smile emerged. Didn't they say you can tell how a man is going to treat you by how he treated his mother?

Well, if that was the case, whoever ended up with Lane was going to be a lucky lady.

"Don't worry, Leanne. Lane has a trove of women in New York City to pick from..." I looked right at Lane and winked. He shook his head.

Not once did I show his mother my feelings for him. We both needed to be careful around her, especially when she was this adamant about him finding someone, but what mother wouldn't?

The waitress brought us our food, and I took a sip of my Dr. Pepper. "So, Leanne, what is one thing I absolutely need to do while I'm here?"

She smiled. "The square on Christmas. You think it's gorgeous now, but when the whole town gathers around and sings Christmas music, it's a sight for wonder. You won't find something like this in your big city."

I forgot she was a small-town girl through and through. "Alright, it's on my list. Once Lane described the town a bit to me, I've been doing research. I don't want to miss a single experience."

A tall woman with dark hair glided up behind Lane. I raised my chin and tapped the table twice with my index finger to get his attention. Who was this woman?

Chapter Twenty-One

Lane

Standing before me was Nicole Peters. I watched as tears welled up in her eyes. “I can't believe it's you.”

My throat tightened. “You look exactly the same.”

Her voice quivered. “I didn't think I'd ever see you again.”

“I didn't think I'd ever see you again.”

She stood there with her arms folded. I stood and touched her elbow and directed her away from our table. As we made our way through the tables, she glanced around, clearly uncomfortable, until we sat down at a faraway table.

“Do you remember the last time we saw each other?”

My throat tightened as memories of the disastrous evening flooded back to me. “I remember.”

We were sitting outside on the grass, surrounded by a garden my mother had been tending for years.

The sun was setting, and I could tell from the conversations we'd had that day that it would not work out between us—our perspectives weren't aligning, and I couldn't

take on another person's feelings right then.

“Listen, it's been years. Let's not worry about what happened then. How are you?”

“I've been okay.” She looked up at me and squared her shoulders. “I just need to tell you one thing. Back then, I never understood why you had to go to Harvard, but I understand now. You had to follow your dreams, and it was worth it—I'm so proud of you for doing it.”

“Thank you, Nicole.”

We used to be good friends before we started dating.

I smiled, my heart still loyal to the woman sitting with my mother, and I tried to quash the spark by quickly asking about her new job.

She lit up when telling me about how much she enjoyed working at the bakery around the corner and how moving back to Amesbury after her divorce had been a blessing in disguise for her son.

Nicole's face softened as she glanced at the booth where Jennifer was sitting, chatting with my mom. “Anyway, I must get home to my son. Would you like to grab dinner and catch up while you're in town?”

“Sorry, I'll be busy with my mother and Jennifer. It's her first time here for the holidays. So many things to do.”

Nicole bit her lip. “She's a lucky girl. Hopefully, she knows that.”

I slinked back to the booth beside my mother, who shot me a sidelong glance. She'd always been fond of Nicole, and if the choice was hers, she'd marry me off without

delay. Thankfully, this wasn't her call to make.

Jennifer kept her head down. My mom shot her a quick glance before standing up and giving me a kiss on the cheek. "Carter is going to walk me to the lodge. You guys stay here for as long as you want. This old woman needs some rest."

"Sorry about that. Small town means running into ex-girlfriends." Jennifer wouldn't make eye contact with me. What was going on? Surely, she couldn't be upset.

After leaving the money to cover our meal, Jennifer and I stepped out of the cozy diner into the bitter air.

My teeth chattered as I pulled my scarf up over my neck and tugged my coat tighter around my body.

We took slow steps as we walked down Main Street.

The snow was coming down heavily now, and the Christmas decorations in the shop windows were barely visible.

"What is your favorite part of growing up in this town?"

"The community." I smiled fondly, recalling the abundance of potlucks we attended over the years. "It's astounding to witness the power of a small, close-knit community come together whenever someone needs something."

The lodge came into view and then our rooms. My gaze lingered on her face. I wanted so badly to reach out to her, to confess my feelings and get it out in the open. But I couldn't move, not an inch, totally paralyzed.

"Good night." I turned toward my door and walked inside like a coward.

Just tell her how you feel...

Chapter Twenty-Two

Jennifer

I was back in my room and couldn't breathe. My hand went to my forehead, and I paced around my room. He was just in the next room, and I struggled to understand why I was so upset about his ex-girlfriend showing up while we were having dinner. I was being ridiculous.

So I sent a text to my best friend, needing someone to talk to.

She called me a few minutes later. I tried to explain, but the words escaped me.

I wished for the love that was shown in movies.

I wanted to open my heart again, to let someone in and to live without fear, without hesitation.

I had a choice to make, to take a chance and find the courage or make things abundantly clear that something cannot happen between Lane and me.

I took a deep breath and leaned my head against the window.

The fireplace sounded like the perfect place, so I grabbed my book and a throw blanket and headed downstairs.

There was nothing like a good book to put my mind into perspective.

I curled up on the corner of the couch nearest the crackling fire, my paperback resting on my lap.

There was only a hundred pages left. My heart ached as I read, wishing that life would replicate the unaccomplished perfection of the romance I was immersed in.

Every page whispered of an ideal man who did not exist in reality.

About thirty minutes later, Lane shuffled down the stairs. He was wearing gray sweatpants that hung low on his hips, and his hands were tucked into the pockets. When he saw me, he stopped short in surprise.

“Hey, I didn't think you'd be down here,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck. “Didn't mean to bother you. The fireplace is a great place to come when I can't sleep.” He slowly lowered himself onto the opposite end of the couch, gazing into the fireplace.

I opened the book, desperately trying to focus on the words in front of me. “Thank you for dinner tonight. I'm so glad I decided to take a break from city life and come here for a change of scenery.”

His face softened. “It has been nice having you around outside of work.”

His gaze moved slowly toward my lips and he moved closer. His head tilted slightly and our lips met. A split second after our lips touched, I yanked away with a gasp. My fingertips hovered near my mouth. His face had turned a deep shade of red as he glanced away.

“I'm sorry, I shouldn't have done that. You've been clear, but then everything besides your words tells me that you feel this... There's just something about you that draws me in.”

“Listen, I'll admit it, and you are a wonderful man, but neither of us can afford to screw up our careers. Like you've said, you worked too hard to get where you are, and to jeopardize that for me, I won't allow it.”

I picked up my book and rose, the book held close to my chest like a shield.

“We should both head up and get some rest,” I said, avoiding his gaze.

I took the stairs two at a time, unable to contain the whirlwind of emotions ricocheting through me as I heard his footfalls below.

My room door closed, and my lips still tingled from our kiss.

My heart raced as I dialed Laura's number. No matter the hour, she was always my go-to confidant. When she answered with her usual bright greeting, I blurted out, “I have some tea...”

An excited gasp came through the phone line. “Dish!”

“Lane kissed me.”

“Girl, I knew this would happen. I warned you before about the small towns—why didn't you listen?”

I stared at the bed, picturing his soft, warm lips pressed against mine. “It doesn't matter. How can I ever go back to work like nothing happened and act like everything is normal after feeling that? After tasting his kiss? Those sweet, luscious lips...”

“Come on! I know you too well. You're obviously head over heels for this guy, but you can't seem to let yourself fall for him. He got into a bar brawl defending your honor and now took you away for Christmas? The way he's showing you how much

he cares is pretty clear!”

“It really isn't that simple. You know why.”

“Actually, it is. New York City is huge and you could find another job if it came down to that. Are you telling me that finding the love of your life isn't more important than your job?”

She had a point. Even though I loved my job, the city was big and it might take me a bit of time, but I could find something.

“Plus, he's a partner. Trust me when I say they will not fire either of you. Now go to sleep. My mother has me getting up at the crack of dawn to go thrift shopping. Night.”

The age-old question loomed through my mind: Is Lane worth putting it all on the line for?

Chapter Twenty-Three

Lane

My mother's words echoed in my mind—once the right girl came along, nothing else mattered. And now, as I laid there wondering how I could prove to her she was worth giving up the partnership for. I had the whole trip to make her realize it was worth the leap.

“Are you ready? It's Christmas Eve. The diner is going to be packed.”

I smile and take her hand. “Let's go.”

I held the doors open for her as we walked inside the diner. We snagged one of the last booths and ordered the hamburger basket. I tried not to let on that something was amiss between Jennifer and I, but my mother's gaze lingered.

“Just say it!” She set down her steaming cup of coffee. Biting the inside of my lip, I looked away. “I... I don't know how to tell this girl how I feel. There are so many things I want to say but?—”

She took both of my hands in hers. “Jennifer is smitten with you.

It's written across her face. I can see that you feel the same way about her, too.

I know it's complicated because of your professional relationship, but finding someone who shares your passion, now that's priceless.” She paused for a moment

and then added, "Don't let her go without fighting for her."

The waitress set our plates down in front of us, and I ate my food, barely tasting it as I ran through the things I had to say. I was done making excuses on why we couldn't be together, but I didn't know how she would take it.

"I gotta go, Mama." I leaped up from the table and rushed out the door and could see Jennifer coming down the sidewalk.

My legs felt like lead weights as I stumbled toward her, and then my arms finally fell around her.

Her body tensed at first, but then she let out a little sigh before I whispered, "Please give me five minutes." I looked into her eyes.

Her face softened, and I brushed a few strands of hair behind her ear and then took her inside Caffeinated Bliss.

"You have said that we can't pursue this because of work, but... I will give up my job for you. That's how deep I know you are the woman for me. If giving up the firm is what it takes to be with you... then that's what I'll do."

Tears streamed down her cheeks and her lip quivered as she gazed at me. "You can't give up your career for me, Lane."

I reached out and cupped my hands around hers. "You aren't asking me to... If the only thing standing in our way is my job, then I'll take it out of the equation." My voice was husky with determination, and I slashed my hand through the air for emphasis. "Easy, done."

"But this is insane. Why don't we wait until we get back to New York City before

deciding? You could be more rational by then, and I'd hate for us to make a rash decision."

Her stubbornness was palpable, but I knew she wouldn't budge. "Okay. Let's compromise. When we get back to the city, I'll tell HR about us, and if they push the issue, I'll resign."

After ten years of loyal service, it would be an injustice to demand that she give up the job she worked so hard for.

My law degree gave me the opportunity to practice anywhere.

If I wanted her by my side, I needed to make a change.

I'd find a different firm willing to take me on.

She was worth it. I grabbed her shoulders and looked into her eyes, willing her to understand my words.

"Understand how much I care about you, Jennifer Jenkins. Nothing in this world matters more to me than your happiness." With a single twitch of my finger, I pulled her closer and our lips met.

"Now, let's go get my mother from the diner."

My mom was waiting for us right where I left her. And when she saw us together, a smile broke out. "Let's head back."

Finally, we returned to the lodge. The lobby had baked cookies. "Help yourself! I made plenty," Carina yelled from the lobby desk.

This Christmas Eve was a special one. I embraced my heart and went for it with Jennifer and there was no turning back.

I intended to show her just how amazing she truly was and how a woman like her should be treated.

All my worries went out the window because even if HR had a problem with us being together, they would lose a partner.

Jennifer Jenkins was the woman for me.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Jennifer

It's Christmas . I called Laura to wish her a merry Christmas and share Lane's confession that he would resign if HR pushed the issue. She just kept saying I told you so. "Whatever I have to go." I pulled on my festive holiday sweater and hurried downstairs.

Lane stood out like a beacon. "Good morning. Carina is going to let us use the kitchen to make a meal. Wanna help?"

"I'd love to."

I followed him to the kitchen, where he gathered ingredients. He chopped onions, then cracked fresh eggs into a bowl with a flick of his wrist. As I watched, he fried bacon in one pan, simmered gravy in another, and mixed up a big batch of cinnamon rolls in between.

"Let's take this out there. Mom should be down and Carina is going to join us."

We gathered around table. I placed my gift on the table and Lane gingerly untied the gold ribbon.

He peeled back the wrapping paper, revealing an old wooden picture frame holding a photograph of his father.

His eyes stayed fixed on the image as he ran his thumb over the edges of the worn frame.

His breathing slowed, and a tear escaped his eye.

“Your mom said that she had some old photos of the two of you together, but some were so faded that I got them restored.”

Slowly, he looked up, tears still streaming down his face. “Thank you.”

Gently setting down the photo on the table, Lane walked across the room and came back, holding a small box wrapped in blue paper and tied with a white bow. “This is for you.”

I opened the lid to reveal a slip of paper with an activation code for the EZ Planning software. Joy burst through me as I realized what it was. How did he know?

“I heard you talking about it with Laura.”

I wrapped him in my arms, pressing my face against his shoulder.

“As much as I’d love to stay inside, the parade is starting soon. We should head out.”

As we walked toward the town square, the streets were alive with families.

The parade began with the thump-thumping of drums and the blaring of trombones, the sound rippling through the air like a wave.

The marching band was decked out in their red and white uniforms adorned with shiny gold buttons, and they strutted proudly past the crowd.

Next came the small floats, festooned with lights and glitter.

Colorful figures danced on each float—miniature Christmas trees, reindeer, snowmen, and elves—all waving cheerily to the roaring crowd as they passed by.

As we walked away from the parade, I couldn't help but feel a sense of hope and optimism.

Maybe things would work out between Lane and me.

Maybe the firm wouldn't push the issue and we could both keep our jobs.

However, one other thought crossed my mind.

What if he didn't want to stay in New York City?

After all, he only agreed to a one-year contract.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Lane

As I helped Mom out of the car in front of Home Away from Home , all the walking we had done in the past few days had gotten to her and she was stiff.

I blinked the tears away, trying to be strong for my mom.

I hated to see her hurting like this, knowing I had to drive away and leave her here after spending Christmas together.

My mom reached out and grabbed my hand. "It's okay, love. We'll have plenty more Christmases together."

I smiled, but it was a weak effort. "I love you."

"I love you, too," she replied. "Thank you for taking me home. It was the best Christmas I've ever had. Don't forget to bring Jennifer back next time. Although, I think y'all will be married before this time next year."

My heart felt like it was breaking in two as I watched her go.

The hour drive back to Amesbury felt like forever. Tomorrow, we would take the bus to the airport and then begin our journey back to New York City. Would our relationship hold up once back in front of prying eyes?

As the sun set that evening, I held Jennifer close. “I want to be with you. I want it all. Marriage, kids, a dog, a white picket fence. All of it with you. My job means nothing if I have to spend every day alone.”

Jennifer smiled, her eyes misting up as she looked into mine. She reached out and took my hands in hers, squeezing them gently. “I want that too.”

Page 26

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 8:07 am

Jennifer

Seven months later...

Laura and I got our nails done before Lane and I went out to dinner. We were both in need of a little pampering.

“Do you have something you need to tell me? I’m getting jealous of how happy you are right now.”

She laughed. “No, we will talk about it tomorrow. Let’s focus on your hot date tonight.”

Lane and I had taken things to the next level.

Laura didn’t like that I moved out, but it was our next step and honestly things couldn’t be greater between us.

Once the firm got over themselves and Lane told them that if it came down to it, he would go to another firm so I could keep my job, they gave us their blessing but made us sign some paperwork so they weren’t liable for any sexual harassment lawsuits down the line.

They didn’t understand that what Lane and I had was special.

It only came across once in a lifetime, and we weren’t giving that up over something as idiotic as a job.

Work had been so crazy busy and his year at the company was almost up.

Tonight, we would need to talk about what his plans were for the future.

Did he plan on signing another contract with them?

His mother wasn't doing so well, and as close as they were, I wouldn't be surprised if he opted to move back to Amesbury, and I wouldn't hesitate to go with him.

Sometimes sacrifices were necessary to get the result you wanted out of life and now that I had a man like Lane in mine, something as simple as moving would not stop me.

"All done," the lady said, and my phone buzzed against the desk.

Lane: I'm outside. No rush.

A smile tugged at the corners of my mouth and Laura was still getting hers worked on. "He's here. You gonna be okay?"

"Girl, it's not my first rodeo. Get out of here and go have fun with your man."

I paid the receptionist and walked outside, slipping into his car and giving him a quick kiss. "So where are we going?"

"Well, seeing as how it's the one-year anniversary of when we met... somewhere special."

He took off down the street until we arrived at LA VI, a fancy Italian restaurant. My heart fluttered as he pulled into the side parking lot. How did I get so lucky? As we were seated, candles were lit.

Lane took my hands in his and looked into my eyes. “Laura, I can't believe it's been a year since I laid eyes on you. I love you and I want to spend the rest of my life with you.”

No way! He is not!

Tears burned my eyes, but I tried my hardest to keep them at bay. The man of my dreams was kneeling in front of me, my hand in his, and he was going to ask. I never thought this day would come. Finding your person was hard work, but now that I had him, I would never let go.

Lane reached into his pocket and pulled out a small velvet box. “Will you marry me?”

I nodded, unable to speak through my tears as he slipped the beautiful ring onto my finger. The restaurant erupted in applause. All I could do was look into his eyes and then at the ring. “Who knew that you coming to the city would change both of our lives?”