



Jessa & Jaxon (What Happens In Vegas #1)

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Category: Romance

Description: I pride myself on being smart and sensible.

But one drunken night in Vegas proves otherwise. Waking up with a ring on my finger is bad enough.

Waking up next to my brother's best friend, Jaxon Jamison is a nightmare. He's arrogant, possessive, and too damn good-looking for his own good.

A man who plays to win, and right now, he's playing for me. When I demand an annulment.

He smirks and says, "Not happening, JJ." Fighting him should be easy.

Ignoring the attraction simmering between us should be even easier.

But Jaxon is a strategist, and I'm starting to suspect that marrying me wasn't a drunken mistake at all.

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Vegas never quiets down, does it?

Even after three full days of bottomless mimosas, poolside cocktails and afternoons of Meesha dragging us through boutique after boutique, the city still hums with relentless energy.

Slot machines chime, laughter spills from every direction, and somewhere nearby, the deep bass of a club pulses through the walls like a second heartbeat.

Though Meesha's wedding is still two months away, we decided to celebrate her bachelorette during spring break while I'm off from school. Four days in Vegas is the perfect escape from lesson plans, mediating recess rivalries, and the never-ending snowstorms back in Winter Bay.

I swirl my drink, watching the deep red hue. The first sip confirms it needs more cranberry juice.

"Jessa! You're not even listening."

Meesha's voice cuts through my musings, her perfectly manicured finger tapping impatiently on the rim of her martini glass.

"Fine, you caught me." I smile at my best friend since kindergarten. "What about the wedding?"

Meesha rolls her eyes dramatically, and I meet her look with one of my own. Twenty-one years of friendship means Meesha has learned to deal with my quirks.

“What? I multitask,” I say unapologetically, straightening the cocktail napkin under my glass.

She lets out an exaggerated sigh. “You are so lucky I love you.”

Meesha’s all spontaneity and surface sparkle, while I assess and execute. She brings the sparkle; I bring the structure. It’s why we haven’t killed each other.

“I love you, too.”

Something flickers across her face. My teacher-radar immediately pings.

“Do you girls think Connor and I are moving too fast?”

“Fast? You’ve been together since you were sixteen?” Jasmine, our third musketeer, glances up from her phone.

Her perceptiveness never missed a shift in mood, even when she seemed absorbed in something else. It’s the same intuition that’s made her five romance novels shoot to the bestseller lists. She understands people’s desires better than they understand themselves.

Meesha and I met Jasmine during our freshman year of college when we discovered we were dating the same guy.

Instead of fighting, we teamed up and broke into Chad’s dorm room, covered his entire floor with a layer of uncooked rice mixed with glitter and corn syrup, replaced his shampoo with pink hair dye, and plastered every surface with printed screenshots of his three-timing text messages.

The campus security footage of him discovering our handiwork mysteriously made

its way to the university's social media page, courtesy of Jasmine's roommate in the IT department. We'd earned a disciplinary warning and a lifetime sisterhood in one fell swoop.

"But he's the only man I've ever kissed." Meesha's voice drops to a whisper in the noisy restaurant. "The only one I've ever..." She doesn't finish and doesn't need to. "I can't help feeling like I'm missing out on something."

Jasmine and I exchange glances.

I want to grab Meesha's shoulders, shake sense into her.

I've watched them grow together. Connor bringing her soup during the weeks leading up to her nursing exam, holding her hand at her grandmother's funeral, looking at her like she hung the moon and stars.

The devotion between them is what other people dream about—what I secretly dream about.

"That's ridiculous, Meesha. You've found what most people spend their lives searching for. Don't throw it away on a whim."

"Have you told him how you feel?" Jasmine asks.

"It was hard enough admitting it to you two." Meesha blinks rapidly, fighting tears. "I don't want him to think I'm ungrateful. I love him, I do. I just—" She swallows hard. "I wonder if I should test the waters before diving all the way in."

How can anyone want to test other waters when they've found their ocean? Isn't that the dream? To have someone who loves you so completely they'd call just to hear your voice, who looks at you like you're the answer to every question they've ever

asked?

The vibration of Meesha's phone cuts through my thoughts. Her screen lights up with Connor's smiling face.

"It's him," she murmurs, already reaching for it. "I should take this."

She slides from her chair, phone pressed to her ear, voice instantly brightening as she weaves through the crowd. "Hey, baby..."

I turn to Jasmine. "Do you think she's okay?"

Jasmine's brow furrows as she gathers her sleek leather purse. "I'm not sure, but I hope she doesn't do anything to mess up her relationship."

"I'll be in the suite!" Meesha calls over her shoulder, already halfway to the elevators. "Connor wants to see the room!"

Before we can respond, she's gone, leaving behind the weight of her confession.

"So," Jasmine says, smoothly steering us away from the emotional iceberg we narrowly avoided, "I've booked that contemporary art tour for this evening. You want to join?"

I wrinkle my nose. "Hard pass. I'm on vacation from educational activities."

An hour later, I'm freshly showered and wearing a thigh-length dress. Meesha's still locked in her room and Jasmine's gone off to the exhibit.

It's our last night in Vegas, and after three days of partying, spa treatments, and excursions, this isn't how I pictured it ending.

Some bachelorette weekend.

Boredom drives me back downstairs to the hotel bar. The massive space buzzes with energy. Laughter and conversation flow as freely as the alcohol. I claim one of the empty bar stools and order a Cosmo.

“That’s how you make a proper Cosmopolitan,” I say after taking my first sip.

I let my eyes wander, taking in the scene. A couple laughs drunkenly near the corner, their heads tilted close together. A woman in a sequined dress gesture wildly to her friend, her oversized margarita sloshing dangerously close to the edge of the glass.

And then I see him.

Jaxon Jamison.

My brother’s best friend. My personal nemesis.

If arrogance were a currency, he’d be a Trillionaire. If there was a way to annoy me, he finds it, perfects it, and patents it.

Jaxon spent most of my teenage years tormenting me with his stupid nicknames. And yet, somehow, he’s grown into that cockiness, wearing it like a finely tailored suit.

He is laughing at something the sleek blonde beside him said, his hazel eyes crinkling at the corners. The blonde is stunning—red lips, perfect hair, manicured nails resting on his forearm. She leans in, pressing her breasts closer to him.

Something unexpected twists in my chest. Not jealousy. Just... irritation. Annoyance. That’s all.

I force my gaze back to my drink, willing the tightness in my chest to disappear. I hope—no, pray—he won't notice me.

A strange heat prickles at my skin, and it has nothing to do with the alcohol. I tell myself not to look. Will myself to focus on literally anything else.

But the pull is irresistible.

When I finally cave, my gaze collides with his. Hazel eyes lock onto mine, amusement flickering in their depths. My pulse betrays me, hammering against my ribs as his lips curl, like he can hear the effect he has on me.

Jaxon gets up from his seat and saunters toward me, his long legs eating up the distance with ease. I immediately flag down the bartender.

“Check, please.”

Too late. Jaxon stands beside me. The faint spicy scent of his cologne hits me, and I curse the throbbing between my legs.

“JJ,” he drawls, his deep voice wrapping around the nickname I hate as easily as a silk scarf.

“Jaxon.” I make my voice as cold as the condensation dripping down my glass.

His eyes flick around the room, assessing. “Where are Jasmine and Meesha?”

“None of your business,” I snap, tilting my chin higher, hoping to shut this down.

Jaxon chuckles, the sound sending heat licking up my spine.

“In that case,” he says smoothly, “I’ll keep you company.”

Without waiting for my invitation, he drags a stool closer to mine with annoying self-assuredness, shedding his blazer and rolling up the sleeves of his crisp blue button-down like he has all the time in the world.

“Did I ask you to sit here?”

“No,” he says.

“Great. Then you can take your over-inflated ego back to your table.”

“I’m waiting for Antonio,” he says, like I give a damn. “He’s running late.”

Antonio is my brother’s other best friend. The two of them, along with Jaxon, run a multimillion-dollar gaming company.

“This music is terrible,” I mutter under my breath as some EDM remix comes on.

“Holding out for Conway Twitty, JJ?”

“Only if you promise not to cry this time.”

“It was George Strait, and I was twelve,” he says stiffly. “And Mom had just died.”

I glance at him, surprised. “Right. Sorry.”

“She used to sing country songs while cooking,” he adds, softer now. “Still can’t hear Amarillo by Morning without thinking of her.”

Sometimes I forget the cocky tech mogul and my childhood nemesis was a boy who

lost his mother too soon. And for reasons I don't care to examine, it sits with me longer than it should.

I take another sip of my drink and feel the heat of a glare searing into the side of my face. The blonde. She is still at their table, watching me, her red lips pressed into a thin, irritated line.

"Your friend looks like she wants to stab me." I set my glass down. "Should I be worried?"

Jaxon follows my gaze, then lets out a low, amused laugh. His eyes return to mine with an intensity that makes my skin tingle.

"You have nothing to worry about."

"She's mentally plotting my demise."

"I met her ten minutes ago." He dismisses her with a casual wave of his hand, then leans in slightly. "So tell me, JJ. What have you been up to in Sin City?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

"Actually," he says, leaning closer, "I would."

The next hour passes faster than I expect. Maybe it's the alcohol, or maybe it's the fact that Jaxon's "civil" mode isn't half bad. We talk about Vegas, politics and a weird story about a guy who did plastic surgery to become a dog.

Somewhere along the way, I feel myself relaxing and laughing more than I should. The Jaxon I know—the arrogant, insufferable one—is still there, but he isn't as unbearable tonight.

“Let’s play a game,” I announce. “We are in Vegas, after all.”

Jaxon raises a brow. “What kind of game?”

“Never Have I Ever.”

I dig through my bag for my phone, struggling to grab it as it keeps slipping through my fingers. Finally, I pull it out like unearthed treasure.

“Okay, here we go. I’ll read the statements, and if you’ve done it, you drink. Got it?”

“Game on,” he says, leaning back.

I scroll through the list and read the first one.

“Never have I ever gone streaking.”

Jaxon laughs and takes a drink.

My jaw drops. “You? Streaking? You’re too uptight for that.”

“College,” he says with a shrug. “That’s all you’re getting.”

“Boring,” I tease, but I can’t hide my amusement.

“Next,” he says, clearly eager to move on.

I click again. “Never have I ever had a one-night stand.”

Jaxon raises his glass, his smile turning cocky.

I hesitate for a beat, then raise mine too.

Jaxon's glass pauses in mid-air, his hazel eyes darkening. "You?"

"What about that surprises you?"

One-night stands are safe. Physical without emotional entanglement. No expectations, no disappointments, no handing over the keys to my heart only to watch someone carelessly drop them down a drain. Just pleasure without the pain that inevitably follows.

His jaw tenses. "Didn't think you were the type."

"What type is that, Jaxon?"

His gaze locked onto mine like he's trying to figure out if I'm bluffing. "Who was he?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

There's a flicker of irritation in his expression before he masks it. "Nah. Doesn't matter anymore."

I giggle, scrolling for the next statement.

"Never have I ever slept with someone twice my age."

Jaxon arches a brow. "If I didn't know any better, I'd think you were targeting me."

"I'm not!" I say, laughing. "Drink up."

The game continues, the drinks flowing as easily as the laughter. We both loosen up more than I expect, leaning into the conversation and forgetting any pretense of civility.

At one point, I catch myself watching his lips as he speaks, but look away before he notices.

“Never...” I slur, holding back laughter, “have I ever... married.”

We lock eyes for a moment before bursting into uncontrollable laughter, the kind that makes my stomach hurt.

Jaxon leans forward, resting his elbows on the bar as he tries to catch his breath. “We’ve got one shot left each. Who’s winning?”

“I don’t know, but maybe we could do something about this last one,” I say, half-laughing, half-slurring. “Then we’d both win.”

Jaxon’s smile doesn’t fade, but the air becomes darker, more dangerous. “Careful what you suggest, JJ.”

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I pace the polished Italian marble floors of my penthouse condo, phone in hand, trying JJ's number again. The late afternoon sun pours through the floor-to-ceiling windows, splashing golden light across the minimalist furniture.

The call goes straight to voicemail. The sound of her voice on the recording twists something in my gut every time. I'm not used to being ignored.

Control isn't just something I'm used to—it's the foundation of my success. People don't ignore my calls. They wait for them. They chase them. They need them.

Every obstacle in my life has eventually yielded to my careful planning and strategic execution. Business rivals, market challenges, technical hurdles—I've overcome them all by identifying the variables and manipulating them to my advantage.

It is a system that has never failed me. Until now. Until JJ.

I walk to the window where the city sprawls below. The swirling snow catches the sun's golden rays like glittering confetti. My tired eyes, disheveled hair, designer suit wrinkled from the long flight home reflect back at me through the glass.

In the month since Vegas, I've been throwing myself into work, traveling across Europe with Antonio to scout locations for our new office. Board meetings, market analyzes, property viewings, but none of it keeps JJ from my thoughts.

Her defiant chin tilt when she's gearing up for a fight haunts me across continents. I should have been focused on mergers and market trends. Instead, I was in meetings, wondering if she was thinking about me with the same restless urgency.

My fingers trace the cool glass of the window, leaving a momentary print against the backdrop of the snow globe world outside. JAK Innovations is thriving, our latest game release breaking sales records. We are on track to triple our revenue this year.

Yet here I stand in my multi-million-dollar condo, feeling completely powerless because one elementary school teacher won't take my calls. Success means nothing if I can't have her.

What good is conquering the world if she isn't mine to share it with?

After years of watching from afar, of suppressing my feelings because of her brother's friendship and my respect for her parents, JJ is legally mine. The thought stuns me sometimes.

The wild-haired girl who once put superglue on my gaming controller.

The sharp-tongued teenager who called me an "egotistical asshat" at my graduation party.

The stunning woman who married with me in Vegas, her body pressed against mine, looking up with those dark eyes that have haunted me since I was twelve years old was finally mine.

My wife.

The word sinks into my bones, a claim as real as the ink on our marriage certificate. She is mine. Mine on paper, but not yet where it matters.

I didn't take advantage of her on our wedding night in Vegas.

JJ deserves more than a drunken encounter.

When I finally have her, she won't be drunk.

She won't be caught up in alcohol-laced laughter and impulsive decisions.

She will be fully aware, fully present. Sober enough to feel everything and to know it is me making her fall apart.

I intend to transform this Vegas union into the relationship I've wanted since before I even understood what wanting her meant. I will make JJ my wife in every sense of the word.

Running a hand through my hair, I steel myself for the confrontation ahead. Outside, snow continues to fall, transforming the city into something softer.

I didn't build JAK Innovations from a dorm room project into a billion-dollar company by backing down from challenges. And JJ has always been my most intriguing provocation.

Tonight, my usual rituals fail to comfort me. The hot shower does nothing to clear my head. Neither does the shave. I pull on a cashmere sweater and tailored pants, but the tension in my body remains.

JJ is still ignoring me. That ends tonight.

By the time I pull into her apartment building, the snow is falling harder, accumulating on the car's sleek black surface. The building is one of those modest red-brick walkups you find all over Winter Bay.

As I scan the parking lot, a fresh wave of frustration hits me. The Mercedes Benz Kamal gifted JJ on her birthday isn't here.

I check my watch, then lean back against the headrest and exhale slowly, pulling out my phone. Emails, market reports and an acquisition proposal wait for my attention. If I'm going to wait, I'll at least use the time productively.

An hour later, headlights cut through the storm, pulling my attention away from my screen.

I straighten in my seat as her car glides into an open space. JJ steps out and I forget everything else.

She's a walking contradiction. Soft but sharp, delicate but untouchable. Snowflakes catch in her thick curls, the dark coils framing her face and making her look deceptively angelic for a woman who's spent the better part of a decade driving me insane.

Her brown skin glows against the cold, her cheeks flushed from the wind, and her full lips—lips I've spent too many nights jerking off to—are pressed into an irritated line as she navigates opening her trunk.

My body moves on instinct, and I'm out of the car before I even make the conscious decision to approach her.

"I've got it," I state, taking the bags from her trunk before she can protest.

"Jaxon!" Her voice cuts through the howling wind. "You're stalking me now?"

"Me? Never," I reply easily, adjusting my grip on the paper bags already dampening from the heavy, wet flakes.

"What are you doing here?"

She pulls her light, inadequate spring jacket tighter around herself and shivers visibly, snowflakes clinging to her eyelashes and melting on her cheeks.

God help me, I want to kiss her just to shut her up.

“Well, I did try calling,” I explain, my breath forming clouds between us, “but I think your phone doesn’t work. I’m here to do a welfare check and to drop off a new device.”

JJ rolls her eyes, her brown skin flushed and her small button nose tinged pink from the cold. A particularly strong gust of wind whips her coils across her face, and she impatiently tucks them back. She glances down at the bags in my hands and makes a move to grab them. I take a step back.

“Give me my bags.” Her voice rises to compete with the wind. “I’m perfectly capable of carrying them.”

She lunges, her fingers latching onto the bag with a death grip, her breath coming out in short, frustrated puffs.

I don’t budge. Of course she fights me on this—she fights me on everything.

“Really, JJ?” My voice is calm, amused, but inside I’m aching to pin her against the nearest surface and bury myself inside her.

She glares up at me, breathless, stunningly furious.

“Let go,” she demands.

I take a step closer, forcing her to tilt her chin higher to keep glaring at me.

“No.”

She exhales, muttering something under her breath that sounds a lot like “egotistical jackass.”

“Careful, wife. That almost sounded affectionate.”

She rolls her eyes again, angry but smart enough not to argue further in the worsening weather. Snow is piling up against the parked cars, unusual drifts forming in the corner of the lot.

She closes her trunk with force, but the sound is muffled by the thickening snowfall. After retrieving her purse and computer bag from the back seat, she locks her car with a beep.

Before I can take a step, a sickening crack rips through the air. A split second later, an explosion of snapping wood and crushing metal.

JJ jerks back, eyes wide. I turn in time to see a massive pine tree atop my brand new car, crushing the hood.

“Holy shit!”

“Your car,” JJ breathes.

A chill that has nothing to do with the weather runs through me. If I’d still been sitting in the car waiting for her, I’d be dead right now. The tree had completely flattened the front half of the vehicle.

Fate has a strange way of intervening. If JJ had taken my calls, I wouldn’t be here. If I hadn’t gotten out to help her with the groceries...

“Looks like I’m not going anywhere for a while,” I say, keeping my voice even.

“Perfect,” JJ’s voice comes through the gloom, dripping with sarcasm. “Just perfect.”

Without another word, she turns and marches toward the building’s entrance, her boots leaving distinct impressions in the fresh snow. I follow steadily behind her, grocery bags secure in my grip, watching as she punches the elevator button with unnecessary force.

“So, Mrs. Jamison, why have you been ignoring my calls?” I ask as we step into the elevator.

The elevator doors slide shut with a soft ping, sealing us inside. The space feels smaller than it should, the scent of jasmine and stubbornness filling the air.

“It’s Miss Smith,” she snaps. “And unlike you, I don’t have endless hours to sit around counting my millions. Some of us have real jobs.”

She crosses her arms, tilting her chin up like she’s daring me to challenge her.

The jab is so quintessentially JJ that I almost laugh.

She knows better. She saw me, Kamal, and Antonio build JAK from scratch, witnessed the all-nighters and the failures before the success.

But JJ’s always had this talent for finding exactly what will get under my skin, whether she believes it or not.

“Right. Fifth-grade spelling tests definitely outweigh a legally binding marriage.”

I step closer, deliberately crowding her. “And for the record, it’s billions, not

millions.”

She rolls her eyes, an expression I’ve seen directed at me countless times over the years. “Whatever. I don’t care about your net worth.”

“You should. It’s partially yours now.”

That stops her cold. “What?”

“Our State is a community property state,” I explain, enjoying her momentary speechlessness. “Anything acquired during the marriage is considered joint property. Technically, you own half of whatever I’ve earned since Vegas.”

Her face pales, then flushes. “That’s—I don’t want your money, Jaxon.”

“I know.” And I do know. JJ has never been impressed by wealth. It’s one of the things that has always fascinated me about her. “But it’s a complication we need to address, along with several others.”

“Please, let’s not discuss this here.”

“That’s fair,” I concede, masking my satisfaction.

JJ thinks she’s winning this battle. Let her.

I don’t chase victories. I construct them. Brick by brick, until my opponent is standing in the middle of the empire I built around them, realizing they were mine all along.

When we reach the fourth floor, she leads the way down the carpeted hallway. At her apartment door, she hesitates. I see the debate playing across her expressive face. She

is trying to formulate a plan to get rid of me.

Her shoulders finally slump in defeat as she unlocks the door. “Come in,” she says. “The kitchen is that way.” She points toward an archway to the right. “You can put the bags down in there.”

She locks the door behind us and arms her security alarm. I kick off my boots and carry the groceries into the kitchen and set them down, taking in my surroundings. The countertops are pristine quartz, gleaming under pendant lights. A single coffee mug sits in the sink.

Her living area is modern and cozy with neutral colors. The sectional sofa is white leather, inviting despite its sleek design, and a thick cream rug lies in front of it. Photographs of her family and past students adorn the walls. A huge television hangs above an electric fireplace.

“You can have a seat while I put the groceries away,” she says from behind me.

“Do you need any help?” I offer, watching as she unpacks a carton of eggs.

“No,” she replies curtly, not looking up. “Things will move faster if I do it myself.”

The message is clear. She wants distance between us, even in this small way.

I shrug, remove my snow-dampened coat and settle onto her sofa. Through the window, I can see fat flakes swirling in hypnotic patterns against the darkening sky.

About fifteen minutes later—during which I hear every cabinet open and close, every rustle of paper bags being folded—she finally emerges and sits on the opposite end of the sofa, as far from me as possible while still occupying the same piece of furniture.

I watch her closely, taking in every subtle gesture. Her hair is now tied back at her nape, revealing the delicate curve of her neck. She looks as beautiful as ever, possibly more so. She always does. My eyes drift to her lips, full and pursed in thought.

“Ready to talk?” I ask.

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I fold my legs underneath me and sigh, feeling the weight of my bad decisions pressing down on me. I am acutely aware of Jaxon's intense gaze following my every movement.

"Listen," I begin, keeping my voice reasonable. "What we did was a stupid, drunken mistake. We don't need to make it a bigger deal than it is."

I move my hands as I speak, needing to physically punctuate each point, as if the gestures can somehow make him understand.

"We can annul the marriage quickly and never speak of the incident again. We can get on with our lives and marry the people we love."

I smile at him, hoping to convey this solution as perfectly sensible. The storm intensifies outside, but it is nothing compared to the storm brewing in Jaxon's eyes.

"You're dating someone?" His voice is carefully controlled, but I catch the edge underneath.

"That is none of your business!"

"I disagree." He moves closer, the leather of my sofa creaking beneath his weight. The distance between us shrinks, and my heart rate picks up in response. "You're my wife."

"I said my piece. I don't plan to engage with you further." My words sound firm, but my pulse skitters as he continues to stare.

“We need to come up with a more reasonable plan. Not an annulment.”

Outside, a violent gust of wind hurls snow against my sliding door with a sound like sand being thrown. I wish I could blame the chill running down my spine on the weather.

“Divorce?”

“No. I was thinking more along the lines of staying married.”

“You can’t seriously expect me to keep this marriage going. I’d rather staple my own hand to my desk.” My voice gains strength. “We don’t like each other.

“I like you,” he says, completely unfazed by my hostility.

My mouth slackens. My brain scrambles for logic, for footing, for something solid to hold on to, but everything tilts. Something flips in my stomach—not unpleasant, but dangerous in its intensity.

No one should have this kind of power over me. Especially not him.

This is ridiculous. I dislike Jaxon. The arrogant tech CEO who tormented me as a teenager, who’s always taken pleasure in getting under my skin. I don’t have feelings for him. I can’t. That would make me the biggest fool in the world.

Panicking at my thoughts, I unfold my legs and plant my feet firmly on the ground to put some distance between us.

“Listen, I don’t know what—”

Jaxon moves toward me like a predator cornering its prey.

I should back away. I don't.

His masculine scent surrounds me a second before his lips capture mine, stealing my breath along with my common sense.

Jaxon groans against my mouth, his hands sliding to cup my face, thumbs stroking my jawline.

His tongue teases, tempts, tortures, and I hold out for half a second before I break.

God help me, I break.

A deep, satisfied sound rumbles from his chest as he tilts his head, taking the kiss deeper, hotter, more consuming.

My pulse is a pounding drumbeat, matching the rhythm of his deliberate assault on my senses.

My hands, which had been pressed against his chest in initial resistance, now slide upward to circle his neck.

His hands trail from my shoulders down the sides of my arms, then back up to trace the curve where my neck meets my shoulder, before finally moving to the sides of my breasts.

I gasp into his mouth when his thumbs find my hardening nipples, the sensation sending electric currents straight through me. He deepens the kiss, his tongue exploring my mouth with hunger.

This is a mistake. A colossal, life-ruining mistake.

But my body doesn't give a damn about logic.

My fingers tighten in his hair instead of pushing him away. My hips lift, chasing friction instead of distance.

I don't want this. I can't want this.

But I do. And that terrifies me more than anything.

Jaxon shifts, pushing me back against the armrest of the sofa, his body covering mine. His weight feels right and the heat of him feels like home.

My legs part of their own accord, allowing him to settle between them. I can't stop a moan from escaping my lips when I feel his erection.

My hips lift to meet his, seeking more contact, more friction. His hands slide under my shirt, tracing my stomach, my ribs, before finally cupping my breasts.

I arch into his touch, my breath hitching as his fingers roll my nipples gently. He breaks the kiss, his mouth moving to my neck, my collarbone, my ear, each touch stroking the tendrils within me.

"Jaxon," I whisper, my voice hoarse with desire. I don't even recognize it.

His lips don't stop the torturous path over my skin, but something feels off. I open my eyes.

"What happened to the lights?"

The room has fallen into darkness, the only illumination coming from the faint glow of the setting sun through the windows.

Sliding from under him, I drag in a shaky breath to calm my aroused body. The sudden loss of light is jarring, but not as much as the way my body still aches for him.

I need distance. More than light.

I shove away from the couch, needing the distance to clear my head as much as to check the power. Because if I stay any closer, I might make another mistake.

Moving across the room, I flick the light switch several times. Nothing happens. I try another switch, then another.

“Power’s out throughout the town, JJ,” Jaxon says, completely at ease, like he owns the damn storm, too.

Nothing fazes him. Nothing unsettles him.

“The snow has gotten worse. Come have a look.”

I walk over and stand beside him, carefully maintaining a few inches of space between us. Through the window, I can see nothing but swirling white, the streetlights unlit.

I groan. “I hate wintery weather.”

“Well, that’s too bad. I was about to ask you to build a snowman,” he says, and I can hear the smile in his voice.

Despite myself, I smile back, and Jaxon pauses. He studies my face for a long moment, clearly caught off guard by my unexpected warmth.

Then he moves toward me with a smooth, purposeful grace, making my heart race. I

back up until I hit the wall, trapped between the cold plaster and his warm body.

“What happened on the couch doesn’t mean I want to stay married to you,” I say, my voice more breathless than I’d like.

I cross my arms over my chest, hating how my nipples still tingle from his touch and how my lips yearned for his kisses.

“As soon as the roads clear, we’re going to find a lawyer and get this annulled.”

“You shouldn’t do that,” he murmurs.

“Do what?”

His gaze drops to my lips. “Smile at me like that.”

I swallow hard. “It wasn’t for you.”

One second, I’m standing stiffly, forcing space between us, the next, his fingers are in my hair, tilting my face up as his lips crash into mine.

I gasp into his mouth, but he doesn’t ease up. He deepens the kiss instantly, his tongue sliding against mine with a dominance threatening to buckle my knees.

I brace my hands against his chest, meaning to push him away. I don’t. Instead, my fingers curl into the fabric of his sweater, holding onto him like I need him to keep me upright.

Damn him.

Damn me.

I hate how effortlessly he unravels me. How he takes control and my body... follows.

He growls against my lips, his hands sliding down my back, molding me to him. The friction sends a dangerous pulse of pleasure through me as his fingers grip my hips, guiding me exactly where he wants me.

I moan into his mouth, the sound swallowed by his kiss. Jaxon takes advantage of my surrender, angling his head to kiss me deeper.

“Still want an annulment?” he murmurs against my lips.

Yes.

No.

I don't know anymore.

I open my mouth, but it's not an answer that comes out. It's another gasp as he trails open-mouthed kisses down my throat, grazing his teeth over my skin.

“Deny it all you want, but your body tells the truth.”

I shove at his chest, ignoring how solid and warm he feels beneath my palms.
“Enough.”

He exhales slowly, his forehead dropping to mine. His hands remain firm on my hips, not caging me, but not letting me go, either.

“You're scared,” he says softly.

I scoff, even though my pulse is still racing. “Of what? You?”

His lips brush against my jaw, a barely there touch that makes me shiver.

“Of wanting me.”

My breath catches.

He pulls back just enough for his dark eyes to meet mine. My stomach flips at their intensity.

“You can fight this all you want, JJ,” he murmurs. “Push me away. Keep telling yourself you don’t want to explore this.”

He lifts a hand, brushing his thumb across my swollen bottom lip, and my stomach clenches at the raw possession in his gaze.

“I’ve waited this long. I can be patient.”

I step back, trying to ignore how my body responds to his touch, how his voice resonates beneath my skin. “Jaxon, this isn’t—”

My phone rings, slicing through the tension. I reach for it with grateful relief, moving away from him to answer.

“Hey, Jas,” I answer, relieved to hear my friend’s voice, a welcome anchor to reality after the surreal quality of the last few minutes with Jaxon.

“Jessa! Are you okay? The power’s out all over town,” Jasmine sounds worried.

“I’m fine,” I assure her, conscious of Jaxon’s presence beside me. “I have candles, batteries, food and I’m not alone. Jaxon’s here.” My eyes flick briefly to him before moving away.

“Jaxon? Why?” Her voice rises with each question.

“He stopped by to... discuss something.”

“Oh! I thought you two had finally decided to stop pretending to not be attracted to each other and do the nasty.”

I catch movement from the corner of my eye and turn to see Jaxon pointing to the door, mouthing “car”. I nod, returning to my conversation with Jasmine as he slips out.

“Girl, there’s no attraction and he’ll be on his way soon.”

We chat for a few more minutes before hanging up. I look around my suddenly dark apartment. No power meant no heat, no TV and no way to finish prepping for the most important interview of my career.

Perfect. Just perfect.

Moving around the apartment, I light candles I keep for emergencies and the occasional bath. Shadows elongate and dance across the walls as I work, the scent of vanilla filling the air.

I hear the door open and look up to see Jaxon. His expression is grim in the flickering candlelight.

“When will your tow be here?”

“Tomorrow.” He raises his right hand, revealing a gym bag. “You’re stuck with me for tonight.”

I grip the back of a chair, steadying myself against the influx of bad decisions waiting to happen. My brain scrambles for a response that isn't 'God help me.'

I watch him move about my space with confidence, and gradually, my breathing steadies. We're adults. We can handle one night of proximity without the world ending.

It's just one night. With Jaxon. In my apartment. During a power outage.

...I am so screwed.

"I could try walking back to my condo," he says.

"You can't possibly!" The words rush out before I can stop them. "You'll freeze to death for sure."

"It's comforting to know you care about my welfare."

"I prefer to not become a widow before I get a chance to end this marriage."

"So, you're acknowledging you're my wife?" His voice holds a note of triumph.

"Sure, tell yourself whatever you need to," I retort.

I can't bring myself to deny it outright. The legal reality is undeniable, even if I plan to change it as soon as possible.

"Where's your washroom?"

"It's right down the hallway on your left," I say, turning away to adjust a perfectly placed candle, needing something to do with my hands.

As his footsteps retreat down the hall, I let out a long, shaky breath. What have I gotten myself into? And more importantly, how am I going to get through this night without making another mistake I'll regret in the morning?

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“That couch isn’t suitable for a child, let alone you,” I finally say, breaking the silence. “You’re sleeping in your bed.”

She’s been arranging and rearranging the same blanket for five minutes, her movements growing increasingly agitated. The candlelight catches the determination in her profile and the stubborn set of her mouth.

She doesn’t look at me. “I’ve slept on it before. It’s fine.”

“For a nap, maybe. Not for an entire night.”

“I’m not the one who crushed his sports car under a tree,” she mutters, smoothing the blanket for the hundredth time. “Besides, you’re the guest.”

I cross my arms, leaning against the doorframe. “A guest you’d rather not have.”

She straightens, pushing a plait away from her face. Even in the midst of our standoff, I can’t help noticing how the candlelight gilds her skin, turning it to burnished copper. The sight does dangerous things to my concentration.

“It’s one night,” she says impatiently. “Take the bed. Say thank you and don’t make this harder than it needs to be.”

“No.”

Her brows snap together. “No?”

I step forward, closing the gap between us. “I’m not taking your bed, JJ. We’ll share. End of discussion.”

Her mouth opens, but I continue before she gets a word out. “Unless you’re worried about your self-control around me. What we did on the couch suggests it might be a valid concern.

Her eyes widen and her nostrils flare. “Fine. But we stay on our respective sides. And you wear clothes.”

“Were you expecting something else?”

Her brows lift before she schools her expression, but the quick flick of her tongue over her lips betrays her composure. By every law of logic, she’s beautiful when she’s flustered.

“Just establishing boundaries.”

“I’ll play along. For now.”

She watches me suspiciously for a moment longer before disappearing into the bathroom with a bundle of clothes. The moment she’s gone, I run a hand through my hair. This woman will be the death of me.

Sharing a bed with JJ while keeping my hands to myself will take more discipline than managing a hostile takeover. In Vegas, she was drunk. Tonight, there’s no alcohol, no excuses.

She called our marriage a drunken mistake, but I wasn’t nearly as drunk as she thinks. I remember how she looked at me, how her voice shook when she said “I do,” how her hand trembled when she signed that marriage certificate.

I could've stopped it. I should've stopped it. But I didn't.

I hear the water running in the bathroom and try not to imagine her naked. I've never been a man who thrives on restraint.

I force my thoughts elsewhere. It's a mental discipline I've honed since Mom's passing. Speaking of family—I wonder how my father is managing.

I haven't seen or spoken to dad in weeks. Our relationship had been strained long before that. I lost my mom to cancer when I was eleven, and in a way, I lost both my parents that day.

The storm outside rattles the windows, and I think of his small, weathered house on the outskirts of town, with the leaky roof he refuses to let me fix. Stubborn old man. Like father, like son, I suppose.

Before I can talk myself out of it, I dial his number. It rings five times, and I'm about to hang up when he answers.

"Yeah?" His gruff voice is exactly as I remember it. No greeting, no warmth.

"Hey, Dad. It's Jaxon."

"Got caller ID."

Silence stretches for three beats. "Just checking in. It's pretty bad out there."

He grunts. I can picture him sitting in his recliner, the one Mom bought him twenty-five years ago, phone pressed against his ear, expression unchanged. Richard Jamison has perfected the art of emotional vacancy.

“Generator’s running.” Another pause. “You need something?” he asks.

“No, just... making sure you’re okay.”

“I’m fine.”

The bathroom door opens, spilling steam into the hallway. And there she is, wrapped in coconut and jasmine, freshly scrubbed, looking softer than I’ve ever seen her.

“Dad, I should go. But call if you need anything, alright?”

“Don’t need anything.” He pauses, and for a moment I think he might say something else, something more. But then, “Watch out for downed lines.”

With that sage advice, he hangs up. No goodbye, no “take care,” definitely no “I love you.”

I stare at the phone for a second before slipping it back into my pocket.

“Everything okay?” JJ asks, hovering in the doorway. Her face is freshly washed, hair wrapped in a satin scarf, wearing an oversized t-shirt and flannel pajama pants. She looks young and vulnerable and impossibly beautiful.

“Yeah,” I say, shaking off the familiar weight that always settles on my shoulders after talking to my father. “Just checking on my dad.”

Something shifts in her expression. She’s aware of the strained relationship with my father. I’d spent many nights at her house with her brother Kamal when I was a teenager. She knows what he’s like.

“Is he alright?”

“Same as always.” I smile. “Grumpy and self-sufficient.”

JJ nods, and I see her hesitation, like she wants to say more but isn’t sure she should. We’re in uncharted territory here. Beyond our usual bickering into something that feels dangerously like genuine concern.

“He’s got a generator,” I add, filling the silence. “Better equipped for the storm than us.”

“That’s good.” She fidgets with the hem of her shirt. “My parents are out of town, thankfully. Dad would be trying to clear the whole neighborhood’s driveways if he were here.”

Mr. Smith was always ready with a helping hand, quick with a joke, and hadn’t questioned why I spent weeks in his home when I was a teenager.

“Your dad’s a good man,” I say simply.

She clears her throat. “Bathroom’s all yours.”

I enter the bedroom, taking stock of my territory. Her eyes track my movement, though she tries to hide her interest. I don’t bother concealing mine as I study her position.

She’s already under the covers on the far left side, rigid as a board, arranged as far from my side as possible.

Predictable and amusing.

“I left you a candle,” she says, nodding to the other nightstand. “In case you need to get up in the night.”

“Thanks.” I set my phone beside it and lift the blanket on my side. The mattress shifts.

JJ slides toward me involuntarily, her body stiffening the moment we touch. Gravity has never been so satisfying.

“Stay on your side.”

“I am on my side,” I reply, amused. “It’s not my fault your mattress has a dip in the middle.”

“It does not.” She shifts, trying to put more space between us, which only makes the mattress dip further.

I turn on my side to face her, propping my head on my hand. “Relax, JJ. I don’t bite.” A beat. “Unless you want me to.”

Her sharp inhale is audible in the quiet room. “For the record, I’m perfectly relaxed.”

I raise an eyebrow, not bothering to hide my amusement. Every inch of her is coiled tight as a spring — from the rigidity of her shoulders to the tight grip she has on the edge of the blanket.

“Could have fooled me,” I say. “Your whole body’s so tense I could bounce a quarter off it.”

“Maybe I’m tense because there’s a six-foot-three arrogant man invading my personal space and making inappropriate comments.”

“Funny how you know my exact height.”

“I—” For once, the quick-witted JJ falters. “That’s not—”

I can’t help pressing my advantage. “And which comment was inappropriate, exactly? The biting one? Because that’s more of an offer than a comment.”

“Don’t you ever get tired?”

“Of what, exactly?”

JJ gestures between us. “The bickering.”

I consider her question seriously.

“No.” I shift closer, not touching, but letting her feel my presence. “Not with you.”

“Why?” Her voice is softer now.

I could give her the easy answer, the one that maintains our comfortable antagonism. Instead, I opt for truth.

“Because you’re the only woman who doesn’t back down. Women either want something from me or are afraid to challenge me.” I watch her carefully. “You’re different.”

JJ’s quiet for a long time, her eyes reflecting the dancing flame of the candle. “That’s because I saw you cry when your toenail fell off. Hard to be intimidated by someone after that.”

The tension breaks like a fever when I laugh in response. “Fair point.”

She laughs too, and something warm unfurls in my chest. These rare glimpses of

connection beneath our barbed exchanges are what I'm fighting for.

"Goodnight, Jaxon," she says softly, turning away to blow out her candle.

"Goodnight, wife," I reply.

I hear her huff of annoyance and smile to myself. I extinguish my own candle, plunging the room into blackness.

As my eyes adjust, I become acutely aware of her presence beside me. The soft sound of her breathing, the faint warmth radiating from her body, the whisper of the sheets when she moves. She's less than a foot away, yet the distance feels both infinitesimal and insurmountable.

I don't know how long I've been lying here, listening to the storm outside and JJ's rhythmic breathing beside me. Sleep eludes me, my mind too full of her scent on the pillows, her warmth just inches away, the memory of her lips against mine earlier.

The wind howls against the windows, but inside this bedroom, there's a different kind of storm brewing.

I check the bedside clock in the darkness—12:17 AM. Great.

Beside me, JJ stirs. She's been restless for the past hour, shifting positions, sighing softly. The temperature in the apartment has dropped considerably as the night progressed. I'm comfortable enough in sweatpants and t-shirt, but I notice JJ pulling the blankets tighter around herself.

A particularly strong gust rattles the window, and she shifts again. This time, her body moves toward mine.

Her leg slides over, tangling with mine. Her arm drapes across my torso. Her breath warms my neck.

I freeze, afraid to move, afraid to breathe too deeply.

She's pressed against me now, the length of her body aligned with mine, soft and warm and completely unaware.

The satin of her headscarf brushes my chin, and her hand rests directly over my heart, which is currently trying to punch its way out of my chest.

"JJ?" I whisper, not wanting to startle her, but knowing I should wake her before she realizes our position and accuse me of crossing her boundary.

She makes a small sound in the back of her throat and burrows closer, her fingers curling into the fabric of my shirt. The leg draped over mine slides higher, settling between my thighs and sending blood rushing south.

Fuck.

I should wake her. I should gently disentangle our limbs and return her to her side of the bed. That's what a gentleman would do. That's what someone respecting the boundaries of this fragile truce would do.

But I've never claimed to be a gentleman. And every cell in my body is screaming at me to pull her closer, to eliminate what little space remains between us.

I remain perfectly still, suspended between desire and restraint, while my mind races through scenarios. If I wake her, she'll be embarrassed, defensive. If I don't wake her, and she wakes naturally to find herself wrapped around me, she might accuse me of taking advantage.

There's no winning move here.

She murmurs something unintelligible and shifts again. Her face tilts up, lips parted, and it takes every ounce of self-control not to lower my head those few inches to capture her mouth with mine.

I bring my free hand up to brush a plait that's escaped her scarf. The gesture feels more intimate than any of our other exchanges. This unguarded moment where I can simply look at her without her defenses up, without her creating distance.

"What am I going to do with you?" I whisper into the darkness.

"Jaxon," she mumbles, and for a terrifying second, I think she's awake. But her eyes remain closed, her breathing deep and even.

She's dreaming of me. The realization makes me happy.

Her unconscious body recognizes what her conscious mind fights. She belongs with me, against me, beneath me and on top of me. Her surrender in sleep is just a preview of what's coming. I've built an empire with less promising foundations than this.

I adjust the blankets around us, cocooning us against the cold. My thumb traces small circles on her hip.

JJ shifts, her leg sliding higher between mine. I grit my teeth against the surge of desire. This is torture of the sweetest kind.

"Mmm, warm," she murmurs, face pressed against my neck, words slurred with sleep.

"I've got you," I whisper, allowing my arm to wrap more securely around her.

In the morning, she'll be mortified to find herself tangled with me. She'll retreat behind antagonism. But right now, there's nowhere else in the world I'd rather be than in this modest bed, in this powerless apartment, with this woman who has unknowingly held power over me for most of my life.

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Something's wrong.

I'm enveloped in warmth and my body relaxed in a way it hasn't been in years. I snuggle deeper into the source of this unnatural comfort, then freeze as realization slams into me.

My eyes snap open.

I'm draped across Jaxon's chest like it's my personal mattress. My leg is thrown over his, my arm wrapped around his torso, my head tucked neatly under his chin. His arm holds me securely against him, his hand resting on my hip.

Oh my god.

My heart launches into panic mode, thundering against my ribs, but I force my body to remain still.

Maybe I can extract myself without waking him.

I'll slip away, pretend this never happened, and we can avoid the mortification of acknowledging that I apparently decided to use him as a body pillow in the middle of the night.

Carefully, I lift my head to gauge if he's in a deep sleep. His breathing seems steady, his face relaxed. Good.

Operation Extricate Myself From Embarrassment is a go.

I start by sliding my leg off his with slow, careful movements. Millimeter by millimeter. I'm practically holding my breath.

"Morning."

The word vibrates against my cheek, like he's still half-asleep.

I go rigid, pulse hammering. Abort mission. Abort mission.

My eyes travel up to meet his, and the impact is immediate. His hazel eyes are still heavy-lidded, his hair adorably mussed, his morning stubble giving him a rugged look that should be illegal before coffee.

Neither of us moves. Neither of us speaks. We just stare at each other.

His hand on my hip feels like it's burning through my pajamas. I'm suddenly acutely aware of every point where our bodies connect. The solid plane of his chest beneath my palm. The way his thigh feels between mine. The gentle pressure of his fingers on my skin.

"I—" my voice comes out as a croak. I clear my throat and try again. "I need to use the bathroom."

With all the grace of a newborn calf, I launch myself backward off the bed, tangling briefly in the sheets before stumbling to my feet. Jaxon makes a move like he's going to help, but I hold up a hand.

"I'm fine!" My voice is too high an octave. "Totally fine. Just...really need the bathroom. Morning routine. You know how it is."

I'm babbling like an idiot as I back toward the door, nearly tripping over my own feet

in my desperation to escape this moment. Jaxon watches me with an expression I can't quite read. Amusement, maybe, but something else, too. Something softer.

"Take your time," he drawls, stretching his arms above his head.

His t-shirt rides up, revealing a sliver of toned abs and a deep V-line that should be banned.

I dart into the half-bath and close the door with more force than necessary, then lean against it, pressing my palms to my heated cheeks.

What is wrong with me? It's just Jaxon. Annoying, arrogant, infuriating Jaxon.

The same guy who put a rubber snake in my backpack in seventh grade.

The same guy who told everyone at junior prom I'd only been asked as a charity date.

The same guy who...who held me all night, apparently, keeping me warm when the temperature dropped.

Groaning, I turn to the sink and refuse to look at my reflection. I know what I'll see—flushed cheeks, guilty eyes and the look of a woman who's in way over her head.

I go through my morning routine on autopilot, brushing my teeth with extra vigor as if I can scrub away these unwanted feelings along with the morning breath.

I take my time removing my scarf and moisturizing my hair and massaging my scalp longer than necessary.

I wash my face, apply lotion, and even floss—something I usually save for nighttime.

When I've exhausted every possible bathroom activity, I reluctantly acknowledge I can't hide in here forever.

I'll just go out there, act normal, and pretend I didn't wake up on top of him.

We'll get through this awkward morning, and then the power will come back, the roads will clear, and he'll leave. Simple.

With a deep breath, I open the bathroom door, braced for the teasing and inevitable gloating. But the bedroom is empty.

Instead, I hear the clatter of pans and the unmistakable sound of sizzling. Not what I expected. Suspicious, I follow the sound, stopping short at the sight of Jaxon standing at my stove and flipping pancakes.

And is that George Strait playing from my Bluetooth speaker?

"Perfect timing," he says casually over the twang of "Check Yes or No," sliding a golden pancake onto a waiting plate. "Coffee's ready, and these are almost done."

"You cooked." And you hacked my speaker.

He glances up, calm as ever, like this is normal. It is not normal.

"Figured we could both use a hot meal," he says, pouring more batter into the pan with ease.

"Where is that music coming from?" I ask, eyeing the Bluetooth speaker on the counter.

"From my playlist," he says easily. "Figured I'd set the mood."

“With old country?”

“Don’t act surprised. You’ve always been a sucker for steel guitar and heartbreak. I just gave the people what they want.”

I scowl. Jaxon Jamison does not belong in my kitchen. And yet, he moves around like he pays rent for the damn place.

I approach cautiously. “Thanks for... this.” I gesture vaguely at the spread.

“You’re welcome.” His voice is neutral, but there’s a hint of amusement in his eyes. “Sleep well?”

There it is. I feel heat rushing to my face, but refuse to give him the satisfaction of seeing me flustered.

“Fine.” I busy myself with pouring coffee.

“The storm’s still going,” he adds, nodding toward the window where snow continues to fall heavily. “Google says power might be out until tomorrow. Roads are closed. Tow company called—they’re unsure when they’ll come as roads are not cleared.”

“Oh,” I manage, taking a sip of coffee, grateful for the warmth and the caffeine. “So you’re here longer.”

“Yes.” He takes a bite of bacon. “Unless you kick me out before that.”

I look up to find him watching me, the intensity back in his eyes. “I won’t kick you out during a blizzard, Jaxon.”

“Good to know there are limits to your dislike of me.”

“I don’t dislike you.” The words surprise us both. “I mean,” I backpedal, “I don’t like you either. You’re... tolerable. Sometimes.”

“High praise from Jessa Smith. I’ll take it.”

“Thank heavens for gas stoves,” I say, desperate to fill the silence with something safe.

“And for pancake mix,” he adds, joining me with his own plate. “And for someone who keeps her kitchen well-stocked.”

“Thank you,” I respond. “For... all this.” I point at the breakfast servings.

“Least I could do. You’re letting me crash here, after all.” He takes a bite of his pancake. “Besides, I was hungry, and you were busy doing... whatever you were doing in the bathroom for forty-five minutes.”

“My morning routine is extensive.”

“Of course.”

His lips quirk up at the corner, but he doesn’t push it. We eat in relatively comfortable silence, the awkwardness gradually dissipating with each bite. Outside, the world is white and still.

“About this morning,” I finally say, unable to leave it unaddressed. “When we woke up. I didn’t mean to...”

“Use me as your personal space heater?” he supplies.

“Yes. That.” I focus intently on cutting my pancake into unnecessarily small pieces.

“I must have gotten cold in the night.”

“The temperature dropped pretty low,” he agrees. “And body heat is the most efficient way to stay warm.”

“Exactly.” I nod, relieved he’s being rational about this. “It was purely a survival instinct.”

“Of course.” He takes a sip of coffee, watching me over the rim. “Although...”

I look up, instantly wary. “Although what?”

“You did say my name while you were asleep.”

“Doubt it.”

“Twice, actually.”

“Then you were hallucinating.” I take a sip of coffee. “Might want to get your mental checked.”

“Denial this strong?” His voice drops lower. “Must’ve been a hell of a dream, JJ.”

I shoot him a glare. “I wasn’t—”

“It’s okay,” he interrupts smoothly. “You don’t have to tell me what it was about. I already know.”

“Eat your food.”

He obeys, but the smile doesn’t leave his face. We finish eating in silence, though it’s

charged with awareness.

As I gather our empty plates, I'm grateful for the mundane task that gives my hands something to do. We settle into washing dishes together, me washing while Jaxon dries.

"You seriously think Reba tops Dolly?" I ask, wiping a spot off a mug before passing it to him.

"Dolly's a legend, but Reba's got grit," Jaxon says, reaching for the mug. "And that red hair? Iconic."

I narrow my eyes. "You're just thinking about the Fancy video again."

"Guilty," he grins.

From my speaker, George Jones starts crooning about love gone wrong. Jaxon softly hums along.

"You know the lyrics?" I ask, surprised.

He doesn't look at me, just keeps drying. "Every last one."

I study him from the corner of my eye, wondering how many other things I don't know about the man I've despised for years.

I reflect on how surreal this is. Twenty-four hours ago, I was preparing for a quiet weekend alone. Now I'm snowed in with Jaxon, debating country music legends while washing dishes together, after spending the night in his arms. And it doesn't feel as wrong as it should.

Later, I watch from the window as he joins other men from the building, shoveling the entrance clear of snow. When he catches me watching, I quickly step away from the glass.

The power doesn't return that day. Or the next.

By the third day of our unexpected cohabitation, we've fallen into a strange rhythm.

Jaxon becomes the keeper of candles, strategically placing them throughout the apartment to maximize light while minimizing fire hazards.

I become the manager of food, rationing our supplies and creating increasingly creative meals.

"This is great," Jaxon says on night four, spooning up the last of my improvised pasta dish—a concoction made from the random contents of my pantry.

"Don't sound so surprised," I reply. "In my next life, I plan to be a chef."

We pass the time with board games, seated across from each other at my small dining table. I accuse him of cheating at Monopoly. He claims I'm making up words in Scrabble. Between turns, we hum along to Kenny Rogers, off-key and confident, like we're auditioning for a honky-tonk revival.

"That's not a real word," he insists, pointing at my tiles.

"'Qi' is absolutely a word. Check the dictionary."

"Fine," he concedes after verification, his eyes lingering on mine a beat too long. "But I'm watching you."

At night, I construct a fortress of pillows, strategically placed for maximum separation. It never lasts. Somehow, by morning, I always wake up tangled with the enemy.

On day five, the water pressure drops.

“Perfect,” I mutter, jiggling the kitchen faucet as the stream reduces to a pathetic trickle. “Just what we needed.”

Jaxon reaches around me to check for himself, his chest briefly pressing against my back. I step away, ignoring the electricity from momentary contact.

“Winter Bay’s infrastructure can handle frostbite but not a full-out blizzard blackout,” he explains, maintaining the new distance between us. “Pumps are probably failing.”

“How long do you think this will last? The whole situation?”

He glances toward the window where snow continues to fall steadily. “Hard to say. I’ve never seen a storm this persistent in April.”

That night, I lay rigidly on my side of the bed, the pillow barrier firmly in place. But as the temperature drops to its lowest point yet, I find myself unable to stop shivering.

“This is ridiculous,” Jaxon mutters from his side. “You’re freezing.”

“I’m fine,” I insist through chattering teeth.

I pull the blankets tighter. It doesn’t help. I curl into myself. Still cold.

Jaxon shifts closer, then slides his arms around my waist, pulling me against his chest. I lock up. But then his warmth seeps through my clothes and melts my

resistance one degree at a time.

“This doesn’t mean anything,” I whisper, more to myself than to him.

“Of course not.”

“And the pillow barrier returns tomorrow,” I add, needing to establish this is a onetime concession, not a precedent.

But as I drift off to sleep, the efficiency of this arrangement becomes harder to deny. Perhaps some solutions don’t need to be complicated. Perhaps, just this once, the simplest answer is the right one.

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“You’re burning it.”

JJ struggles with the makeshift oil lamp she’s created from cooking oil and a strip of t-shirt. The flame sputters dangerously high, threatening to scorch the jar she’s using as a base.

I should let her struggle, let her prove whatever point she’s trying to make. But watching her fight with something as simple as a wick, when I could fix it in seconds, grates on me.

She shoots me a glare over her shoulder. “I’ve got it.”

“Clearly,” I drawl, leaning against the kitchen counter.

The temperature has dropped significantly with nightfall, our breath visible in the air. Day six of being trapped together, and she’s still fighting my every attempt to help.

“Fine.” She steps back from her creation. “Since you’re such an expert.”

My height advantage allows me to stretch past her to grab the lamp, my chest pressing against her back. She stiffens but doesn’t retreat.

“Your wick’s too long,” I say, adjusting it with ease. “Burns too hot and wastes fuel. Basic survival, JJ. Thought you were supposed to be the smart one.”

She crosses her arms, eyes narrowing. “Basic survival, huh? And here I thought you only excelled at overpriced whiskey tastings and corporate power plays.”

“I’m multi-talented. Try to keep up.”

“Oh, I’m keeping up just fine. I was just letting you have your moment.”

“Letting me?” I raise an eyebrow. “That’s cute.”

JJ snatches the wick from my hand, trimming it herself. “See? I had it handled.”

“After almost setting your kitchen on fire.”

She lights the lamp and it flickers to life just as Reba’s voice cuts through the quiet, twanging through JJ’s tablet on the shelf.

“Where’d you learn this, anyway?” she asks, turning the jar to inspect my handiwork.

“My grandfather.”

“I don’t think I ever met him.”

“You didn’t,” I say. “He didn’t live in Winter Bay and died two years before my mom. He was... intense.”

She gives me a curious look. “Intense how?”

“Survivalist. Conspiracy theorist. The world is always one bad day away from collapse kind of guy.” I smile. “He had a bunker before bunkers were a trend.”

“Wait. Are you telling me you were trained by a full-blown doomsday prepper?”

“Oh, trained is an understatement,” I say dryly. “By the time I was ten, I could filter water through charcoal, catch and clean a rabbit, and recite every major economic

collapse of the last century.”

She stares at me like I’ve just confessed to being raised by wolves. “That explains so much.”

“Relax, JJ. I didn’t drink the Kool-Aid.”

Something in my voice must betray the weight of my emotions, because her expression shifts.

“I’ll start on lunch.” She moves toward the kitchen, her socked feet padding softly across the worn hardwood floor.

I follow, watching as she expertly navigates her limited options, opening cabinets and assessing dwindling supplies.

Six days into this storm, and somehow, we’ve settled into an uneasy rhythm where JJ pretends she doesn’t wake up tangled with me every morning, and I pretend I don’t notice.

One where she cooks and I handle keeping this place clean and from turning into an icebox while ignoring the simmering attraction beneath every interaction.

“Let me help,” I offer, reaching for an aluminum pot hanging from the rack above her small island. My arm brushes against her, and she inhales.

JJ immediately shifts to block me, her body creating a barrier between me and the stove. The kitchen feels impossibly small with both of us in it.

“I can handle lunch,” she says.

“I know you can. But you don’t have to do everything alone.”

Our eyes meet. Something unspoken passes between us—acknowledgment that these words extend beyond cooking dinner.

She exhales and shoves a knife into my hand like she’s doing me a favor. “Fine. Chop these.” A pile of assorted vegetables sits on the cutting board, remnants of her pre-storm shopping.

We work in companionable silence, the gentle scrape of knife against cutting board strangely intimate in the quiet apartment.

The next song kicks in, something older and slower—Tammy Wynette, all ache and longing. Neither of us says anything, but I catch the subtle shift in JJ’s movements.

“When I was little,” she says suddenly, “my mom would make hot chocolate during storms. She’d add cinnamon and these tiny marshmallows.” Her voice grows soft with the memory. “We’d sit by the window and count seconds between lightning and thunder.”

“That sounds nice.”

“What about you?” she asks, shifting to look at me. “Any storm traditions?”

“My mom and I built forts.” The knife pauses against the cutting board as memories surface, the sound of childhood laughter echoing in my mind. “When she got sick, we’d still try, but...”

JJ moves closer to me, facing me now. Her eyes are soft in the candlelight.

“I remember when she passed. You stayed at our house for almost a week.”

“Your parents were kind,” I say, though they feel inadequate. “My father... He shut down after she died. Couldn’t look at me without seeing her.”

“Is that why you two are estranged?”

I resume chopping the bell pepper. “He was never the same.” The knife hits the board with force and a piece of pepper skitters across the counter. “Started drinking, working longer hours. By the time I was in high school, we were strangers living in the same house.”

Her hand covers mine where it rests beside the cutting board. “I’m sorry.”

“Thanks.” Her touch eases something inside me. “Your family became mine, in a way. You, Kamal, your parents.”

JJ retrieves her hand, leaving a lingering warmth. “You had a funny way of showing appreciation. You teased me and pulled my braids.”

“You weren’t very welcoming,” I reply as I scrape the chopped peppers into a small ceramic bowl.

She raises an eyebrow. “You called me elephant ears.”

“Because you tattled on Kamal and I when we planned on sneaking out.” I meet her gaze directly. “F.Y.I. like your ears.”

She turns away quickly, but not before I catch the way she presses her lips together.

“Tell me something I don’t know about you.” The question shifts us to safer territory while maintaining the intimacy we’ve established.

The best negotiations progress in planned steps. Push too hard, retreat when necessary, always keep the ultimate goal in sight. And with JJ's guard lowering, I've never been more certain of my target.

"I almost dropped out of my master's program."

This surprises me. Education is everything to her.

"Why?"

"My boyfriend at the time had an associate's degree. He started making comments when I got accepted into the program. Little things at first. Then he flat-out told me no man wants a woman more educated than him."

Anger flares in my chest. "What an insecure jackass."

"I believed him," she admits softly. "For a while. I was ready to withdraw when my advisor called, asking why. That wake-up call made me realize I was choosing a mediocre man over my future."

"I'm glad you chose your future."

She looks up at me, something vulnerable in her eyes. "Sometimes I wonder if I'm destined to choose between career success and a relationship. Like I can't have both."

The thought of some insecure asshole making her doubt herself turns my blood to ice. I don't know his name, but I want to find him and fuck him up.

"That's bullshit," I say firmly. "The right person won't make you choose."

Her eyes meet mine, searching. I cup her face, giving her time to pull away, but she

doesn't.

Instead, she closes the space between us and brushes her lips against mine.

My hand slides to the nape of her neck, holding her gently as our tongues meet. A quiet sound escapes her. Part sigh, part moan, and it sends an electric pulse to my groin.

"Say the word," I whisper. "And I'll step away."

"Please," she breathes. "Don't."

"Say it again."

Her breath stutters. "Please—"

I catch her mouth with mine, claiming what's already mine. This time, there's no slow build, no testing the waters.

My hands explore the curves of her body as hers maps the muscles of my back. Every touch feels electric, charged by years of want finally finding release.

I trail kisses down her neck, feeling her pulse racing beneath my lips. Her head falls back, giving me access as her nails dig lightly into my shoulders. When my hand slips under her shirt, she gasps.

"Feels good," she moans.

I lift my head to look at her, needing to see her face. Her eyes are half-closed, lips parted, hair pulled up in a loose bun. She's beautiful—always has been—but like this, open and wanting, she's breathtaking.

“I’ve wanted this for so long,” I confess against her skin. “Wanted you.”

I lean down, capturing her lips again. This time, the kiss is deeper, hungrier. Her body arches against mine as I press her into the cupboard. I can feel her heat, even through our clothes, and it drives me wild.

My hands slide down to her thighs, gripping them firmly before moving up to her ass. I squeeze, pulling her against me, grinding my hardness against her. She moans into my mouth, her nails digging into my back.

I break the kiss, trailing my lips down her neck, her collarbone, her sternum. I lift her shirt, exposing her stomach, her ribs, her breasts. I take one nipple into my mouth, swirling my tongue around the hardening peak. She cries out, offering more of herself to me.

I lavish attention on her breasts, moving from one to the other, my hands kneading her flesh, my mouth sucking, my teeth nipping. Her breath comes in short gasps, her body writhing beneath me.

But I want more. I want to taste all of her.

Reaching for the waistband of her leggings, I pause to give her a chance to stop me. She doesn’t. Instead, she guides my hand as I roll her leggings and panties down her legs.

I take in the sight of her, completely naked, completely vulnerable, and bury my nose in her flesh. Her scent fills my lungs, musky and sweet, driving me insane.

I lift her onto the island, then slide onto the stool between her legs and place her knees on my shoulders. She watches me, her cheeks flushed, her breath coming in short pants. I lean down, pressing a soft kiss to her inner thigh. Then another higher

up. And another, closer to her center.

Her hips lift, seeking my touch. I smile against her skin, enjoying her responsiveness. I run my hands up her thighs, brushing my thumbs against her folds.

“You’re so wet,” I murmur. “So ready for me.”

She moans softly, her head and body falling back as my thumbs spread her open. I lean in and run my tongue up the length of her slit, circling her clit.

Her cry echoes through the room, her hips bucking against my mouth. I grip her thighs, holding her in place as I explore her with my tongue. I lick and suck at her clit.

JJ’s moans grow louder, her body trembles. But just as she’s about to tip over the edge, I pull back.

Her eyes snap open. “What the hell!”

“Not yet.”

Before she can protest further, I slide my hands under her ass, lifting her. Her eyes widen in realization just before I run my tongue along the seam of her ass.

She jolts. “What are you—”

“Shh,” I soothe, massaging her cheeks gently. “Trust me.”

JJ sucks in a breath as I dive back in, licking and kissing her ass. She squirms initially, uncomfortable with the new sensation, but I hold her firmly, not letting up.

“No one’s ever...” she trails off.

“I know,” I say, looking up at her. “But you’ll like it. I promise.”

She bites her lip and I lower my head once more. I take my time, letting her get used to the sensation. Gradually, her body begins to relax, her moans returning.

I continue to lavish attention on her ass while my thumb teases her clit. Her breathing stutters, her body tense again, but this time, I don’t stop. I keep licking, keep rubbing, pushing her higher and higher.

“Jaxon,” she cries out, her body convulsing. “I’m... I’m going to...”

Her words dissolve into a scream as she comes undone, her orgasm crashing through her. Her body trembles violently as she surrenders to the intensity of the orgasm.

I slow my movements when her body goes limp and her breaths come in ragged pants. I press one last kiss to her pussy before standing up.

Her eyes flutter open. They’re filled with a mix of shock, satisfaction and desire.

“That was...”

I trace her lower lip with my thumb, watching her eyes close at my touch. “A preview,” I whisper against her skin.

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I'm on fire, every nerve ending in my body alight with sensation. Jaxon's mouth and hands have set me ablaze, and I can't get enough. I need more. I need him.

I reach for him, pulling him to me. I taste myself on his tongue. It's dirty and hot and I want more.

"Jaxon," I pant between kisses, my hands fumbling with the waistband of his sweats. "I need you inside me."

He groans, grinding against my hip. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," I say, my voice steady and sure. "I'm sure."

He stands up, pulling me with him. Our bodies press together, our mouths meeting in a hungry kiss. His hands travel my body, squeezing my ass, my breasts, as if he can't get enough of me.

I know the feeling. I can't get enough of him either.

We stumble our way to the bedroom, a tangle of limbs and lips and tongues. His shirt comes off, tossed aside carelessly.

My hands explore the hard planes of his chest, his abs, his shoulders. He's all muscle and heat, and I can't wait to feel him inside me.

He kicks off his sweats and boxers quickly. I catch a glimpse of his shaft, hard and ready, before he presses me back onto the bed. His mouth finds my breast, sucking

and nipping at the sensitive peak.

He slips a finger inside me, then another, his thumb circling my clit. I buck against his hand, my body seeking more, seeking release.

“I want to be inside you when you come.”

He shifts, moving off me. I whimper at the loss of contact. But he’s not gone for long.

Grabbing a condom from his wallet, he tears it open before rolling it onto his length. Then he’s back, his dick poised at my entrance.

But he doesn’t push inside me. Not yet. He flips me over, pulling me up onto my knees. I glance back at him, a question in my eyes. His gaze is locked on my ass.

“You have a tramp stamp?”

His fingers trace the small tattoo at the base of my spine, a butterfly I got on a whim years ago.

“Is that a problem?”

He shakes his head, his eyes darkening. “Not at all,” he says. “It’s fucking hot.”

Jaxon grips my hips, his cock pressing against my entrance. I push back against him, feeling him slip inside me, inch by delicious inch. He’s big, filling me completely, stretching me in the most incredible way.

Jaxon begins to move, his hips thrusting against mine, his cock sliding in and out of me. I grip the sheets, my body moving in time with his, meeting each thrust with one of my own. The sensation is intense, pleasure coursing through me with each

movement.

His gaze is on me, hot and intense, watching as his cock moves in and out of me. It's sexy, and I love it.

Jaxon leans forward, his mouth finding my ear. "You feel so good," he breathes. "So tight, so wet. I could fuck you like this forever."

His words send liquid heat to my core. His hand slides around my hip, finding my clit, his fingers circling the sensitive nub. I whimper, my body tensing as pleasure becomes me.

"Come for me, JJ." His voice is low and commanding. "I want to feel you come around my cock."

Those words push me over the edge. My body tightens, trembling as overwhelming pleasure rolls through me. I cry out, my hips bucking against his, my body milking his as I come.

Jaxon groans, his body tensing behind me. His thrusts become faster, harder, his fingers digging into my hips. Then he's coming too, his penis pulsing inside me, his breath hot against my neck.

We collapse onto the bed, a tangle of limbs, sweat and satisfaction. He pulls me into his arms, his body spooning mine, his mouth pressing soft kisses to my shoulder.

"I should get cleaned up," I murmur, reluctantly extracting myself from his embrace.

His fingers encircle my wrist, like he already knows I won't resist. "Come back."

Looking back at him, I take in his tousled hair and semi-erection. My body responds

instantly, wanting him again despite the pleasant ache between my legs.

“I will,” I promise, and I’m surprised to find I mean it.

In the bathroom, I brace my hands against the sink, exhaling slowly as I take in my flushed cheeks, messy hair and the faint, unmistakable marks forming along my neck. It was all evidence of how thoroughly I’d been devoured.

I should feel regret, or at the very least, a sliver of worry, but as I press cool fingertips to my swollen lips, all I feel is the lingering heat of his mouth and the quiet, undeniable fact that I don’t regret a damn thing.

When I step back into the bedroom, the first thing I notice is the empty space I left behind, the sheets slightly rumpled, one of Jaxon’s arms stretched across the mattress. The sight does something strange to my chest.

It would be easy to grab a pillow, to build a barrier between us again, to reclaim the careful distance I’ve been clinging to for days. But instead, I slip beneath the covers as if I can somehow trick my own mind into believing this is temporary.

The moment I settle, his arm finds me, pulling me in. I allow my body to sink into the warmth of his, closing my eyes as he murmurs something unintelligible against my hair.

I shouldn’t find it endearing. I shouldn’t find him endearing. But with the storm raging outside and his warmth enveloping me, I can’t help but wonder how it would feel to sleep like this for the rest of my life.

With that unsettling thought, I drift into a deep, dreamless sleep.

The acrid scent of something burning jolts me awake, sending a rush of adrenaline

through my system before my brain even has time to catch up. The sheets beside me are cold, the space where Jaxon had been now empty, and for one disoriented second, my mind scrambles to put the pieces together.

Then the smell intensifies, thick and unmistakable, and panic kicks in.

I throw the covers aside and reach blindly for the first thing I can find—Jaxon's t-shirt. It's soft, oversized and falls past my thighs. I rush down the hallway, mentally preparing for whatever disaster awaits me.

What I find is Jaxon, shirtless and cursing, waving a dish towel frantically at a smoking pot on the stove. The kitchen is hazy with smoke, the smell of burned food overwhelming.

“What are you doing?” I demand, coughing slightly.

He spins around, looking sheepish and frustrated in equal measure. “Making dinner,” he explains, gesturing to the blackened mess in the pot. “But the water boiled way faster than I expected.”

I step closer, peering into the pot. What appears to be the charred remains of spaghetti noodles are stuck to the bottom, smoking and filling my apartment with the smell of culinary disaster.

“You burned pasta?” I repeat, torn between disbelief and reluctant amusement as I take in the blackened disaster clinging to the bottom of my once perfectly functional pot.

Jaxon huffs a breath, dragging a hand through his hair. “In my defense, pasta is a lot more complicated than it looks.”

“Boiling water is complicated?”

He shoots me a glare, but there’s a grin lurking at the edges of his mouth. “It is when you fall asleep. And when no one warns you water evaporates quickly.”

I should be annoyed. My apartment smells like a failed chemistry experiment, my best pot is probably ruined, and my deep sleep was interrupted by the scent of impending disaster.

But then I look at him, barefoot, shirtless, standing in my kitchen with the expression of a man who just got his ego knocked down a peg by a pot of spaghetti. Before I can stop myself, laughter bubbles up from my chest.

“You think this is funny?” he asks, his expression shifting from embarrassment to indignation.

“I think it’s hilarious,” I admit, my laughter growing. “The great Jaxon Jamison, thwarted by spaghetti.”

The corner of his mouth twitches, fighting a smile. “I was trying to do something nice.” He takes a step closer. “You were sleeping peacefully, and I wanted to surprise you.”

The thoughtfulness of the gesture cuts through my amusement, leaving something warm and tender in its place. In all my past relationships, I can’t remember anyone ever wanting to surprise me with a home-cooked dinner.

“Well,” I say, softening, “the idea was nice, even if the execution was catastrophic.”

I move to open the windows, letting the cold air in to clear the smoke. Jaxon takes the ruined pot to the sink, running water over the blackened mess. The sizzle of hot metal

meeting cold water fills the kitchen.

“I think your pot is a goner,” he says ruefully, examining the scorched bottom.

I come to stand beside him, our shoulders brushing. “It’s just a pot.”

He looks down at me. “You’re not mad?”

“No.”

His gaze drags over me, committing every inch of exposed skin to memory. “If I’d known you’d look this good in my shirt,” he muses, “I would have woken you sooner.”

The heat in his words sends a flush through me, warming my skin despite the cold air from the windows. I’m suddenly intensely aware of our state of undress—him in boxers, me in only his t-shirt.

“Stop looking at me like that.”

“Like what?” he asks, stepping closer until my back is against the counter.

“Like you want to devour me.”

His smile is slow and predatory. “What if I do?”

Before I can respond, he kisses me. My body reacts before my mind catches up, molding into him as his hands slide down, gripping my thighs with effortless strength.

In one smooth motion, he lifts me onto the counter, spreading my legs. I wrap my

legs around his waist, pulling him closer, all thoughts of burned pasta forgotten.

His hands find their way under the shirt, tracing patterns on my skin. My own hands explore the muscled expanse of his body. I can't get enough of him.

"We should stop," I whisper, but my hands fist in his hair as his lips graze my neck.

"Should we?" he asks. "Or is that just what you think you're supposed to say?"

I don't want to stop. I want more of this—more of him, more of us together, more of the way he makes me feel desired and cherished.

"No," I admit. "I'm starving."

"Okay."

He lowers me down from the counter but doesn't step back immediately. Instead, he keeps his hands on my waist, holding me close.

"Perhaps you can teach me to make pasta?" he suggests. "Then later we can burn your sheets."

I laugh, wrapping my arms around his neck and standing on my toes to press a kiss to his lips. "That sounds perfect."

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The snow sparkles under the early morning sun as I dig the shovel into another dense pile beside JJ's sedan. The physical labor feels good after being cooped up inside, though memories of the last few days bring a smile to my face.

I had her again and again in the past couple of days. But instead of feeling satiated, I am hungry for more.

Things changed between us, but I'm not naive enough to think she's fully mine. Not yet.

JJ is careful. She doesn't give trust easily, and that makes every inch of ground I've gained with her feel like a victory. The way she looked at me, the way she allowed me to possess her means something.

And if I know anything, it's how to capitalize on an opening. I shove the thoughts aside and focus on digging her car out of the snow.

Steam rises from my breath as I clear another section around her car. The storm has passed, but it's left behind a transformed world.

Snow blankets the cars, the street and buildings. It's heavy, wet, and nearly knee-deep in most places. The city remains silent, as if still holding its breath after the storm's fury.

The plows haven't made it to this side street yet. I can hear their distant rumble on the main roads, but here, we might as well be in a snow globe, isolated in our own winter wonderland.

A sudden impact between my shoulder blades makes me jerk upright.

I turn slowly and find JJ standing near my crushed car. She's bundled in a puffy jacket that makes her look twice her size, and a bright blue knit hat is pulled low over her ears. She's sunk nearly to her knees in snow, her boots covered from the effort of wading through the white expanse.

"Did you just throw a snowball at me?" I ask.

"Me? Never." Her innocent expression is betrayed by the telltale red of her gloved hands dusted with snow.

"Uh-huh." I bend down, casually scooping snow into my gloved hand. "Because it felt like someone declared war."

"You wouldn't," she challenges, but she's already backing up, her movements labored as she struggles through the deep snow.

"Wouldn't I?" I pack the snow tight, my eyes never leaving her.

She squeals and attempts to duck behind my car, but the deep snow turns her quick escape into a comical, high-kneed trudge. My snowball sails past where she stood moments before, disappearing into the drift behind her.

I crouch behind her car, gathering ammunition. The snow is perfect for snowballs—wet enough to hold together, but not so slushy it falls apart.

"You know I'm going to win this, right?"

"Big talk from a man who just missed!" Her voice comes from somewhere to my left.

I peek around the bumper just in time to see another snowball flying toward me. I dodge, but not fast enough. It clips my shoulder, exploding in a spray of white.

“Two points for me!” she crows.

“Oh, it’s on now.” I launch myself from behind the car, snowball in hand.

JJ shrieks and attempts to run, but her movements are slow and cumbersome. Her boots leave deep impressions as she struggles forward, sinking with each step.

I pursue, finding it only marginally easier with my longer, stronger legs. Each step requires effort, lifting my knees high to clear the snow’s surface, then plunging down into the cold white mass.

Just as I’m about to catch her, my foot hits a patch of ice hidden beneath the snow. I slide, arms windmilling, before regaining my balance.

She uses my momentary stumble to her advantage, pelting me with a rapid-fire series of snowballs she must have prepared while I was shoveling.

“That’s cheating!” I call out, laughing as I advance on her while shielding my face from the icy projectiles.

“Payback for monopoly.”

I lunge forward, struggling through the deep powder to grab her around the waist before she can throw another snowball. She squeals as I lift her off her feet, spinning her in a circle.

“Put me down!” she demands, but she’s laughing too hard to sound threatening.

“Admit defeat first,” I counter, holding her firmly against my chest.

“Never.” She squirms in my grasp, trying to break free.

I lose my footing and we both go down, landing in a particularly deep snowdrift with her on top of me. Snow billows around us in a white cloud, some of it falling back onto our faces.

We stare at each other, breathing hard. Her cheeks are flushed with cold and exertion, snowflakes clinging to her eyelashes and dusting her dark coily hair where they’ve escaped her hat. I’ve never seen anything more beautiful.

“You surrender yet?”

“Not a chance.”

I chuckle. “Then I guess I’ll just have to keep wearing you down.”

Reaching up, I brush snow from her face. I lift my head and press my mouth to hers. Her lips are cold, but they quickly warm under the leisurely onslaught of mine. The contrast of the frigid air around us and the heat building between our bodies is intoxicating.

I savor the moment, loving how her lips welcome me, how she feels in my arms. When I finally pull back, her eyes flutter open and I can’t resist leaning in for another kiss.

We lie there, half-buried in snow, trading lazy kisses and quiet laughs, neither of us caring about the cold seeping through our layers. I forget about the outside world, about contracts and deadlines and the life waiting beyond snow-covered streets.

Right now, it's just us. And I'm not ready for that to change.

Eventually, though, the cold becomes impossible to ignore. JJ shivers against me, her earlier exertion no longer enough to keep her warm.

"We should head inside," I say against her temple. "Before hypothermia sets in."

She nods, reluctantly pushing herself up. The movement sends more snow cascading down her coat and into her collar, making her yelp.

"Now I remember why I don't engage in snowball fights," she says, brushing at her snow-covered clothes.

I stand, pulling her against me. We're both soaked from the knees down, our gloves and sleeves wet from the snow.

"Was it worth it?"

Her smile is answer enough. "Maybe."

I guide her up the four flights of stairs to her apartment, one hand at the small of her back, enjoying the feel of her in my arms. Throwing open her front door, I spot the glowing overhead lights.

"The power's back."

I don't like it. The roads will clear soon and this little snowstorm bubble we've been living in will come to an end.

"Thank heavens," she breathes, immediately heading for the thermostat to turn up the heat. "I was starting to think we'd never have electricity again."

I close the door behind us, already shedding my wet outer layers. “We were running low on candles, anyway.”

JJ makes a beeline for the TV remote while I put my phone on the charger.

“... authorities urging residents to stay off the roads unless absolutely necessary,” the anchor is saying. “Crews are working around the clock, but many side streets remain impassable. Schools will remain closed through at least Wednesday, possibly longer depending on conditions.”

JJ and I exchange a look. “Wednesday? That’s three more days,” she says.

“Looks like we’re stuck with each other a little longer,” I observe, watching her carefully for her reaction.

Her expression gives little away, but the slight upturn at the corner of her mouth tells me all I need to know. “I think I can manage.” She stands, plucking at her wet clothes. “But not in these. I’m freezing.”

While JJ showers, I check my messages. Dozens of emails and a few texts from Kamal and Antonio, checking in. I send quick responses, letting everyone know I’m fine but snowed in.

When JJ emerges from the bathroom wrapped in a fluffy robe, her hair piled atop her head, I’m still engrossed in catching up on work correspondence.

“Your turn,” she says, gesturing to the bathroom. “I left you a clean towel.”

The hot shower is blissful after the cold. I take my time, letting the steam and heat melt away the last of the chill from our snow adventure. By the time I emerge wearing sweatpants and a t-shirt, I feel human again.

I find JJ at the dining table, surrounded by papers, face screwed up in concentration. She's changed into leggings and an oversized sweater, her feet bare despite the lingering chill in the apartment.

"What's all this?" I ask, gesturing to the spread of documents.

She looks up, startled, as if she'd forgotten I was here. "Oh, um, just some work stuff. I have to prepare for an interview."

I move closer, curious. "Interview? Are you looking for a new job?"

She hesitates, then sighs. "Vice principal position. At my school. The current VP is retiring at the end of the year, and they're interviewing internal candidates first."

This is news to me. "I didn't know you were interested in administration."

"It's always been the plan," she admits, shuffling papers nervously. "Teach for ten years, move into administration, eventually become a principal and then possibly superintendent. The timeline's a bit accelerated—I've only been teaching for five years—but the opportunity's too good to pass up."

I sit across from her, genuinely impressed. "That's amazing, JJ. When's the interview?"

"Next Monday. Assuming the roads are clear by then." She grimaces.

"Let me help," I offer, reaching for one of the papers on the table.

She snatches it away. "You?"

"I own a billion-dollar company," I remind her. "I interview people for a living. I

know what makes a candidate stand out.”

“This is different from corporate hiring.”

“The fundamentals are the same. Confidence. Clear communication. Evidence of past success.” I lean forward, challenging her with my gaze. “Let me help, JJ.”

After a moment’s consideration, she slides a sheet toward me. “These are the expected questions. I’ve been drafting responses.”

I scan the list, noting the expected mix of experience questions, scenario-based problems, and leadership philosophy inquiries. “Standard stuff. What are you most worried about?”

She chews her lip, an endearing gesture she does when thinking deeply. “The leadership questions, I think. I have plenty of classroom experience, but my leadership roles have been limited. Committee work, some department coordination.”

“Tell me about your leadership philosophy,” I prompt, slipping into interview mode. “What kind of leader would you be as Vice Principal?”

She straightens, switching into a more professional posture that fascinates me. It’s like watching her put on armor.

“I believe educational leadership should be collaborative and student-centered,” she begins, her voice taking on a confident cadence.

“Administrators should support teachers so they can do their best work, which ultimately benefits students. I’d focus on open communication, evidence-based decision making, and creating a culture where everyone feels valued and heard.”

I nod, impressed. She doesn't half-ass anything. Not work, not arguments, not even avoiding me when she wants to. And that's why I know she's going to get this job—because no one could do it better than her.

“Good. Now give me a specific example of how you've demonstrated that philosophy in your current role.”

As she launches into an example about restructuring her department's curriculum approach, I watch her come alive. Her hands gesture expressively, her eyes bright with passion for her work. It's captivating.

“What?” she asks, breaking off mid-sentence when she notices my focused stare.

I lean back in my chair, watching her with undisguised appreciation. “Nothing,” I say. “I like watching you when you're in control. It's... attractive.”

JJ clears her throat, shuffling papers unnecessarily. “Focus, Jaxon. You're supposed to be helping me prepare, not... whatever that look is.”

“What look?” I ask innocently, though we both know exactly what look I'm giving her.

“The one that says you're thinking about taking off my clothes instead of asking interview questions.”

I don't bother with denying it. “I can multitask. Next question.”

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“Scenario,” Jaxon says, moving from across the table to sit beside me. “A parent is upset about their child’s grade and demands you override the teacher’s assessment. How do you respond?”

We’ve been at this for nearly an hour, him asking increasingly challenging questions while I respond with growing confidence. He seems genuinely impressed by my answers, though his attention occasionally wanders to my lips.

I cross my legs, hyper-conscious of his proximity, but determined to maintain my professional composure.

“I’d listen to the parent’s concerns,” I begin, “then explain our grading policies and the teacher’s autonomy in their classroom.

I’d offer to facilitate a conversation between the parent and teacher, but make it clear that I support my staff’s professional judgment unless there’s evidence of a serious error or unfairness.

“Good,” he murmurs, his hand moving up my leg under the table. “Very diplomatic.”

I swallow a moan when his fingers trace maddening patterns on my thigh, but I don’t move away. His touch sends electricity through me, even through the fabric of my leggings.

“Are you trying to distract me, Mr. Jamison?”

“Not at all, Vice Principal Jamison,” he counters as his fingers make contact with my

sex. “I’m testing your ability to maintain focus under pressure. Critical skill in administration.”

“Jamison is your name, not mine,” I correct him automatically. “And if this is your idea of interview preparation, your HR department must have quite the file on you.”

“Smith for now,” he states with certainty, not withdrawing his touch. His eyes hold mine with unwavering confidence. “And I maintain strict professional boundaries in business. It’s one of the reasons I’m successful. I can separate personal from professional.”

I open my mouth to fire back a response, but his fingers press just right, stealing my breath.

“Tell me, JJ,” he says, his voice a low purr, “would you like me to stop? Or should I keep testing your... composure?”

“I’m perfectly capable of maintaining composure under any circumstance,” I challenge.

I straighten my posture and meet his gaze directly.

“Continue with the next question. Unless you’re concerned with my ability to answer coherently despite your.

.. techniques. In which case, perhaps you’re the one lacking in your abilities.

His hand slides higher, slipping beneath the hem of my sweater to find the bare skin of my stomach. The touch is so intimate, so deliberately provocative that I must fight to keep my breathing steady.

“What innovations would you bring to the school’s professional development program?”

I manage to answer, drawing on my prepared notes about collaborative learning communities and peer observation cycles. My voice remains admirably steady even as his fingers drift tantalizingly along my nipples.

It’s only when he leans in to press a kiss to the sensitive spot below my ear that my response falls apart.

“That’s not fair.” I tilt my head to give him better access despite my half-hearted protest.

“Leadership requires adapting to unexpected situations,” he says, his lips brushing against my skin with each word. “Consider this practical experience.”

A laugh bubbles up from my chest, quickly transforming into a soft moan as his teeth graze my earlobe. The sensation travels the length of my body, collecting at the pit of my stomach.

“This isn’t exactly what the interview committee has in mind.”

“Their loss.”

He shifts, turning my chair to face him and lifting me effortlessly onto his lap, so I straddle him. The sudden movement startles a gasp out of me, but any protest dies on my lips when I feel the hard length of him pressed against my core. This new position puts us face to face.

“Much better,” he says. “I think you’ve practiced enough for one day.”

My hands come to rest on his broad shoulders, neither pushing him away nor pulling him closer. I'm balanced on a knife's edge of wanting.

"You think?"

"I know." He runs his hands up my thighs, his touch confident and possessive. My body responds to him, almost against my will. "You're more than ready. Smart, prepared, passionate about education. They'd be idiots not to hire you."

His belief in me makes me happy. It's not a line to get me into bed; he actually means it.

"You really think so?"

"I know so."

He presses a kiss to my lips. The tenderness in the gesture makes my heart flutter uncomfortably. "You're going to be an amazing Vice Principal, JJ."

I kiss him back, my hands sliding up to cradle his face. His stubble is rough against my palms, a masculine contrast to the unexpected gentleness of his words.

A moan escapes my lips when his fingers trace a heated path up my spine, pressing into the small of my back and sending tendrils of desire radiating outwards.

He kisses me like he's starved for it, like I'm the only thing that can satisfy him, and it's intoxicating.

I reach between us, my fingers tracing the outline of his erection through the fabric of his sweatpants. He sucks in a sharp breath, his hips jerking upward.

I smile, enjoying the effect I have on him.

“Too many clothes,” I murmur, echoing his earlier sentiment.

I shift back, giving myself enough room to slip my hand inside his sweatpants. He lifts his hips, helping me as I push the fabric down to free his erection.

His dick springs out and I wrap my hand around him, marveling at the silken heat, the rigid strength. He groans, his body shuddering as I stroke him slowly, my thumb circling the sensitive tip.

His hands find the waistband of my leggings, pushing them down over my hips. I lift myself up, allowing him to slide them down my legs. They join his sweatpants on the floor, leaving us both naked from the waist down.

I position myself over him and slide down easily, taking in every inch of him. His hands grip my hips as I begin to move, rising and falling, my body taking what it needs from his.

The feeling is intense, the pressure building inside me with each thrust, each grind of our bodies. His hands guide my movements, his hips thrusting up to meet mine. The sound of our bodies coming together fills the room, driving us both higher and higher.

I can feel him getting close, can feel the urgency in his touch, his kiss. It pushes me over the edge, my body convulsing around him, my cry of release echoing through the room.

Jaxon follows me a moment later, his body shuddering, his groan guttural. We cling to each other, our bodies slick with sweat, our breaths coming in ragged gasps.

“I was thinking,” Jaxon says casually two days later as he watches me gather the dice,

“we should go on a proper date when we get back to civilization.”

In the background, Patsy Cline hums low from the speaker, the mournful notes of “You Belong to Me” floating over the room. It’s the kind of song that seeps into your skin.

“A date?”

The board game lies between us on the living room floor, our makeshift fortress of pillows and blankets creating an intimate cocoon around us.

We’ve arranged ourselves like children at a sleepover, cross-legged and competitive—though what we’ve been doing for the last few days has been decidedly adult.

The memory of his hands on my body lingers, making my skin tingle even now. I’ve experienced more orgasms in these snow-bound days than in years of previous relationships combined.

“Yes, Jessa, a date,” he confirms. “It’s this social custom where two people who are attracted to each other spend time together, usually involving food or an activity.”

I drop the dice onto the board, buying myself time with the simple action. “Sounds fake. Who invented this?”

“Some genius who realized people like foreplay before commitment.”

“Who says I need foreplay?”

“Oh, sweetheart,” he drawls, “I’d say you more than enjoy it.”

Heat creeps up my body in waves, starting at my core and spreading. I refuse to give him the satisfaction of a reaction, channeling my energy into moving my game piece instead.

The music shifts to George Strait. Jaxon perks up, mouthing along to the chorus like he can't help himself.

"You always get flirty when George plays," I say, not quite smiling.

"George Strait's been singing people into bad decisions for decades," he replies, grinning. "Come on, JJ." His voice softens, the teasing replaced with sincerity. "Say yes."

"To what?" I feign ignorance.

He reaches out, lazily tracing a finger along my wrist. The simple touch sparks a sensation that races through me, leaving a trail of goosebumps in its wake.

"To dinner. At a restaurant," he murmurs. "You and me."

Part of me wants to climb into his lap and say yes. I picture walking into a restaurant hand in hand, feeling like the luckiest woman in the world. And God, I want it. I want it more than I should.

But then I picture what comes after—the expectations, the complications, the inevitable fallout when Jaxon realizes I'm not the kind of woman he wants to build a life with. Better to end it now, before I start believing in something that can't last.

"I appreciate what you're trying to do," I say. "But we're too different. You're you and I'm me and this would never work."

The words feel wrong. Too small for what's between us.

"Why not?" His thumb traces my lower lip, and I have to fight not to lean into the touch. "Because I'm wealthy? Because your brother is my business partner and best friend? Because we argue?"

"Because this was just sex," I blurt out. "You'll get bored, then you'll move on to the next challenge."

"Is this what you truly believe? That you're just a conquest to me?"

"Yes, Jaxon." I double down.

"I've wanted you since we were teenagers," he says. "This isn't a game to me, JJ. It never has been."

"What?" I whisper, shock rippling through me.

"Why do you think I showed up at every family dinner your parents invited me to? Why do you think I've never had a serious relationship?" He presses his forehead against mine. "Because no one else has ever measured up to you. No one else challenges me, frustrates me, excites me the way you do."

I shake my head, unwilling to believe what I'm hearing. "That's insane."

"Maybe." He smiles. "But it's the truth."

His hands tighten on my waist. "Give us a chance," he says.

"I have no interest in a relationship at this point in my life, and you're the last man I'd want a relationship with."

The shift in atmosphere is immediate. The warmth in his gaze is gone and the teasing edge in his voice vanishes. I feel the loss acutely.

And I hate it. But I don't take it back.

"You're right," he says finally. "We're not compatible. The woman sitting before me now is a liar and I don't want any associations with liars."

"Don't do this, Jaxon."

"Do what? Ask for honesty?" His eyes bore into mine. "I told you how I feel about you, and you want to continue to pretend there isn't a connection between us. A connection that's always been there, under everything else. You can't tell me you don't feel it too."

"What I feel is the need for my freedom," I say firmly, gathering my resolve. "My life is exactly how I want it. Independent. Uncomplicated."

"And lonely?"

"Being alone isn't the same as being lonely," I counter, ignoring the voice in my head asking if I believe that. "I'm exactly where I want to be."

His jaw tightens as he studies me, eyes darkening with something that looks like hurt.

"Message received," he says, as he rises to his feet in one fluid motion. The warmth of his body leaves mine, and the sudden absence feels more significant than it should.

I remain seated on the floor, fingers idly spinning a game piece as I watch him gather his things from around my apartment. His movements are efficient and quick.

“The weather report says the roads should be clear by morning,” he comments. “I’ll be out of your hair first thing.”

He doesn’t look at me when he says it.

I nod, not trusting myself to speak. Because if I do, I might ask him to stay. And that would just delay my heartbreak.

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The tow truck driver finishes hooking up my car and tightening the chains. The early morning air is crisp, but my body is warm with the slow burn of frustration simmering beneath my skin.

“She’s good to go,” the driver says, giving the chains one last tug before straightening. “We’ll drop it at the shop.”

“Fine.”

He waits a beat, maybe expecting more, but I’m not in the mood for small talk. After a moment, he shrugs, climbing into the truck. The engine rumbles to life as he pulls away with my car in tow.

I glance up at her forth-floor apartment window, curtains still drawn. She’s probably still curled under those flannel sheets, knees tucked to her chest.

I hadn’t bothered waking her. What was there to say that hadn’t been said last night?

“I have no interest in a relationship at this point in my life, and you’re the last man I’d want a relationship with.”

I exhale harshly, my breath fogging in the cold air. I’m done chasing a woman who doesn’t want to be caught.

At least, that’s what I tell myself as I climb into the rented SUV and pull away from the parking lot of her building.

I step into my penthouse at 7:00 AM as the security system chimes its welcome. It greets me with climate-controlled perfection and the hushed reverence of expensive emptiness. Everything is as I left it.

“Lights, sixty percent,” I command, and the apartment responds immediately. Unlike some people, technology at least does what I tell it to do.

I toe off my boots, and the silence presses immediately. No soft laughter from the other room. No scent of that jasmine lotion she applies after showering. No lingering warmth from a woman who swore she didn’t want me, even as she trembled in my arms.

My footsteps echo across the marble floor as I move through the living room. The Italian leather furniture is precisely arranged, the art pieces perfectly aligned and the glass surfaces spotless. The cleaning service came yesterday, as scheduled.

I roll my shoulders, trying to shake off the weight pressing against my chest. It’s fine. This is how I like it—quiet.

But the lie settles uncomfortably in my gut.

My phone buzzes. A message from Antonio. I should respond and review the quarterly projections. Instead, I head to the home gym. The need to move, to release the restless energy inside me is overwhelming.

Music blasts through the speakers, a heavy bassline rattling the walls as I push through my workout. I go through the motions—lifting, pressing, stretching—but nothing settles the irritation eating at me.

Sweat courses down my body as I increase the weight again. Pain is irrelevant. Weakness is unacceptable. I push until muscles scream in protest, until each breath

burns in my lungs.

This was just sex.

Her voice echoes in my head and cut deeper than they should. I slam the barbell back onto the rack, the metal clanging violently. The frame shudders, but it's nothing compared to the turmoil swirling within me.

JJ lied to me. I saw it in her eyes, in the way she held herself stiff, as if saying it aloud would make it true. She's running scared, and I'm left here with no playbook or strategy to prove my good intentions.

A week passes. I lose myself in work.

Meetings blur into deals into contracts into expansion proposals.

The office becomes my refuge and my prison.

I arrive before dawn and leave well after dark, letting spreadsheets and conference calls fill the spaces where thoughts of her would creep in.

The grind should be enough. I tell myself it is enough.

It's not.

Because no matter how many hours I work, no matter how many projects I sign off on, JJ remains stubbornly lodged in my thoughts. And despite all my business acumen, all my supposed skills at negotiation, I'm no closer to figuring out how to win over the one person who matters.

"The team is waiting in the conference room," my assistant, Claire, says as I skim

through the latest acquisition report.

“Let them wait,” I mutter.

Claire hesitates. I can sense her standing there, arms crossed in a way that means she’s about to step beyond professional boundaries. I allow this from her because strategic leaders understand the value of having an assistant who speaks the truth without fear.

“You’ve been on a warpath all week,” she finally says. “Are you okay?”

I lift a brow, meeting her gaze directly. “Do I look like I want to talk about my feelings, Claire?”

She snorts. “No. But you also don’t usually bite people’s heads off for breathing too loudly, so I figured I’d check.”

I don’t dignify that with a response. Instead, I grab my tablet and head to the conference room, ignoring the look she shoots my way.

Inside, Kamal and Antonio are already seated, along with half a dozen department heads. The room buzzes with the low chatter of pre-meeting conversations.

I take my seat at the head. Even as equal owners, Kamal and Antonio flank me on either side, a formation that emerged organically from our earliest days coding in Kamal’s bedroom.

What began with three outcasts huddled around a salvaged computer has transformed into JAK Innovations—named for our initials and built on our complementary strengths.

The department heads wait for my cue. Their postures reflect varying degrees of deference. It's surreal sometimes how the world bends to accommodate my ambition rather than the other way around. How the skills that once made me a target in high school now make me formidable.

Everyone except JJ. She alone has seen through every layer of my transformation, from the awkward teenager to the man who commands boardrooms. She's the only person who's never been impressed by how far I've come.

The dichotomy fascinates me. In this room, I control billions with a word or gesture. Companies rise or fall at my command. Yet with her, my usual strategies crumble to nothing.

Logic dictates I should cut my losses. Reallocate resources. Move forward. That's what I'd tell any associate about a deal this problematic. Identify the sunk cost and pivot. Walk away.

But JJ isn't a failed acquisition. She's the only woman I've ever loved.

Seven days of silence stretch between us like a chasm. No text. No call. No sign she's reconsidering. Each passing hour amplifies my frustration until it's pacing inside my chest and clawing at my concentration.

JJ thinks I'll move on. That I'll get bored, just as she predicted. That I'll prove every doubt she's ever harbored was justified. The thought ignites a determination that burns hotter than anger.

She forgets who she's dealing with.

I didn't build a multi-billion-dollar empire by accepting defeat. I see what others miss. I recognize value before the market catches on. I persist when competitors

retreat.

And suddenly, clarity breaks through the haze of defeat. My marriage isn't a lost cause. It's my most important investment. JJ isn't pushing me away because she doesn't care; she's protecting herself because she cares too much.

The realization transforms my frustration into purpose. My wife is a woman worth convincing she's the center of my universe. Because she is. And I'll find a way to prove it to her.

One of the junior execs, Eric, clears his throat and I'm pulled back to the present. "We should delay the Phoenix rollout another quarter," he says, shifting nervously under my hardening stare. "It would give us more time to—"

"No." I don't need to raise my voice.

Eric shifts in his seat, clearly uncomfortable with challenging me, but foolishly committed to his position. "With all due respect, sir, if we—"

I place my hand flat on the table. The gesture itself is minimal, but the effect is immediate. Complete silence falls across the room. I maintain eye contact with Eric.

"Eric." I say, calmly. "When I hired you, was it for your expertise in market timing?"

"N-no, sir."

"Then explain to me why you believe your assessment should override mine on a decision that affects fifty million in projected revenue?" I lean forward. "Or perhaps you'd prefer we discuss the user experience testing that was due on my desk yesterday?"

The color drains from his face. “I’ll get the testing results to you today,” he manages, eyes dropping to the table.

“Two hours,” I correct him. “And a revised timeline for Phoenix that doesn’t involve delays.”

No one else dares to speak.

The meeting wraps up tense and awkward, and as soon as the last person shuffles out, my two business partners turn on me.

“What the hell was that?” Kamal asks, arms crossed.

Antonio studies me like I’m a puzzle missing half its pieces. “Yeah, man. You usually rip people apart with a little more finesse.”

I exhale sharply, pinching the bridge of my nose. “Drop it.”

Kamal scoffs. “Not a chance.” He jerks his head toward the door. “Come on.”

I’m not in the mood to be questioned. I should tell them to back the hell off, that it’s none of their business. Instead, I follow Kamal down the hall, with Antonio on my heels.

We enter Kamal’s a spacious corner office where his collection of African art is displayed.

Hand-carved Makonde figures stand in illuminated cases.

A massive Senufo mask dominates one wall, while a massive Benin bronze mask watches over the room.

Unlike the minimalism of my own office, Kamal's space tells a story of his heritage and travels.

Dominating the center of the room is a championship-sized pool table. Its burgundy felt a perfect complement to the mahogany bookshelves lining the walls. Kamal immediately moves toward it, selecting a cue from the custom rack beneath a striking Maasai warrior shield.

"Here." He tosses a cue each to Antonio and me. "Maybe knocking some balls around will loosen that jaw of yours."

Antonio catches his easily. "Last time we played, I believe someone owes me a rematch."

We play in tense silence for several minutes, the soft click of balls and occasional sigh the only sounds. After I miss an easy shot—my third in a row—Kamal leans against the table, levels me with a no-bullshit stare.

"Talk."

"JJ wants to annul our marriage."

Absolute silence fills the room.

Antonio freezes mid-shot. "Come again?"

"JJ and I are married."

Kamal finally speaks. "Nah. Nah. You playin'." His voice is the kind of calm that comes before a man commits murder.

I meet his gaze directly. “Do I look like a man who jokes about marriage?”

I give them a straightforward account of Vegas, the snowstorm, being trapped for nearly two weeks. I’m selective with details, careful to preserve JJ’s dignity while making no excuses for my actions.

“Bruh... you married my sister?” Kamal’s face contorts through a series of emotions I’ve never seen on him before. He gestures with his cue stick in disbelief. “What the hell were you thinking?” His voice rises now, cue stick jabbing toward me.

“I love her,” I admit easily. “I’ve been in love with her for years, Kamal.”

Antonio, who’s been silently taking in the scene, snorts from across the room where he’s examining a bronze sculpture with manufactured interest. “Amor? You?”

Unlike Kamal and me in our suits, Antonio’s dressed in designer jeans and an unbuttoned blazer over a graphic tee.

“It’s not that shocking,” I counter, though Antonio’s skeptical expression suggests otherwise.

“Jaxon, meu amigo, this is like hearing a shark say he’s gone vegan.” Antonio crosses to the bar cart, pouring himself a drink.

Kamal’s lips twist. “You and Jessa can’t have a conversation without biting each other’s heads off.”

“JJ’s stubborn as hell and believes she isn’t relationship material,” I say. “But I can’t stop loving her and frankly, I don’t want to.”

Antonio moves between us. “From what you’ve told us, it seems Jessa doesn’t feel

the same way.”

“She does, but she’s holding herself back. Some asshole spooked her.” My jaw tightens. “I’m giving her time before I convince her we’re meant to be.”

Kamal laughs incredulously. “This ain’t one of your business deals where you strong-arm folks into giving you what you want.”

“Listen to the man who actually grew up with her,” Antonio adds, perching on Kamal’s desk. “Your steamroller approach might work in boardrooms, but Jessa’s immune to your intimidation tactics.”

“I grew up with her too,” I remind them, my patience thinning. “And I’m not afraid of a challenge.”

“This isn’t a challenge. It’s a disaster waiting to happen,” Antonio warns. “Jessa’s—”

“My wife,” I interrupt.

“You realize she’s going to kill you, right? Actually kill you,” Kamal says, replacing his cue beside the shield. “And I might help her hide the body.”

“I’ll take my chances.”

“You’re completely loco. Certifiably insane, meu irm?o.”

“Speaking of things that happened in Vegas,” I say, leveling my gaze at Antonio, “were you going to tell us about Jasmine being in your suite in Vegas?”

Antonio’s smooth confidence falters. “What?”

“Saw her leaving your room when I came looking for you.”

Kamal’s head snaps to Antonio. “You and Jasmine?”

“That’s—” Antonio waves dismissively. “Completely irrelevant.”

“Says who?”

“Nice try changing the subject, Jaxon, but we’re not done discussing you and Jessa.” Antonio’s expression shifts, a mischievous grin spreading across his face. “Because I have a way for you to get Jessa to admit her feelings.”

I narrow my eyes, instinctively wary. Antonio’s ideas always mean trouble.

Kamal groans, rubbing his temples. “Oh, hell. This is gonna be some bullshit.”

Antonio ignores him. “You want to know how Jessa really feels about you?”

“Obviously.”

“Then you need to make her see what she’s missing.”

Antonio’s brilliance in business often translates to drama in personal matters. Exactly what I don’t need with JJ.

“The last time I agreed to one of your schemes, I ended up banned from the Venetian with a Sicilian family convinced I’d promised to import their special olive oil,” I remind him.

Antonio laughs. “Did you die though? My schemes work out in the end.”

Kamal crosses his arms. “I’m with Jaxon. Your ideas are insane ninety percent of the time.”

“And the other ten percent?” Antonio challenges, replacing the figurine carefully.

“Revolutionary,” Kamal admits reluctantly. “But this is my sister, not a product launch.”

I take a deep breath, already regretting my next words. “What’s your brilliant idea?”

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My phone vibrates in my bag as I wait for Jasmine to exit the dressing room.

Principal Watkins's name flashes on the screen, and my heart seizes in my chest. It's been exactly one week since the interview and alternating between hope and anxiety, with thoughts of Jaxon intruding every time I try to focus on anything else.

"I need to take this," I tell Meesha, moving toward the dressing room's entrance.

"Ms. Mitchell," Principal Watkins's warm voice fills my ear. "I hope I'm not catching you at a bad time."

"Not at all," I reply.

"I wanted to personally let you know that after careful consideration, the school board has unanimously decided to offer you the position of vice principal at Winter Bay Elementary."

The world seems to slow around me. The boutique's music fades into the background as Principal Watkins continues talking about start dates and transitional meetings, but I can barely process the details. I made it. After years of working toward this goal, I actually made it.

"Thank you," I manage to say, though my voice is thick with emotion. "I'm honored. Truly."

As I end the call, promising to return the signed paperwork, an overwhelming urge washes over me. Before I can second-guess myself, my fingers are scrolling to

Jaxon's name in my contacts.

It's been ten days since he left. Ten days of making lists in my head about why this is for the best, why we wouldn't work, why I'm better off alone. Ten days of lying to myself, and failing miserably at pretending I don't miss him.

But in this moment of triumph, he's the person I want to share it with first. Not my friends waiting inside, not my brother, not even my parents—but Jaxon.

But would he answer?

The doubt paralyzes me just long enough for Jasmine to call out for me.

“Jessa! Is this dress too much for Kamal's party?” Jasmine asks, twirling once when I reenter the dressing room.

I tuck my phone away, pulse quickening at the thought of Saturday's confrontation. Three days until I face Jaxon, who'll probably look unfairly gorgeous in one of those tailored suits at my brother's birthday bash.

Antonio insisted on throwing the party with only three days' notice, claiming thirty deserved something special. Forcing my thoughts on Jasmine, I focus on what she's wearing.

The dress is a deep burgundy cocktail-length sheath that hugs her figure with a tasteful slit and off-shoulder neckline. She looks stunning, and will fit what Antonio described as a “sophisticated but chill” gathering.

“I like it,” I tell her.

We've been at this boutique for over two hours now, champagne glasses in hand

(courtesy of the boutique's excellent customer service), watching Jasmine's parade of potential party outfits. Meesha and I found our dresses within the first twenty minutes.

I selected an emerald cocktail dress that hit just above the knee, and Meesha chose a sophisticated plum wrap dress.

Jasmine's selection process has turned into an afternoon-long saga when she is typically the one who walks into a store, selects perfect items, while Meesha and I are still browsing the first rack.

"This the one," Meesha says, her verdict carrying weight as our resident fashion expert.

I approach Jasmine and check the fit, tugging on the back. My mind circles back to how Jaxon and how much I miss him.

"Ouch!" Jasmine flinches, her hands flying protectively to her chest.

"Did I hurt you? I'm sorry." I pull back immediately. "Is the fabric scratchy?"

"My breasts are too tender for all that pulling," Jasmine explains.

"You're probably PMSing, girl. Happens to me all the time," Meesha offers from her seat.

Jasmine's posture stiffens. Looking at her through the mirror, I notice the tightening in her throat. Her hand drifts to her stomach and her light brown eyes widen before blinking rapidly.

"Girl, are you okay?" I ask, concerned.

Jasmine clears her throat and forces a smile. "I'm good," she replies. "Let's see about buying this dress."

While waiting for the store attendant, Meesha enthusiastically discusses her wedding.

"With only sixteen days left, I'm freaking out about finalizing everything."

The caterer needs the final headcount by Tuesday because Connor's mom keeps calling her to change it, the florist keeps pushing for decisions on centerpieces, and the DJ wants our must-play list ASAP."

"Let's schedule a planning session on Monday evening," I suggest, grateful for a concrete task to focus on beyond Saturday's encounter. "We can knock out all the remaining decisions in one three-hour block instead of these scattered conversations."

I created a master spreadsheet tracking every wedding task, color-coded by deadline and priority level. Meesha initially laughed at my organizational system, but now refers to it as her "wedding bible."

Despite talks of the wedding, I can't help noticing Jasmine's unusual silence. She sits with perfect posture, nodding occasionally while her gaze drifts repeatedly to the calendar hanging behind the counter, as if calculating dates in her head.

Meesha's vibrating phone interrupts the conversation. She glances down at it, and I catch the worried frown creasing her brow. She turns the phone off and puts it into her purse.

"There's something I've been wanting to talk to you girls about." Her perfectly manicured nail traced the rim of her champagne glass, creating a faint, crystalline hum. "My heart's been filled with guilt since Vegas."

The air in the boutique suddenly feels too warm. I look down at my hands, studying my cuticles to avoid making eye contact with either of them.

What could Meesha possibly have done that was worse than what I did?

“You didn’t do something stupid like getting married in Vegas, did you?” I make myself look up, struggling to keep my expression neutral.

Meesha’s head jerks backward. “What? Of course not!”

“Well, you did say you felt guilty,” I say. “And it is the only thing I could come up with that would make you feel that way.”

“Getting married in Vegas is tacky. I could never,” Meesha responds.

“I feel you, girl,” Jasmine adds.

My shoulders tense at the unintentional jab. Great, now my wedding is officially “tacky” before I even explain myself. So much for my big confession. I’m definitely not telling them today.

“Come on, do we really have to talk about Vegas?” Jasmine interjects before I could speak.

“I want to talk about it,” Meesha insists. “I did something bad. It’s been eating at me.”

“Did you kill someone?” Jasmine asks with a raised eyebrow.

“Of course not!” Meesha recoils, looking genuinely offended at the suggestion.

“Then what happened in Vegas should stay in Vegas,” I say, infusing my voice with a finality.

“I couldn’t agree more,” Jasmine chimes in, her voice unusually quick. “Let’s talk instead about Jessa being snowed in with Mr. Tall, Dark, and Hostile.”

“Excuse me?”

“Oh, don’t play innocent,” Jasmine says. “You were trapped alone for seven days with your nemesis?” She emphasizes the word with air quotes and a smirk. “That must have been... interesting.”

The memory of Jaxon’s hands on my skin, his mouth against mine, flashes through my mind. I take another sip of champagne, hoping the flush I feel rising isn’t visible on my face.

“It was... fine,” I say. “We were civil.”

“Civil?” Meesha repeats incredulously. “Girl, please. You’ve been crushing on that man since you were twelve.”

“I have not!” My protest comes too quickly, too forcefully.

“Mmm-hmm.” Jasmine’s expression is painfully smug. “That’s why you always complain about his girlfriends. Nobody gets that worked up about other women unless there are feelings involved.”

I roll my eyes. “Dislike is a feeling too, you know.”

“So what did you guys even do for a nine days?” Meesha presses, clearly not ready to drop the subject.

My mind races through the highlights. Jaxon cooking breakfast shirtless, board games by candlelight, his body moving above mine, inside me. I drain my champagne in one gulp.

“Nothing exciting. He helped with my interview prep for the vice principal position and we played board games.” I’m not exactly lying, just omitting the parts where we couldn’t keep our hands off each other.

Jasmine narrows her eyes. “You’re being weird.”

“What? No, I’m not.”

“Yes, you are,” Meesha joins in. “You’re doing that thing where you twist your bracelet when you’re holding something back.”

I glance down and find my fingers indeed fidgeting with my silver jewelry. I force my hands to still. “There’s nothing to tell.”

“Something happened,” Jasmine declares, studying my face with uncomfortable intensity. “You slept with him, didn’t you?”

The directness of her question catches me off guard. “What? That’s—I wouldn’t—”

“Oh my God, you did!” Meesha practically shrieks. “Jessa Smith, after all your comments about how you can’t stand him! I knew it was sexual tension!”

“It wasn’t like that,” I protest weakly, then realize my mistake.

“So you admit it!” Jasmine looks triumphant, exchanging a high-five with Meesha. “Finally! We’ve been watching you two circle each other for years.”

“No, you haven’t,” I counter, “because there’s been nothing to watch. It was just... a storm thing. Confined spaces, unusual circumstances.”

“And now?” Meesha asks, her excitement dimming slightly at my tone.

I think of how he left without saying goodbye and how he hasn’t reached out despite making it seem like he wanted more. “Now nothing. He called me a liar and left.”

“What happened?” Jasmine’s voice softens, her teasing replaced with genuine concern.

I shrug, aiming for casual despite the unexpected tightness in my throat. “He wanted a relationship, and I told him I was only interested in sex. When I woke up, he was gone.”

“Are you kidding me?” Meesha’s voice rises an octave. “The man finally tells you he wants you, and you shut him down?”

“Jessa, we love you, but you’re being an idiot.”

“Excuse me?” I glare at Jasmine, but she doesn’t care.

“You’ve been half in love with that man since the sixth grade.”

I scoff. “That’s ridicu—”

“Oh, really?” Meesha narrows her eyes. “So you didn’t convince one of his girlfriends to take her old boyfriend back?”

“Estella was still in love with her ex,” I argue. “I was being a matchmaker.”

Meesha snorts. “Girl. You made us eat gas station ice cream in the parking lot on Easter because Jaxon showed up with another woman and you suddenly wanted to start a new tradition.”

My stomach drops. “That had nothing to do with Jaxon.”

Jasmine crosses her arms. “Uh-huh. And it was also a coincidence when you disappeared to that cabin for Christmas right when he started dating that marketing executive?”

I can’t ignore the evidence piling up against me. The way my heart races when he walks into a room, how I practice comebacks in my head before seeing him, the emptiness I felt watching him with that marketing executive.

“Pure coincidence.”

“Girl, please.” Meesha rolls her eyes dramatically. “You light up when he walks into a room. Right before you pick a fight.”

Have I really been this obvious all these years?

“I do not—”

“You do,” they say in unison.

Jasmine reaches across the table and takes my hand. “Look, we get it. Relationships are scary, especially when you’ve been burned before. But Jaxon isn’t Marcus.”

The mention of my ex makes me wrinkle my nose. “This has nothing to do with Marcus.”

“Doesn’t it?” Meesha’s voice softens. “Since that disaster, you’ve been building walls so high nobody can climb them. But Jaxon’s been scaling them anyway, hasn’t he? That’s what scares you.”

“I’m not scared,” I say automatically, but my throat feels tight.

“Then what are you?” Jasmine challenges. “Because from where we’re sitting, you finally got what you’ve secretly wanted for years, and you panicked and pushed him away.”

“I don’t know what I want.”

Meesha sighs. “Yes, you do. You’re just afraid to admit it because then you’d have to do something about it.”

I’ve always been good at spotting patterns. I’ve always changed direction when the facts didn’t match what I thought was true. It’s what makes me a good educator. Yet here I am, clinging to a lie I’ve told myself for years, refusing to see what’s right in front of me.

“And what if it doesn’t work out?” The question bursts from me with unexpected emotion. “What if we try, and it falls apart and I lose him completely?”

“What if it works out?” Jasmine counters. “What if he’s exactly what you need, and you’re exactly what he needs?”

“The way he left...”

“You told him you didn’t want him,” Meesha points out. “What did you expect? The man has his pride.”

I sit back, feeling suddenly overwhelmed by the truth. I didn't push Jaxon away because I didn't want him. I pushed him away because I wanted him too much. Because if I let myself have him and then lost him... I wouldn't survive it.

But I've already lost him, haven't I? And somehow, I'm still breathing.

My mind races ahead, planning what comes next. Saturday's party hovers. The anxiety of seeing him mingles with unexpected importance.

What if this is my chance? What if he brings someone else? What if I never get another opportunity to tell him what I've only just admitted to myself?

"I don't know what to do."

Jasmine and Meesha exchange a look before Jasmine says, "Yes, you do. The question is whether you're brave enough to do it."

Am I?

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 2:58 am

The hotel's banquet hall buzzes with conversation and laughter as I step inside, gift tucked under my arm. My eyes scan the room and inevitably find Jaxon.

He stands near the windows, impossibly handsome in a tailored charcoal suit. Beside him stands a woman in a sleek black dress, her hand resting casually on his arm.

Something twists in my chest, but I force my expression to remain neutral. My parents approach me before I could make my way to him.

"There's my baby girl!" Dad's voice booms as he sweeps me into a bear hug, lifting me off my feet. "Where you been hiding? We ain't seen you in a minute!"

"Jamar, let the girl breathe," Mom says, her calm voice a perfect counterbalance to his enthusiasm. She waits for Dad to release me before embracing me with her characteristic warmth. "You looking good, Jessa. That green is really your color."

"Thanks, Mama." I smooth my dress, grateful for the momentary distraction from Jaxon and his companion. "How have you both been?"

"Worried 'bout you working yourself to the bone, as usual," Dad says. "Any word from that interview?"

I hesitate to share the news of my promotion. For some inexplicable reason, I want Jaxon to be the first to know.

"Still waiting," I lie, feeling a twinge of guilt. "I'll let you know soon as I hear something."

Thankfully, Kamal joins us, grinning. He's dressed in a perfectly fitted navy suit.

"Birthday boy!" I hand him the wrapped package.

"Look at you, all fancy with your gift-wrapping skills," Kamal says, weighing the package. "Heavy. Perfect corners. You ain't never gonna change, sis."

"Some habits are worth keeping."

Before Kamal can respond, movement in my peripheral vision draws my attention. Jaxon and the woman are approaching our group. My heart performs an inconvenient gymnastics routine.

"Jessa," Jaxon says with a nod, his deep voice sending a ripple of awareness through me. His eyes drag over my form appreciatively. "Good to see you."

"Likewise."

Antonio materializes beside the couple, champagne glass in hand. "Ah! I see you've all met Alyxandra!" Antonio's voice carries more enthusiasm than necessary. "Jaxon's been absolutely smitten with her since they met!"

"Has he?" Mama asks.

I glance at Antonio, whose smirk is so self-satisfied I'm tempted to step on his Italian leather loafers. Hard.

"Oh yes," Alyxandra continues, her crimson lips curving into a smile as she adjusts the thin strap of her dress. "He's a keeper."

My fingers clench around my purse as possessive thoughts blazes through my mind.

He's my husband. Mine!

Jaxon clears his throat. "If you'll excuse us," he says, a muscle tightening in his jaw.

"Jaxon, can I speak to you privately for a moment?" I interject, seizing the opportunity before it slips away.

His eyes meet mine, but before he can respond, Alyxandra suddenly stumbles forward with a small cry.

"Oh!" she gasps, gripping Jaxon's arm. "I'm so sorry. These heels are treacherous on this floor."

"Are you alright?" Jaxon asks, his attention immediately diverted as he steadies her.

"I need to sit down for a minute," she says, leaning against him with unnecessary emphasis.

Jaxon guides her to a nearby table draped in midnight blue linen and my internal temperature rises several degrees.

An hour later, I spot Jaxon standing alone at the bar. This is the first time all evening I've seen him without his shadow. It's my chance. My pulse kicks up as I step forward.

"Jaxon—"

"There you are!" the party planner interrupts, her clipboard clutched to her chest. "The photographer needs shots of Kamal with his closest friends. Right now."

I suppress a sigh as I watch them disappear into the crowd gathered around my

brother. Another moment lost.

“Girl, you need better timing,” Meesha says, appearing at my elbow with a fresh glass of wine, her plum dress making her skin glow under the ambient lighting.

Near the dessert table, with its elaborate tower of Kamal’s favorite cookies, I spot Jaxon alone at last, adjusting his cufflinks. I navigate between clusters of laughing guests with determined strides, only to have my cousin Gina intercept me three steps away from my target.

“Girl, how have you been?” she exclaims, pulling me toward a quieter corner of the room where the music is less insistent.

Over Gina’s shoulder, I catch sight of Alyxandra returning to Jaxon’s side, laughing at something he’s said and touching his arm. I really wanted to break it. It would show her to keep her hands off what’s not hers.

While Gina enthusiastically describes her upcoming baby shower, my attention splinters between politely nodding and watching Jaxon. I’m happy for Gina and Maverick. Their love story still amazes me.

Who would have thought a disastrous family vacation with her ex-husband Chris would lead her to find love with Maverick, of all people?

Maverik was the ex-husband of Chris’s girlfriend at the time.

Looking at her radiant face now, you’d never guess the drama they weathered to create their blended family.

As she speaks, I find myself wondering if relationships that begin in messiness can find their way to solid ground. If the most complicated beginnings sometimes yield

the strongest foundations.

The realization unfolds within me, reshaping everything I thought I knew. Could Jaxon and I navigate our own complicated path? Or am I clinging to fantasy, pretending our situation is something it's not?

I grab a glass of champagne from a passing waiter and down it in one desperate swallow. The bubbles burn my throat, but the alcohol does nothing to quiet the turbulence inside me.

I've spent weeks convincing myself I made the right choice in walking away. That what happened in Vegas should stay there. That marriage to a man like Jaxon could only end in heartbreak.

But watching him across the room, I recognize something I've been denying. The man I thought I knew is only part of who he is. The version of Jaxon I met in my apartment showed me how genuine and loving he can be.

Jaxon leans in to hear Alyxandra's whispered words, and it feels like a knife twisting in my heart. Not just jealousy, but the pain of possibly losing something precious before I've truly allowed myself to have it.

No. No more running. No more hiding behind excuses and fears.

"Gina, I'll catch up with you later," I say, squeezing her hand.

Before doubt and fear paralyze me, I cross the ballroom floor to the stage with trembling knees. My heartbeat thunders in my ears as I wrap my fingers around the cool metal of the microphone. The room blurs at the edges, faces becoming indistinct save Jaxon's.

Without pausing to consider the consequences, I let the opening notes of Dawn Sears' "Don't Take Your Hands Off My Heart" flow from somewhere deep inside me. If words have failed us, perhaps music can bridge the gap between what I've been saying and what I truly feel.

The room falls into a startled silence. I don't care. My gaze focuses on Jaxon across the crowded room, his expression shifting from confusion to recognition as our song fills the space.

My voice is off-key and breaking with emotion, but it holds everyone captive. The DJ catches on quickly, filling in the melody behind me as I step down from the podium, never breaking eye contact with Jaxon.

"What is she doing?" I hear my mother ask loudly.

"Singing, Dianne. The girl is singing," Dad responds with characteristic bluntness.

I move slowly through the crowd, each step bringing me closer to Jaxon, each note more vulnerable than the last. From my peripheral vision, I spot Aunt Ruby clutching Uncle Jerome's arm.

"Is she drunk?" Aunt Malina stage-whispers. "I've never heard Jessa sing in public. Not even in church."

I push their voices away, forcing myself to focus solely on Jaxon. Nothing else matters right now.

Finally, I stand before him, inches away, close enough to smell his cologne. My pride was gone, stripped away by the realization nothing was worth losing him.

"I lied," I say, standing before him and completely ignoring the woman beside him.

“Forgive me.”

His expression offers me nothing to hold on to. But I press on anyway, my heart too full to contain another moment of pretense.

“I love you, Jaxon,” I say, my voice low but somehow filling the hushed room. “I want—”

“Say it again.”

The command is quiet, but it does something to my core.

“I love you.”

“Louder.”

His eyes darken. He’s not making this easy. But neither did I.

“I love you, Jaxon! I want to be your wife forever. I don’t care that we got married in Vegas while we were drunk. I’m glad I married you. The thought of not spending the rest of my life with you fills me with dread.”

“Married?” My mother’s voice cuts through the room.

I wince, but keep my eyes locked on Jaxon’s. Stay focused, Jessa.

“Did she just say they’re married?” Jasmine asks nobody in particular.

“In Vegas!” Meesha adds, clutching her chest dramatically. “Lord have mercy!”

“When did this happen?” Dad demands, looking between Jaxon and me with wide

eyes.

I take a deep breath, mentally filing away their questions for later as I maintain my focus on Jaxon. One task at a time. Right now, that task is convincing my husband I love him.

“Are you sure, JJ?” Jaxon asks, seemingly unperturbed by the family chaos erupting around us.

“I love our bickering. I love how safe you make me feel.” My words gather momentum, tumbling out faster.

“I love how your eyes twinkle when you’re excited.

I love waking up to your tender kisses and your.

..” I trail off when I see my stunned parents across the room, my mother’s hand pressed to her mouth. “You know what.”

Jaxon’s lips twitches, the first crack in his composure, and I press on before my courage falters.

“Oh, we know what,” Aunt Ruby mutters, fanning herself vigorously with a cocktail napkin. “Sweet baby Jesus, give me strength.”

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 2:58 am

I clear my throat, determined to regain control of this moment. “I love you, and you’ve become my entire world,” I say, as I placed the microphone down on a nearby table. Everyone had heard my confession, but anything else I needed to say was just for Jaxon.

“Excuse me,” my father’s voice breaks through, closer now. “But I think we need to discuss this marriage before—”

“Not now, Dad,” I say without taking my eyes off Jaxon.

“Not now?” Mom echoes incredulously. “Jessa Smith, you just announced you got married in Vegas while intoxicated, and you don’t think we should discuss it now?”

“Jamison,” I correct automatically. “It’s Jessa Jamison.”

A collective gasp ripples through my family members.

“When were you planning to tell us?” Mom demands, her voice rising an octave.

Jaxon turns to address my family. “I will explain everything in six minutes,” he states. His tone brooks no argument as he continues. “Right now, I need five uninterrupted minutes with my wife.”

The word ‘wife’ triggers another wave of murmurs, but Jaxon’s expression silences further objections. Even my father, who has never taken orders from anyone, responds to the unmistakable authority in Jaxon’s voice.

“Ten minutes,” Dad agrees reluctantly. “Not a second more.”

With our momentary reprieve secured, Jaxon turns back to me, his eyes bright with amusement. He takes my hand in his, warm fingers rubbing small circles with his thumb against my skin. The familiar gesture calms me.

“I love you, too,” he says, and my heart did a somersault, hope blooming where despair had taken root.

“Really?” The word escaped as a breathless question.

“Do you even have to ask?” His voice softens as the mask fell away completely. “I’m glad you finally came to your senses.” He pulls me closer, one hand rising to brush away a tear before his lips find mine in a kiss.

“I’m sorry it took me so long,” I whisper against his mouth, breathing him in.

“You don’t need to apologize, JJ.” His forehead rests against mine, our private bubble intact despite the crowd surrounding us.

“What about Alyxandra?”

Jaxon rubs the back of his neck, a sheepish smile crossing his face. “About that...”

“I need to hear this,” I say, raising an eyebrow.

“Aly is the niece of Antonio’s assistant. She’s a drama student at the university.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Her being my date, this last-minute birthday party, even her stumble was all

Antonio's idea." Jaxon looks both guilty and amused. "He was convinced you needed a push to admit your feelings."

I glance across the room where Antonio stands watching us, champagne glass raised in victory.

"So you've been playing me this entire night?" I ask, trying to sound stern despite my laughter.

"Not playing you," Jaxon corrects. "Creating an environment where you might reconsider your position on our marriage."

"That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard."

"You're not mad?" Jaxon looks relieved.

"Are you kidding? It worked, didn't it?" I shake my head. "Antonio must be insufferable right now, thinking his plan was genius."

"Oh, he definitely is. He'll be bringing this up at every dinner party for the next decade."

"Worth it," I say, stretching up to kiss him. "But remind me to never tell him when we're actually fighting. He might hire an entire theater company next time."

Jaxon laughs against my lips. "Deal."

"I finally figured it out."

"What?"

“My nickname. You’ve been calling me Jessa Jamison for years.”

A slow smile spreads across his face, reaching his eyes and making them crinkle at the corners. “If you want something as badly as I wanted you, you put it out there in the universe, Mrs. Jamison.”

I pull back. “I got the job!”

“Congrats, my love.” Pride radiated from him as his hands tightened on my waist. “I knew you could do it.”

“I love you, Mr. Jamison.” The words feel right, perfect, as though I’d been meant to say them all along.

“I love you more, baby.”

His mouth slants over mine, setting fire to my senses, and the crowd erupts in applause. But Jaxon wasn’t done. He reached into his jacket pocket, pulled out a small velvet box, and, never breaking our gaze, lowered himself to one knee.

The room collectively gasped. My hand flies to my mouth.

“I know we’re already married,” he says, voice rough with emotion, “but I never got the chance to ask you properly.” His fingers tighten around mine. “JJ, that week with you wasn’t just the best of my life. It was the first time I’ve ever felt like I was exactly where I was meant to be.”

I bite my lip, my vision blurring with tears.

“Jessa Jamison. My wife. Will you let me love you for the rest of our lives?”

Joy explodes inside me. “Yes! I’ll go on dates with you, move in with you, and have five babies with you!” I exclaim, unable to contain the happiness spilling over.

“Not all at once, I hope!” my brother says, earning laughter from the crowd.

Jaxon stands, sliding the ring onto my finger where it belongs. The weight of it felt significant, a tangible promise. He is mine, and I am his, for better or worse, in sickness and health, till death do us part. My heart swells with happiness so profound it borders on pain.

He lifts me off my feet, twirls me in a circle, then steals my breath with a kiss. Everything beyond the circle of his arms fades away and nothing exists but us and the beautiful, unexpected future stretching out before us.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 2:58 am

The Maldivian sun kisses JJ's skin, turning it a shade of honey-gold that makes my mouth water. I watch her from behind my sunglasses as she laughs at something the waiter says. She's stretched out on a lounge, a white bikini against her brown skin.

Mine. All of it mine.

I've positioned my lounge to maintain perfect sightlines to my wife and anyone who approaches her. Six months of living together hasn't diminished my need to protect what's mine. If anything, having our love out in the open has only intensified my territorial instincts.

The waiter—Arif, according to his name tag—laughs too loudly at whatever clever thing my wife just said. His eyes linger a second too long on the curves barely contained by that scrap of fabric she calls a swimsuit.

My swimsuit.

He doesn't know I'm watching. That I catalog every flicker of his eyes, every inch they drift from her face.

"Another coconut water for the beautiful lady?" he asks, and I note the way he leans closer.

"That would be wonderful," JJ says, flashing a brilliant smile.

I lower my book. "Make that two," I say, my voice carrying easily across the deck of our over-water villa. "And bring the lunch menu when you return."

The waiter startles, finally registering my presence on the opposite side of the deck.
“Of course, sir. Right away.”

When he disappears, JJ turns to me with a frown. “You’re doing it again,” she says.

“Doing what?” I ask, feigning innocence.

“That thing where you mark your territory without actually peeing in a circle around me.” She sits up, adjusting her sunglasses.

“He was staring at your ass.”

“He was not.”

“JJ, I’ve been staring at that ass for years. I know what it looks like when a man appreciates the view.”

She laughs, the sound carrying across the crystal-clear water stretching endlessly around our private villa. “We’ve been together for six months. Don’t you get tired of being so possessive?”

I set my book down and cross the deck to her lounge in four long strides. Leaning down, I brace my hands on either side of her, caging her body with mine.

“Should I get tired of wanting what’s mine?” I ask, my lips a breath away from hers.
“The day I stop wanting you, Jessa Jamison, is the day they put me in the ground.”

She rolls her eyes, but I catch the subtle quickening of her breath. My wife thinks she can hide her reactions from me, but I’ve made studying her my obsession.

“I’m not a possession, Mr. Jamison.”

But she doesn't push me away. Instead, her fingers find the edge of my jawline, tracing the stubble I've neglected to shave this morning. The contradiction between her words and actions is purely JJ. She'll challenge me verbally while her body tells a completely different story.

"Mmm." I skim my lips along her jaw.

The waiter chooses that moment to return with our drinks. I hear his footsteps falter on the wooden deck.

"Your coconut waters," he says, voice professional now. "And the lunch menus."

I straighten unhurriedly, keeping one hand possessively on JJ's bare shoulder. "Leave them on the table."

"Will there be anything else?"

"No," I say, dismissive. I don't take my eyes off my wife, who's trying not to laugh.

After he leaves, JJ swats my chest. "You're terrible."

"You didn't marry me for my restraint," I remind her.

"No, I married you because I was drunk in Vegas."

I pull her to her feet. "You married me because you knew from the first moment we met that you were mine."

"That's revisionist history," she says, but she doesn't pull away when I slide a hand into her hair.

“Revisionist or not, it’s the truth.”

She leans into my touch, her eyes closing as I trace the shell of her ear with my thumb. “I love you.”

“I know.” My smile broadens as I pull her closer, wrapping an arm around her waist.

Her body melts into mine, a perfect fit. Twenty-one days into our honeymoon, and I still want her with the same desperate hunger as our first time.

Our wedding three weeks ago had been everything our Vegas ceremony wasn’t. It was intentional, surrounded by family and friends and a true celebration. When everyone flew home after the festivities, we stayed behind, claiming this paradise as our own private sanctuary.

“I was just being friendly with the waiter,” she says, pressing her palms against my chest.

“Keep smiling in other men’s faces and see what happens.” The threat comes out as a husky promise as her hands travel down my torso.

“What exactly will happen?”

JJ’s fingers hook into the waistband of my trunks, pulling them down just enough to free me. I can feel the cool ocean breeze against my heated skin, but it’s nothing compared to the sensation of her hand wrapping around me.

“JJ...” I trail off

“Do you want me to kneel before you and take you into my mouth?” she asks, her voice sultry and seductive.

“You know I do,” I growl.

Slowly, she moves down until she is kneeling before me and wastes little time before swallowing me. I can’t suppress the groan that escapes my lips.

The sensation of her warm, wet mouth surrounding me is almost too much to bear. I watch as she moves, her head bobbing slowly at first, then picking up speed.

The sun beats down on us, the sound of the ocean waves crashing against the stilts of our villa. The scent of saltwater mixes with the intoxicating aroma of our desire.

I can feel the tension building, the pleasure coiling in my balls. JJ’s hands grip my thighs, her nails digging into my skin as she takes me deeper. I tighten my grip in her hair, my hips moving in sync with her mouth.

“JJ,” I groan, my voice a warning before stepping back.

Before she can process what’s happening, I execute the move I’ve been planning since I first spotted the waiter’s wandering eyes. I lift her by the backs of her thighs in one powerful motion, positioning her body so her pussy hovers above my erection. Her weight distributes perfectly in my grip.

JJ’s eyes widen in that delicious combination of surprise and arousal I’ve become addicted to provoking. Her hands clutch my shoulders for support, her body instinctively yielding to my strength. “Jaxon, what are you—?”

“Shh,” I command, holding her gaze. “Be a good wife and slide the crotch of your panties aside.”

She does as I say and I capture her mouth in a fierce kiss, my tongue plunging into her mouth as I lower her onto my cock. She’s wet and ready, her pussy gripping me

tightly as I slide in. We both moan into the kiss, the sensation of our union overwhelming.

I break the kiss, my forehead resting against hers as I begin to move. Slowly at first, savoring the feel of her body sheathing mine. The sound of the ocean waves crashing against the stilts of our villa matches the rhythm of our bodies.

“So tight, so wet. You’re made for me, love.”

She clings to me, her nails digging into my shoulders as she matches my thrusts. “Only for you, Jaxon. Always for you.”

JJ’s words ignite something primal within me. I grip her thighs tighter as I increase the pace. Our breaths mingle, ragged and desperate, as I claim her mouth again.

Her taste is sweet and intoxicating and drives me wild. The sun beats down on us, making us slick with sweat.

I break away from her lips, trailing kisses down her jaw, down her neck, until I reach the swell of her breasts. I tug aside the fabric of her bikini top with my teeth, freeing her nipple. I capture it in my mouth, sucking hard, and she throws her head back.

“Jaxon,” she pants, her eyes glazed with pleasure. “I’m close... so close...”

Her inner muscles clench around me, her pussy clamping down on my cock like a vice. She cries out, her orgasm ripping through her, her body shaking with the force of it. I swallow her screams with a kiss, my own pleasure building to a fever pitch.

But I’m not ready to let go yet. Her body goes limp in my arms and I press a kiss to her temple, her cheek, her lips, as I begin to walk us towards the bedroom.

Each step sends a jolt of pleasure through me, her body still impaled on mine, her inner muscles fluttering with the aftershocks of her orgasm. I feel the cool tiles of the floor under my feet when I enter our bedroom.

I lay her down on the bed, her body still wrapped around mine. She looks up at me, her eyes soft and sated, a small smile playing on her lips. I brush a curl away from her face.

“You know,” she says, voice low, “I used to think the night in Vegas was a drunken mistake.”

“And now?”

“I don’t think you were drunk.”

Her gaze holds mine, and I know there’s no point pretending anymore.

“No,” I admit quietly. “I was in love.”

Her lips part, but she doesn’t speak. She doesn’t need to. I feel the tightening of her walls around me.

I lower my head to kiss her lips. “And I’d marry you again, JJ. Sober. Tipsy. Half-asleep. Doesn’t matter. I’d say yes every single time,” I whisper, as I begin to move inside her again. “You’re mine, Jessa Jamison and I love you more than anything in this world.”

And with the sound of the ocean whispering our names, we make love, our bodies and souls intertwined, our hearts beating as one.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 2:58 am

“You realize that’s over five thousand dollars, right?” Jessa’s voice pulls me back from the trance-like state I’ve been in, staring at the crystal-encrusted stilettos in the boutique window.

“The perfect Vegas souvenir.” I grin, mentally calculating if I should add them to my growing collection.

“Absolutely not,” Jessa says, tugging my arm. “We still have a dinner reservation at—”

“Oh, come on, just for a minute!” I pull free and dash into the boutique before she can protest further. The salesperson looks up as the bell chimes.

“Those Louboutins in the window. Do you have them in a seven?”

My stepmother, Carmen, would approve. She’s the one who taught me that quality purchases are investments, not splurges. I smile thinking about how she’d want photos immediately.

Carmen and her son Antonio had been in our lives for nearly fifteen years now. My father married Carmen a year after divorcing Mama. Antonio, two years my senior, had become the protective older brother, constantly checking if my fiancé Connor was “still treating my sister right.”

Ten minutes later, I’m strutting out with the stilettos on my feet. Jessa and Jasmine share identical expressions of disbelief.

“I can’t believe you just dropped five grand on shoes,” Jasmine mutters.

“Life’s too short for boring footwear,” I announce, twirling to show them off. “Besides, these babies will pay for themselves.” I link arms with my besties, pulling them close. “Now let’s go find trouble!”

Unlike my friends, I love to treat myself. I work hard for my money, so best believe I’ll spend it.

We pass a craps table where a crowd has gathered, their energy electric with anticipation. I slow, watching as a man in a sharp suit tosses the dice.

“No.” Jessa recognizes my expression. “Meesha, we have reservations.”

“Fine.”

We’re in Vegas for my bachelorette, though, my wedding is two months away. Jessa, an elementary school teacher, could only get Spring Break off. The the timing couldn’t have been better for escaping my pre-wedding jitters.

Vegas in March provided the perfect backdrop for my last hurrah as a single woman , even if my wedding to Connor wasn’t until May.

We settle at our table in the restaurant and the lights paint shadows across our faces. I order another martini, though I’m already feeling the effects of our day-drinking.

“So, I’m thinking we should do a Vegas-themed brunch when we get back,” I suggest, looking over the menu. “Recreate the amazing crepes from this morning.”

Jasmine nods enthusiastically while Jessa barely looks up from her phone.

As our appetizers arrive—crispy calamari and bruschetta that look too pretty to eat—I vent about the wedding prep swirling through my life lately.

“Vivienne texted me again about changing the flowers from hibiscus to roses because ‘they’re more traditional.’ As if I haven’t spent hours with the florist already!

Connor says to just ignore her, but she’s his mother and I’m trying so hard to be respectful.

” And I’d rather face a dragon than a displeased Vivienne. My peace, always my priority.

“I swear, planning this wedding is becoming a full-time job on top of my actual job, even while Asia is doing so much. And don’t even get me started on the bridesmaids’ dresses.

The sample color looked completely different in person than it did online, and now I’m wondering if we should start over with a new palette entirely.

What do you think about seafoam instead of teal? ”

I pause, noticing Jessa’s eyes still fixed on her phone screen, thumbs typing rapidly.

“Jessa! You’re not even listening.”

“Fine, you caught me.” She smiles, the same smile I’ve known since we were sharing crayons and juice boxes. “What about the wedding?”

I roll my eyes dramatically, and she meets my look with one of her own. Twenty-one years of friendship means Jessa has learned to deal with my moods.

“What? I multitask,” she says unapologetically, straightening the cocktail napkin under her glass.

I let out an exaggerated sigh. “You are so lucky I love you.”

The weight of Connor’s grandmother’s ring feels suddenly heavy on my finger. I twist it absently, remembering the look in his eyes when he proposed at Christmas while visiting Mama in Ruby Coast.

“I love you, too,” Jessa responds.

“Do you girls think Connor and I are moving too fast?”

“Fast? You’ve been together since you were sixteen!” Jasmine glances up from her phone.

Jasmine, our resident romance expert, always seems to know when conversations shift toward matters of the heart. I still remember how we bonded over a revenge plot in college, forming a friendship that outlasted the pain of betrayal.

“But he’s the only man I’ve ever kissed,” I whisper, conscious of dice rolling, cards shuffling, strangers celebrating wins and lamenting losses around us.

“The only one I’ve ever...” Slept with. I didn’t need to finish the sentence, because they knew.

“I can’t help feeling like I’m missing out on something. ”

And what if that was the problem? Not that Connor wasn’t amazing, but that he was all I knew.

All the good, all the bad, all the in-between, made up one beautiful, familiar man. Was there another ‘between’ I was supposed to explore?

Jasmine and Jessa exchange glances, and my stomach twists with guilt.

They’ve witnessed every milestone in my relationship with Connor.

From convincing my parents I wouldn’t stop seeing him when they believed his being eighteen and my sixteen wasn’t right, to our tearful goodbye when I left for college to our joyful reunion when I returned to Winter Bay after I graduated.

My coworker Kira showed me photos from her trip to Barcelona last month, laughing with a gorgeous Spanish guitarist she’d met at a café. The way she became animated when describing their three-day whirlwind romance made me yearn for that.

Connor and I have our vacation spots, our favorite restaurants, our books. But when was the last time we did something spontaneous? When we were teenagers, maybe. Before life became a perfectly planned timeline.

“That’s ridiculous, Meesha. You’ve found what most people spend their lives searching for. Don’t throw it away on a whim.”

“Have you told him how you feel?” Jasmine asks.

“It was hard enough admitting it to you two.” I fight back tears. “I don’t want him to think I’m ungrateful. I love him, I do. I just—” I swallow hard, the words catching in my throat. “I wonder if I should test the waters before diving all the way in.”

My phone vibrates, lighting up with Connor’s face. “It’s him,” I murmur, already reaching for it. “I should take this.”

I slide from my chair, phone pressed to my ear, my voice instantly brightening as I weave through the crowd. “Hey, baby...”

“Bonjour, ma belle.” Connor’s deep voice washes over me. “Guess where I am, là?”

“Please say you’re back in Winter Bay?” I lean against a wall, away from the noise.

“Oui. Just landed at Winter Bay Regional, me.”

My heart does a little flip. He was finally home after spending the past month in Quebec caring for his mother after her hip surgery. I hadn’t expected him back for another week at least and tell him as much.

“I missed you.” The smile in his voice is audible. “How’s the bachelorette extravaganza going, eh?”

“It’s been amazing,” I say, glancing back at Jessa and Jasmine, who are talking amongst themselves. Probably about what I just said. “We fly back tomorrow night.”

“Good, because one month away from you is too much. I don’t know how I did it when you were at college.” There’s a pause. “Oh, and I have a confession to make.”

“A confession?” My stomach tightens.

“I finished ‘The Silent Patient’ on the flight, calisse. I know we were supposed to read it together, but j’étais tellement ennuyé—I was so bored and I couldn’t stop once I got to the twist.”

My jaw drops. “Connor Beauregard! You did not just break our sacred book pact!” Our shared reading ritual had sustained us through four years of long-distance while I was at college. Even now, four years after graduation, we’d maintained our tradition.

“Ben, j’suis désolé! But that ending—”

“Don’t you dare spoil it!” I interrupt, fighting a smile. “I’m still halfway through.”

“Mes lèvres sont scellées until you finish. My lips are sealed. But you’re going to freak out.”

I shake my head; the brief moment of worry evaporates. The doubts that have plagued me since I accepted his proposal suddenly seem ridiculous.

“I’ll be in the suite!” I tell my friends, approaching our table. “Connor wants to see the room.”

I don’t miss the look they exchange before I head toward the elevators. Connor excitedly talks about the story without bringing up spoilers, and I find myself smiling despite his betrayal.

“You owe me big time for cheating on me,” I warn him playfully.

“Name your price, future Mrs. Beauregard,” he responds, and just like that, the doubt retreats another step.

I end the call with Connor after two hours and stare at my reflection in the hotel mirror. My lash extensions frame dark brown eyes, tinted moisturizer gives my skin a natural glow, and my black bob lies perfectly sleek against my neck.

Earlier, Jessa and Jasmine had bailed on me, their messages in our group chat vaguely mentioning a “meeting at the hotel bar” without specifying which one.

I hold white jeans against one hip, black against the other. White wins tonight. They complement my mocha skin perfectly and make my ass look fuller. I pair them with a

backless blush pink blouse.

When I slide the crystal stilettos onto my feet, a childlike glee washes over me. They transform my posture, my confidence, my entire aura. Worth every penny.

“Time to find my friends,” I tell my reflection, grabbing my clutch.

The hallway breathes with distant music, laughter, and the faint ring of slot machines rising from below. The elevator descends in a smooth glide, opening to the main floor where the casino’s heartbeat pulses stronger.

Perfume mingles with cologne and the faint tang of alcohol as bodies weave through the space. I send another message to our group chat. No response.

They’re not at the first bar I pass by or the next. I move on, following the sound of livelier music.

I enter the next lounge, where chandeliers splash golden light across the crowd. I’m scanning for Jessa and Jasmine when someone bumps me from behind, sending me off-balance.

“Damn—” The curse cuts short.

I turn to find myself face-to-face with a man whose brown hair falls in tousled waves, and his fitted henley reveals broad shoulders and strong arms. When his striking blue-gray eyes meet mine, I stammer an apology.

He looks at me, forcing a pained smile through perfect teeth. “No worries. I’m fine.”

I stare at his loafer where my heel left a divot. “You are definitely not fine. I impaled your foot.”

His hand closes around my wrist briefly. “Look.” He takes a few steps. “All good.” His eyes drop to my shoes. “Though I’ve never been attacked with such spectacular weaponry.”

“Just bought them today,” I admit, angling my foot so we both get a better view of them. “Couldn’t resist.”

“I can see why.” He gestures toward the bar with a charming tilt of his head. “You could buy me a drink though—you know, for pain and suffering.”

I almost refuse, then change my mind. I would stay here until someone responded in the group chat. “Sure.”

His face lights up. “Great. I’m Dennis.”

“Meesha,” I offer.

In a plush booth near the bar, Dennis orders a white Russian. I’ve never had one but say, “Same.”

“Meesha’s a beautiful name,” he says, leaning forward. “Beautiful name for a beautiful woman.”

I snort. “Wow. Did you practice that line in the mirror?”

“Your beauty short-circuits my brain.” He grins. “Cut me some slack.”

Raising my hand, I flash my engagement ring. “Taken. Sorry to disappoint.”

“Crushed,” he says dramatically.

The white Russian arrives—creamy sweetness with a vodka kick. “This is actually good.”

“Also dangerous if you’re not used to them,” he warns.

“Please. I’m not some amateur.” I take a bigger sip.

“My phone died. Can I borrow yours to text my buddy?”

I hesitate, my fingers tightening around my clutch. But Dennis is staring at me expectantly, and I didn’t want to make the moment awkward.

“Sure,” I say, fishing out my phone and handing it over. “I should probably find my friends too. They’re around here somewhere.”

Dennis takes it with a quick nod, his fingers moving rapidly across the screen. He angles my phone away as he types before handing it back with a grin. “Thanks. Guess it’s the night of disappearing friends.”

“Tell me about it.” I sigh, glancing around the crowded bar.

The room begins to feel warm. Dennis slides to my side of the booth, thigh pressing against mine. “Couldn’t hear you over there.”

I take another sip and lean back. “You know what’s crazy?” Words tumble out. “Most girls my age are living it up, dating around, but I’m marrying my high school boyfriend. What kind of boring life choice is that?”

“You tell me,” Dennis says, his voice a pleasant rumble.

“Look at my parents, for instance. They were together throughout high school and

then had me. When I was ten, they suddenly decided they shouldn't be together.

They stayed together all those years because I anchored them.

"I turn to face him, our faces inches apart.

"What if I'm marrying Connor because I'm accustomed to him? He's all I know."

His gaze drops to my lips. "I want to kiss you."

A forbidden excitement runs through me. "What?"

He leans in, pressing his mouth to mine. His lips are soft, tasting of white Russian. My hands move to his arms, feeling firm muscle beneath his shirt. I kiss him back, curiously.

Then reality crashes in like ice water.

I pull back, horrified. "I'm engaged."

"You're not married yet," he whispers.

His lips find mine again. I wait for fireworks, butterflies and earth-moving justification.

Nothing. Not just nothing, but a terrifying absence of the very newness I'd foolishly chased.

The kiss leaves me completely cold. I pull away, stomach lurching violently as reality crashes down.

What have I done?

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 2:58 am

Winter Bay looks exactly as I left it four days ago—snow still piled in dirty heaps along the sidewalks, the lakefront barely visible through winter’s haze.

As the Uber turns onto Connor’s street, I immediately spot his sleek Olympus Titan in the driveway, its metallic finish reflecting the mid-morning winter light.

I smile despite my anxiety, remembering how he surprised me with my midnight-blue Olympus Nyx last birthday. It was a perfect complement to his larger SUV.

“His and hers Olympus vehicles,” he’d said with that crooked smile. “Yours is smaller and more efficient, just like you.”

Home safe. Text when you can. Have fun with your man!

The pulsing anxiety in my chest only intensifies. We switched to an earlier flight, but neither Jessa nor Jasmine seemed disappointed to cut our trip short. In fact, they both seemed oddly eager to get home, lost in their own thoughts during the entire flight.

A flash of crimson catches my eye—a cardinal perched on a branch of the tree in Connor’s front yard. I pull out my phone to capture it, holding my breath as I zoom in.

Just as I snap the photo, the bird takes flight, leaving a perfect streak of red against the white backdrop. I smile at the image, grateful for the momentary distraction.

I turn to the two-story house Connor bought four years ago with our future in mind. Despite being in our twenties, we’ve never lived together.

My parents were adamantly against it without marriage, and I couldn't bring myself to defy them. Connor had been disappointed but understood, so we compromised with frequent overnight stays and vacations instead.

My fingers hesitate for only a second before punching in the code—our anniversary. The keypad beeps its approval, and the lock clicks open.

I step inside, greeted by the aroma of freshly brewed coffee and ESPN's familiar drone from the living room. Dropping my bag and luggage by the door, I look at the photos lining the hallway.

Images capture us in Cancun, hiking the Adirondacks in matching flannel shirts, feeding each other beignets in New Orleans with powdered sugar on our noses. Four years of memories carefully framed and arranged, each one a reminder of what I risked.

My eyes land on the newest addition from Christmas at my mother's house in Ruby Coast. I'm opening the small velvet box, mouth open in surprise, while Connor watches intently. I touch my engagement ring unconsciously.

The sound of running water grows louder as I climb the stairs. I slip off my shoes after entering his bedroom, then my jeans. By the time I reach the bathroom door, I'm down to nothing but guilt and bare skin.

I ease the door open. Through the fogged glass shower door, I can make out Connor's broad shoulders, his head tilted back under the spray. Water cascades down his muscled body.

My own body responds to the sight, and I move closer, sliding the shower door open. Connor spins around, eyes wide with surprise, water droplets clinging to his dark lashes.

“Meesha?” His voice, deep and tinged with that French-Canadian accent that still makes my knees weak, wraps around me. “What are you—I thought your return was scheduled for tonight?”

I step into the shower, letting the hot water sluice over my travel-worn body. “Surprise,” I manage, my voice catching. “We got an earlier flight.”

His strong hands find my waist, pulling me against him. The familiar contours of his body press against mine, and I forget the Vegas lights, the stranger’s lips, the crushing weight of what I’ve done.

“This is some surprise, ma belle.” His mouth curves into that half-smile that’s been making my heart skip since I was sixteen. His hands slide up my back, leaving trails of heat. “I missed you.”

A terrible thought flashes through my mind. Would he still touch me like this if he knew? Would his hands still worship my body, or would they push me away?

The fear makes me cling to him more desperately. I twine my arms around his neck, pressing my body flush against his. If I can just get close enough, maybe I can erase the memory of another man’s touch.

“I need you right now,” I whisper against his lips, desperate to feel only him, to remember why what we have is worth fighting for. Worth saving.

His eyes darken, but there’s something questioning in them too. Does he know? Can he sense it?

“Meesha...” His accent thickens when he’s emotional, my name becoming something exotic on his tongue. “Is everything okay?”

I silence his question with a kiss, pouring my love, my guilt, my fear. My hands

tangle in his wet hair as the steam rises around us, shrouding us in a world where nothing exists but this man.

His hands slide down to cup my ass, pulling me against his growing hardness. I can feel his need, urgent and insistent, pressing against my stomach. I break away from his lips, trailing kisses down his neck, his chest, until I'm on my knees.

I take him into my mouth, swirling my tongue around his shaft. He groans, his hands finding their way into my wet braids. I can taste the faint saltiness of his pre-cum, feel the silky smoothness of his skin. I take him deeper, relishing the feel of him.

His hips move slowly at first, then faster, matching the rhythm of my mouth. The water cascades over us, dripping from his body onto my face as I take him deeper still.

His grip on my head tightens, his muscles tensing. I can feel his orgasm building, but before he can reach the peak, he pulls me to my feet.

“Not like this,” he growls. “I want to be inside you.”

In one motion, he lifts me and presses my back against the cold tiles. He hitches my leg up around his shoulder, his cock poised at my entrance.

“Connor,” I whimper when he thrusts into me, hard and deep.

My nails dig into his shoulders, holding on as he moves. The steam surrounds us, creating a cocoon of heat and desire.

His hips pound against mine, each thrust pushing me harder against the wall. The sensation is intense, almost overwhelming, but I want more. I always want more from him.

His mouth finds mine again, his tongue mimicking the movements of his hips. I can taste his desperation, his love, his all-consuming need for me. It matches my own.

“You feel so good, Meesha,” he groans against my mouth. “So fucking good.”

My orgasm hits me like a freight train, tearing through my body, leaving me gasping and shaking in its wake. Connor follows soon after, his body tensing as he spills into me.

“That was quite the homecoming,” he murmurs, pressing a kiss to my forehead.

“I missed you.”

He reaches for a towel, wrapping it around me with tenderness before grabbing one for himself. “How was Vegas?”

My stomach drops. “I had fun with my girls, but I’m glad to be back and even more excited to marry you.”

Connor nods as he opens the bathroom door, letting the steam escape. “I should probably warn you—”

“Let’s get dressed first,” I interrupt. “I’m freezing.”

Connor pulls on a pair of sweatpants, leaving his chest bare. Even after all these years, his broad shoulders tapering to narrow hips, the defined muscles of his abdomen, the trail of dark hair disappearing beneath his waistband make my mouth dry.

He catches me staring, and his answering smile warms me from the inside out. “Come ‘ere, ma belle,” he says softly, holding out his hand.

I take it, letting him pull me against his chest. His fingers trace my cheekbone.

“Tu sais ce que je me rappelle? You know what I remember?” he asks, his voice low.

“What?”

“That hockey game where we met. When my puck almost hit you?”

I laugh softly. “Malcolm was so mad when you insisted on taking us for dinner.”

Malcolm had been my boyfriend for barely a week, and we hadn’t even kissed yet. We were supposed to after the hockey game.

“And even madder when you left with me instead,” he says, pride evident in his voice. “Best decision I ever made was choosing Winter Bay over Montreal, là. Everyone said I was crazy, but j’le savais.”

“Knew what?” I ask, though I already know the answer.

“That you were worth it, ma belle. Always have been.” He presses his forehead against mine. “Everything is better with you, oui?”

I swallow hard. This is why I said yes. This is what I’d be throwing away.

Ten minutes later, we’re heading down the stairs, my braids still damp, but at least I’m clothed in one of Connor’s sweatshirts that smells like him. His hand rests on the small of my back. I’m just about to ask what he was going to warn me about when the front door swings open.

I freeze.

Vivienne Beauregard, Connor’s mother, sweeps in like a winter storm. Her silver-

streaked dark hair is loose about her shoulders. Behind her follows a tall, willowy blonde woman who looks vaguely familiar.

“Ah! C’est Meesha!” Vivienne’s perfectly painted lips curve into what might generously be called a smile. Her French-Canadian accent is thicker than Connor’s, each word enunciated.

My stomach clenches, but I stretch my lips into a bright smile. Years of nursing had perfected my ability to look composed while panicking inside.

“Hello, Vivienne,” I manage, my voice honeyed with a warmth I don’t feel.

Acutely aware of my bare legs and lack of underwear, I tug at the hem of the jersey, wishing it were three inches longer.

Connor rubs my back. “Maman, j’pensais pas que tu r’viendrais si t?t,” he says, slipping into French.

The blonde woman closes the door, her eyes flickering between Connor and me.

She has high cheekbones, clear skin, and dressed in an ankle-length winter jacket.

The woman offers a small smile as she tucks a strand of hair behind her ear, her gaze briefly dropping to the floor before meeting mine with what looks like discomfort.

“Le restaurant était trop plein,” Vivienne says, removing her gloves one finger at a time. “This is Frédérique. You know her already, I think? From before?” Vivienne gestures to the other woman.

My mind races. Frédérique... the name clicks into place.

Connor’s ex-girlfriend from Montreal. The one he dated before moving to Winter

Bay. The one his mother adored.

“Maman came back with me yesterday. She’s staying until the wedding.” Connor won’t meet my eyes. “Her hip replacement recovery is taking longer than expected.”

Vivienne settles herself on the arm of the sofa, surveying me. “The doctors, they insist I need full-time care. Frédérique—she was kind enough to come with me, là. She leave her life in Montréal for me.”

I turn to Connor. “Isn’t she your ex?”

Before Connor can answer, Vivienne laughs lightly. “Oh, they were just children then. Frédérique has been like a daughter to me for years.”

“And is Frédérique staying here too?” I ask, looking directly at Connor.

“Of course she will stay here! Where else would she go?” Vivienne interjects smoothly. “Frédérique needs to be close to monitor my recovery.”

I take a deep breath, forcing a tight smile that feels like it might crack my face. “Connor, can I speak with you for a moment? Privately?”

“Of course. Excuse us,” he says to his mother and Frédérique.

I lead him to the kitchen, waiting until we’re out of earshot before turning to face him. “What the hell, Connor?” I hiss, keeping my voice low but unable to hide my anger. “Your ex-girlfriend is staying at your house? And you didn’t think to mention this to me?”

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