

# About Last Knight

CITY OF SISTERLY LOVE  
BOOK FIVE

AK LANDOW

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City of Sisterly Love Book 5



AK Landow



Author AK Landow



# Copyright

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ABOUT LAST KNIGHT: City of Sisterly Love: Book 5

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# Dedication

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This book is dedicated to all the women out there who are both funny and perverted. We finally have some use for our talents.

*“Women need other women in their lives who think they are a big deal. No competition, no backhanded comments, no jealousy, no hate, just ‘I love you, I support you, and there is no one on Earth like you’ kind of energy.” ~Unknown*



# Contents

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- [1. Prologue One](#)
- [2. Prologue Two](#)
- [3. Chapter One](#)
- [4. Chapter Two](#)
- [5. Chapter Three](#)
- [6. Chapter Four](#)
- [7. Chapter Five](#)
- [8. Chapter Six](#)
- [9. Chapter Seven](#)
- [10. Chapter Eight](#)
- [11. Chapter Nine](#)
- [12. Chapter Ten](#)
- [13. Chapter Eleven](#)
- [14. Chapter Twelve](#)
- [15. Chapter Thirteen](#)
- [16. Chapter Fourteen](#)

[17. Chapter Fifteen](#)

[18. Chapter Sixteen](#)

[19. Chapter Seventeen](#)

[20. Chapter Eighteen](#)

[21. Chapter Nineteen](#)

[22. Chapter Twenty](#)

[23. Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[24. Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[25. Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[26. Epilogue](#)

[27. Acknowledgements](#)

[28. About The Author](#)

[29. Also By](#)

[30. Prologue ~ Love Always, Scott: A City of Sisterly  
Love Prequel Novella](#)

[31. Prologue ~ Knight: City of Sisterly Love Book 1](#)

# Prologue One

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## *Melissa*

When I was nineteen years old, just a kid, I got married for the wrong reason. Obligation. Obligation to my family and obligation to my unborn child.

I can't regret it because I have my three incredible sons who I love more than anything in this world, including myself.

They wanted for nothing, and I watched them grow into the amazing young men they all are. I got to watch them all fall madly in love and choose their life partners. Not out of obligation, but out of pure love.

I even got to watch my wonderful ex-husband fall madly in love. It just wasn't with me. He was never in love with me. In all fairness, I was never in love with him either.

I became everyone's project. Everyone wanted to fix me up with their son, their brother, their friend, their neighbor, their co-worker, their father.

No one cared what I wanted. Frankly, I wasn't always sure what I wanted. I was never given the time when I was younger to figure out what it was I wanted in a partner.

One-hundred and eighteen first dates. After my divorce, I went on one-hundred and eighteen first dates before I figured out what I wanted and who I wanted it with.

It took a marriage, a divorce, and one-hundred and eighteen first dates to fall in love for the first time in my life. I finally

found everything I never knew I was looking for. The man that made me feel things I'd never felt.

That's supposed to be when happily ever after kicks in, right?

It took me fifty-two years to find that man. I shouldn't have expected things to come that easily. Falling in love with him was the easy part. It's everything that came after that was hard.

I'm Melissa Knight. This is my love story (it's about damn time).

# Prologue Two

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## Thirty-Three Years Ago

*Melissa*

I'm curled in a ball on the vinyl flooring of my bathroom. I'm in complete and total shock. I don't think it's registered. What the hell am I going to do? Is my life ruined? Am I ruining his life too? My parents are going to lose their ever-loving shit.

My roommate, Rayne, walks in and sees me on the ground. "Oh no."

I look up at her. Tears start to well in my eyes.

She sighs. "It was positive?"

I slowly nod as I whisper, "Yes, all five of them." I point to the five pregnancy tests sitting next to our sink.

She grabs my hand and pulls me into a seated position. She sits down next to me, both of our backs now leaning against the wall.

Rayne and I met last year. We were assigned as freshman dorm roommates. We hit it off right away, and now we live together now in the sorority house.

She rests her head on my shoulder. "What are you going to do?"

I shake my head. "I have no clue."

"Are you going to tell him?"

“I...I...I don’t know what to say to him. We’ve only been dating for three months. How do I tell him that I’m pregnant?”

“He knows the condom broke, right?”

“He does, but I had just finished my period. I assured him that it couldn’t happen right after your period.”

She turns her head to me and widens her eyes. “I don’t think that’s true.”

I throw my hands in the air. “Obviously!”

She pulls me close to her. “We’ll get through this, Melis. Jackson’s a good guy. He’ll support whatever you want.” She gives me a small smile. “And hey, between the two of you, at least you know your baby will be gorgeous. *Tall* and gorgeous.” She looks at me hopefully.

I lean my head back on the wall and let out a breath. Her mentioning the actual baby just somehow made it more real. Tears start flowing down my cheeks.

She wipes them. “Don’t cry. It’ll be okay. I promise.” She turns and grabs a few tissues and hands them to me.

I wipe my nose and tear-filled face. I need to get it together.

I throw the tissues away, take a deep breath, and start to stand. “I need to go tell him. He deserves to know.”

She nods in agreement. “Do you want me to come with you?”

I smile at my best friend. She really is a good friend. “No. I need to do this on my own. It’s between Jackson and me.”



I walk over to his fraternity house, doing my best to get ahold on my emotions. I'm practically shaking as I reach the door.

I don't bother knocking because none of the guys would answer and it's always unlocked.

I walk in and see Jackson sitting on the sofa with a bunch of his friends, laughing. When he sees me, he smiles, but as soon as he notices my bloodshot eyes, his face drops and he jumps up.

He runs over to me. "What's wrong?"

"Can we talk in your room?"

He nods. "Of course." He takes my hand and we make our way upstairs to his room. He closes the door, giving us some privacy. Rubbing his thumb along the back of my hand, he says, "Talk to me. Tell me why you're upset."

I take a few breaths. I know I'm about to throw his world off its axis, and I hate myself for it. "I took a test. Actually, I took five tests." I take one more big breath. "I'm pregnant."

He sucks in a breath, and his eyes widen with the same shock I felt an hour ago.

I'm not sure what I was expecting in terms of a reaction right now, but it's definitely not what he does next. He puts his arms around me, squeezes me tight, and kisses my head. "I'm so sorry I did this to you, Melissa. It's all my fault."

I pull my head back in visible shock. "Jackson, I was a willing participant."

He swallows. “I know, but the condom was my responsibility and I failed you. I’m so sorry. I promise I’ll never fail you again. Tell me what you want to do. I’ll support whatever you choose.”

“Can we sit? I’m a little light-headed right now.”

“Of course.” We move to the bed and sit as he takes my hands in his. “What are you thinking? Are you considering an...an...”

“An abortion?”

Tears well in his eyes as he nods.

“I’m not 100% sure. I don’t know that I could go through with it, but I wanted to talk to you about it first. This is *our* decision to make. I want to know what you want to do.”

He shakes his head. “The ultimate decision is yours Melissa, it’s your body. But if you’re asking me what I want...”

I nod. “I’m asking. I want to know.”

He swallows again as he appears to think for a moment. “I think I want to keep it.” He pauses, realizing the meaning of his words. “You know I lost my mother a few years ago. There’s just something very full circle about this and I personally would prefer to have the baby. But like I said, I know this decision is harder for you and I’ll respect whatever you choose. I’ll pay for whatever you decide. I’ll do anything you want.”

I have tears in my eyes. I reach over and kiss his cheek. “Thanks for being you, Jackson. If nothing else, I know our

child will have a good man as a father.”

He gives me a small smile. “Does that mean we’re keeping it?”

I take a deep breath and slowly nod, finally feeling some sense of resolution on this. “I don’t think I’m capable of doing otherwise. Hearing your thoughts on it only bolsters that decision.”

Before I even process my last sentence, he immediately gets down on one knee. My eyes widen in surprise. “What in the world are you doing?”

He takes my hand in his. “Marry me?”

“What? Are you crazy? We’re too young to get married. We’ve only been dating for three months. We’re not in love. I care about you a lot, and I know you feel the same for me, but we’re not in love.”

“I know, but the love will come with time. We’re having a baby. Don’t you want our baby to have both of her parents around all the time?”

I pinch my eyebrows. “You said her. What makes you think it’s a girl?”

He tilts his head to the side and makes a face as if he didn’t realize he had said it. “I don’t know. I just always imagined that I’d have a daughter to protect.”

I can’t help but give him a small smile. He really is very sweet. I rub his handsome face. “Jackson, can we take a step back? We’ve just received some life-changing information.

Can we take a minute to think everything through before making any more life-changing decisions? One a day is all I can handle.”

He nods. “Okay. Whatever you want. Just know that I’m willing to get married. I’m going to start thinking through finances and everything we’ll need to take care of our baby.”

He’s so...so...damn logical.

He wraps his arms around me. “I promise you I’ll be a good father. I had the best example growing up.”

He so...so...fucking nice.

I sigh. “Speaking of fathers, *my* father is a bit of a hothead. He’s going to beat the shit out of you. So will my brothers. When the time comes, I’ll have to be the one to tell them.”

He shakes his head. “No. I’ll man up and tell them. If they beat me up, so be it. I won’t send you as my heavy. That’s not how a man behaves.”

I can’t help but let out a small laugh. I’m not sure he realizes just how bad it’s going to be. My father and brothers are all military and have deep religious views with regard to marriage and procreation. They’re going to legitimately beat the crap out of him.

He squeezes my hand. “You and I have a lot of decisions to make in the next few days and weeks. Once we have a concrete plan in place, I’ll be the one to sit down with them. It’s the right thing to do. I’m sure when they see how much we’re thinking things through, cooler heads will prevail.”

He's nuts. They'll beat him senseless without batting an eyelash, but there's no need to argue about this with him right now.

I eventually head back to my sorority house. Of course, Jackson insists on walking me back and buying me food along the way.

We get to my house. He pulls me into his arms and gives me a deep kiss. He's a really good kisser. He leans back and rubs my arm. "We'll be okay. I promise. We're in this together. We're a team."

I nod as I say good-bye to him and walk inside. Rayne and Isabella are standing there. Isabella is a sorority sister of ours that we've become close to this year. She runs over to me and hugs me. I give Rayne an annoyed look.

Rayne puts her head down in shame. "Sorry. I needed to tell someone."

I shrug my shoulders as I rub my temporarily flat stomach. "It's alright. Everyone will know soon enough."

Izzy squeezes me before she pulls away and the three of us sit down on the couch. No one else seems to be around.

Rayne grabs my hand. "Are you okay? How did he take it?"

"He took it shockingly well." I shake my head. "I actually think he's excited. He immediately proposed."

Rayne's mouth drops open. "He proposed? What did you say?"

“I told him that I’m not interested in making any more life-changing decisions today. We’re keeping the baby. That’s enough decision making for one day.”

Rayne smiles at that.

Izzy shrugs. “I mean, you could do a lot worse. He’s gorgeous. He’s the smartest guy in our class. I’m sure he’ll be successful. He seems really nice. He’s always nice to us.” She looks at Rayne who nods in confirmation.

I sigh. “I know all that. He’s a great guy. It doesn’t mean I’m ready to get married at nineteen though. I just wanted to experience more things in my life before I settle down and get married.”

Rayne asks, “Like what?”

“College is the first time I’ve ever left my small hometown. I want more than the homemaker life my mother had. I want to get my degree, learn a few languages, live on my own, maybe travel abroad, have a career, date different types of men, have some different kinds of experiences.”

Izzy smiles. “Like what kind of experiences? Like threesomes?”

I laugh. It’s the first time I’ve laughed all day. “Maybe.” She smiles at me.

I shake my head. “I’ve only been with two other men. After being with Jackson, I know the others hardly count. It’s hard for me to articulate. I just thought I’d do a lot more before

getting married and having kids. I don't want to be my mother. I want to live more."

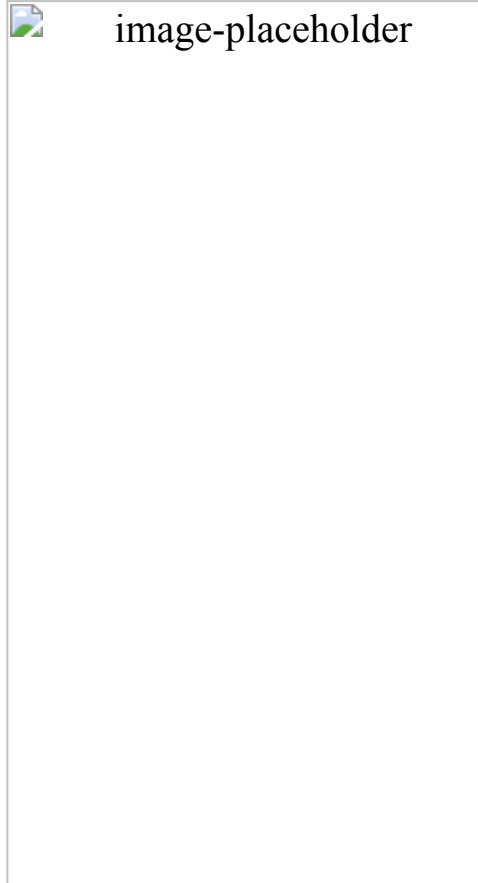
Rayne bites her lip. "He's really that good in bed?"

I laugh again. "Yes. He's amazing in bed."

Izzy shakes her head. "Let me get this straight. He's hot. He's smart. He's nice. He's good in bed. And he wants to marry you. I'm sorry, I don't understand the problem."

Tears well in my eyes. "I'm not in love with him." Tears start to stream down my cheeks. "Maybe one day I would have been and maybe not. Now I feel like I'll never know. I know it's the same for him. He's not in love with me. When I eventually get married, I want it to be with a man I'm crazy in love with who's equally crazy in love with me. I want someone who I feel I can't live without, who feels the same for me."

They both nod in understanding.



The next few weeks are a blur. Jackson wants us to get married immediately. He asked if I could work to support us while he finishes his degree, and, in return, he promised to take care of me for the rest of my life.

I'm having trouble with the phrase *the rest of my life*. I'll now be attached to him for the rest of my life.



What he's asking isn't unreasonable. It actually makes sense. Every single thing Jackson does makes sense.

The girls were right. Jackson's the smartest person in our class. He's really good with numbers. Financial institutions and real estate companies will undoubtedly be knocking on his door at graduation.

If we can get through the first two years, I know we'll be fine. Two years feels like a lifetime though.

We told my family last night. Despite my warnings, Jackson insisted on coming. As I expected, my father and brothers each threw a few punches. Jackson didn't fight back. He just stood there and literally took it on the chin.

Then, my entire family screamed at him about marrying me. He didn't tell them that it's me who's hesitant about getting married. He just stood there and metaphorically took it on the chin.

After confirming the health of the pregnancy with a doctor, one cold winter day, surrounded by a small group of friends and my disappointed family, I married Jackson Knight at the local courthouse. Not for love, but out of obligation. Obligation to my family and to my unborn child.

Standing at the altar, looking at Jackson, I know I'm lucky to be marrying such a considerate man. It could have been worse. *Way* worse. But I mourn knowing that I'm not looking at a man that I love. I'm not looking at a man that I'm completely crazy about. I'm not looking at a man that I can't

imagine living another day without. And equally as bad, I'm not looking at a man who feels any of those things for me.

# Chapter One

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# Present

## Date Count: 89

### *Melissa*

I'm just sitting down to lunch with my two long-time best friends, Rayne and Izzy. I pull out my phone when I get a text notification. After reading it, I look back up at them. "Cassandra said she's running a few minutes late from a meeting. She said to just order our drinks and she'll be here before they arrive. She'd like a vodka."

They nod as the waiter arrives. I smile at him as he introduces himself and asks if we'd like anything to drink. "I'll have a Patron on the rocks. My friend that isn't here yet will have a Tito's on the rocks." I motion toward Rayne and Izzy as they order their drinks of choice.

Once the waiter leaves, Rayne shakes her head at me. "I can't believe you're letting Cassandra come to our weekly lunches."

I shrug my shoulders. "Why? What's the big deal? She's our age?"

"Because we talk about sex and relationships the whole time. How comfortable will you be talking in front of your soon-to-be daughter-in-law?"

I smile. “I don’t actually care whether she knows things about me, I just don’t want to know anything about her and Trevor, and she promised me she wouldn’t share. You guys don’t really know her yet, but she’s a little crazy. God knows what goes on between the two of them. I certainly don’t want to know.”

Izzy laughs. “She’s marrying a man nearly half her age. Wouldn’t she have to be a little crazy?”

I nod. “I suppose. For some reason, they actually work well together. It’s hard to understand unless you see them together. My son’s blissfully happy and, thanks the marvels of modern medicine, he’s about to become a father twice over. She and I are good. You’ll like her. She lacks a filter, but she’s a lot of fun.”

Rayne raises her eyebrows. “What about the fact that she’s best friends with your ex-husband’s wife?”

Before I can answer, our drinks arrive and Cassandra walks in. “Sorry I’m late.” She puts out her hand and introduces herself to Rayne and Izzy. “I’m Cassandra, the cradle robber that Melissa hates.”

Rayne and Izzy both giggle.

I shake my head. “I don’t hate you. I wish you were younger, but I don’t hate you.” I smile at her.

Cassandra holds up her drink. “Don’t we all wish that?”

The three of us nod in agreement.

“Cassandra, Rayne’s my oldest friend, dating back to our first year of college.”

“Like Darian and me.”

“Remember rule number two of joining our lunches. No talking about Darian.”

She rolls her eyes. “Yes, I remember your stupid rules. No sex and no Darian. I have no idea what the fuck I’ll have to talk about.”

I smile. “Rule number one is particularly important.” She rolls her eyes again. “Anyway, Rayne is an advertising executive. She’s very good at what she does. She’s happily married to a great guy named Grant. She has two kids. A twenty-one-year-old son named Pierce, and a twenty-four-year-old daughter named Quinlan.”

Cassandra nods.

I turn to Izzy. “This is Isabella. We call her Izzy. She’s an accountant with twin nineteen-year-old sons named Ryder and Austin. She’s been divorced a few years now. Oh, and she’s never had an orgasm.” I smile at Izzy, whose face drops in humiliation.

Cassandra spits out her drink. “What? You’ve never had an orgasm. How’s that possible? How do you function in life?”

Izzy narrows her eyes at me. “Does that really need to be part of my introduction to people? An orgasm-less, divorced, accountant. You can’t come up with something nicer after all of these years?”

I can't help but laugh. I love ruffling her feathers.

She turns to Cassandra. "To answer your question, I've just never had one. I feel like I've come close a few times, but it's never happened for me. My ex-husband sort of quit trying after a while. In pretty much every department, but especially that one."

Cassandra looks like her head might explode. "What about masturbation? You must be able to seal the deal yourself?"

Izzy shakes her head. "I tried for years. It just doesn't happen for me. I've read that up to thirty percent of women can't orgasm. I guess I'm in that group."

I see Cassandra's wheels turning. "Do you date, Izzy?"

"Occasionally." She points at me. "Not as much as Melissa, but I go out now and then."

"Can I fix you up with someone? Let's just say he's very skilled. It's now my goal in life to help you orgasm. If he can't get it done, then I'll believe that no one can."

Izzy and Rayne laugh. I look at Cassandra. "And how would you know?"

"I'm not allowed to talk about my sex life, remember? But, newsflash, I was single for nearly fifty years when I met Trevor. I've had sex with other men. *Lots* of other men." She smirks at me.

"If you can help Izzy have an orgasm, I'll forever be your fan."

“Will you babysit my kids when I want to go have some *special fun* with Trevor?”

“Done.”

Cassandra nods and smiles.

Rayne turns to me. “How was your date last night? I believe it was date number eighty-nine.”

I see Cassandra pinch her eyebrows in confusion. “Eighty-nine?”

I nod. “Since *everyone* loves to fix me up, I’ve kept a count of how many first dates I’ve gone on since my divorce.”

Cassandra mumbles, “Shit, and I thought I got around.”

I shake my head. “I don’t sleep with them all. I’ve been divorced for over nine years. Ten first dates a year is hardly a lot. But they’ve started piling up and rarely get to a second date, so we keep count for fun. Anyway, there will not be a date two for lucky number eighty-nine.”

Rayne asks, “Why?”

“Hmm. Where do I start with this gem? He’s the brother of my dentist, who insisted we’d be a perfect match. We were in his car on the way to dinner and a Rihanna song came on the radio. He made some off-color remark about how getting beat up by Chris Brown was the best thing that ever happened to her career. I told him how inappropriate the comment was, and that I sit on the boards of several women’s shelters in the area. That it’s a cause very near and dear to me and not a joking matter. He apologized profusely and begged for a second



chance. I reluctantly agreed. We got to dinner and he kept checking his Apple Watch every few minutes. After a dozen or so times, I asked him if he was expecting a text or call. He laughed and said that he tracks his heart rate on dates to gauge his attraction to the person. He said his heart rate was really high, and then asked if I wanted to go back to his place. I got up and left.”

Izzy and Rayne are laughing. Cassandra scrunches her nose. “That line would’ve totally worked on me.”

I can’t help but shake my head and smile at that.

She looks at me. “So which number dates were your post-divorce threesome?”

I look at her in question. “What post-divorce threesome?”

Cassandra gives me a shocked look. “Melissa, don’t tell me you didn’t have a threesome shortly after your divorce. Every woman who gets divorced after the age of forty has a threesome. I think it’s actually called the *divorcee threesome rite of passage*. It’s basically your initiation in the post-forty divorced club.”

I stare at her with my mouth open. “I’ve never heard of that.” I look over at Izzy. “Did you do that?”

She bites her lip and gives me a guilty look. “I didn’t mention it to you guys, but I actually did. Right after my divorce. Like my first night out. I was with some of the other divorced moms in the twins’ high-school class. They told me I

had to do it. I think they actually used the words *rite of passage*.”

I look at my friend of over thirty years in shock. “How was it?”

She smiles. “It was amazing. Having two guys all over me? I loved it. I would do it again.”

Cassandra can’t help herself. “But you didn’t come, right?”

Izzy shakes her head.

Cassandra mumbles, “It couldn’t have been that amazing.”

Izzy stands her ground. “It was. I really enjoyed having two sets of men’s hands on my body with the goal of pleasing me. You can have a good time without coming.”

Cassandra places her hand over Izzy’s. “Izzy, I really am making it my mission in life for you to have an orgasm. When you do, first you’ll thank me, and then you’ll realize that everything you just said is complete bullshit.”

Izzy rolls her eyes. Rayne and I laugh.

I’m flustered at Cassandra’s comment though. “Why don’t I know about this? It’s not like I haven’t slept with my fair share of men since my divorce.”

Rayne shakes her head and smiles. “Remember, the micro-penis guy doesn’t count.”

“I know he doesn’t because when I physically couldn’t find his penis, I left. I didn’t have sex with him... Not that I felt anyway.” I smile while the girls all laugh.

Cassandra stares at me as though she's waiting for the story.

I sigh. "I believe he was number twenty-three. He was an attractive, big guy, with big hands and big feet. I just assumed. We were starting to get intimate. I put my hands down his pants and literally couldn't find anything."

The girls are cackling now.

"I patted all around, and nothing. At some point he pulled away from the kiss. He knew why I was frustrated and said he was a grower, not a shower. I said, *unless you grow about nine inches, I'm going to have to head out*. I told him my ex-husband was quite large and that I really couldn't go backward. So, I left. I'd say I left him hanging, but there really wasn't anything to hang."

The three of them are now shaking with laughter. I can't help but join in. "I can admit, it's pretty funny. At the time, I was upset, but I see the humor in it now."

I let them continue with their giggles for a few moments before returning us to the matter at hand. "Back to the threesome thing."

Cassandra shrugs. "I don't know. I've never met a woman who got divorced after forty who hasn't gone a little wild and had a threesome. I just assumed everyone has."

Hmm. Maybe I've been playing it a little too safe.

# Chapter Two

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## *Melissa*

Trevor called me to let me know that Reagan went into labor. Reagan is Jackson's stepdaughter. She quite selflessly agreed to carry Trevor and Cassandra's baby. Cassandra froze her eggs when she was much younger, so biologically, the baby would be Trevor and Cassandra's. As it turned out, it's babies. Two fertilized eggs implanted, so Reagan's carrying twins. I'm incredibly excited to add two more grandchildren to our growing brood.

I arrive at the hospital. Jackson and Darian are already in the waiting area. Naturally, she's sitting on his lap and his hands are all over her. Jackson slides out and stands to kiss my cheek hello.

I look up at him. "Any word?"

He shakes his head. "No. I think we're in it for the long haul."

Oh great. I can't watch them fondle each other all day.

As if hearing my thoughts, he returns to his seat and promptly places Darian back on his lap. I sit in a chair and prepare to watch the man I spent twenty-five years with molest his new wife.

I don't begrudge him his happiness. In fact, I'm thrilled for him. He's an amazing man, a genuinely good person, and an incredible father. He deserves this. I know in my heart that his

relationship with Darian is the type of marriage he always wanted, but never had with me.

Seeing them act the way they do just highlights the lack of affection and deep love in our marriage. From the day Payton was born, there was never a moment where I felt as loved as he makes Darian feel every minute of every day. I can't blame him entirely though. He gave what he got from me, which was next to nothing. Our problems were as much my fault as his, maybe even more so.

We were just two people, living parallel lives, managing the life neither of us would have chosen for ourselves.

We probably should have divorced sooner than we did. We just seemed to have an unspoken understanding that we'd wait until all of the boys were out of the house. Neither of us wanted to split our time with them in half.

I can't help but stare at Jackson. He really is a very attractive man. What is it that I wasn't attracted to? I know him being so accommodating and nice rubbed me the wrong way at times, but what's the alternative? An asshole. Would I have preferred an asshole?

He treated me well, he often put my needs ahead of his own, he was always considerate, he was a generous lover, and he never disrespected me. What does it say about me that I had more nights than not where I couldn't manage to sleep next to him?

Now that I think about it, I'm pretty sure the failure of our marriage was way more on me than him. He tried so hard to

love me at the beginning. I just couldn't return it. I hated the whole situation we were in. It was unfair to him. I was unfair to him.

All's well that ends well, I guess. He found Darian. She's the right woman for him. The love of his life. But I don't have that. I don't know that I ever will. If I couldn't love a near perfect man like Jackson, who could I ever love?

My self-pity party is broken by Darian's oldest daughter, Harley, walking into the waiting area. She and her husband Brody are surgeons at the hospital. She looks at Darian. "Still nothing?"

Darian shakes her head. "No. Will you check on her? I can't stand the thought of her in so much pain. It all makes me nervous."

Harley smiles. "Of course. She'll be okay, Mom, don't worry." Harley heads off to the labor and delivery rooms.

I certainly understand why Darian's nervous. Harley had complications during the delivery of her second child, and they nearly lost her. My boys said it was a pretty intense few hours when they weren't sure what was going to happen. They said both Darian and Cassandra were inconsolable. Cassandra is extremely close with Darian's three girls.

I walk over and sit down next to Darian. I rub her back. "She'll be okay. She'll be up and around making us all laugh in no time."

Darian nods and whispers, "Thank you."

Just then, Darian's youngest daughter, Skylar, arrives. She looks at her mom. "Any news?"

Darian shakes her head. "Not yet. Harley's checking on her now."

I stand to kiss Skylar hello and offer her the seat next to her mom, which she takes.

Harley eventually comes back out with a smile. Phew. "She's fully dilated. It shouldn't be long now."

Darian asks, "How is she? Is she in a lot of pain?"

"Mom, it's labor. You've been through it three times. It's not exactly pleasurable. Of course she's in some pain, but she's handling it in typical Reagan fashion. She's cursing and screaming, and making wildly inappropriate comments to everyone."

We all laugh. That's definitely typical Reagan fashion.

Over the next hour, my sons Payton and Hayden arrive and sit with me as we wait. They each hold a hand of mine.

Eventually Trevor comes out with a huge grin on his face. "I have a daughter...and a son."

Cheers erupt as everyone runs to hug him. I'm so happy for them. I squeeze him tight.

I initially had trouble with him dating Cassandra. Even though she's a nut, it was never about that. Trevor's a nut too. I was just worried this day would never come. I know this was



their one chance at kids, and knowing he now has one of each is such an overwhelming comfort for me.

I have tears in my eyes. I look over at Jackson and he does too. He walks over to me and gives me a big hug. “Congratulations, Grandma.” He pulls away and smiles at me.

I smile back as I wipe my tears. “You too, Gramps.”

He laughs.

We all head back to Reagan’s room. Cassandra is holding their daughter. She looks at Darian with tears in her eyes. “I have a daughter and a son. Can you believe it, Dare?”

Darian sobs and hugs Cassandra. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

Darian runs her fingers through Reagan’s hair. “How are you?”

Reagan looks exhausted and upset. “I’ll never be able to have sex again. There’s no fucking way.”

Darian looks over at me and we both smile in silent acknowledgment of how it feels just after you give birth. It’s been a long time for both of us, but it’s not something you easily forget.

She turns back to Reagan and rubs her arm. “Yes, you will. I promise.”

“Trevor promised me a lot of big dicked guys as my pushing present.” She turns to Trevor. “You better deliver, asshole.”

Trevor and Reagan have the most bizarre relationship I've ever seen. They're so much alike. They're extremely close. She's the sister he never had. Actually, all the girls are. It's nice for my boys to have that now, but Trevor and Reagan have a particularly strong bond.

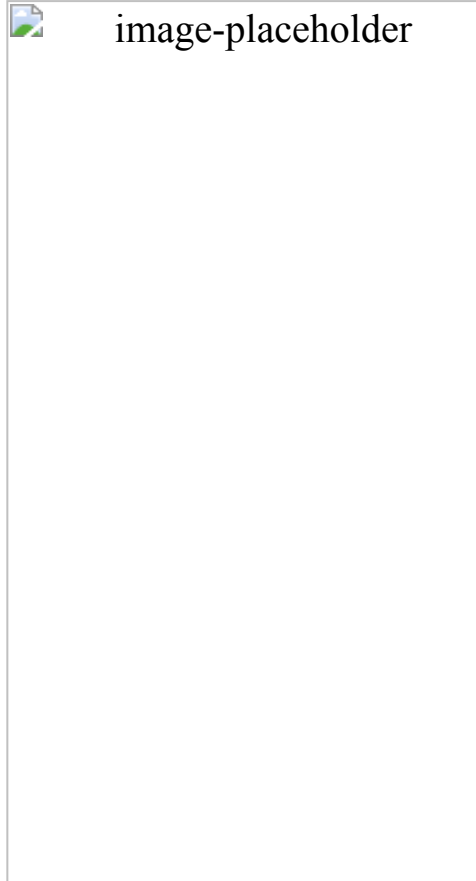
Cassandra laughs. "He literally promised her that in the middle of labor. The nurses all thought the two of them were crazy."

Harley interrupts, "They both *are* crazy."

I put my arm around Trevor's waist. "Have you guys picked any names yet?"

He rolls his eyes. "My crazy fiancée wanted to name them Brandon and Brenda after her favorite nineties television show, but I refused. So, we compromised on Brandon and Dylan."

I narrow my eyes at Cassandra. Dylan's also a character on the same television show. She just smiles at me and winks. I catch Darian silently laughing next to me.



A few days later, we're all at Trevor and Cassandra's house to welcome the babies home from the hospital. Despite needing to recover, Reagan insists on coming, not wanting to stay home alone while everyone else is here.

It's me, my boys, their significant others, my granddaughter Paisley, Darian and Jackson, her three girls, Harley's two

children, her husband Brody, Cassandra's sister Beth, and her son Luke.

We're all taking turns holding and feeding the babies. They're certainly surrounded by a lot of loving family.

Jackson ordered a big Mexican feast for dinner. The children ate first and are running around the house. Kylie, my son Payton's wife, offered to keep an eye on them while the rest of us sit down to eat.

Everyone is chatting when Darian asks Skylar if she's been dating. She recently broke up with a long-term boyfriend.

She shrugs. "I haven't really gone out much. I downloaded a few dating apps aimed at people my age, but I'm not into it. The guys are all perverts."

Reagan deadpans, "What's wrong with perverts? I don't mind them."

Darian rolls her eyes at Reagan and then turns her attention back to Skylar. "What do you mean by *perverts*?"

"I was messaging back and forth with a guy. He randomly sent me a dick pic to prove it was as big as he claimed it was. I didn't ask for it. He just sent it in the middle of a normal conversation. It's like people think it's fine to say and do whatever they want when it's not in person. Naturally, I told him I couldn't really tell the relative size from the photo..."

Jackson interrupts, "Are dick pics really an appropriate dinner conversation topic? Can we talk about something else?"

At the same time, Cassandra, Beth, Reagan, and Harley all yell out, “No!”

I’ve learned the hard way that Darian and her girls definitely have no boundaries when it comes to their conversation topics. I don’t completely understand it, but I find it amusing to watch Jackson squirm over it the way he does.

Skylar continues, “So, I told him I couldn’t tell the size from the pic. He then sent a dick pic next to a soda can so I could see it relative to the size of a can. I was obviously no longer interested in the guy at this point, but I needed to fuck with him. I asked him what size the soda can was. He said twelve ounces. I decided to zoom in.”

She smiles. “The can was actually one of those smaller seven-point-five-ounce cans. Can you believe it? He tried to fool me. If I was actually interested, I would have eventually found out.”

Everyone bursts out in laughter.

Beth asks, “Does size really matter that much?”

Myself, Cassandra, Darian, and all three of her girls yell, “Yes,” at the same time. Then we all start giggling.

My three boys just give cocky smirks to each other. I don’t want to think about what that means.

Reagan shakes her head. “Men can be clueless and disgusting at times. I had a guy, who I wasn’t dating, send me a video of him jerking off once.”

Trevor responds, “There’s nothing disgusting about jerking off. It’s natural. You do it too. Don’t deny it.”

I can’t help but interrupt this conversation. “Really, Trevor? It’s not disgusting for teenage boys to jerk off into their socks and then just leave the socks around for their mother to clean?”

Darian’s girls start laughing. Darian turns to me. “Is that what teenage boys do? They jerk off into socks?”

I nod. “Yes. And not only did they not bother to wash the socks, just like the rest of their clothes, they just left them on the floor for me to pick up. I spent years picking up socks that were stiff as a board. At some point, I honestly started going into their rooms with rubber gloves.”

Now everyone is laughing. Reagan turns to my boys. “Why socks? Why not a tissue or something you can just throw out or flush?”

They all shrug. I see Jackson trying to hide a smile because he knows it’s true.

Trevor eventually responds, “I guess because it’s the closest thing and it limits the mess. It’s also the right size. I have big feet, so I have big socks.” He grins. “And some socks are soft, and you can feel...”

“Okay, enough,” I interrupt. “We get the point.”

Reagan sighs. “I’m going to spend my life masturbating, since I won’t ever be able to have sex again.”

Darian shakes her head. “I promise you will.”

“Mom, I can’t even sit without an egg crate under my ass. I have like six pads on me right now, being held in place by some sort of weird, hospital-issued mesh shorts that I never knew existed. It takes me thirty damn minutes to clean up after myself when I pee. I don’t see sex happening anytime soon.”

Darian pats her hand. “I promise you’ll be fine. Women heal quickly.”

Cassandra looks like a deer in headlights. “Wow. I dodged a bullet on this one.”

Trevor adds, “*We* dodged a bullet.” She winks at him. I didn’t need to see that.

I agree with Darian. “Reagan, your mom is right. You’ll be okay. I swear.”

Jackson shakes his head. “I feel we’ve genuinely reached a new low in family dinner topics of conversation.”

Everyone just smiles at that, not remotely embarrassed.

Skylar rubs Reagan’s back. “You’ll be fine. I think I’ll wait for you to start going out to meet people though. You’re the best wingman at the clubs. I’d rather do that with you than participate in any more internet dating.”

I hadn’t ever considered internet dating. Maybe I should. Not the type for young people like those Skylar would use. I know there are apps for older single people. It’s not like I go to clubs with friends at my age. Maybe this could be a new avenue for me to meet men. The fixups certainly haven’t been

working for me, and surely that well has to dry up at some point.



# Chapter Three

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## Date Count: 94

### *Melissa*

Izzy looks nervous at the beginning of lunch. We order our drinks, but when they come, her hands are shaking as she tries to bring it to her mouth.

I can't take it anymore. "Isabella? Just tell us what's on your mind!"

She visibly swallows. In a raspy voice, she says, "Do you guys promise not to make fun of me?"

We all nod, though Cassandra mouths, "No," at me as she holds up her crossed fingers. She's like a child.

"I went out with Cassandra's friend."

Cassandra's face lights up. "Oh, I didn't realize you guys were getting together so quickly. And?"

Izzy bites her lip. She then lights up with a big smile and nods. "It happened. I *finally* had an orgasm."

We all jump up to hug her. While I'm hugging Izzy, I mouth to Cassandra, "Thank you." She smiles and nods.

Cassandra squeezes Izzy's hand. "I knew if anyone could get the job done, it would be Patrick. He's multi-talented. He has that thick, pointy tongue with the piercing, and..."

"Enough." I hold up my hand.

She smiles at me and looks back at Izzy. "So, how was it?"

Izzy lets out a breath. “It was...it was...it was the most incredible thing I’ve ever felt in my life.” We all laugh. “I can’t believe I’ve been missing out on this for so long. The orgasms were so strong. I felt like my body was exploding. I’m addicted.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Orgasms? As in plural?”

She enthusiastically nods her head. “Oh, hell yes. We didn’t get out of bed all weekend. I kept wanting more. Thank God the kids are away at college. I was screaming for forty-eight hours straight. That’s why my voice is hoarse today.”

Rayne asks, “So, do you like this Patrick guy?”

“Honestly, I barely got to know him. We sort of got right to it on Friday and didn’t come up for air until sometime on Sunday. We were too exhausted to bother with the get to know you chit chat by then.”

We all giggle, but Izzy looks like she has more to say.

“Can I ask you guys something?” We all nod. “How wet is your bed after you come?”

I look at her curiously. “What do you mean by wet? How wet are we talking?”

“I mean, I have to change the sheets after every time I come. They get soaked. Like fully soaked.”

We all burst out laughing.

Cassandra pats Izzy’s hand. “Sweetie, you’re an ejaculator. Some women are like that. Or maybe it’s just fifty plus years

of pent-up sexual frustration literally bursting out of you.”

Rayne and I are still laughing.

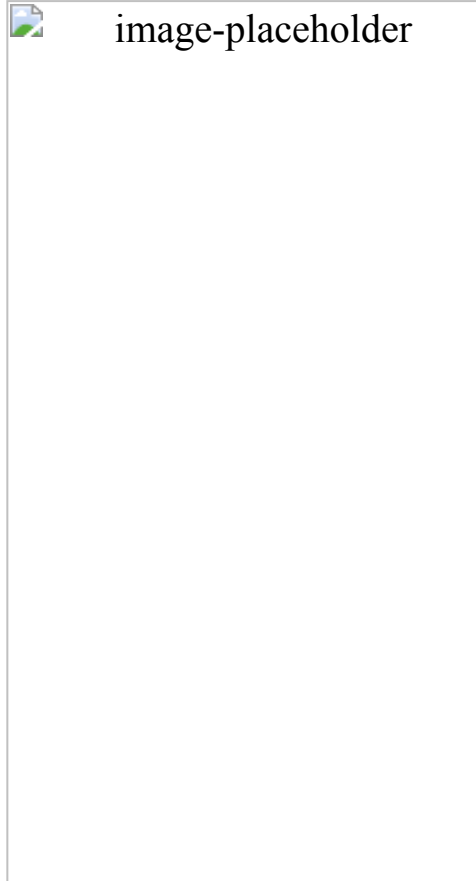
Izzy rolls her eyes. “Stop laughing. It was really messy. I was so damn sick of changing the sheets. I eventually just went and got the dog’s pee pads from the laundry room and laid them down under me on the bed.”

Now Rayne, Cassandra, and I are all practically on the floor cackling.

I attempt to gather myself. “Izzy, you made me laugh so hard, I almost peed myself. Do you have any pads on you that I can put on my seat?”

Cassandra and Rayne have their heads on the table in laughter. The entire restaurant is looking at us.

It takes us a good ten minutes to finally calm down. Izzy looks annoyed, but it’s too funny not to laugh.



I think I finally exhausted all the fixups. Everyone I've ever met in my life has tried to fix me up since my divorce. I suppose on some level it's a compliment, but it's exhausting, and I really hate how much it disappoints people when it doesn't work out.

So, I've recently entered the world of internet dating. It actually seems like an efficient way to sort through people.

I'm tall, so all short men are automatically eliminated. I have no interest in having any more kids, so that gets rid of a few. I'm not terribly into young men who like older women, so that cuts out another group.

I have a date tonight with a man I met on one of the dating apps. He seems nice.

His name is Joel. He's a divorced father of four. He's eight years older than me, which is a bit old, but he seems youthful and attractive in his photo. Our online messaging, though limited, has been fun and flirty.

I'm meeting him at the restaurant since I was with the new babies all afternoon, and I'm going straight there. I walk in and don't see anyone resembling the man from the photos. At some point, I'm waved over by an elderly looking gentleman. He introduces himself as Joel. The photo on his profile must be at least twenty years old. Maybe I need to rethink internet dating.

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The next morning, my three boys are over for brunch. Every few months, the four of us get together and they leave their significant others at home. It's nice to have the boys to myself, even if it's just a few times a year. We're able to catch up in a way that we can't when it's a big group.

Even after the divorce, Jackson would occasionally come, but since he met Darian, he hasn't. They have their big family dinners every Sunday night. Darian does always invite me, but

I very rarely go. Only if there's something specific to celebrate pertaining to one of the boys.

As always, I have a big spread prepared for them by the time they arrive. Trevor and Payton both work for Jackson at his real estate development company, and they catch us up on everything going on at the office. Darian's youngest daughter, Skylar, now works there, too. They all get along well and have managed to successfully divide the labor. I know how happy Jackson is that his once small company is becoming a big, family business.

I actually helped at his company at the very beginning. There's a decent age difference between the boys. Payton was seven years old when Trevor and Hayden were born. Once he was in preschool, I went back to school and worked to help Jackson build his company. I helped wherever needed, and my multilingual skills often came in handy during negotiations, as Jackson worked with such a diverse clientele.

Even through the years, Jackson often asked for my help when appropriate. He always referred to his company as ours, appreciating my efforts at the beginning, and me supporting us through his schooling. Even though he didn't have to, he insisted on giving me half of the company's extreme net worth in the divorce. He's more than lived up to his promise to take care of me for the rest of my life. I'll never want for anything.

Hayden's almost finished with medical school. He's in his final semester. He's the most stressed out and intense of the

three boys. Trevor's the polar opposite. He's always relaxed and happy.

I worry about Hayden keeping his nerves in check. Though, his fiancée, Jessica, has been good for him in that regard. He's been much more relaxed since they started dating.

I beam at my youngest, by three minutes, for the incredible man he's become. He's so kind, sensitive, and thoughtful. He looks more like me than his brother. Payton looks like me a bit too, but Hayden more so. Trevor's all Jackson.

"Hayden, are you excited for the wedding? I haven't heard much lately. I know it's been a long engagement, but we're finally in the homestretch."

Trevor immediately interrupts. "I'm getting married too, Mom. In just a few weeks."

"I know, sweetie, but you and Cassandra have everything under control. It's her fourth marriage. I think she can handle things. I'm not worried. I know it'll be an outrageous event that no one will soon forget."

Trevor laughs. "True."

I turn back to Hayden and nod my head for him to answer.

He smiles. "Jess is a little stressed, but everything's fine. I'm trying to keep her calm."

That's a bit of a role reversal. "Just normal bride stuff?"

He shrugs. "Yes and no. Her father's proud and doesn't want any financial help with the wedding. I think she's



worried about insulting you and Dad if she doesn't accept your help, but doesn't want to upset her father."

I shake my head. "We don't want to step on any toes. We can do as little or as much as you want. I'm sure your father feels the same. Don't let her stress about it. It's not worth it. The wedding should be whatever she wants it to be."

I grab his hand. "The marriage matters a lot more than the wedding anyway. You two love each other. That's the most important thing."

I hear Trevor mumble, "How would you know?"

I turn to him. "What was that? Do you have something to say to me, Trevor?"

He shakes his head. "No. Sorry, Mom."

"You clearly have something to say. Spit it out. It's fine."

He gives me a guilty look. "With mine and Cassandra's wedding coming up, I've just been thinking about the kind of marriage I want. I don't mean to be hurtful, but I don't want one like yours. I want one like what Dad has now."

A knot forms in my throat and tears well in my eyes. He stands up and comes over to hug me. "I'm sorry, Mom. I didn't mean it."

I swallow and look up at him. "Yes, you did. It's fine. I want the same for you. I'm sorry you guys didn't see a perfect marriage growing up. I hope you know that your father and I always cared for the other, and we still do. I want nothing more than for the three of you to have wonderful, love-filled

marriages. Payton has that.” I look between Trevor and Hayden. “You two are well on your way too...”

“And laugh-filled,” Trevor interrupts.

I look at him in question.

“You and Dad never laughed together. I want a laugh-filled marriage.”

“What do you mean? We always joked around.”

“You joked around with us. Never each other.”

Hmm. Is he right? I never thought about that.

We’re getting a bit heavy for brunch. I need to lighten things up. I smile at him. “You’re marrying the craziest woman on the planet. I have no doubt that you’ll never lack in the laugh department.”

He returns my smile. “I love her crazy.”

“I know you do. It’s growing on me, too.”

“She said she’s having fun at your lunches with Aunt Rayne and Aunt Izzy.”

“She fits right in. They already love her.”

He smiles again. “You can’t not love her. She’s infectious.”

I nod. “She’s infectious, all right.” He laughs.

I turn back to Hayden and take his hand. “Do whatever it takes to make her happy. To make you both happy. Don’t worry about the superficial nonsense.”

“Okay, Mom. Are you bringing anyone to Trevor’s wedding?”

I shake my head. “Absolutely not. I’m not seeing anyone seriously, and even if I was, that’s not the place for it.”

I smile at them. “I actually started internet dating this week. I’ve finally exhausted the million fix-ups.”

Payton, always the cautious one, looks at me. “Be careful meeting strangers.”

I nod reassuringly. “I am. I don’t let them come inside here to pick me up.” I smirk at them. “I save that for later in the evening.”

The boys all make puking faces. I can’t help but giggle. I love getting them riled up about my love life.

Trevor shakes his head. “No, no, no. You’ve only had sex twice. Conceiving Payton and us. That’s it. I refuse to acknowledge anything else.”

I smirk at him. “You know I’m the same age as your future wife, right?”

“No, you’re a year older, so that makes you a completely different generation.”

I laugh. “Whatever you need to tell yourself. Do you think your father has only had sex twice too?”

They all laugh and Hayden says, “I think we actually see him and Darian have sex at least twice at every dinner.” I can’t help but laugh at the truth in that.

Trevor adds, “And Reagan always calls them out on it. Without fail.”

“How’s she doing?”

He shrugs. “She’s still home recovering. I think she goes back to work this week. She told me that she’ll kill me if she can’t have sex again. She’s very fixated on that.”

“She’ll be fine. Don’t worry.”

Trevor nods. “I know. So will you, Mom.”

I nod my agreement, though I’m not sure I believe it.

# Chapter Four

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## Date Count: 95/96

### *Melissa*

I hear the buzzer letting me know I have a visitor in the lobby. I assume it's my date, Michael, who I met online. I agreed to the date after confirming that his profile picture was current. I'm learning from my mistakes.

I tell Jerry, the security officer that works the lobby, that I'm on my way down. When I step off the elevator, the only man I see besides security is the tiniest grown man I've ever seen in my life. Not only am I significantly taller, but I must outweigh him by thirty to forty pounds.

I smile. "I'm sorry. I thought you were someone else. Can I help you?"

"Melissa, it's me, Michael. Your date."

I pinch my eyebrows together. "I'm confused. My date indicated that he's six feet two inches on his dating profile."

He gives me a guilty smile. "Oh. That must have been typo. I must have typed six instead of five."

What a bunch of bullshit. I've got seven inches on this guy, plus I'm in heels, so it's more like ten or eleven inches. What the hell am I supposed to do with this? What a waste of time.

He looks me up and down, smiles, and holds out his arm. "Shall we go?"

I don't want to be a jerk. He was very nice all week and looks excited for the date. I guess one dinner with mini-me won't hurt. I've got nothing else to do tonight, though it's a shame that I bought this cute dress just for the date.

I plaster on a fake smile as I reach down, far down, and take his arm. We make our way to the door. I see Jerry smirking out of the corner of my eye. I jokingly narrow my eyes at him, and he widens his smile back at me.

We arrive at the restaurant to a sea of stares. I look like I'm babysitting this guy. We need to sit immediately to even things out a bit. Though he might need a booster seat to see over the table.

We have to wait several agonizing minutes for a table but when we are eventually seated, mercifully, it's in the back, away from the front entrance and crowded bar area. The waitress comes to take our drink orders.

I need a drink right now. A big one. I smile up at her. "I'll have a double Patron on the rocks."

Michael makes a weird noise. "Melissa, I'm actually recovering. Do you mind skipping the drink?"

Normally, I'd absolutely respect that, but I have no clue how I'm going to get through this evening without a drink. Or several drinks.

I nod my head and grit my teeth. "No problem."

We make small talk for the next fifteen minutes. Not only can I physically fit this guy into my pocket, he has zero

personality. I'm too damn old to spend my time on this crap.

Fuck it. I need a drink. The front bar area is out of sight of our table. I can go down a drink and be back before he can see over the table that I've left.

I stand up. "I'm going to run to the restroom and then check in on my new grandkids. I'll be back in a bit."

He stands as I leave. Or at least I think he stands. It's hard to tell. "No problem. Take your time."

I make a beeline for the bar. I'm locked in on the bartender, and he smiles as I arrive. "What can I get you?"

"I need a double Patron on the rocks. No, make it a triple. I'll give you an extra twenty if you have it in my hands in the next fifteen seconds."

I hear a chuckle next to me. I turn to see an exceptionally attractive man sitting at the bar with a beer. He's broad, with dirty blond hair and bright blue eyes. He's sitting, but he looks like he's well over six feet. Why couldn't this guy have been my date tonight? He's delicious looking.

He smiles. "Let me guess, it's a blind date?"

The bartender hands me my drink. Phew. That was quick. I hand him fifty dollars for his efforts and take a huge first gulp.

The stranger laughs again. "That bad, huh?"

"God, yes." I take another large gulp and set my drink down before turning to him. "What makes you think it's a blind date?"



“I saw you walk in. You’re fucking gorgeous. There’s not a chance in hell that someone that looks like you would intentionally go out with that guy.”

I smile. “I met him online. He lied about his height. By a full foot.”

The stranger laughs again but then gives me a long, obvious once over before his eyes return to mine. “I can help you with your problem. Why don’t we get out of here?”

He places his hand on my hip and pulls me closer so I’m standing between his legs. Though I don’t pull away, he locks his ankles behind me, giving me no room to move. His hand squeezes my hip. My whole body heats up at his touch.

I raise my eyebrows, but don’t flinch otherwise. “You’re very sure of yourself.” I look down at his hand on my hip. It’s now moving up and down my thigh, which I’m secretly loving. “And very forward. What makes you think I want to go anywhere with you?”

He smiles as he licks his lips. “I think I’m considered a pretty decent looking guy.” He smirks. He knows he’s way more than decent looking. “I know I’m at least a better option than micro-man over there.”

I can’t help but laugh at that.

He leans toward me and whispers in my ear. “And I see how much my touch affected you. Your whole beautiful body flushed, and your nipples got hard.” He looks at my breasts for

a moment before moving his eyes down into his lap. “They’re not the only thing that got hard.”

I look down and see a remarkable bulge in his pants. There’s nothing micro about that.

I widen my eyes. Holy fuck. I’ve never in my life had a man talk to me like this. I’m not sure if it’s more surprising that there are men that behave this way, or that I’m completely turned on by it.

I take a moment to gather myself but eventually pull away, grabbing my drink off the bar. “I’m heading to the restroom and then back to my date. I hope you and your friend,” motioning to his pants, “have a good night.”

He smiles as he lifts my hand and kisses it before saying, “We’re not done. You feel it too. I can tell. You’ll be back for more.”

I gulp and then finally walk away.

I rush into the bathroom and head straight for the sink. I splash a little cold water on my overheated face. I lean over the sink and look at myself in the mirror. My face is completely flushed. I’ve never had such an immediate physical attraction to a man. I’ve never had a strange man talk to me and touch me that way. I don’t know whether our interaction was hot as hell or met the definition of assault. Either way, I’m shockingly into it.

I stand there and try to gather myself. I slowly finish off my drink and take a few deep breaths before regaining my

composure. Eventually I head for the bathroom door. As soon as I open it, I see the handsome stranger standing there waiting.

When he sees me, he moves right into my airspace. Our lips are only an inch away from the other's. He breathes, "I'm about to kiss you. I need to see if it's as good as I'm imagining it to be."

I don't move away, but I breathe back, "What's your name?"

He smiles. "Declan." He then takes my lips with his. With one hand, he grabs my ass and pulls me flush against his hard body. He runs the other through my hair, taking control of my head and the kiss.

He deepens the kiss and slides his tongue into my mouth, moving it around until it finds mine. He feels good and tastes even better. My body instantly reacts to him. I'm practically flooding my panties right now.

I can't seem to stop myself as I drop my purse and grab fistfuls of his hair with both hands. I push my tongue into his mouth too. I can feel him smile on my lips.

He pulls me tight to his erection. I can feel it and its effect on my whole body. I moan into his mouth and he smiles again.

I'm completely consumed by this kiss. His tongue moves around my mouth in expert fashion. His lips sucking mine right in. It's demanding, domineering, and hot as hell.

I rub my nipples against his chest, craving more contact. I'm pulling his head as close to mine as possible. What the hell is happening to me right now? I've never experienced anything like this.

All of a sudden, we hear a throat clear. We stop kissing, completely out of breath, and look to the offending throat clearer. Naturally, it's Michael. This isn't good.

Michael looks at me. "I was getting worried about you, Melissa. I guess you're *o-kay* though." He says it with an edge I completely deserve.

Before I have a chance to speak, Declan grabs my hand and says, "Sorry, man. She's coming home with me tonight."

I open and close my mouth a few times, but nothing comes out.

Michael looks at me for confirmation, but Declan steps in front of me. "You don't need to look at her, little guy. I told you what's up."

This hot man is pushy and I like it. I step in front of him. "I'm sorry, Michael. Declan and I are...old friends. I don't see you and I continuing on. I'd hate to waste your time and money tonight. I hope we can part as friends."

Declan looks at me in challenge. "You don't owe him an apology."

I challenge him right back. "I do owe him an apology. I just kissed another man on our date and I'm ending it early. He doesn't deserve to be mistreated."

Declan squeezes my hand. “Napoleon here lied to you off the bat about his *size*. You’re the one that’s been mistreated, not him.”

Oh man. This guy is pissing me off. I let go of his hand and point to the front of the restaurant. “Declan, go wait for me out front. Now.” He pauses for a moment. I can tell he doesn’t like being told what to do. But eventually, he does head out toward the front door.

I turn to Michael. “I’m very sorry for that, Michael. I meant what I said. I hope we can part as friends.”

He gives me a resigned smile. “Of course we can. Be careful with that guy. He’s a bit of a Neanderthal.”

I nod in agreement as I pick up my purse and head to the front door. I’m frankly not sure if Declan will be there when I leave the restaurant. I can’t believe how much I want him to be.

I walk out the front door and am immediately grabbed by big hands. His lips softly kiss mine. He smiles. “Let’s have some angry make-up sex after our first fight as a couple.”

I can’t help but laugh. “We aren’t a couple, *caveman*. You don’t even know my name.”

He rubs his fingers along my face as he stares into my eyes. “You bet I do, Melissa. I’m about a minute away from getting it tattooed across my heart so you’re mine forever.”

I look at him in question.

He smirks. "Pocket man in there was good for something."  
Ah, Michael called me by my name.

"You didn't need to be mean to him. He can't help that he needs a phonebook to see over the steering wheel."

Declan laughs. "I'm just all about honesty. It's a thing for me. He lied to you. You owed him nothing."

"That guy has enough problems without a man that looks like you picking on him."

He gives me a sexy smile. "So you think I'm hot?" He's still right in my face.

"You said you like honesty so, yes. I do think you're attractive. Very attractive."

He licks his lips. "I'll give you some more honesty. All I've been thinking about since you walked in is tearing off your clothes and doing very naughty things to you."

I've never in my life met a more direct person, with the possible exception of Cassandra. Certainly not a man like this. It's both bizarre and refreshing. Equally bizarre that I want to let him do those things to me.

"You won't be tearing my clothes off tonight, but why don't we go for a walk so we can talk for a bit. Get to know each other. You know, like normal people when they first meet?"

He lifts his head. "Fine, but full disclosure, I'm not really normal, and I'll be undressing you with my eyes the whole time."

I smile. The feeling is mutual.

He takes my hand in his as we walk away from the restaurant. I'm able to truly look him up and down now. He's as tall as I assumed. His body is masculine and hard. He's sexy as hell and my attraction to him is palpable.

He catches me ogling him and winks at me. "Melissa, tell me about yourself, including your last name."

"I'm Melissa Knight. I'm a divorcee with three grown sons, and three grandkids, two of which are brand new."

He stops in his tracks and looks at me. "You're a grandmother? How old are you?"

I smile. I get this reaction all the time. "I'm fifty-two. How old are you?"

"I'm fifty, but I have a seventeen-year-old daughter. Not three grown kids and a few grandkids."

I nod as we continue walking again. "I got pregnant in college. I was a very young mother."

"Ahh. That makes sense. Is the man who fathered your first child your ex-husband? Did he father your other two children as well?"

"Yes, he's my ex-husband and he's the father of my other two children. They're twins. One of them is getting married in a few weeks, and the other is engaged and is getting married in a few months. My oldest son has been married for a few years already."

“Wow. Lots of big stuff in store for you.”

“Yes. It’s very exciting.”

“How are things with your ex? Was your divorce messy?”

I shake my head. “Nope. Not at all. We didn’t even bother with lawyers. We both started with nothing, and we ended with plenty, so we split that plenty right down the middle. It was all very civilized. Obviously, because of our children, we’re in each other’s lives. It’s all pretty easy and amicable. He’s blissfully remarried now to a woman who’s a much better fit for him than I was. She’s been nothing but nice to me and includes me in everything they do as a big family. She’s good to my boys and my grandkids, so as long as that continues, she and I are completely fine.”

“Wow. The full modern family.”

I shrug. “I suppose so. What about your daughter and her mother?”

“I’ve never been married. I was a pretty messed up, lost soul for most of my life. I battled a lot of demons.” He looks down for a moment as if in contemplation. “I was...I am...a drug addict.”

I’m completely shocked. I didn’t expect that. “Are you clean?”

He nods. “Yes, I’ve been clean for ten years, but you lose a lot when you’re as fucked up as I was for as long as was. I have no communication with my family. I wasn’t there for my daughter for the first seven years of her life. I can never get



that time back. It's among the biggest items on the large list of regrets I have. I have no custody rights, but since I've been clean, her mother has been pretty generous about letting me spend time with her."

"What's her name?"

"Jade. She's everything I wasn't. Strong, confident, motivated. Her mother did a great job with her."

I rub his arm with my fingertips. "What happened that you got so lost?"

"I had severely overachieving older siblings. They had a different father than me. Our mother got remarried to my father, and they had me. I think he preferred my brother and sister to me. At least that's how I saw it at the time. As a teenager, I tried a few drugs to numb my pain, and before I knew what was happening, I was an addict. My family tried for years to help me, but you can't help someone who won't help themselves. I take all of the blame."

"What about alcohol? Do you abuse that as well?" I saw him drinking at the bar.

He smiles, knowing what I'm thinking. "I didn't fall off the wagon tonight, if that's what you're thinking. No, for whatever reason, I've never had alcohol abuse issues. I don't over-indulge, but I can have a few drinks and it's not a problem for me."

"Glad to hear it."

“Part of my recovery is honesty. When you’re in the throes of addiction, you’ll say and do anything to secure your next high. I won’t ever be that person again. I’m a completely straightforward person now. Sometimes to a fault, but it’s how I need to be. You’ll never get anything but the truth out of me. Both the good and the bad.”

I smile. “So I’ve noticed. You’re one of the most straightforward, *assertive* men I’ve ever met.”

He quickly pulls me into his arms and pushes us against the brick wall of the nearby building. He presses his entire body to mine. He’s so damn aggressive.

“Enough about me and my former drama. Tell me something about you. Something other people don’t know.”

I smile. “I speak five languages.”

He shakes his head. “No good. That’s actually pretty cool, but I want something deeply personal. Something people don’t know about you. I want to know the real Melissa Knight. Not the divorcee. Not the mom. Not the grandmother. And not just the sexy woman the rest of the world sees on the outside.”

He touches me in such a familiar way. It doesn’t feel like we met an hour ago. It’s like we’ve known each other so much longer. I’ve never had such an instant connection with a man. I’ve never before wanted to tear a man’s clothes off within an hour of meeting him. More so, I want him to tear off mine.

I think for a moment. I look up at him. Our faces are only inches apart. “I’m pretty sure I’ve never been in love.”

He looks down at me as he tucks my hair behind my ear.  
“Not even your ex-husband?”

I shake my head. “No. We got married because I was pregnant, not because we were in love. We did have some amount of love for each other, but it wasn’t storybook love. It was more about mutual admiration and respect.”

“That’s what you want? Storybook love?”

Our lips are nearly touching. I nod my head. “I’m not sure I fully believed it existed until I saw him with his new wife. They have storybook love. All three of my sons have it too. So does my best friend.” I softly breathe out, “I’m the odd woman out.”

He takes my lips in his again. This kiss is softer than the one in the restaurant. His tongue slowly moves into and explores my mouth. I feel it in my whole body.

His arms squeeze around my waist, pulling me tight between him and the wall. Our bodies are glued to one another. I feel his erection as I wrap my arms around his neck and pull him even closer.

We continue to kiss as if we have all the time in the world. And in this moment, it feels like we do.

He eventually pulls away and we just stare at each other. Maybe I’m crazy, but I’m feeling something special between us. I’m about two seconds away from inviting him back to my place when he hits me with, “I’m moving to Africa tonight.”

Huh? What? I look up at him confused. “Was the kiss so bad that you needed to make up such an outrageous reason to bail?”

He laughs. “Just the opposite.”

He pulls out his phone and shows me the airplane ticket. “I’m a professional photographer. I’m being sent there indefinitely. At least eight months or so. I stopped at the restaurant to get a quick bite and a few beers before I head home to grab my stuff and leave for the airport. But you walked in and kind of set my head spinning.”

I sag back on the wall and let out a long breath. At some point I start laughing. He looks at me like I’m crazy. “You’re the first man in a very long time that’s stirred anything in me. It’s just my luck with men that you’re leaving and unavailable.”

He pins his body to mine again. “You stirred something in me too.”

He runs his fingers up and down my body. I have goosebumps. Fucking real goosebumps from his touch. I’ve never had that before from just a man’s touch. I look up at him. “What about your daughter? How can you leave her for that long?”

He lets out a deep breath. “Unfortunately, photography’s the only thing I’m good at.” He smirks. “Well, one of two things I’m good at.”

I bite my lip to hide my smile.

He shrugs. “It’s how I make money. We video chat when I’m on long assignments. It’s just how it’s been for the past ten years. It’s the best way I’m able to support her.”

He looks at his watch. “I need to be back at my place to pick up my luggage in less than an hour. Let me take you home.”

I shake my head. “That’s not necessary. You should get going.”

“It wasn’t a question or a request. I’m telling you that I’m taking you home. Is it a walk or an Uber ride?”

Again, I’ve never had a man talk to me this way. Why is it such a damn turn-on?

“It’s a five-minute walk.”

He kisses my lips one more time and grabs my hand as we walk toward my condo.

We arrive at my building. I stop to say goodbye, but he heads toward the door. I squeeze his hand to stop him. “You’re not coming up.”

“Yes, I am. I want to give you a proper kiss goodbye.”

“You can kiss me here.”

“Not the way I want to kiss you. Promise me one more kiss.”

I roll my eyes. “One kiss. That’s it. Then you leave.”

He nods as we walk through the door and lobby hand-in-hand. Jerry is standing at the elevator keeping guard. “Hi, Mrs. Knight. Did you have a good evening?”

I know he's confused that I'm coming home with a different man, but I don't owe him an explanation. I simply smile. "I did, Jerry. How about you?"

"All good here. Mrs. Bevil's dog went to the bathroom in the lobby again, but otherwise fine."

I laugh in an understood acknowledgement. Her dog never makes it outside before relieving himself. It's the subject of much madness at condo association meetings.

"Jerry, my friend Declan will be leaving in about five minutes. Can you grab a cab for him then?"

Declan interrupts. "Make it fifteen minutes, Jerry." He winks at him.

I mouth to Jerry, *ten*. Jerry smiles and nods.

We get into the elevator. "Goodnight, Jerry."

"Have a pleasant evening, Mrs. Knight."

As soon as the elevator doors close, Declan grabs me in his arms and starts kissing my neck. He whispers into it, "Do you have any idea the things I would do to you if I weren't leaving tonight?"

I whisper back, "I probably would've let you."

"I wasn't asking your permission. I'm telling you, your legs would be shaking all night, beautiful Melissa."

Oh god. Why does he have to be leaving? I could use a night where my legs shake. It's been a long time since I've had that. I desperately want it with him.

The elevator pings with our arrival. It opens straight into my condo and we walk in.

His eyes open wide. “Wow. This is quite a place. I guess half of *plenty* was a pretty big sum.”

I half smile. “I suppose. It’s kind of lonely here when my boys aren’t around though.”

I look at the time. “You need to get going. You don’t want to miss your flight.”

I wrap my arms around his neck, taking in his scent one last time. “Time for our final kiss.”

He gives me a mischievous grin. “It’s adorable that you think you’re in charge here.”

He walks me backward toward my sofa until my legs hit it and I’m forced to sit. He gets on his knees in front of me and starts to move his hands up my exposed legs.

“Declan, what are you doing?”

“I said one last kiss and you promised it to me. I didn’t say it was on your lips. At least not those lips.”

He moves his hands under my dress, pulls my panties down and off, and then spreads my legs wide.

Before I can even register what’s happening, he buries his face between my legs and takes a deep inhale. He moans. “Hmmm. I’m going to remember the way you smell when I lay in bed at night in Africa, looking at the stars, stroking my cock. So damn good.”

Oh god, that was hot. I immediately feel the rush of what his words are doing to my body.

He looks up at me. "I see you liked that."

Before I can formulate words, he starts rubbing his entire face around and between my legs, covering himself in my wetness. I feel the scruff of his face running through me. He then starts open-mouthed kissing me there. I should stop him, but I can't manage to find one ounce of willpower. I think I'm in shock at his abrasiveness.

He teases me, kissing around me, and only occasionally licking through me. I'm seconds away from grabbing his head and holding him where I need him to get what I'm now craving. I'm turned on to the point where I feel like I'm one substantial lick away from coming. He's driving me crazy with need.

Without warning, he spreads my lips wide and thrusts his tongue inside of me like he's fucking me. He then squeezes my upper thighs hard with his hands to allow himself to continue his deep penetration as his tongue twists and turns inside of me. Holy shit. I've never felt anything like it.

I begin moaning loudly as the onslaught continues. I'm already so close.

He lifts his head. "I'm gonna make you scream in a minute. Don't hold back."

He dives back in, but this time, he goes straight to my clit. He begins licking and sucking me like a man starved. It's been



so long for me since a man did this well. Admittedly, it really hasn't been good for me since Jackson. Not until now. This is good. This is great. I'm so close to coming, and it's going to be hard.

He switches back and forth between keeping his tongue pointed and flattening it. I never know what's coming next. It's fantastic. I'm grabbing fistfuls of his hair as I get louder and louder.

Sensing my impending orgasm, he lifts his head. "Come hard. Come long. Come loud. Soak me with your juices. I want them with me all the way to Africa."

Oh fuck.

As soon as his tongue hits my clit again, I scream out and detonate. My entire body writhes as I come hard, I come long, and I come *very* loud. I have no doubt my juices are all over him.

He sucks me all the way through until it eventually subsides. He licks away every ounce of my release, leaving nothing behind. He's like a child licking his dessert plate clean.

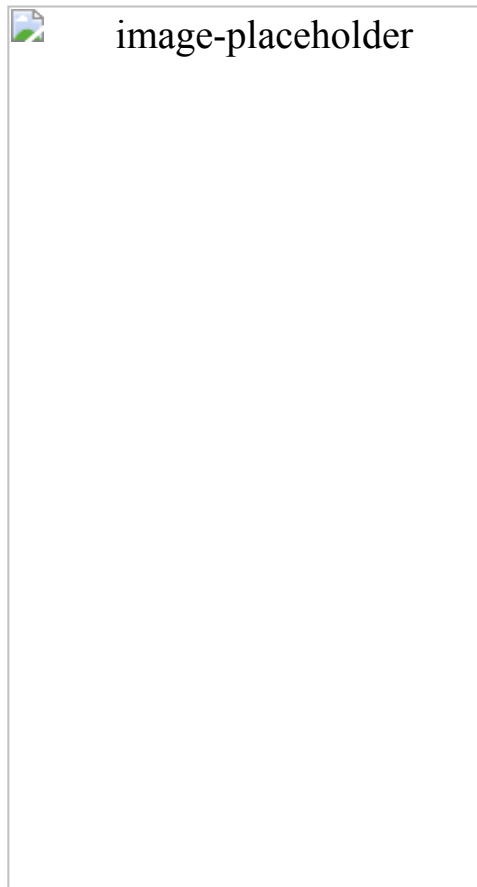
He stands and his eyes flutter as he licks his way around his lips. "Every time I lick my lips on the plane, I'll get hard thinking of the way you taste and the way you come."

I think I could come again just from the way he talks.

I start to move, but he holds his hand up. "Don't move. I want to remember you just like this. Spread for me, dripping

for me, satisfied by me.”

He walks backward toward the elevator, never taking his eyes from mine. He presses the button, and as soon as the doors open, he blows me a kiss. “Until we meet again, beautiful Melissa Knight.” The doors close, and I’m frozen in shock at what just happened.



“What do you mean you didn’t fuck him? Explain this again.”

“Relax, Cassandra. It’s exactly what I said. He pushed me down on my sofa. He spread my legs wide. He went down on me. He made me come hard. Really hard. And then he just got up and left.”

Cassandra, Rayne, and Izzy all look dumbfounded. Cassandra shakes her head. “The poor guy probably had blue balls his whole flight to Africa.”

We all laugh. I nod my head. “That’s true.”

Cassandra continues, “I do remember this one time…”

I put up my hand, “No. You know the rules. You aren’t allowed to remotely mention your sex life with my son. You can’t come to our lunches if you start with that shit again.”

“You’re no fun Melissa. Can’t Darian come sometime? She’d want to hear this.”

I shake my head. “No, she can’t. I don’t need to hear about her sex life with my ex-husband, nor does she need to hear about mine. There are certain lines I just won’t cross.”

Cassandra scrunches her nose in disgust.

Izzy asks, “Did you ruin your sofa?”

I roll my eyes. “No, Iz. I don’t piss myself when I come like you do.”

She gives me a nasty look. “I don’t piss myself. I just produce a lot of fluid when I come. I’ve researched it. I believe I’m officially considered a squirter. There’s a lot of porn about it. It’s considered sexy.”

Cassandra narrows her eyes. “You put dog piss pads under you when you have sex. There’s nothing remotely sexy about that.”

We all laugh again.

Rayne looks at me. “Did you exchange cell numbers? Anything?”

I shake my head. “No. I didn’t even get his last name. He’s gone indefinitely. It’s over.”

I take a deep breath. “Ladies, it was a really helpful night. I learned something new about myself. I learned that I get off on a dominant man. I’d never been with one before. The aggressive way he completely manhandled me, and the dirty way he spoke, genuinely turned me on. I now know that I need to explore that side of myself.”

Cassandra starts to speak, but I interrupt. “Don’t even fucking think about talking right now. I told you I don’t want to hear about it.”

She sits there pouting like the child she is.

I honestly feel like this awakened something in me. Something I want to explore.

# Chapter Five

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## *Melissa*

Trevor and Cassandra got married today. It was the most outrageous wedding ceremony I've ever witnessed. They danced their way down the aisle to matrimony, and then rode off on a horse. An actual horse.

They're both completely crazy, but for some reason, they work. I have to admit they really do love each other and make one another so incredibly happy. Trevor was grinning from ear to ear the entire day. How could I possibly want more for him than that?

Reagan officiated the ceremony. I suppose she more than earned that right. She was adorable and hilarious. It was perfect for Trevor and Cassandra.

It's been a fun celebration. We've all danced the night away. Payton gave a sweet best man's speech. The boys have some sort of circular deal for speeches. Hayden spoke at Payton's wedding, Payton has now spoken at Trevor's, and Trevor will speak at Hayden's.

Now it's time for Darian's matron of honor speech. She's in a low-cut blue dress that shows off her fabulous figure. She looks beautiful.

She stands and grabs the microphone with a big smile on her face.

"Good evening, everyone. My name is Darian Knight. I'm the matron of honor and am married to the groom's father. In

case you're confused by my relationship to the members of the bridal party, let me quickly educate you. I'm the step-grandmother and one of the godmothers of one of the flower girls, the step-grandmother and one of the godmothers of one of the ring bearers, grandmother to another flower girl, step-grandmother to another flower girl, grandmother to another ring bearer, mother of the officiant, mother of two bridesmaids, stepmother of the two best men, stepmother to the groom, and best friend and matron of honor of the bride." She smiles and sarcastically adds, "I'm glad I could clear that up for you all." Everyone laughs at this crazy, confusing family tree.

"Trevor, your mom and dad did such an amazing job raising you. If I could have crafted the perfect man for my best friend, it would be you. You obviously have a similar deranged sense of humor as Crazy Cassandra and your father's good looks, but there's so much more to you than that. You're kind, compassionate, and one of the most thoughtful men I've ever met. Cheers to Jackson and Melissa for the sensational man they've raised."

She raises her glass to both of us. Jackson and I both smile in gratitude. She makes it so damn hard not to like her.

"Cass, you're more than just a best friend. You're the sister I never had. I cherish your friendship and loyalty in a way that I'll never be able to adequately express in mere words. I can't begin to tell you how happy I am that you finally found your soulmate to give you the happily ever after you so very much deserve. You're one of the most intelligent, considerate,

wonderful, and perverted women I've ever known." Everyone laughs again. That couldn't possibly be a more accurate statement.

"I know my daughters have benefitted so very much from your constant presence in their lives." She looks at Trevor. "She's going to be an amazing mother to your two precious babies. I know this because she's been an incredible second mother to my girls for thirty years now. Trevor, thank you for loving my best friend the way you do. You've forever changed her life for the better."

She wipes a few tears from her face as she holds up her glass. "You two are spectacular together. I wish you a lifetime of continued love and happiness."

Everyone shouts, "Cheers," to the happy couple.

Trevor kisses Cassandra in a way that's completely over the top and inappropriate for a room full of people, but no one seems surprised. They receive nothing but catcalls.

I can't help but be happy for both of them. I suppose Cassandra finding love at her age gives me hope that I still have a chance.

Rayne and Izzy find me. Rayne squeezes my hand. "He looks happy, Melis."

I nod. "He is. I know I've had my issues with Cassandra's age, but I guess the heart wants what it wants. Sometimes it doesn't make sense to the outside world, but they're clearly in



love and it works for them.” I smile. “At least we got a new fun friend out of this deal.”

They both laugh.

The evening’s almost over. It’s just the immediate family there for the last slow, love song of the night. Jackson is practically inside Darian, with Harley and Brody not too far behind. Everyone is paired up with their significant others except Reagan and Skylar. They’re sitting at a table with drinks, laughing.

Reagan motions for me to come over, which I do. I smile when I get to them. “Did you girls have a fun night?”

Skylar nods but Reagan shrugs. “Obviously I’m thrilled for them, but it sucks coming to this stuff alone. You feel like the pathetic loser of the crowd.”

I laugh because it’s true. That’s exactly what it feels like. “You two are young. Your time will come.”

Reagan shakes her head. “I just birthed your demon grandkids. It’s going to be a while for me.” I laugh again. She has a way with words.

I shrug. “You look amazing. You definitely don’t look like you gave birth six weeks ago.”

She smiles. “Thank you. It’s probably a little easier to get back in shape when you’re not the one up all night taking care of the babies.”

I laugh. “You’re right about that. You’ll be back to dating in no time.”

“I hope so.”

Skylar asks, “Do you date, Melissa? The boys don’t mention much about it.”

I smile. “I go on an awful lot of first dates.” They both laugh. “My friends and I actually have started counting my first dates because it’s gotten so ridiculous.”

Reagan’s big blue eyes light up. “Ooh. What number are you at?”

“Well, I recently hit ninety-six. That’s since my divorce from Jackson. Ninety-six first dates, very few of which made it to date number two. It’s exhausting.”

“Holy shit. You get around.”

I smile as I shake my head. “To be clear, I don’t sleep with the vast majority of them.”

She gives me a devilish grin. “But you do with a good handful?”

I wink at her and they both giggle.

“You didn’t like any of them?” Skylar asks.

I take a breath. “I actually really liked number ninety-six, but he moved out of town, so it’s over.”

They both give me compassionate looks. “How do you meet them?”

“I used to get fixed up by everyone I’ve ever met in my life. But lately, it’s been more online dating. It’s hard at my age to

just go out and meet people. We're not much of a club-hopping crowd these days."

They both nod in understanding.

I turn my eyes back to the dance floor. I motion toward Darian and Jackson, and Harley and Brody. "I don't think I've gotten that far on any of my dates."

They both laugh at that. Skylar looks back over at them all. "As I'm sure you've realized, it's kind of normal for Mom and Jackson, but usually Harley and Brody are a little more discreet, though not much. We teeter somewhere between horrified and jealous at all times."

I hold my glass up in cheers to that.

# Chapter Six

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## Date Count 97-115

### *Melissa*

I'm going out to lunch with Izzy, Rayne, and Cassandra today. We haven't had a chance to meet the past several weeks. Cassandra was away on her honeymoon. Darian and I were tag team caring for the twins. I was able to get in a few dates when Darian had them but didn't otherwise have a ton of spare time. Then, I agreed to teach a few straight weeks of language classes during the day. Rayne and Izzy were on vacations with their families. It's been a perfect storm of us not being able to get together.

During this time, I decided to change my search criteria on the dating apps. Now that I've learned how much I like a dominating, aggressive man, I wanted to see if I can find one that interests me. What I didn't expect was the can of worms this would open. I need to fill them in on the insanity of my dating life over the past few weeks.

When I arrive, the three of them are already seated. Izzy and Rayne appear to be hanging on every one of Cassandra's words, though I can't yet hear what she's saying.

As I sit, Cassandra notices me and goes silent. I look at her in question. "Is there some big secret I'm not allowed to hear?"

She smiles. "Did you want to hear about how Trevor and I got kicked out of our hotel for fucking on the trampoline in the

waterpark in the middle of the night?”

My eyes widen. “Oh my god. No, I don’t. You know you’re not allowed to talk about that stuff.”

She nods. “That’s why I stopped talking when you arrived.”

I shake my head. “Rayne and Izzy don’t need to hear it either. They’ve known Trevor since he was born. They don’t want to know that stuff about him.”

Rayne and Izzy both give me guilty looks. I look at them in confusion. “What?”

Izzy bites her lip. “The stuff they do is insanely hot. To be honest, I kind of do want to hear about it.”

Cassandra laughs. Rayne looks down. “Me too. It’s pretty out there. I never know what they’re going to do next.”

I scowl at a grinning Cassandra. “Remind me why I started inviting you to our lunches.”

“Because I’m the entertainment.”

I laugh. That’s true.

I clear my throat. “Well, I promise I’ll be entertaining all of you today.”

They look at me in question.

“I changed my online dating profile. I checked a few more boxes. I want to date more dominating men since I recently learned of my attraction to them. Little did I know that I was unleashing all the crazies.”

Cassandra’s eyes light up. “Ooh. Tell us.”

“I think using the word *dominating* was perhaps a mistake, given that it’s a specific sex kink. I intended it to be more of a personality trait, not a full kink. The men that reached out were into all kinds of shit. I had one man show up with a dog collar and he asked me to put it on for the date. I immediately turned around and went home.” They laugh.

“I had another send me pictures of paddles and whips. Yet another asked if I was into being shackled in his dungeon. Then, I finally seemed to have met a decent guy, so I went out with him. When he picked me up, he asked me if we could go to a friend’s party. I agreed, but when we got there, they asked us to put our cellphones in a hat. I had safety concerns with that, so I asked my date why I needed to. I honestly thought that maybe someone famous was there and they didn’t want their picture taken. Boy was I wrong.”

Cassandra laughs. “That’s hilarious. He took you to a swinger’s party?”

I nod. “Yep. Just a totally normal first date thing. Go to a swinger’s party and have sex with all kinds of random men.”

Rayne smiles. “I guess you left that one right away too?”

Now it’s my turn to give a guilty expression. “Actually, I stayed.”

They all look at me in shock.

I hold up my hands. “I didn’t participate, but I did want to stay and see how it went down, and they let me. It’s like a different universe. I talked to a guy who said he met his wife

at one of these parties. They were both married to other people at the time but fell for each other at a swinger's party and left their spouses so they could be together. Can you imagine that? I just can't believe they still go to the parties."

They're all laughing now.

"Then I went on a date with a guy who wore more jewelry than me. It was like Mr. T on steroids."

They're still laughing.

"Then I was getting messages from all these guys with slightly broken English. Apparently, European men are very into the whole dom/sub thing. Oh, and I'm also learning new terms. Have you heard of ENM?"

Izzy and Rayne shake their heads no. Naturally, Cassandra nods. "Ethically Non-Monogamous?"

"Yes." Izzy and Rayne look confused. "It basically means married people who have an understanding that they will see people outside of the marriage. I got a bunch of those guys. I unknowingly went out with two before I started noticing that ENM is actually listed on their profile. Imagine my surprise when they started talking about their wives."

They're all shaking their heads, smiling at the insanity that is my love life.

"I had at least ten guys ask about peeing on me. Two asked if I would be willing to pee on them, one of which said I'd need to eat asparagus first. I had one guy ask me if I was into



knife play. Was I okay with him cutting me during sex? Hell, no.”

I throw my hands in the air. “I’m giving up. I think my definition of dominant and other people’s definition are different. I took all that stuff off my profile.”

Izzy shakes her head. “It can’t be as bad as the guy I went out with last week. He spent the whole date texting his ex-wife and lawyer. We didn’t say a single word for like thirty straight minutes because he was attached to his phone. At some point, he excused himself to take a call from his divorce attorney. When he got up, I decided to just leave. I was so pissed off. I went outside and there was a cute guy out there smoking a joint. He and I started talking and hit it off. Long story short, we end up in my car and he was going down on me. He was really good at it. My windows were completely fogged.”

Cassandra asks, “Did you come?”

Izzy nods. “Yes. The floodgates have figuratively and literally been opened.”

“Did you ruin your car seats?”

Izzy narrows her eyes at Cassandra. “I had the foresight to lay down a towel. Anyway, the guy I was on a date with came out and started knocking on the windows. I forgot that I had told him that I’d drive him home.”

Now we all have tears running down our faces.

“I’m lying there with my skirt around my waist. I didn’t even get the opportunity to reciprocate on that poor guy in my

car. I had to shamefully admit that I was on a date with another man while I let him go down on me in the car.” She covers her face. “The whole thing was a mess. I had to drive the original guy home in my car that smelled like sex.”

Once we stop laughing, I sigh. “Izzy, what do we do next? Dating at our age is horrible. I’m getting close to throwing in the towel.”

I turn to Rayne. “You’re so lucky you met your forever guy so young and don’t have to deal with modern dating. It’s a goddamn nightmare.”

Rayne gives me a weird look. I ask, “What’s the look? Is something wrong?”

She bites her lip. “I feel like a little bit of an asshole saying this.”

I wave my hand. “Just say it.”

“Grant is acting super weird lately.”

“How so?”

She gives me a guilty look. “He wants sex a lot. Like all the time. Like several times a day.”

Cassandra scoffs. “What’s the problem with that?”

Rayne shakes her head. “I don’t have a problem with it. I don’t mind it at all. It’s just unusual, that’s all.”

I rub her back. “You guys have always had a healthy sex life. Maybe he’s just appreciating what he has.”

She slowly nods. “Maybe. We’ve always had a good amount of sex, but multiple times a day every day is more than our normal.”

Cassandra looks at Rayne. “Enjoy it while it lasts.”

She then turns to me. “You need to do more than just use dating apps to meet men. I never used apps and I always met men before Trevor. There are a lot of upscale bars with appropriate men for you. You don’t have to give up the internet dating, just add some bars to the mix. You’ll meet a lot of men that way. I’ll give you the names of a few. I’ll even go as your wingman, if you want.”

Hmm. She does make a good point. Maybe I need to meet men the old-fashioned way.

# Chapter Seven

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## Date Count: 116/117

### *Melissa*

It's a Thursday night, and I'm meeting Izzy for drinks at one of the bars Cassandra suggested. Jackson and Darian are taking everyone to Mexico tomorrow for a long weekend, and I agreed to watch the twins since they're a bit young to travel. So this will be my only adult night for the entire weekend.

Rayne is with her family, and Cassandra wants to spend the night with the twins since she won't see them all weekend. It's just Izzy and me. We're the two single girls, so it's probably better this way. I can only imagine how Cassandra would behave in these already slightly awkward social situations.

I have to admit that she was right. There have actually been a decent number of single men here tonight. We're having a great time. We've spoken to many men and have had a few too many drinks purchased for us.

I've been talking to an Italian man named Anthony for the past thirty minutes. He's very sexy, very touchy, and has a deep Italian accent that's driving me wild. He calls me *Mell-eesa*, or *Bellissima*, which means beautiful in Italian. I'm totally eating it up.

He's got dark hair, dark eyes, and olive skin. He's tall and broad, just how I like them. I'm guessing he's a few years younger than me. He's flirty and funny. I like him a lot.

At some point, he leans down and whispers in my ear, “Bellissima, I want to make sweet love to you.”

I playfully swat his chest. “Anthony, I’ve known you for less than an hour.”

“I’m a man who knows what he wants. I want to deeply pleasure you, my Bellissima.” Why does that sound so much sexier in an Italian accent? If another guy said that, I’d probably call him a pervert and walk away. But with Anthony, I’m considering it. He looks like he knows what he’s doing in bed.

He motions to someone behind me. Another exceedingly attractive Italian man comes over and sits with us at the bar.

“Bellissima, this is my cousin, Tony.”

Tony kisses my hand. “She’s very beautiful, Anthony.” He has a deep Italian accent as well.

I look at them both. “You’re Anthony and your cousin is Tony? Your family couldn’t come up with a different name?”

They both laugh. Tony says, “We have twenty-four Anthonys in our famiglia.”

I laugh.

Anthony whispers in my ear, “But I’m very close to Tony. My cousin and I like to do everything together. *Everything.*” He lifts his head and gives me a panty-melting smile.

My eyes widen as I realize what he means by that. I’m not sure I have the sexual competency to deal with these two, but

I'd be lying if I said there isn't a part of me that wants to find out.

Tony starts rubbing my shoulders, while Anthony's hands travel up and down my thighs. I'm equal parts frightened and turned on.

All I can think about is what Cassandra said about the *divorcee threesome rite of passage*. Did I really miss out on that? If there were ever two guys who'd pique my interest, it's these two. I can't believe I'm actually considering this.

They both keep massaging me as they talk to me in their sexy accents. Having four big hands on me isn't so bad. In fact, it's really nice. I'm having a hard time not imagining what four hands on the rest of my body would feel like.

Izzy turns from the man she's talking to and sees what's happening to me. She smiles. I look at her in nervous apprehension. She mouths, "Go for it."

Anthony stares at me. I'm sure he can tell my breathing has picked up. He gives me a knowing smile. He licks his big lips and winks at me.

Fuck it. I'm going for it.

"Anthony, Tony, let's get out of here." They both smile.

I turn to Izzy. "Are you okay here alone?"

She smiles as she nods and waves her fingers at me. "Have fun. I know you will."

We leave the bar. My anxiety level is rising. I'm not sure I can go through with this.

They each take a hand as we walk toward my building. They both kiss my neck and whisper sweet and dirty things in my ears the entire way there.

I'm getting a lot of looks for the open adoration they're giving me. Anthony and Tony don't seem to remotely care about the stares.

We walk into my building, and unfortunately Jerry is on duty. His eyes widen as he sees me with two men, neither of whom bothers to hide their intentions with me. They're practically pawing at my body.

Sometimes it's like living with my father, the gatekeeper, again. I immediately feel his judgmental stare.

"Good evening, Mrs. Knight. Would you like me to call your friends a cab?" Jerry isn't known for being very subtle.

I bite my bottom lip. I need to own this.

I smile at him. "Not just yet, Jerry." I throw a wink his way as we get into the elevator. I can't help but giggle to myself knowing what Jerry must be thinking.

As soon as the elevator doors close, Tony starts kissing me. Anthony is behind me running his hands up and down my body while kissing my neck.

Holy shit. I can get onboard with this.



The elevator doors open. As soon as they realize we're in my living room, Anthony unzips my dress. It falls to the floor.

They both circle me like I'm their prey, eye-fucking every inch of my body, as they trace it with their fingers. They move in unison, like they've been doing this for years. I'm sure they have.

Anthony licks his lips. "Bellissima, you have a beautiful body." He starts kissing my neck.

Tony asks, "Where is your bedroom?"

I motion my head toward the bedroom.

Anthony picks me up and I straddle him. He kisses me as we make our way to my bedroom.

As we walk in, I see Tony's shirt is already off. He has an amazing body. He looks a few years younger than Anthony.

Tony removes his pants. I see an impressive bulge in his boxer briefs. Thank God. I think I still have PTSD from the micro-penis incident. I have a brief moment of fear every time I'm intimate with a new man.

Anthony places my feet on the ground, but nudges me toward Tony. It's Tony's turn to kiss me as he removes my bra.

I look down to see Anthony, who managed to quickly remove his shirt and pants, pulling my panties down. He's also thrown about ten condoms on the bed. I'm not sure what the hell we're doing that we'll need so many condoms. I try to push from my thoughts the fact that he had ten condoms in his pocket.

Tony pushes me down to the bed. They each climb up my body and take a nipple into their mouth. They're like synchronized swimmers in their movements. I try not to think about just how many women they've had, and how many times they've probably done this. I'm letting myself have this experience once. I've earned it.

Anthony and Tony seem to silently communicate what will happen next. Anthony kisses his way down my body, while Tony momentarily remains at my breasts, sucking one and kneading the other between his rough fingertips.

I hear Anthony whisper, "Dio Mio comè bella!" I inwardly smile.

Tony stops what he's doing and moves down to Anthony. They both stare at me and then smile at each other. Tony looks at me and says, "Che bella buchiach." I smile again.

Anthony replies, "Prima vado a fatterla nella sua bocca." They assume I don't know Italian. After he told me how pretty my pussy is, Anthony told his cousin that he's going to fuck my mouth first.

Tony moves back up to kiss me, while Anthony slips two fingers through me and then inside of me. He slowly moves them in and out. Hmm. That feels good. I buck my hips and moan into Tony's mouth.

After a few slow, deep pumps of his fingers, Anthony's mouth is on me. He's licking me up and down at the same pace as his fingers continue to move in and out of me.

Tony is playing with my breasts. He looks at Anthony. “How does she taste?”

Anthony responds, “Ha un sapore dolce.” I guess I taste sweet.

There are so many hands on my body. It feels amazing. I’ve never had so much of my body stimulated at once. My orgasm is barreling toward me at a rapid speed. I’ve been getting increasingly worked up since they started touching me at the bar.

My body is writhing. “Hold her while I tongue fuck her pussy.”

Tony grabs my wrists with one hand and holds me in place. “Your pussy feel good, Bellissima?”

“God, yes. Don’t stop.”

Anthony curls his fingers inside me as he laps my clit. My body convulses as my legs start to shake. I begin to scream as the orgasm hits me long and hard.

That came on quickly. I can’t see straight yet, but I hear Tony shout, “Capovolgila.” Before I realize it, Tony’s on his back on the bed, and I’m turned and positioned straddling his face. Anthony is kneeling on the bed above Tony’s head.

I hear Tony say, “Adesso tocca a me,” as he takes his turn and pulls my pussy down to his mouth.

Anthony is in front of me. He roughly pulls my head to his as he kisses me hard. I can taste myself on him. “Does it taste good, Bellissima?”

I nod as I kiss my way down his body. I grab his cock with my hand and circle the tip with my tongue. I bring him to the front of my mouth, slowly working my way onto him. As I take him deeper into my mouth, he releases a long string of Italian expletives.

I've got Tony's mouth between my legs, which I'm now grinding on hard, and my mouth is swallowing down Anthony's cock. It's the craziest thing I've ever experienced.

I have another orgasm building. Anthony clearly senses it and pulls my head off of him. He bends down and sucks my nipples into his mouth. He reaches down to where Tony is licking me and applies pressure to my clit with his fingers. As soon as he does, I detonate. My whole body is convulsing as I scream into the orgasm.

“You're so sensitive, Bellissima. It's very sexy.”

Once I come down from my orgasm high, Tony moves from under me. He asks Anthony, “è brava a succhiare un cazzo?”

“Sì.” I guess I suck a good cock.

Anthony rolls on his condom as I briefly recover from my latest orgasm. He slides between my legs. “Come here, Bellissima. Come ride my big Italian sausage.”

I line myself up and sink down onto him. Oh god, that feels amazing.

Tony crawls his way to me and grabs my hair for me to suck his dick too. I happily oblige.

As I take Tony's dick deep into my mouth, Anthony grabs my hips hard and thrusts into me over and over. Anthony is nibbling on my nipples while I lean over. There's so much going on.

I'm moaning into his cock, but Tony's moaning even louder as he thrusts into my mouth, deep down my throat.

This is fun, but I need the whole experience before this is over. If I'm only doing this once, I want the full treatment. I pop my mouth off of Tony and shout, "Fottimi in culo."

They both freeze in obvious shock that I speak Italian. They look at each other and smirk.

Anthony is still inside me, but he looks up at me and smiles. "You heard the lady, Tony. Fuck her ass."

I motion toward the nightstand. Tony opens it and grabs my lube.

While he sheaths himself in a condom, I move up and down on Anthony. I start to ride him in rhythm. He's deep inside me. Anthony grabs my breasts hard. "Ti piace il mio cazzo?"

"Yes, I like your cock. Both of your cocks. Now get them both inside of me."

I feel Tony make his way to my back entrance. He's rubbing the lube all over me. I slow my movements on Anthony to give Tony the access he needs.

He slides two fingers in my back entrance to loosen me up while kissing my back. In and out. It's such a crazy sensation having them in both the front and back.

He pulls his fingers out and says, “Tirala avanti.” Anthony complies and pulls my body forward so my chest is touching his.

Tony’s cock first teases my back entrance. I find myself squirming in need and anticipation. He finally starts to enter me. He slowly slips forward inch by inch until he’s all the way in.

Then they’re both completely still, letting me acclimate to having two big dicks inside me. I close my eyes at the sensation. I’ve never felt so full in my entire life. I take a few deep breaths.

I feel Anthony’s hand brushing my face. He looks at me with such care and compassion. “Stai bene?”

I nod. “I’m fine. You guys can start moving. Don’t hold back.”

They look at each other and smile. I wasn’t kidding when I called them synchronized swimmers. They move in and out of me in perfect, practiced unison. It’s like a choreographed dance. I’m just the lucky woman who gets to go along for the ride. And what a ride it is.

I can’t believe I’ve waited fifty-two years to experience this. It’s incredible. Euphoric. After a few condom and position switches, they give me three more orgasms before I pass out cold.



image-placeholder

## *Cassandra*

“Are you sure we have everything, Sexy?”

I shrug. “I don’t know. You did most of the packing. Your mom’s done this before. I’m not worried. She can drop by our house if we forgot anything.”

Trevor smiles as we ride up the elevator to Melissa’s apartment. “I can’t wait to get you back to Mexico.” He runs his eyes up and down my body as he licks his lips.

I smile back at my handsome husband. “Me too. I can’t wait for Secretariat to break another lifeguard stand.”

He leans over and kisses me. “I have some other plans for us this time. I vowed to keep you on your toes. I take those vows seriously.” He winks at me.

Yes, please.

The elevator doors open to Melissa’s palace. I roll the double stroller off the elevator while Trevor carries Brandon and Dylan’s bags. For two small babies, they certainly do require a lot of items for a long weekend.

I was staring at the bags and didn’t realize that I ran over something. I look down and see a dress and a man’s shirt on the floor. Oh shit. I know what this means. I hand Trevor the stroller and take the bags from him. “Take the kids back down and go for a walk around the block. I’ll text you when it’s time to come back up.”



He pinches his eyebrows together. “What? Why? We have to get to the air...”

Just then we hear a voice from the bedroom. It’s a man saying, “Buongiorno.”

I look up at Trevor and his eyes pop open. His nostrils flair and his breathing picks up.

I see him start to move toward the bedroom, but I put my hand on his chest. “Trevor, she’s a grown woman. She’s allowed to have a man stay over. Don’t go in there and embarrass her.”

We then hear a different man’s voice say, “Buongiorno amore mio.”

Oh my god. The timing couldn’t be worse. I try to hide my smile with my fist but fail miserably. Good for Melissa.

I whisper, “I’ve got this. Just go. Come back in fifteen minutes. Please. Let’s not humiliate her more than we need to.”

I think Trevor’s in shock. He just nods and gets back on the elevator as if on autopilot.

As soon as the doors close, I grab Melissa’s dress off the ground and walk toward her bedroom. I can’t help but laugh when I walk in. Sure enough, Melissa is naked, half-sleeping between two equally naked men. The lube is out and there must be ten used condoms on the ground.

She stirs when I laugh. She slowly opens her eyes, but when she realizes what’s happening, they pop wide open. “Oh fuck.”

I smile. “It certainly looks like you got fucked.” I look at the men more closely as they turn their heads in my direction. “Tony? Anthony? Is that you two scoundrels? Are you two still up to these old tricks?”

They both look at me. Anthony smiles. “Cassandra, la mia principessa, where have you been? We haven’t seen you in years.”

I hold up my left hand. “I got hitched. Can you believe it? I got myself a little boytoy. Melissa’s son. Melissa is my mother-in-law. She’s babysitting my kids today. You know, her *grandkids*.” I grin at Melissa.

Melissa throws her arm over her face. “Oh my god. Cassandra, please tell me you haven’t slept with them?”

I smile at Anthony and Tony as they smile back. “I mean, we never did much sleeping, right boys?”

They laugh, but Melissa groans. “This is a goddamn Greek tragedy.”

I roll my eyes at her dramatics. “Oh relax. I haven’t been with them in years. If it makes you feel better, I haven’t been with the Italian Stallions since before the first time I was with Trevor.”

She sits up and sucks in a breath. “Oh my god. Is Trevor here? Does he know?”

“He *was* here. He *may* know. As soon as I realized what was happening, I sent him for a little walk around the block.”

She nods. “Thank you.”

“Boys, I’m sure Melissa enjoyed your *Italian sausages*,” I say in my best Italian accent, “but you need to hit the road. Melissa has grandma duties today. My husband will be up here any minute. You need to be gone before he gets back or your Italian sausages will get run through the meat grinder.”

They both laugh and get out of bed naked without remotely caring that I can see them. I try to be a good wife and avert my eyes. They don’t hold a candle to Trevor, and I’d rather watch Melissa’s reaction anyway. She’s freaking out.

Anthony and Tony quickly dress and leave, both kissing my cheek on the way out. Melissa is sitting in distress running her hands through her hair. I rummage through her drawers for some clothes and bring them to her.

I sit at the end of her bed and smile. “So, I guess you finally got your *divorcee threesome rite of passage*?”

She nods.

“How was it?”

She plops back down and sighs. “It was incredible.”

I smile. “I know. Right? I know you don’t want to hear that I’ve been with them, but at least your first time was with good guys who know what they’re doing.”

I pick up the nearly empty bottle of lube on the ground and place it on her nightstand. “I see you got to 5<sup>th</sup> base.”

She covers her eyes with her arm. “Cassandra, we need to stop talking about this.”

I laugh. “Fine. Have it your way. Put your clothes on. You have a walk of shame to do in front of your son. Don’t worry, I won’t tell him that you found God’s loophole.”

She throws a pillow at me, and I laugh again as I leave her bedroom.

# Chapter Eight

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## *Melissa*

After a nice weekend with the babies, I'm meeting the girls for a late lunch on Monday. Rayne and Izzy are already there when I arrive. They both giggle when they see me.

I narrow my eyes at Izzy. "I guess you opened your big mouth."

She just smiles. "I would imagine you're the one whose mouth had to open pretty big." They both giggle again.

We're interrupted by the waiter, who brings over five fruity looking drinks. I just arrived. I didn't order anything. I look at Izzy and Rayne in confusion considering they never order fruity drinks. They shrug their shoulders.

He starts placing them on the table. I say, "I'm sorry, there must be a mistake. We haven't ordered drinks yet and there aren't five of us."

He lifts his head and smiles. "The lady at the bar ordered them for you. She said to bring over five Leg Spreaders, but to make sure to give the tall blonde woman two of them. She said you like two at a time."

I look over at the bar and Cassandra is standing there with a huge grin before making her way over to us. Rayne and Izzy start laughing again.

I slowly slink into my chair in humiliation. "Thank you. You can leave them here," I say covering my face.

Cassandra arrives and sits. The grin hasn't left her face. "How's my favorite queen of the DP?"

I moan. "Ugh. You're relentless. Just stop."

She smiles. "You had to know what you were walking into today."

I roll my eyes. "All right. Let's get this over with. Yes, I finally had a threesome. Yes, it was amazing. Yes, I'm happy I did it. Yes, we did *everything*." They all laugh at that as I smile.

Cassandra interrupts, "Yes, your son walked in on you."

Rayne and Izzy both gasp. Rayne covers her mouth. "Are you serious?"

I slowly nod. "I forgot that Trevor and Cassandra were stopping by to drop off the twins in the morning. I was asleep with the two men when they arrived. As soon as Cassandra realized what was happening, she sent Trevor out. He didn't see the men, but he couldn't look me in the eyes, so I imagine he knows."

Cassandra nods. "He heard both of their voices when we arrived."

I close my eyes. "Oh, shit. Do I need to talk to him?"

"And say what? Sometimes mummies like it in the front and the back at the same time?"

Rayne and Izzy laugh. I narrow my eyes at her.

She shakes her head. “I would leave well enough alone. I think he’s scarred enough without having to discuss it further with you. He didn’t tell Hayden and Payton, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“Okay. I’ll happily drop it. I didn’t get a chance to ask you guys about your trip last night. You were in and out so quickly.”

“I hope the Italian Stallions weren’t in and out quickly.” I shake my head and she smiles. “Secretariat wasn’t quite up for a conversation with you just yet, but yes, we had a great time.”

I pinch my eyebrows at her. “Secretariat?”

She widens her eyes like she didn’t mean to say that. “Forget it. You don’t want to know.”

She’s right. I don’t, but naturally, Rayne and Izzy beg her to tell them what it means.

She looks at me. I sigh. “Fine. Just tell us.”

She bites her lip. I pinch the bridge of my nose. “Whatever it is, just rip off the band-aid and say it. It can’t be that bad.”

She looks at Rayne and Izzy. “Trevor’s hung like a horse, so I call him Secretariat after the most famous horse of all time.”

Rayne and Izzy spit out their drinks laughing.

I look at her with my mouth wide open. “I was wrong. It can be that bad.”

I only have myself to blame. I take a deep breath. “One last question. You getting engaged on a horse, and there being a



horse at your wedding?”

She smiles and shrugs her shoulders in guilt.

Rayne and Izzy are still laughing.

“Please, can we get back to Mexico. Everyone had fun?”

“Yep. It was a blast. Very relaxing. Jackson took care of us. It was really nice. I’m happy that Hayden and Jess got to chill out before the wedding madness begins. They both needed it.”

“Me too. Did Carter go? Hayden said he wasn’t sure if he was coming.” Reagan met someone and got engaged pretty quickly. He’s a well-known businessman and the two of them are always in the Philly gossip rags.

Cassandra nods. “Yes, he was there.” She doesn’t say anything else. Clearly, she doesn’t want to talk about it. I wonder if she doesn’t like Carter. He’s been nice enough the small handful of times I’ve been around him.

The waiter arrives again with five more drinks. He smiles. “Five Santa’s Little Ho mixed drinks for you ladies.”

I roll my eyes while the three of them laugh.

After the waiter leaves, Izzy smiles “So, Melis, will threesomes become a part of your regular routine?”

I shake my head. “I don’t think so. It was definitely great, and I’m glad for the experience, but those aren’t the kinds of guys I want to spend time with.”

I sigh. “I’m not twenty-two with all the time in the world for crazy experiences. I genuinely want to find someone. I’m just

not sure he's out there. He may not exist.”

Rayne gives me a sad smile. “Except Africa guy.”

I'm hit with a wave of sadness. I would give anything to feel half of what I felt for Declan with any other man. We barely spent any time together, yet he consumes so many of my thoughts, both clean and dirty. He awakened something in me that I didn't know was there.

I sigh. “He's on the other side of the world. It doesn't matter. I think that maybe I've built up the attraction in my head. Maybe I'm misremembering it.” I'm not. I was desperately attracted to him. I know because I've never felt that way before or since, and if I'm being honest with myself, I still feel it because I still think of him often.

Rayne gives me a knowing look. We've been friends for nearly thirty-five years. She knows what's going on inside my head.

Just then, the waiter returns. He's got five more drinks. “Another round for you ladies.”

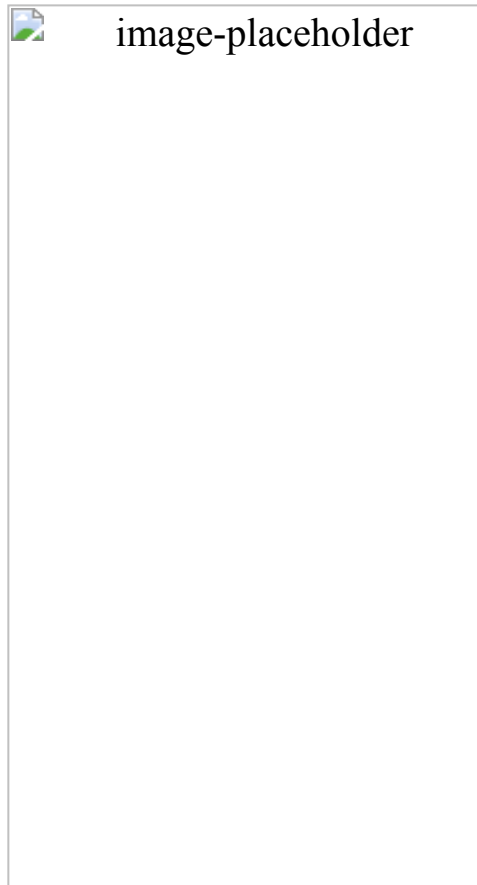
I narrow my eyes at Cassandra as I speak to the waiter. “What do we have this time?”

“We have Red-Headed Sluts, but I was instructed to use Pineapple Juice instead of Cranberry Juice so we can call it a Blonde-Headed Slut.” He says it with a completely straight face.

Even I can't help but join in on the laughter this time. Cassandra is crazy, but I can admit that I've come to

appreciate her crazy.

Thanks to Cassandra, I have way too much to drink. The last thing I remember is her talking me into going to Darian and Jackson's house.



## *Jackson*

**It's early in the morning and I see Melissa walking down the stairs of my house looking like she's at death's door.**

**She holds her head and moans when she sees me. I'm on the far side of our kitchen island. I have a bottle of Advil and a bottle of water waiting for her on the near side. She grabs it, nods in gratitude, and then takes a few Advil and the whole bottle of water in one shot.**

**She looks up at me. "I don't even remember coming here last night. I don't remember seeing you, assuming I did."**

**I nod. "It's a good thing you don't remember. You'd be humiliated."**

**She covers her eyes. "Ugh. I'm sorry. Damn Cassandra. She got me drunk. Tell me what I did."**

**I shake my head. "I'll let Cassandra fill you in on those details. Just know that it was highly inappropriate, and you owe my wife an apology."**

**She lets out a deep breath in regret. "Absolutely. Is she here?"**

**"No. She had an early meeting. I stuck around to talk to you."**

She nods. "I'll apologize when I see her at the wedding, if not before."

"Thank you." I pause for a brief moment. "What's going on with you? This isn't like you. I've never seen you behave or talk like you did last night. Something's wrong."

She gives me a sad look. "Jackson, I'm not your problem anymore. You don't need to do this. We don't need to have this conversation."

I can't believe she'd say that to me. "Melissa, we were married for nearly twenty-five years. We have three sons together. Three grandkids. We basically grew up together. How can you possibly think that all of a sudden, I don't care? I don't see you as a problem. I see you as a person I care about that's clearly hurting and is clearly going through something. Talk to me."

Tears well in her eyes. I move to the other side of the island and take her in my arms. She briefly sobs into my chest.

I rub her back and whisper, "Talk to me."

She looks up at me. I looked into these dark blue eyes for so many years. All I see in them is sadness.

"It's nothing overly deep. I feel alone. I feel unwanted. I feel unloved. I'm afraid I'll spend the rest of my life alone." She whispers, "I just want what you have."

I look down at her. "What's that? What do I have that you want?"

**“Love. The love you share with Darian.”**

**I step back and look at her in shock. “You’re jealous of my relationship with Darian?”**

**She shakes her head. “Not like you’re thinking. I’m not jealous that Darian has you because I want you. I’m jealous that you were able to find someone when I can’t. I want it too. I was in the same marriage you were in. I know we never had it. But now you have it, and I don’t. To be honest, it fucking hurts, Jackson. Am I unlovable? Am I such a mess that I can’t open my heart to someone?”**

**Her voice is raising. “Look at the last few years. All three of our sons fell in love. Real love. You fell in love. Everyone in our family has love but me.”**

**I shake my head. “Everyone loves you.”**

**She smacks her hand on the island. “Don’t patronize me. You know what I mean. Don’t talk to me like I’m a child.”**

**“What do you want me to say?”**

**“I want you to tell me the truth. Am I unlovable? Am I capable of giving love? And you know the kind of love I’m talking about.”**

**I nod in understanding. “Do you want the truth?”**

**“Of course.”**

**I shrug my shoulders. “I don’t know.” I see the shock in her face. It’s not the answer she was expecting.**

**“You never even gave us a chance, Melissa. You resented me for getting you pregnant. You resented me for wanting to marry you. You resented me for you having to drop out of school. You resented me because we had a baby to take care of when all of your friends were out having a good time. I tried for years to bend over backwards to make you happy. I all but forced you to go back to school to get your degree. To learn all the languages you always wanted to learn. I knew how important that all was to you. I always offered to stay home with Payton when I had time, so you could be with your friends. I tried hard to make you happy and make you love me. But you never ever tried. Not even at the very beginning. At some point, I stopped trying. I had to for my own self-preservation.”**

**She stands there with her eyes wide open, tears welling in them, breathing deeply. I may have gone too far. She didn't deserve that. I step toward her, “Meli...”**

**She holds up her hands. “No. Stop. You're right.” Tears begin streaming down her cheeks. “You're 100% right. I was a closed off bitch for our entire marriage. It's on me. I ruined your life. I'm sorry.”**

**I shake my head. “Stop it. Yes, you were closed off. You weren't a bitch. Maybe last night you were a bitch, but not during our marriage.”**

**She lets out a laugh through her tears. “Are you going to tell me what I did last night?”**

I shake my head. “No. I’m not. Melissa, you didn’t ruin my life. Do I seem unhappy?”

“No, you’re the happiest motherfucker on the planet. Sometimes it drives me nuts.”

I smile at her honesty. “I *am* happy. I won’t apologize for that. But you’re a huge part of my happiness.”

She gives me a confused look. “Without you, we wouldn’t have our sons. We wouldn’t have our grandkids. And, honestly, I don’t know that I would’ve met Darian if not for you. Darian wasn’t available to me when we were younger. I believe I met her exactly when I was supposed to. Exactly when I needed her and she needed me. I don’t resent our marriage. I choose to see only the good that came from it, and a lot of good came from it. I couldn’t ask for a better, more loving mother for our boys than you.”

She has a fresh set of tears in her eyes. “Why are you so nice to me?”

I let out a laugh. “I have no reason not to be.” I shake my head. “Frankly, I think you would have preferred if I wasn’t so nice to you. You may have been more into me.”

Her eyes widen. “How... why... what makes you say that?”

I shrug. “I don’t know. Living with you for twenty-five years? I think you’d prefer a man with more edge than I have. I could be wrong. It’s just my gut instincts on it.”



**The look on her face right now tells me that she knows I'm right.**

**I look at my watch. "I'm sorry to cut this short, but I have a meeting. Can I drop you somewhere?"**

**"Are you headed to the city?"**

**"I am."**

**"I'll take a ride, if you don't mind."**

**"I don't"**

**We head out the door. I throw my arm around her. "You know you're a smart, beautiful woman. I imagine it hasn't been hard for you to find dates. Eventually, the right guy will walk through the door. Actually, in your case, he may break through the door."**

**She laughs as we head out.**

# Chapter Nine

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## Date Count: 118

### *Melissa*

I love the feel of his body on mine. His scent is intoxicating. His blue eyes stare intensely into mine.

I run my hands all over his sexy body. Up and through his hair.

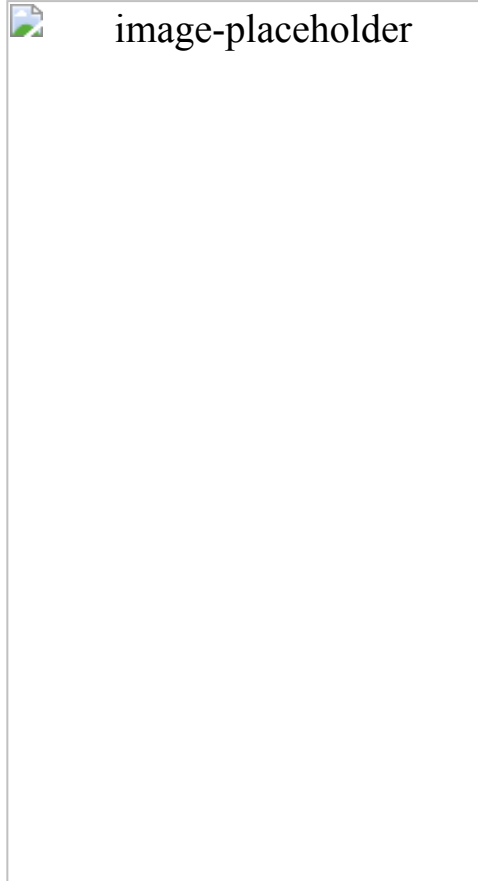
He's naked, between my legs, pounding into me. It's so damn good.

I scrape my nails down his back. It only serves to make him go harder, deeper, and faster. I arch my back in pleasure, so close to coming. My body is about to lift into orbit.

He reaches down and touches my clit. Oh god, here we go. I feel like a volcano erupting. I grab the sheets. Yes. Yes. Yes.

My eyes blink open just after I come. I look down. There's no one on top of me. I turn to the spot next to me in the bed. I'm alone.

I lift my head and look all the way down at my soaked panties with my hand between my legs. I plop my head back down. Holy shit. He felt so real.



I look around the table at my friends. “Do you guys still have wet dreams?”

Cassandra nods. “All the time.” She turns to Izzy. “No, they’re not wet enough to cause me to need to change my sheets.”

Izzy narrows her eyes at Cassandra. Cassandra just laughs in return.

I'm surprised. "Really? All the time?"

Cassandra shrugs. "Yes. I feel like it relates to how horny you are. I'm always horny."

I put my hand up. "Okay. Enough." I turn to Rayne. "What about you?"

She thinks for a moment. "Hmm. Maybe two or three times a month. Every other week or so. Why do you ask?"

"I've been having a lot lately, but that's a recent thing. Until the past few months, I couldn't tell you the last time it happened to me. The one I had this morning was crazy. I would have sworn the dream was real. I came really hard. I don't ever remember it feeling so real. I don't remember ever having one that intense."

Cassandra remarks, "Someone or something kickstarted this."

I shrug. "I suppose."

Izzy looks dumbfounded. "You guys can come in your sleep? Without a man touching you?"

The three of us nod.

"Wow, you're lucky."

Cassandra smiles. "Just think of how your inability to do so is saving you from having to change your sheets." We laugh.

I shrug. "I guess I've been pretty worked up lately. Lots of dates and the threesome. It makes sense. I suppose it's good

that I have another date this weekend. It's with a man I met online."

Cassandra shakes her head. "Your track record with the online thing isn't good. I really think you need to continue to pursue other avenues."

"My track record has sucked for fifty-two years. I'm not really in a position to be too picky about how I meet men. I'll take it any way I can."

Cassandra nods and throws her hands up in defeat. "Fair enough."

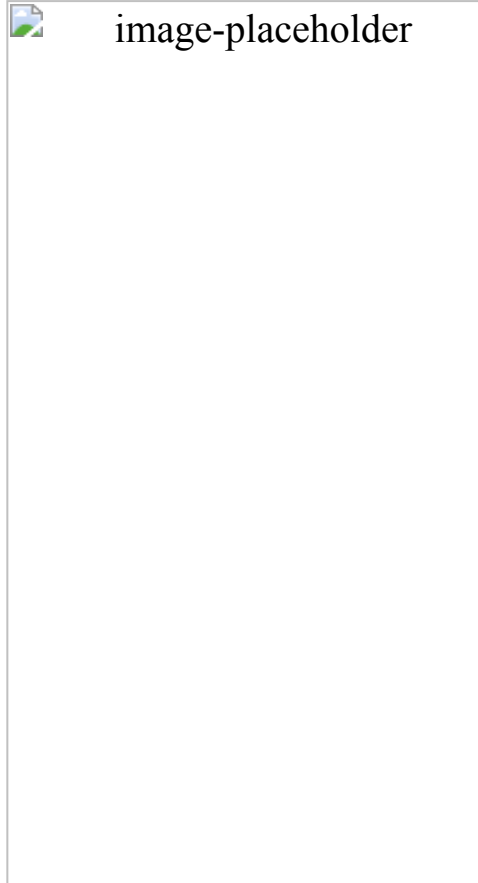
Izzy smiles. "Tell us about the guy."

"His name is James. He's a high-school football coach. Since I learned the hard way that I can't include that I like dominant men in my profile anymore, I decided to look for men that have a job where they need to be pretty alpha dominant. I think a football coach could fit the bill." They all nod in agreement.

"He looks attractive in his profile photo, which I confirmed is a recent photo. He was really engaging in our conversations. He's definitely smart. He's six feet three inches. And I did confirm with him that there were no typos."

They all laugh.

"He asked why I needed confirmation of everything, and when I told him, he thought it was hysterical. So at least he has some personality. I genuinely feel excited for this one. Something tells me he's different."



I'm in my favorite dark blue dress. It matches my eyes and makes my legs look even longer than they are. I haven't been this excited for a date in a long time. James really does look pretty attractive from his profile picture. We messaged for hours each night all week. I like him and his personality. I hope there's some physical chemistry when we meet.

Jerry rings that James is here. I tell him to send James up. I rarely let them up before I meet them, but I have a feeling about this guy.

The elevator doors open and an Adonis walks out. Wow. He's even more attractive than his picture. He's tall with neatly combed brown hair and big chocolate brown eyes. He has a stubble-covered square chin and big lips.

When he sees me, he gives me a huge smile. And he has a nice smile. A sexy smile.

He's wearing jeans with a T-shirt and a blazer. He's pretty thick looking. I'm happy with what I see. I'm immediately physically attracted to him.

I walk up and offer my hand, but he hugs me instead. He smells amazing. "It's nice to finally meet you, Melissa."

I hug him back. "Same to you, James."

He pulls back and looks at me. "Wow. You're even more beautiful than your photo."

I smile. "Thank you. I was actually thinking the same about you."

He nods in humble gratitude. He looks around. "Your place is amazing."

I shrug. "Thanks. It's home. I like it. I *love* the location though. I can walk everywhere from here."

He grabs my hand. "Yes, it's a fantastic location. I made a reservation nearby. Do you mind walking?"



I shake my head. “Not at all. I prefer to.”

We head down to the lobby. I see Jerry cleaning up after Mrs. Bevil’s dog. He gives me a frustrated look, and I can’t help but giggle. Poor Jerry. I hope Mrs. Bevil gives him a good Christmas tip. He deserves it. “Have a good night, Jerry.”

He scrunches his nose at me and calls out, “You too, Mrs. Knight.”

James picked one of my favorite restaurants. It’s only a few blocks away. The walk is nice as we get to know each other a little bit more. He’s divorced with two daughters and one son, all in their twenties. He tells me about his kids and I tell him about mine.

We arrive, sit, and order drinks. I order tequila, and he orders whiskey.

He takes a deep breath. “Melissa, before we begin, I have to admit something to you. Something I wasn’t entirely truthful about in my profile. It’s nothing major. I’m not a foot shorter or anything.” He smiles.

Ugh. Things were going so well. I nod for him to continue.

“I’m not a high-school football coach. I’m a doctor. A surgeon, actually. I don’t put it in my profile because there are a lot of women out there who kind of hunt for doctors. I purposefully put a humble profession, trying to steer clear of the wrong type of women. Obviously, you’re not that type, so I just wanted to get that out in the open before we continue on.”

I understand why he lies. I just can't believe the irony of the fact that him being a football coach made me want to connect with him in the first place.

He continues, "If it makes you feel better, I do actually volunteer to be the team physician for football games for a few of the local high schools."

I smile. "Where do you work?"

"Right here at Pennsylvania Hospital. I run the orthopedic surgical department."

"Oh, then you must know my ex-husband's stepdaughter and her husband. They're both surgeons there."

"You must mean Harley and Brody. They're the only married couple."

"Yes, that's them. And you must know my future daughter-in-law, Jessica Shaw."

He smiles and nods. "Of course. She's a doll. Isn't she getting married next weekend?"

I nod. "Yes. We have a big wedding weekend coming up."

"Congratulations to you."

"Thank you. It's very exciting. They're an adorable couple. I couldn't be happier for them."

We spend a nice evening getting to know each other. It's definitely the most successful date I've had in a long time. After the madness of last weekend, I'm not up to rushing into anything physical. We share a brief kiss at the end of the

evening. It's nice and warm. We agree that we'll keep in touch and go out again after the wedding.

# Chapter Ten

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## *Melissa*

The wedding went off without a hitch. Actually, it was incredible because just before they walked down the aisle, Jessica told Hayden that they're expecting. I'm going to be a grandmother again. I couldn't be more excited about it.

All of my sons are happily married now. It's a wonderful feeling. They all deserve the happiness they have. Maybe my time is coming. I feel like it is.

James sent me flowers just ahead of the wedding to wish me luck, and called right after the wedding weekend to check on things. He's incredibly thoughtful and sweet.

He said he'd like to see me, but he's on-call and asked if we could meet for dinner near the hospital in case he gets paged. I immediately agreed.

I'm really looking forward to seeing him again. Being around so many couples in love this past weekend made me want it all the more.

It's kind of nice that we're taking things relatively slowly and getting to know each other. It's very different for me. I guess it's how things went for Darian and Jackson, so maybe there's something to it.

I walk into the restaurant. James is in scrubs. He looks incredibly sexy like that. He looks like one of the hot doctors from Grey's Anatomy.

He smiles as soon as he sees me. He softly kisses my lips hello and we sit. He can't drink because he's on-call, so I don't either. I don't need it.

We talk and laugh and flirt throughout the night. He's an interesting guy. He never sits still for a minute. He works hard at the hospital, he spends time at the high school with the football players, and he even manages to teach two yoga classes a week. He said it's his physical and emotional release from his stressful job.

I tell him about the charity work I do and the classes I teach. He's a good listener. I tell him of my desire to eventually spend some time abroad, and he tells me about the time he's spent on medical missions abroad and that it's something he plans to do again in the future.

When we walk out of the restaurant at the end of the evening, he checks his phone to make sure the hospital hasn't called. When he confirms it hasn't, he asks me if I'd like to come to his place, which is nearby.

I accept and we start walking that way, hand in hand. We're almost at his place when his phone rings. It's the hospital and he's needed to go back in for an emergency. We're both disappointed, but it is what it is.

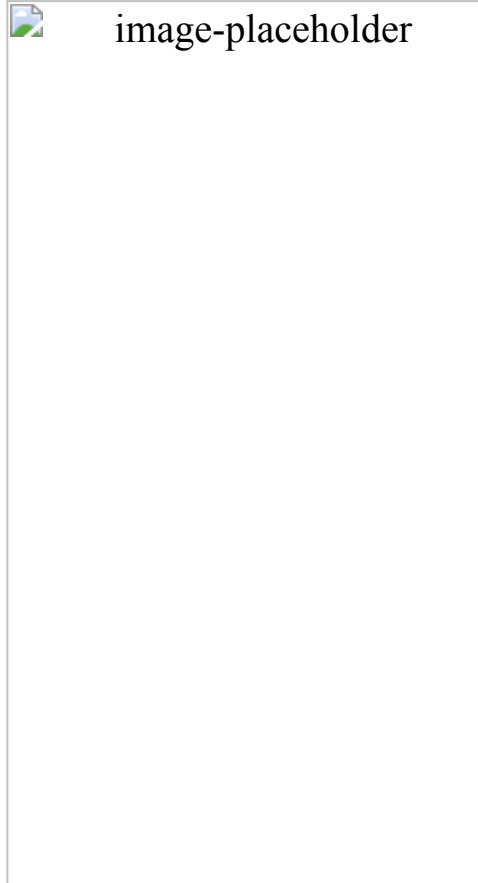
He offers to get me a cab home, but I tell him I prefer the walk. We make plans for a yoga date over the weekend. He's going to come over to my place and teach me. He gives me another soft kiss goodbye.

I walk home alone. I don't mind it. I've gotten used to being alone the past nine years.

I think about James. He's an attractive and nice man. I hope we're physically compatible. He's the kind of man I could really spend time with. He's incredibly sweet.

I can't help that just as I'm thinking of how sweet James has been, I think of Declan. Declan wouldn't have sweetly kissed me goodnight. He probably would have pulled me into the alley and fucked me senseless. I can't help the thrill it gives me to think of him doing that to me.

I shake my head. That's so wrong. I really need to let him go.



James is coming over this afternoon to give me a yoga lesson, and I assume to progress our physical relationship. I'd really like to see if we're physically compatible before we continue on. It's important to me that we are.

I'm in tiny shorts and a tight tank top. I'm hoping that gets the point across.



He's on at the hospital at five o'clock, which gives us about two hours. That should be plenty of time for what I have in mind.

He arrives, and I tell Jerry to let him up. He walks off the elevator in athletic shorts and a T-shirt that's tight across his broad chest. There's something sexy about seeing him like this.

He stops short when he steps off the elevator. "Wow. Your legs are like a mile long."

I smile. "Thank you."

He approaches me and gives me a kiss on the cheek.

For the next hour, he runs me through all of the yoga poses. Who knew yoga poses were so sexual in nature? His hands are on my body, but he's taking the yoga incredibly seriously. I see him getting frustrated that I'm not.

Time is ticking. Am I going to have to make the first move here? That's not really my style or what does it for me.

He's got me in some pose where my knees are on my elbows. I can't hold it and tip over onto my back.

His arm gets caught under me and he falls on top of me. We both laugh for a moment, but then our faces turn serious.

I thread my fingers through his hair and pull his head to mine, bringing my lips to his. He returns the kiss immediately.

His lips are soft, and he's a pretty good kisser, but I'm frustratingly the aggressor in it. I'm starting to think this is a

mistake. Maybe I'm forcing this. I'm not feeling it. I'm confused. I'm going to put a stop to it.

We have the music on fairly loud, so I guess I don't hear the elevator door open. What I do hear is a familiar voice barking, "Get the fuck off of her."

My mind must be playing tricks on me since I'm not kissing the person I really want to be kissing right now. I must be imagining the voice of the man that makes appearances in my dreams every night, and many mornings.

James and I both quickly sit up at the interruption. To my complete shock, Declan's standing there with his suitcases, looking like he's about to commit murder.

I blink my eyes a few times to make sure I'm not imagining this. I pinch my eyebrows in disbelief. "Declan?"

He smiles at me in a half-endearing, half-diabolical way. "Honey, I'm home."

I shake my head at his absurdity. I might smile a little too.

James looks at me in horror.

"I'm sorry James. This is my friend Declan. He moved to Africa months ago. I didn't know he was back."

I turn to Declan. "When did you get back?"

He motions down to his luggage sitting on the floor next to him. "About thirty minutes ago. I came straight to see you. I couldn't wait to see my girlfriend." He smiles and blows me a kiss.

This just got incredibly awkward. Though I've had very little time with Declan, I know enough to know that he won't be nice to James. I need to get one of them out of here right away.

I turn to James. "James, to be clear, I'm not his girlfriend, but I should probably chat with him. I'm sorry to cut our date short. I know you have to get to the hospital anyway. Can I maybe stop by around dinnertime and sit with you? I can fill you in on this." I motion between me and Declan.

James gives me a defeated smile as we both stand. "Of course. I look forward to it." He kisses my cheek and leaves. Declan doesn't bother to acknowledge him or get out of his way when he passes Declan to get into the elevator. I may even see Declan throw an elbow at James.

The elevator doors mercifully close with James on the other side. Declan and I simply stare at each other in silence.

I didn't imagine it all those months ago. The attraction between us is palpable. My entire body reacts to the sight of him. I haven't felt this way since my night with him.

I can feel my heart beating rapidly in my chest. I'm getting overheated, yet I have chills sweeping through my body. I have no idea what he's going to do right now. I love it.

After a few long, sizzling seconds, he begins walking toward me. Actually, it's more like he stomps over to me with an angry look on his face. He stops in front of me. He stares at me for a moment before he takes his thumb and roughly rubs it across my lips, cleaning them of any evidence of James.

“No one else gets these again. They’re mine.”

At that, he grabs my face with both hands and smashes his lips to mine. His tongue immediately pushes into my mouth. Oh god. I forgot how incredibly he kisses. I love how he takes command. My whole body instantly buzzes with arousal.

My hands grab fistfuls of his hair. The harder I pull it, the harder he kisses me. *This* is animalistic attraction. *This* is passion. *This* is what I’ve been craving. *This* is the only man I’ve ever had it with.

He immediately shoves his hand down into my shorts and my panties. He runs his fingers through me. I gasp at the sudden intrusion.

He talks into my lips. “You’re so damn wet. Tell me, is it for me or for him?”

There’s not a single doubt in my mind. I breathe back, “You. Always you.”

He lets out a growl as he roughly sinks two fingers inside of me and pushes them as deep as they’ll go. I cry out into his mouth.

He whispers in my ear. “When I know there’s no one else, this will be my fat cock inside of you. For now, my fingers will fuck you until you come, and then I’ll lick them and get off on your taste.”

Jesus Christ, I’m almost coming just from the way he talks to me. A normal woman would push him away. Clearly, I’m not normal.

He's driving into me hard and fast. I grab his forearm and dig my nails in, hoping to slow him down. "Declan, calm down."

"Dig in, baby. It drives me wild. It'll only make me go harder."

I purposefully dig in, and he finger fucks me within an inch of my life.

He keeps going until my legs shake and I can barely stand. I have to grab his shirt with my other hand to hold myself up as I reach my orgasm in world record time. I've never in my life come so hard or so quickly from that.

When it's over, I fall back and collapse onto my couch, completely spent from his onslaught. He stands there and slowly licks and sucks the fingers that were inside of me. His eyes roll back in pleasure, and he moans.

"Fuck, I've missed your taste. I dreamed of it every night. I almost forgot how good it is."

I put my head on the back of the couch, nearly breathless, wondering why I'm so damn attracted to this guy. I barely know him. I know his head isn't on completely straight, but all I can think about is the way that same head kisses me, and how much I want it on top of me and between my legs again.

What's wrong with me? Why can't I be this attracted to the nice, stable guy that was in here just a few minutes ago?

Declan eventually sits down next to me. He grabs my hand and rubs it over his jeans covered hard cock. "You need to

clean house, cause this guy wants you.” He looks down at the giant bulge in his pants. “He wants you badly. But I won’t share you.”

I turn my head to him, still catching my breath, and admit, “He’s never had me.”

The corner of his mouth rises. “And he never will.”

I’m suddenly confused by his ability to get up into my condo. “How’d you get up here unannounced?”

He smirks. “Jerry and I came to an understanding the last time I was here. I’ve been anticipating this day for months.”

He leans his head forward toward my neck and breathes me in. “Fuck, I’ve missed you. I love the way you smell.” He grabs me and pulls my body so that I’m straddling him. I’m not a small woman, yet somehow, he tosses me around like a ragdoll.

He pushes my hips down so that I’m grinding onto him. I gasp at his aggressiveness, and then moan at how good he feels. How can I already want him again after the finger tornado I just weathered? I run my hands underneath his shirt until I feel his abs and chest, running my fingers through his chest hair. I lean forward and kiss him.

God, what this guy makes me feel. I want him so badly.

I rub myself down onto him, but after only a minute or two, he stops me. “No. Think about what you want. I want one hundred percent of you. Nothing less.”

He kisses me hard. “Make it one hundred and ten percent. You may need a little something extra to be able to deal with me. I’m a bit of a handful.” He winks at me and then places me back on the couch, stands, and throws down a piece of paper with a phone number on it. “Call me when you know what you want. When there’s no one else.”

He grabs his bags and leaves on the elevator.

That’s the second time he’s left me on my couch, fresh from one orgasm, desperate for another.

# Chapter Eleven

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## *Melissa*

I knock on Trevor and Cassandra's door. There's no answer. I see their cars though. They must be home. I knock again.

I suddenly hear laughter. I shake my head and smile. Those two are always laughing together. It's remarkable.

The door opens and the two of them are standing there wrapped in a single blanket. They're clearly naked, with him standing behind her, holding her. I've never appreciated a blanket more.

Trevor's eyes widen when he sees me. "That food delivery guy looks a lot like my mom. Excuse me, sir, where's our food?"

Despite my current emotional state, I can't help but break into a smile at his absurdity. "Do you always answer the door naked for delivery guys?"

"Only the cute ones." He then looks down, becoming fully aware of their state of undress. "Oooh. Awkward."

Cassandra smiles as she turns her head back to him. "She knows we have sex, Secretariat." She turns back to me. "I'm just not allowed to talk about it, right Melissa?" She gives me a huge grin.

Trevor mumbles, "At least I'm only having sex with one person." Cassandra laughs. I just shake my head.

She slowly looks me up and down and notices that I'm in sweatpants and a sweatshirt. "What the hell? I've never seen you dressed like that. I didn't know you owned casual clothes. Is everything okay?"

I shake my head and look at her. She subtly nods in understanding. She turns her head back. "Trevor, let's go change. I need to talk to your mom."

She screeches as he picks her up and carries her upstairs. Once they disappear into the house, I let myself in. It's quiet. The twins must be napping.

Cassandra reappears a few minutes later fully clothed. She motions for us to go into her home office. We step in, and she closes the door.

We sit down on her sofas. "What's wrong? What happened? Why do you look so... so... normal?" I can't help but smile at that. I guess I do always dress nicely.

"He's back."

"Who's back?"

"Declan."

"Who?"

"Africa guy." My friends continuously refer to him as *Africa guy*.

Her eyes pop open. "Oh. Wow. Well, you obviously really liked him. Isn't it a good thing? Maybe you can cure him of the blue balls you sent him off with."

I shake my head and tears well in my eyes. “He’s hard to explain. He’s a loose cannon. Here I am, a few weeks into dating James. A responsible, stable, nice man. We’re slow playing things, but I’m definitely attracted to him. And then crazy comes barreling back through the door. *Literally* barreling through my door. He practically kicked James out of my place.”

“James was there when you saw him?”

“James and I were kissing in my living room when he walked in. He basically threatened James and told James I was his girlfriend. I quickly made up an excuse to get James out before there was a fight. As soon as he left, Declan charged at me, roughly wiped my mouth clean of James, kissed me hard, and then shoved his hand down my pants and made me come in under a minute.”

Cassandra fans herself. “Wow. That sounds hot. I vote for him over Mr. Slow Play. How did you leave things?”

“He told me I needed to end things with James before he’ll consider anything with me. He left his cell phone number and then walked out just like last time. With me sitting on my couch panting for him.”

“Is that what you want to do? End things with James?”

“I don’t know. That’s why I’m here. I have this super stable, attractive, nice guy who’s clearly interested in me and treats me well. And then I have a madman who I honestly haven’t been able to get out of my mind for months, who tosses me around, says whatever’s on his mind without a filter, who’s

bossy, insanely aggressive, and comes with a shit ton of baggage.”

“But you’re more attracted to him?”

I close my eyes for a moment. “Yes. My mind is telling me to do one thing. My body is telling me another. What should I do?”

“I’m not sure I’m the one you should be asking. You know the decision I eventually made. For years my mind told me that I shouldn’t have Trevor, but my body never got the memo.”

I nod my head in understanding. “Can I say something without you making it weird?”

“Probably not, but you can try.” She smiles, but then nods.

“James reminds me of Jackson. He’s attractive, smart, nice, and treats me well. I’ve always wondered if I hadn’t gotten pregnant with Payton, and we were able to progress our relationship in a normal way, would we have fallen in love? Our relationship was stymied by the rushed marriage, a bit of resentment, a new baby, and the first few years of financial stress before Jackson started making money. Jackson’s such a wonderful man. What’s wrong with me that I couldn’t fall in love with someone like him? Was it the circumstances or am I not attracted to that type of man? Am I making sense?”

She’s quiet for a moment, deep in thought. “So, you’re saying that you think James is your Jackson do over? This time you can let things progress as you wished they could have

with Jackson? Maybe fall in love with the good guy this time around?”

I nod. She gets it.

“Are you attracted to James?”

I let out a deep breath. “He’s a gorgeous, sweet surgeon. How can I not be?”

“But you’re just not hot for him? Or at least not as hot as you are for Africa guy?”

I swallow hard. “I want to be. And I’m just wondering if in time I could be. If I let this relationship progress, maybe that could happen for us. I don’t want to end it and never find out. I fear ending it with someone that makes sense for me long term for a loose cannon who will probably disappear again in a few weeks. I don’t want this to be hard. I want it to be easy. James is the easier choice.”

She lets out a laugh. “No one said love’s easy, Melissa.” She thinks for a moment. “I’m not going to tell you what to do, but I do believe that you can’t control physical attraction. It doesn’t slow play. Either it’s there or it’s not. While you may be somewhat physically attracted to James, it doesn’t sound remotely as deep as your attraction to Africa guy.”

I slowly nod and sigh, tears stinging my eyes. “I think I need to talk to Jackson. I want to understand things from his perspective. He said something to me a few weeks ago that I want to sort through. Do you know if they’re home tonight?”

“Yes, Darian mentioned staying in and watching a movie, but be warned, in four years they’ve never once actually made it through a movie.” She smiles.

I tilt my head back and take another deep breath. “In twenty-five years, we never didn’t make it through a movie.”

She gives me a compassionate smile. “Do you mind if I ask you something?”

“Go for it.”

“Were you faithful to Jackson?”

I pinch my eyebrows together at the unexpected question. “Why do you ask?”

She shrugs. “You two seem pretty ill-suited. That was a long time to be married to someone you knew you weren’t into.”

I think for a moment how to phrase this. “Cassandra, I don’t want to go into too many details because he’s married to your best friend, but Jackson and I didn’t have a bad marriage. There are a lot worse marriages than ours. There was something missing, but it wasn’t loveless or sexless. We did have some physical connection and attraction. The best way I can explain it is that it was like being married to a close friend who you like as a person, but you just don’t have that feeling that you can’t live without them. I have nothing negative to say about Jackson. He was a good husband. I wasn’t the best wife, but I was never physically unfaithful to him. My unfaithfulness came in the form of me never giving our

marriage a shot from the very beginning. I wronged Jackson in that regard, and I regret how I treated him.”

“Have the two of you ever discussed it?”

“To some extent, but not directly. It’s not like we don’t have closure, though. We do.”

She nods. “Can I ask you something else?”

I sigh. “Why not?”

“How come you came to me tonight instead of Rayne or Izzy?”

That’s actually a good question. This is the only place I even considered coming. “Hmm. Izzy’s a relationship mess. This isn’t something I would ever think of going to her to discuss. Even when she was married, things were always messy for her. I guess Rayne had an easy road to love.”

I shrug. “Maybe because things were harder for you? You found love later in life. I honestly don’t know. I didn’t think about going anywhere else.” I give her a small smile. “I guess you’re like a fungus that’s grown on me.”

She laughs as I say good-bye and make my way toward Jackson’s house.



image-placeholder



## *Jackson*

Darian laughs in her special, sexy Darian way. “Jackson, we’re supposed to be watching the movie.”

I’m lying on our couch, between my wife’s fully clothed legs, kissing her neck, not remotely paying attention to the movie.

“I think the movie’s almost over. It’s time for you to get naked.”

She laughs again. “It’s been on for less than thirty minutes. We promised to stay clothed and actually make it through an entire movie for once.”

I kiss my way from her neck to her lips. She briefly kisses me back. I whisper into her lips, “I can’t wait. I need you.”

She shakes her head. “We’re watching this movie, Knight.” She runs her fingers along my scruff as she bites her lip, serving only to further harden my cock. “This is like being back in high school making out with a guy, in my clothes, on the couch in my parents’ basement. The build-up is kind of hot.”

I smile. “If we were in high school, I’m confident I would’ve already gotten to second base.”

She giggles. “Fine, you can have second base.”

I immediately move my hands under and up her sweatshirt. I narrow my eyes at her when I discover that she's not wearing a bra. She gives me a sexy, knowing smirk.

Two can play this game. I move my head under her sweatshirt and suck on one of her nipples while pinching the other. I know it drives her absolutely wild.

Her breathing picks up and she wraps her legs around me, squeezing me in for the friction I know she's craving.

She breathes out, "Okay. You win. Let's move this along."

I pull my head out and smile in triumph as we sit up. She quickly straddles me as I pull off her sweatshirt.

I stare at my wife's perfect, full tits. She smiles as she shakes her head. "You're looking at my boobs like you haven't seen them every day for nearly four years."

I grab them with my hands. "My memory never does them justice. They're so fucking perfect." I look up at her. "You're perfect."

She lifts my T-Shirt over my head. "No, Knight." She moves her eyes up and down my chest and abs as she licks her lips. "This is perfection."

She runs her fingers through my hair and brings her lips to mine. She slides her tongue into my mouth, and I return the favor. I love the way she tastes and the softness of her

lips. She's aggressive but in a loving way. I could kiss her all day long.

I move my hands around her waist and push her onto my cock. She circles her hips, grinding down hard onto me. I need to be inside her.

I stand with her wrapped around me, still kissing. I start walking us toward our bedroom, but the kiss is becoming more feverish. When I reach the foyer, I push her body against the wall and rub myself where I know she's aching for me. She moans into my mouth.

I love the feel of her soft chest against my hard one. Everything about her is warm, delicate, and inviting. Her legs are locked around me. I run my hands up her body. My extreme need for her never lessens. I may tear her clothes off and fuck her against the wall right here.

Just then, the doorbell rings. Given that we're in the foyer, we can actually see the mostly glass front door from where we are. We break our kiss and both turn toward the door to see Melissa standing there through the glass. As soon as she sees us and our state of undress, her eyes widen and she quickly turns around.

I pull Darian's exposed chest flush against mine, and immediately move us back into the living room, out of sight. I put Darian back on her feet. We're both laughing as we put our tops back on.

She looks at me. "Just another awkward Melissa encounter. We're piling them up lately."

I nod in agreement. “You can go to the bedroom. I’ll see what she wants.”

She moves her eyes down to the large bulge in my sweatpants. “I don’t think you’re in any condition to greet her. You stay here and chill out for a minute. I’ll get the door.”

I look down and nod. She’s right. I can’t answer the door like this.

Darian turns the corner and heads for the door. I take a few deep breaths to try to calm myself down.

I hear the door open. “Hey, Melissa. Oh my god. What’s wrong?”

I hear Melissa’s shaky voice. “I’m so sorry to interrupt you guys. Can I just talk to Jackson for a minute?”

“Of course. Come in. Please. Can I get you a drink?”

“No, thank you. I’ll just be a few minutes.”

I look down and seem okay enough. There’s only so much a man can do to keep things at bay in gray sweatpants.

I turn the corner and see Melissa. She’s clearly been crying. And she’s dressed down, which I rarely ever see from her. I pinch my eyebrows in concern. “Hey. Are you okay?”

She shrugs and whispers, “I don’t know.”

“It’s not the boys, is it?”

**She shakes her head. “No, nothing like that.” She looks up at me. “Can we talk?”**

**I nod. Darian walks by me. “I’ll give you two some privacy.”**

**I grab her arm. “You can stay.”**

**She smiles. “No. I’ll be in our bedroom.” She turns back to Melissa. “Take as much time as you need.”**

**Melissa nods in gratitude.**

**As soon as Darian disappears, I motion for Melissa to have a seat in a kitchen chair and she does. I sit a few feet away in another chair. “What’s wrong?”**

**She has fresh tears in her eyes. “Everything you said a few weeks ago was right. I resented everything I didn’t have and couldn’t be thankful for what I did have. I never let myself consider falling for you. It wasn’t a conscious decision, but you were right about the way I acted. I take full responsibility for the failure of our marriage.”**

**I shake my head. “There’s no reason to carry the burden of the blame. It’s no one’s fault. We were both victims of circumstance. There’s no sense in dwelling on the past. Let it go, Melissa. I have.”**

**“That’s not why I’m here. I just felt like I needed to say that to you. Like I owe it to you. I do have a question for you though.”**

**She briefly pauses to compose herself for whatever she’s about to ask. “Do you think if I hadn’t gotten pregnant**

and we were allowed a more normal progression of our relationship, we would have eventually *really* fallen in love? If we eliminated the stresses of a rushed wedding, having no money, a new baby, and all the other stuff that went with it, that we would have had our own storybook romance?”

This isn't what I was expecting. I take a long breath. I've actually thought about this a lot over the years. “Do you want me to be honest?”

“Please.”

I nod. I'll give her honesty. I owe her that. “When we were married, I thought that. I thought we might feel differently for each other if we could have done things the right way. If we progressed like a normal relationship. But...”

“But what? Tell me.”

“Are you sure you want to hear this? It may hurt.”

“Yes. I need your honesty. I promise it won't hurt.”

“But since meeting Darian, I don't feel that way anymore. The first second I saw her, I knew she was the one for me. I don't think I can adequately describe the intense, immediate physical attraction. I felt things the first time I spoke to her and touched her that I've never experienced in my life. It was a shock to my system.” She closes her eyes. “I'm sorry. I don't mean to hurt you.”

She's silent for a moment before she opens her eyes. "I'm okay. Can you...can you explain your love to me?"

I shake my head. "No. That's not a good idea."

"I know you think you're hurting me, Jackson, but you're not. You're helping me. I promise. I have things to work out in my head. Tell me. Tell me how you feel about her. Explain the love you share. I want to understand it."

I blow out another long breath. This may be a mistake, but she is asking for it. I run my fingers through my hair as I look at her with the compassion I currently feel.

"Melissa, she's the center of my universe. Nothing feels right without her next to me. She's the first person I want to see in the morning. She's the last person I want to see before I go to bed at night. I rush through my work day to get home to her because I genuinely miss her in the handful of hours we're apart. She's always on my mind. I think about her. I dream about her. I know everyone makes fun of me for how handsy I am with her, but I have an intense need to touch her at all times. I don't know that I can control it. I want her to touch me at all times too. I'm not going into certain other details, but our chemistry is off the charts. All in a unique way that I've frankly never experienced before. Every part of me believes we were meant to be together. That she's my soulmate."

She closes her eyes again and swallows hard. When she reopens them, she slowly nods her head. "And your deep

**physical attraction to her hit you immediately? It wasn't something that grew over time?"**

**"It hit me like a freight train the first second I laid eyes on her. The first time I touched her was like that freight train times a million. It was completely out my control. My body had a mind of its own."**

**She's quiet as she bites her lip. She's clearly deep in thought. "Thank you for your honesty. I appreciate it."**

**"Are you okay?"**

**She gives me a resigned look. "No, but hopefully I will be one day soon."**

**"Tell me what's happening. Let me help you. Did you meet someone?"**

**She's silent for a moment, as if she's thinking of telling me something, but then doesn't. She shakes her head. "There's nothing for you to do. Just a few things I need to sort through in my head. I know you don't understand why, but this was helpful for me. Thank you for being you."**

**I give her a small nod. "You'll find your person too, Melissa. You're intelligent, beautiful, and warm. He's out there. Keep looking. I had all but given up before I met Darian. It can happen. I believe it'll happen for you. Trust me, you'll know it when you meet him. You'll feel something you never felt for me or anyone else. You'll**



react in a way you never have before. It'll be completely out of your control.”

She gives me a small smile as she stands. “Thanks, Jackson. I’m going to head out. Please apologize to Darian for me. I’m really sorry to have... ummm... interrupted you guys.”

I smile. “It’s okay. I’m here anytime you need to talk.”

I walk her to the front door and hug her goodbye. I close the door behind her and head back through the foyer toward our bedroom, but as soon as I turn the corner, I stop dead in my tracks.

I whisper to myself, “Fuck me.” I see Darian leaning against the wall in the kitchen. She’s wearing the necktie that I wore today. *Only* the necktie.

I look her up and down her sinfully naked body. “I like your outfit.”

She looks down at the quickly re-emerged tent in my pants and gives me a sexy smile. “I can tell. How about you put on the same outfit?”

Without another thought, I pull my T-shirt off, followed shortly thereafter by my pants and boxer briefs. I toss it all on the ground and stride toward my goddess of a wife.

I bring my body flush to hers and pull her to me. “You’re genuinely the sexiest woman I’ve ever seen.”

She looks up at me as she moves her hands up my chest. “I heard what you said about me. About us.” I nod. She

**runs her fingertips along my face. “Thank you for loving me the way you do, Knight.”**

**I pick her up and she wraps her legs around me. I whisper into her lips, “Thank you for letting me.”**

# Chapter Twelve

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## *Melissa*

Well, I set a cockblocking world record today. First James, then Cassandra and Trevor, and then Jackson and Darian. I may be the only person that actually got off today. I laugh to myself at the irony of that.

I know Jackson thought he was hurting me, but he helped me. Maybe one day I'll tell him why I was asking the questions I asked.

I head straight to Pennsylvania Hospital. James texted me what time he would be taking a break for a late dinner and how much he was looking forward to seeing me. He's such a nice guy. I'm such an asshole.

I arrive at the hospital and head to the cafeteria. He stands and smiles as he sees me. I look down at myself. I never leave the house looking like this. I'm sort of embarrassed by it, but I have bigger issues right now.

He kisses my cheek and we sit. I take his hand in mine. "We need to talk."

"Uh oh. I know what that means. It's that guy, right?"

I nod. "I met him months ago. We had one amazing evening, and then he left for Africa with no set return date. Admittedly, we had an incredibly strong connection, but I assumed he was out of my life for good."

"But he's back, he wants you, and you're clearly still attracted to him. Even I could see that this afternoon."

I whisper, “Yes.” I let out a long breath. “I don’t want to be. He’s difficult and abrasive. He has no manners or filter. He’s a Neanderthal. The opposite of you, who’s kind, respectful, and sweet. You’re obviously an attractive man. The full package. I want to be the type of woman who deserves you. Who’s attracted to you in the way you deserve.”

He gives me a resigned smile. “But you’re not.”

I shake my head. “Not as much as I am to him. I’m so sorry. I wish I felt differently. I genuinely do.”

He gives me a sympathetic look. “He’s probably going to hurt you.”

I let out another deep breath. “I know, but if I don’t see it through, I know I’ll always wonder about it. That’s not fair to you, and it’s not fair to me either.”

“I suppose I understand. I wish the best for you, Melissa. You’re a wonderful woman and you deserve happiness.”

Damnit, he’s so nice.

We say our goodbyes and I head home. I’m mentally exhausted. I need a long shower and a good night’s sleep. I’ll call Declan in the morning.

I walk into my condo and stop short. I can’t help but let out a small laugh. Declan’s asleep on my couch. I shake my head. He’s got Jerry under the same spell he’s got me under. No one except my boys and their significant others are supposed to be allowed up here without my permission. Now it’s twice in one

day that Declan has maneuvered his way up. So much for my top-notch secure building.

Declan must be exhausted from traveling. I grab a blanket and lay it over him. I can't help but stare at him for a moment or two and run my fingers across his chin. He really is an attractive man. I aimlessly start to move my hand down his body, but then pull it back. I better get out of here before I wake him up.

I quietly make my way to my bedroom. I undress and step into my shower. The hot water feels amazing after an afternoon and evening of tears and emotions.

I run the day through my mind. I started off thinking I was going to progress my relationship with James, instead I sent him packing and I've got Declan, who rarely escapes my dirty thoughts, sleeping on my couch.

Who knows what he'll do in the morning. He's so unpredictable. I can't help the rush of excitement that runs through me at that thought.

I wash my hair, but as I'm washing my body, I feel two large hands start to caress my breasts from behind. I don't even flinch. I think I half expected this. I think I wanted it too. I know I did.

I look down to make sure I'm not imagining it this time. I'm not. His big hands are on my body. My physical reaction to his touch confirms that I made the right decision today.

I then feel the front of his naked body pressed to the back of mine. I lean back into his big, hard body, the contact bringing me immediate chills despite the warm water washing over us.

He whispers in my ear, “You’re so incredibly beautiful.” He starts peppering my neck with kisses.

He bites my ear. “Is everyone else gone? Are you finally mine?”

I have no words right now. I’m savoring the feeling of being in his arms. I’ve wanted this for so long. I simply nod.

He continues whispering in my ear. “I’m going to imprint myself on every inch of your body, so you never forget who you belong to.”

His hands move over my hips and up my body. “It’s all mine.” His big hands spread out across the top of my chest, where my heart sits. “Mine.” He grabs my breasts again and starts playing with my nipples. “These are mine.” He then cups my pussy. “This is mine.”

He runs his fingers slowly through me and then briefly sinks them in and out of me a few times. I nearly collapse at the sensation. He removes them and brings his fingers up to his mouth. I can hear him suck on them. “Hmm. Tastes like mine.”

Holy. Fuck.

We stand there for a while longer, under the hot stream of water as his hands run all over my body. His lips trail across my neck and shoulders as he continues to whisper words of

possession in my ear. My body ignites in a way I've never experienced. The throb between my legs is nearing painful.

He eventually turns me around slowly. His eyes unapologetically travel up and down my body. His fingertips tracing the same slow path. I see nothing but want and need in his face.

I move my eyes up and down his body too. He's even sexier than I imagined. He's thick and broad, with big, muscular arms. His chest hair is the same dirty blonde as the hair on his head. I start running my fingertips across his chest. I want to bury my face in it and take in his masculine scent.

I move my eyes down. His hard cock is just like the rest of him. Big, long, thick, angry, and fucking perfect. I'm physically aching for it.

I lick my lips at the sight before me. He smiles. "You like what you see?"

I don't pretend to look up at his eyes. I continue studying his body as I nod in confirmation.

He runs his fingers down my legs. "I want these long legs wrapped around me as I drive my cock into your wet pussy." I nod again. I want that too.

"Are you on birth control?"

"Yes." I have an IUD. "You still need to use a condom. I don't know who you've been with the past few months. Actually, I have no clue who you've ever been with."



“I’ve been with no one since I left.” He looks down at himself and strokes his big cock. “He’s belonged to you since the second we met you. He has no interest in other women. I was tested before my trip and I haven’t touched another woman since I laid eyes on you.”

I freeze in shock at this revelation. I want to believe him, but look at him. His body was made for fucking. His whole persona is one giant sexual magnet for women. Am I supposed to believe he’s actually been celibate all these months?

He sees what I’m thinking and nods. “It’s true. When I only last ten seconds, you’ll know I’m not lying.”

I can’t help but smile at that.

He moves toward me and nudges me until my back hits the cold tiled wall. He grabs my hair and tilts my head back, nibbling his way up my neck until he reaches my lips. When he sucks my bottom lip into his mouth, I whimper.

I shamelessly rub myself against him, begging for any relief I can get. He twists my head to the side so that his lips are on my ear. “You want my cock inside you?”

I nod.

“How badly do you need it? Tell me.”

I don’t answer and he pulls my hair so that our eyes are forced to meet. “How badly? Use your words or I won’t give you what you’re clearly craving. I won’t fuck you.”

I’ve never had someone talk to me or treat me this way. I’ve never in my life been so turned on. I’m legitimately aching for

him. I whisper, "Like my life depends on it."

He smiles as he grabs for my legs. He doesn't bother to check if I'm ready for him. He knows I am. I think I'd come if he tried to touch me again anyway.

He lifts my legs, wraps them around him, and impales me in one hard move. There's no slow entry. He's immediately buried to the hilt, and he's a lot to take.

I let out a loud moan as I grip his shoulders. I lean my head back against the wall and take a few deep breaths.

"This is going to be hard and fast. It's been a long time for me and I don't think I've ever wanted anyone as much as I want you right now. After we get out of the shower, I'll spend all night making you come over and over."

Oh god, that sounds good.

I grab his face and kiss him as he begins to drive into me. There's no build-up. He goes hard, and he goes deep.

We're surrounded by the sounds of water, skin slapping, and my moans of ecstasy.

He fucks like he behaves. With reckless abandon. Like a bull in a china shop.

He's making me feel things I've never felt. The combination of being so entirely turned on and being fucked so thoroughly is new for me. I'm already teetering at the edge.

I'm being pounded into the tile wall, which is most definitely leaving marks on my body. I don't care. I can only

feel him, and I feel him everywhere on my body.

Without breaking stride, he grabs my chin roughly so our eyes meet. “Tell me you’re mine.”

I can’t even think right now. I scream out, “I’m yours.”

My arms and legs are locked around him while I’m completely at his mercy. His lips crash to mine again. Our tongues move around each other’s mouths in a wet and wild dance, manifesting the need we both have for the other.

I pull my mouth away. “Oh god, Declan. Don’t stop. Please.”

It’s so hard, so deep, and so damn good. My toes are curling and my legs are going numb with pleasure.

“Ah, Declan, I’m coming.” I see the moment he can feel me coming, because his eyes and mouth widen and then his eyes close in bliss.

My whole body shakes through my orgasm. I feel his cock throbbing as he squeezes me tight and grunts through his own.

He continues moving in and out of me until my tremors eventually subside, never letting go of the strong hold he has on me.

That. Was. Incredible.

As soon as he stills, I bring my head down and kiss him hard. He kisses me right back. I don’t want this to be over. I need this connection with him. But I know our evening is only beginning.

He eventually sets my feet back down. I lean back on the wall as he traces my kiss-swollen lips with his fingers. "I'm going to clean you. All of you." I nod.

He runs his fingers down my body and through my folds as his semen drips out of me. I flinch, still sensitive from my orgasm. He brings his fingers up, completely covered in his come.

He spreads it all over my breasts. "Mine."

He really is a Neanderthal. But there's no denying that I'm so fucking into it.

I lean my head back against the wall. I am totally screwed when it comes to this guy.

# Chapter Thirteen

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## *Declan*

I wake the next morning in Melissa's bed. I smile when I remember where I am and who I'm with.

I look over at her sleeping. She's on her back, with the sheets barely covering her sexy body, looking like an angel.

She's the most beautiful woman I've ever seen in my life. I haven't been able to get her out of my mind since we met. I worked double-time in Africa to capture everything I needed so I could come home way earlier than expected. I had an overwhelming need to see her again. I can't explain it.

My head almost exploded when I walked in and she was kissing another man. But she pretty quickly dismissed him, and I believe she's feeling what I'm feeling.

I know I need to keep my temper in check or I won't get to keep her for long. I have a tendency to screw up everything good in my life.

I carefully pull the sheets off her body so I can look at her. She gets goosebumps and her nipples harden. My cock stands at immediate attention.

I slowly spread her legs and see her red and swollen from the hours of attention I gave her pussy last night. I lost count of the number of times I made her come. Her body is so receptive to me. The sex between us was

indescribable. So full of passion and need. The best of my life.

Her entire body is covered in marks from me. The sight of it makes me even harder.

I get on my knees between her legs and run my tip through her. She stirs but doesn't wake. She's even wet for me in her sleep, getting wetter each time I run myself through her.

I can't seem to help myself. I lean over and slowly enter her, watching for her reaction. Her head tilts back and her mouth widens. She moans, "Declan," but still doesn't fully wake. It certainly makes me happy that even when asleep she wants me and knows it's me inside of her.

I start to move and her eyes gradually blink open. With half opened eyelids she looks at me and breathes, "Is this real? Are you real?"

I push as deep into her body as I can. She gasps. I grumble, "*We're* real."

She smiles as she wraps her arms and long legs around me, meeting my slow, deep thrusts with movements of her own.

She pulls my head to hers for a kiss. I enjoy the intimacy of a kiss in the morning. I hate when women worry about morning breath. If I wanted to suck on a tube of toothpaste, I would.

**I love that she doesn't care and goes right for my mouth. I would have kissed her regardless though. I crave all of her fluids and tastes, and she gets off on me taking charge. I can tell.**

**Eventually I pull us up so I'm on my knees, sitting on the backs of my legs, with her straddling me. She rolls her hips, adding to the sensations, but I keep control of our movements as I grip her ass and thrust up into her.**

**Her head rolls back, and she arches her back, giving me full trust and control over her body. She scrapes her nails down my chest. "Ah, Declan. Yes."**

**I lean forward and growl into her neck. "Tell me you're mine."**

**She whimpers, "I'm yours. Oh god, I'm yours."**

**I lick my way down and suck her nipple hard. As soon as I do, her body starts shaking. "Oh shit. I'm coming."**

**I can feel her spasm on my cock as she screams my name. It feels too good. I have to let go myself. My cock pulses deep inside of her as I fill her with my come.**

**My body's relaxed as I gradually slow my strokes, making sure she's completely done. I look down and see some of my semen already dripping out of her. I gather a handful and spread it across her body.**

**I have an uncontrollable need to mark her as mine. I've never felt that way with another woman before. I don't**



remember ever coming inside another woman before, but for some reason I want to with her.

She eventually pulls her head up and looks at me. Seemingly unbothered by my marking her, she runs her fingertips over my scruff. She smiles. "I'm ashamed to admit how often I've dreamt of waking up with you inside me. I swear I've had mornings where I thought I could feel it. That's how badly I wanted it."

I lean in and give her a soft kiss. "You said my name as soon as I entered you, while still asleep."

She gives me an embarrassed smile. It's adorable.

"Don't be embarrassed. It was hot as hell. It made me hard as steel."

She lets out a small laugh. "I really don't think you getting hard is an issue."

I laugh with her as I gently lay her back down and give her one more kiss. "I need to get going. I'm having breakfast with Jade."

She smiles. "Oh good. I'm glad. I'm sure she missed you."

"She's seventeen. Missing her old man isn't a top priority for her."

She gives me a sexy smile. "For what it's worth, I missed you."

I can't help but kiss her again. "I missed you too. I want to see you later this afternoon. I have a few things to do, but then I'll come back. It's supposed to be nice out. Let's go for a long walk along the river. We can talk and I want to take some pictures down there."

"Sounds good." She gives me a nervous look.

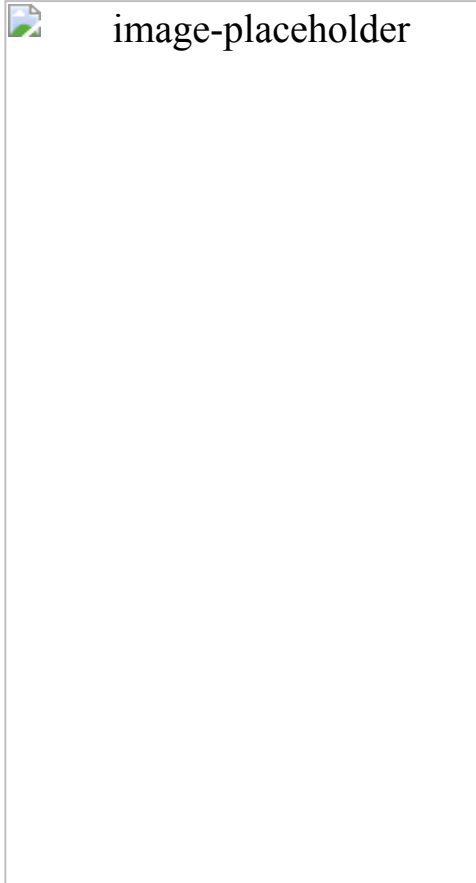
"What?"

She covers her eyes in embarrassment. "I don't even know your last name."

I chuckle. "It's McGinley."

"Okay, Declan McGinley. Have fun with Jade." She pulls the blankets up over her. "I'm going back to bed. Some sex lunatic kept me up half the night."

I smile. "Funny, I had the exact same problem."



**I pull up to Amanda's house. Jade's mom and I were never really together. We were both pretty screwed up when Jade was conceived. I barely remember the brief time I had with her. We did a lot of drugs and had a lot of sex. I'm just happy that she got clean as soon as she found out about being pregnant. I'm thankful to her for that. She's been clean ever since.**

I ring the doorbell and Jade answers. She throws her arms around me. “Dec...Dad, I’m so happy to see you.” It took her years to call me Dad, and she still slips from time to time. She’s so damn stubborn and was so damn mad at me for missing the first seven years of her life. I don’t blame her. I hate myself for it too. It took a lot of time and patience for her to finally come around, but I think we have a pretty good relationship now.

I start tearing when I look at her. “Wow, you’ve grown up so much in just a few months. You’re a woman now. A beautiful woman.”

She’s gorgeous. She’s tall with all of my coloring. Her eyes are so expressive. Such a bright shade of blue. She’s wearing a little make-up now, so her eyes really pop.

She gives me a big grin at the compliment.

“I was clearly just an incubator.” Amanda comes to the door and smiles. Amanda is shorter with dark hair and brown eyes. “If she didn’t come out of me, I’m not sure I’d believe she’s mine. I’d demand a maternity test.” She laughs. “She even has your temper, Declan.”

Jade and I laugh. I shake my head. “We’re just passionate, right sweetie?” I wink at her.

Jade smiles as she nods. “Yep. Passionate.”

“You ready, kiddo? I need a big pile of pancakes.” I pat my empty stomach. I worked up a big appetite all night long. I’m starving.

**Amanda bites her lip. “Dec, can you and I talk privately for a minute?”**

**I nod. “Of course.”**

**Amanda looks up at Jade. “Why don’t you run upstairs and put away your laundry. Just give Dad and I five minutes.”**

**Jade nods and heads back into the house.**

**I pull out an envelope and hand it to Amanda. She looks in it. “Declan, this is too much.”**

**I shake my head. “No, it’s just right. Jade’s going to have a lot of expenses coming up. Let her have whatever she wants. Clothes, dresses for dances, computers for school, sock some away for college, whatever you think she needs.”**

**She smiles. “Thank you. I appreciate it. I guess Africa went well?”**

**I shrug. “I didn’t love being away for so long, but it paid extremely well.”**

**She nods. “I actually thought you’d be away much longer. Jade did too.”**

**“I was supposed to be, but I worked twice as hard and did what I needed to do to stay way ahead of schedule. Now, why don’t you tell me why we needed to have a private conversation. What’s up?”**

**“Well, I’ve gotten pretty serious with Rick.” I’ve met Rick a few times. They’ve been dating for a few years. He seems like a decent enough guy.**

**“Okay.”**

**She looks nervous. I don’t know why. It’s not like I’m jealous. I don’t care who she dates as long as she doesn’t bring assholes around my kid. “He asked me to marry him.”**

**I kiss her cheek. “That’s great. Congratulations.”**

**She smiles. “Thank you.” There’s more. I can tell.**

**“Spit it out, Amanda.”**

**“He works in New York City. His job is up there.”**

**I feel all the blood drain from my face. She’s going to move with Jade to New York. I don’t see her much as it is. Now I’ll see her even less.**

**I hit the wall next to me with my fist. “Fuck, Amanda. You can’t take her away from me. We’re finally in a good place. It took so long to get here.”**

**She puts her hands on her hips. “Actually, Declan, you have no parental rights, so I can take her if I want to, but that’s not what I’m getting at. Why don’t you try calming the fuck down before you get crazy about things.”**

**I nod. “I’m sorry. Tell me. What is it you’re getting at?”**

**“Jade wants to finish her last year of school here. She has her friends and she’s happy. I don’t want to upset the**

apple cart. But I also don't want to have a *weekends only* marriage. I'd like to more evenly split my time between here and New York for the next year. If you want her, I'd like for her to spend a few nights a week with you. Maybe something like Tuesdays after school until Friday mornings when she goes to school."

My chin must hit the floor because she lets out a laugh. "Tell me, Declan. What are you thinking? It's hard for me to tell with you," she adds sarcastically.

I have a huge grin. "I'm thinking that this is the best day of my life. Really? You'll let her stay with me?"

She nods. "Jade and I have discussed it. If she wants to finish school here, she knows that she'll be with you a few days a week. I think she's nervous but excited about it."

I give her a huge hug and she laughs. "Thank you, Amanda. Thank you for trusting me. I promise I won't let you down."

"What about your travel?"

"I'll do whatever it takes to stay in town. I'll photograph weddings for all I care. I'll make sure I'm here Tuesday through Friday every week for the next year."

She nods. "Okay. I've never seen your place. Is it child appropriate?"

I shrug. Jade has never stayed at my place, so I've never thought about it. It may be a bit of a bachelor's pad. "We can go see it together. If you don't like it, I'll redecorate or

**I'll buy a different place. I'll do whatever you think is best."**

**She smiles but then bites her lip again.**

**"What is it? What's giving you pause?"**

**"Declan, you can't parade your normal group of women around our daughter. It's not healthy to have people in and out of her life. It's not healthy for her to see all different women in and out of your bed. Especially the type of women you normally date, and their ages. They're all closer to her age than ours. I don't want you to have them around when she's there. I didn't introduce her to Rick for several months. Not until I was sure about him."**

**I nod in agreement. "I'm actually sort of dating someone. It's new, but I'm really into her." Amanda gives me a skeptical look. I hold up my hands. "For real. I swear."**

**"Is she at least over twenty-five years old?"**

**I give her a big smile. "She's older than me."**

**Her eyes pop wide open. "What? Declan McGinley, I never thought I'd see the day."**

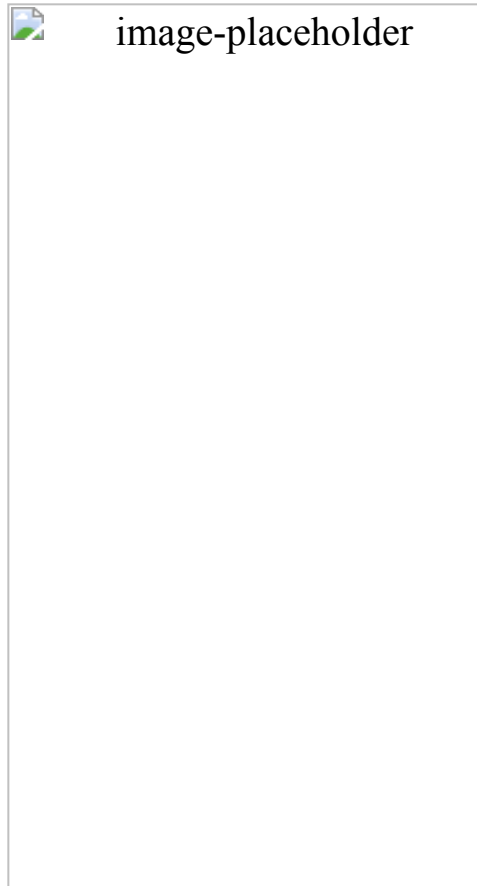
**"Yep. She's amazing. She has three grown sons and a few grandkids."**

**Now it's her turn for her chin to drop the floor. "Grandkids? You're dating a grandma?"**



**I laugh. “She doesn’t really look like a grandma though.”**

**She smiles back. “I have no doubt.”**



**Jade and I head to the local diner for breakfast. I order enough for twenty people, and Jade orders a piece of toast.**

**“Why don’t you order more? That’s not enough food for you.”**

**“It’s fine, Dad. I don’t want anything else.”**

**“You’re a growing girl. You need to eat.”**

**“I’m a woman, not a girl. I doubt I’ll grow anymore. I’m already the tallest girl in my class, and I’m taller than nearly all of the boys too.”**

**I don’t think we need to battle about this now, but when she lives with me, I’m going to make sure she eats.**

**I clear my throat. “I guess you and Mom talked about you living with me a few days a week?”**

**“Yep. Are you okay with having me around? I don’t want to cramp your bachelor style, but I really don’t want to transfer for my last year of high school. I love all of my friends. I want to be here for my senior year with them.”**

**I grin at her. “I’m more than okay. I’m ecstatic. I can’t wait. I want to get a room ready for you. Do you want to have any input?”**

**She shakes her head. “Not really. Surprise me. I’m sure it’ll be fine. I’m not picky.”**

**I have no idea how to set up a bedroom for a seventeen-year-old girl. I guess I’ll figure it out.**

**“How was the end of the school year for you? I saw your report card. You’re so smart. You definitely got that from your mother.”**

**She rolls her eyes at me. “You’re smart too, Dad. School was fine. It’s not hard for me. I really liked my graphic design class though. I think I’m actually pretty good at it.”**

**“That’s fantastic. An artist, like me.”**

**She smiles. “I’m also thinking of getting a part-time job during the school year.”**

**“Really? Doing what?”**

**“Working the pole. I hear strippers make mad bank.”**

**My mouth must drop wide open, because Jade lets out a huge laugh. “Oh my god, you should see your face right now. I’m just kidding, Dad. Obviously, I’d like a job related to graphic design.”**

**I slowly nod, still in shock at my baby girl talking of becoming a stripper.**

**“Can I ask you a question, Dad?”**

**“Always.”**

**“Why haven’t I ever met your family? Mom doesn’t have siblings, so I have no cousins on her side. I know you have a brother and a sister. They must have kids. I want to meet them.”**

**I gulp down the large knot that has just formed in my throat. “You know I’ll always be honest with you, right?”**

**She nods. “I know. Sometimes too honest.” I smile at that.**

**I turn serious again. “I haven’t spoken with my family in about twenty-five years. They’re not in my life.”**

**“I know that, but why? I don’t know what happened. No one has ever told me.”**

**I take a breath. “Because of my addiction issues. I did some terrible, irresponsible things. They didn’t want me in their lives. They were right. I was a danger to everyone around me when I was using.”**

**“You had a problem so they dumped you? That’s messed up. That’s not what family should do. They should have helped you, not abandoned you.”**

**I shake my head. “It’s not that simple, honey. It was all my fault. Not theirs. They tried really hard to help me, but I was a walking disaster. I don’t blame them in the slightest. They were better off without me.”**

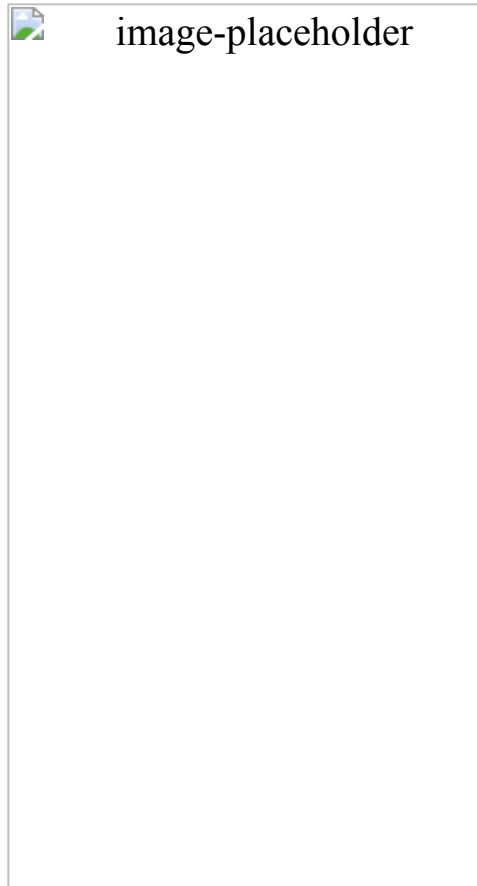
**I see her getting upset. “Can we shelve this for another day? I’m so happy today because you’ll be spending more time with me. I don’t want to think about that dark period in my life right now. It’s hard for me to talk about. It brings up a lot of sad memories and regrets.”**

**“Fine, but you’re not sweeping this under the rug. I want to meet my family. I’m sure your siblings have kids. I want to know any cousins I may have.”**

**I nod. “I’ll think about it. That’s the best I can promise you right now. I’m not saying no. I’m saying that I need**

**time to come to terms with what it may look like if I try to reach out to them.”**

**“Okay, Dad.”**



**After breakfast, I drop off Jade and head to a coffeehouse to meet Freddie. He’s waiting for me when I walk in and has already purchased me my drink of choice. I nod my head in gratitude as I take a seat at the table.**

**“Declan, I was happy to get your text yesterday. How long have you been back?”**

**“I just got off the plane yesterday.”**

**“I haven’t heard from you since the first week you were gone. You’re supposed to check in with me more often. Did you stay out of trouble?”**

**I smile. “I sure did. I was working sixteen-hour days to get back early.”**

**“Wow, that’s extreme. Did you have time for any fun? You *always* manage to make time for fun.” He gives me a knowing look.**

**I shake my head. “I meant what I told you on the phone after I arrived. I met the perfect woman. I didn’t touch another woman the entire time I was gone. I wasn’t even tempted. I put my head down and plowed through my work at a record pace. I wanted to get back to Jade and to this woman so I could see where things go with her.”**

**He looks surprised. “I’ve never seen you like this. Have you spoken with her since you’re back?”**

**I smile. “I went straight there from the airport. I stayed with her last night.”**

**He nods. “Is she feeling as strongly as you’re feeling?”**

**I shrug. “I don’t know for sure. It seems like it. She’s special, Freddie. She’s way out of my league. I need to be careful so I don’t fuck this up.”**

**“Does she know about your past?”**

**“She knows I’m an addict. Fortunately, that didn’t deter her. We’ve barely spent any time together. We’re going for a long walk this afternoon. I’ll fill her in on a few things then.”**

**“Make sure you do. Being honest is part of your recovery.”**

**“I know.”**

**I take a deep breath. “Jade asked about my family this morning. She wants to meet them?”**

**He mumbles, “Oh shit.” He looks up at me. “What did you say?”**

**“I told her I’d think about it.”**

**“How are you feeling about it?”**

**“Honestly, I’m scared. There’s a part of me that thinks it may be time. I’ve been clean for ten years. I’d like to think they’d welcome me back. But then there’s a part of me that’s afraid of rejection and how I’d handle it. I’ve done some pretty unforgivable things. I wouldn’t blame them if they slam the door in my face.”**

**“I think forgiveness starts with you. The real question is, have you finally forgiven yourself?”**

**I shake my head. “No. I’ll never have the chance to truly make things right. It’s a hard pill to swallow.”**

**“I know. You need to take your time and think this through. I’m not sure you’re ready for this just yet. You still have some work to do on yourself.”**

**“I know. I just don’t want to disappoint Jade. She seems fixated on having family around. She’s never had that.”**

**He nods in understanding.**

**“I did get some good news today, though.”**

**He smiles. “What’s that?”**

**“Amanda asked if Jade can stay with me a few nights a week through this school year. She’s getting married. He lives in New York City, and she’s going to split her time. Jade wants to finish her last year of school here.”**

**“Wow, Declan. That’s the most trust Amanda has ever shown you. How are you feeling about it?”**

**“I’m so excited. I never thought I’d have this opportunity. Real family time with my daughter. I’ve missed so much of her life. I want to cram everything into this next year with her. I only hope the woman I’m seeing is good with it. Her kids are grown. She didn’t realize she was getting involved with a man that would have a teenage daughter living with him half the time.”**

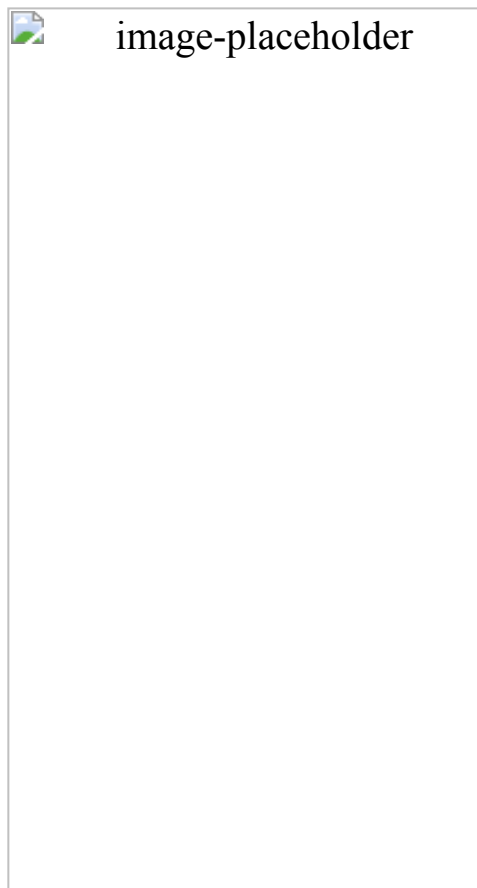
**“Did you say she has grown kids? Is she an actual adult?”**

**I laugh. Why is this everyone’s reaction? “Yes, she’s older. Not my usual type.”**



**He looks completely shocked, much like Amanda did. “This could be really good for you, Declan. A more mature woman might be what you need.”**

**I couldn’t agree more. I just hope I’m what she needs.**



**I quickly head home to shower, grab a camera, and then go back to Melissa’s. I can’t wait to spend the afternoon with her.**

**I see Jerry in the lobby when I return. I hand him a cheesesteak from his favorite spot. I quickly found out the way to Jerry's heart. He thanks me as he gives me access to the elevator up to Melissa's place.**

**When I enter her condo, I see her standing nearby. She turns when she notices me. Before she can speak, I quickly grab her and dip her into a long, deep kiss.**

**When I pull her up, she has a dazed look on her face as she runs her fingers through my hair and gives me a smile. "Declan, I wasn't expecting you back so soon."**

**I smile into her mouth. "I missed you. We have a date for this afternoon."**

**All of a sudden, I hear, "Mom?"**

**I turn and see a young, attractive couple in their twenties. A tall, broad man who very much resembles Melissa, and a petite woman with long brown hair. They're both grinning from ear to ear.**

**Melissa immediately snaps out of her haze. "Hayden, honey, I'm sorry. I didn't know my friend was coming by this early. Hayden, Jess, this is my friend Declan. Declan, this is my son Hayden and his new wife Jessica. They just got back from their honeymoon last night."**

**I whisper, "Do you want me to leave?"**

**She shakes her head. Hayden makes his way over and holds out his hand. "Nice to meet you, Declan."**

I shake his hand back. “You too, Hayden. Congratulations to you both.”

“Thank you.” He turns to Melissa. “You said you didn’t expect him back so soon. Does that mean he was here this morning?” Hayden has a big grin. I can’t help but do the same. Jess giggles.

She gives him a small smile. “That, my love, is none of your business.” She turns to me. “I have some lunch prepared in the kitchen. We were just about to eat. Join us?”

“Are you sure?” I know this is awfully quick to be meeting each other’s kids.

She nods. “It’s fine.”

I spend lunch getting to know Hayden and Jessica. Hayden just finished medical school and will be spending the rest of the summer studying for his Boards. His residency begins in September. Jessica is a surgical nurse at a local hospital. They’re expecting their first child a little after the New Year. They’re genuinely nice, good kids. I’m not surprised.

They leave after lunch to go see their father, Melissa’s ex-husband.

Once they leave, I say to Melissa, “I’m sorry if I intruded. I know it’s early to meet the kids.”

She shrugs. “It’s not a big deal. My kids aren’t babies. They know I date. I have no doubt they’ll be at their

father's telling his whole big family about it. I'll get a call from Jackson either tonight or tomorrow *checking in on me*, because despite nearly a decade of being divorced, he still worries about me." She smiles.

I don't like that. "Anything I need to be worried about?"

She laughs and shakes her head. "Not even a little bit. He's so blissfully married, sometimes I'm not sure they live on planet earth. She has three kids and a few grandkids now too. All is la la land happy in their house."

"If he's such a nice guy, and you get along so well, why didn't you two work out?"

She gives me a sexy look. "Maybe I don't like nice guys."

We both smile as something unspoken passes between us. The chemistry and spark we share is like nothing I've ever felt before.

She proceeds to give me more details about their whole accidental pregnancy, got married and stayed together for the sake of the kids story. It's both sad and admirable.

We eventually head down to the river for our afternoon walk. I love it down here. It's so special to have a place like this in the middle of a city.

We talk and get to know each other better. She tells me about her charity work and that she volunteers to teach a few Spanish and Italian classes at the local community center when she's able to. I tell her a bit about my messed-

up family situation. Not every gritty detail, but enough for her to understand that they're not in my life anymore. I tell her about what Jade asked this morning and my struggle with considering reaching out to them.

She encouraged me to do what will make me happy and comfortable. I'm not sure they're one in the same though.

I tell her about my sponsor, Freddie. That he's encouraged me to really think through reaching out to my family. She seems to agree, so I'm going to let it be for a while. I hope Jade understands that I can't just jump back into this.

I ask about her family growing up. I know she has her three sons, but I don't know anything about her childhood.

She gives me a sad look. "I grew up in a smaller town in western Pennsylvania. My family was very religious. My parents were older than most. Both of my brothers are much older than me. I imagine I wasn't planned. My father and brothers were in the military and lived a strict code of conduct that I never quite subscribed to. When I fell pregnant out of wedlock, things became further strained. I saw less and less of them as the years went on. But when I got divorced, the worst sin there is, that was truly the end. Both of my parents have since passed, but they were barely in my life anyway." She looks regretful as she says that.

I rub her back in compassion. "I guess we can relate more than I thought."

She nods. “Yes, we can. I do make an effort with my brothers, but it’s not reciprocated. Though my youngest nephew recently reached out that he’s coming to Philly for graduate school and asked me to have lunch. Perhaps that will be the impetus for change. He’s the baby of the bunch. I haven’t seen him since he was a little boy. I’m actually really looking forward to connecting with him.” She has such a hopeful look. I want it to work out for her.

“That sounds promising. You said *further* strained with regard to your relationship with your family. What did you mean by that?”

She smiles. “In my hometown, women are good for two things - staying home and making babies. For most, it starts at around eighteen years old. As the only girl, it was more than expected of me to do the same. I just never wanted that small town lifestyle. I always stuck out like a sore thumb from the rest of my family. I had opinions, I was into fashion, I wanted to be educated, live in a big city, and travel abroad. Me wanting to go to college, especially a college away from home, was really the beginning of the end of my relationship with my family. Everything that came after only substantiated their fears of me living away from home. And...” She hesitates.

“And what?”

She takes a few deep breaths. “My father used to push around my mother a bit. It was never extreme, but enough

that it bothered me and enough that I wanted to get away from him as soon as I could.”

I rub her arm. “I’m sorry you went through that.”

She shrugs. “I ended up forming my own family pretty young. Things didn’t go exactly in the order I planned, but I did get most of it, and I live a pretty nice life. My boys are all amazing men. They have a truly special father who has always shown them in both his words and actions how to treat women. They’ve all found wonderful women to share their lives with. My family is only growing with all of them now married and new grandchildren constantly coming into the picture. I’m still very tight with my two best friends from college. Life is mostly good. I try not to dwell on my life growing up. I do my best to move forward.”

I certainly understand that. I do the exact same. I do my best to forget the past and try to make a better future.

As we continue walking, I take a lot of pictures. Some of the beautiful scenery, and some of the beautiful woman I’m with.

I look down at the camera and show her the latest picture. “You’re very photogenic. Did you ever model?”

She laughs. “No, but flattery will get you everywhere.”

“It was a legitimate question. You have the looks and the body for it.”

“My body was nine months pregnant at nineteen. Not exactly model material.” She pauses for a brief moment. “I

did have a few inquiries in my teen years, but my father wouldn't consider it. Like I mentioned, he was military and religious, which meant he was overbearing and protective. My brothers were the same. I was the baby girl and was always treated accordingly. I was also tall and awkward as a teen. I don't think it would have worked out."

I nod in understanding. "You'll have to let me photograph you one day."

"Hmm. Isn't that what you're doing right now?"

I tug on her shirt as I pull her closer. "I mean in your natural state. Without this stuff in the way."

She shakes her head. "I don't know that I'd ever be comfortable with that."

I kiss her neck and feel her shiver. I move my way up to her ear and whisper, "Trust me, it's an amazingly erotic experience. You'll love it. I won't force you, but I hope one day you'll trust me enough to allow me the honor."

She smirks at me and whispers back, "Let's see how things go before I become Rose from Titanic."

I laugh. "Okay."

We walk a little further. I take a deep breath and focus on what I'm about to say. "There's something I need to tell you. I'm not sure how you're going to take it."

"That doesn't sound very promising. What is it?"



“When I went to pick up Jade this morning, her mother pulled me aside. She’s getting married. He lives in New York City. Jade doesn’t want to move. Amanda, her mother, wants to split her time evenly between here and New York until Jade graduates. She asked if I could take Jade three nights a week during the week.”

Melissa smiles. “That’s wonderful. I’m sure you’re thrilled. Why would I take it as anything other than happy news?”

I shrug. “You thought you were getting involved with a relatively unattached man. Now I have responsibilities half the week.”

She laughs. “Declan, we’ve been together for less than twenty-four hours. I’m not worried about it.”

“But we *are* together, right?”

She turns and wraps her arms around my neck. She reaches up and softly kisses me. “That’s what I want. I dumped a *really* nice guy yesterday because I find you so damn irresistible.” I smile into her lips at that.

“I thought you don’t like nice guys?” We both smile. “That’s what I want too. I promise to be very un-nice to you.” At that, I deepen our kiss.

We eventually break apart and continue walking. I look around. “I love it down here. It’s so unique to have something like this in a city. Do you come here much?”

She nods. "I came here a lot when my oldest granddaughter was little. I'd take her for long walks in the stroller. Once she got mobile, she preferred some other activities. Now that it's warm again, I can bring the twins down here when I have them."

"That's nice. Speaking of kids, do you by chance know anything about decorating a bedroom for a seventeen-year-old girl?"

She twists her lips. "I had all boys. Their bedrooms were dark and smelly when they were teens." I laugh at that. "But I can ask my friend, Rayne. She has a daughter."

"Okay. That would be helpful."

She texts on her phone. A few minutes later it beeps in notification. She looks at it. "Rayne said to start with her favorite color. To paint it that color and then use it for the bedding. She said to also get fun things like bean bag chairs, Bluetooth speakers, a mini-refrigerator, and a swing?"

"A swing? Like a sex swing? Absolutely not."

She laughs. "No, dope. It's like a hammock but it hangs from the ceiling. Kids love it."

"Okay. Will you help me pick everything out? I want to do it as soon as possible so it's ready for her."

"Of course."

# Chapter Fourteen

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## *Jackson*

Hayden and Jess returned from their honeymoon last night. Everyone's coming over for dinner to welcome them back.

I've been sitting with Reagan and Carter through most of the afternoon as they plan Carter's announcement that he now owns Daulton Holdings. Carter initially resigned to both expose his father's wrongdoings and to right things with Reagan. Shortly thereafter, he learned that his grandfather bequeathed the company to him on his thirty-fifth birthday. He's chosen to keep that a secret for now, allowing his father to be properly investigated.

We've spent the afternoon putting together a plan for his big announcement, and strategizing for the company moving forward. I'm happy that they want my input.

I've enjoyed spending time like this with Reagan. I'm seeing her in a completely different light than her normal funny, provocative, button-pressing demeanor. She has an inherent vision that few have. It's something you're born with. It can be cultivated, but it can't be taught. She's whip smart and is definitely ready for the big career step she's about to take. I'm so proud of her. I know Darian will be too when she finds out exactly what's in store for her.

I'm worried about Melissa. She's seemed out of sorts lately. Her visit last night was peculiar. I don't know why

she asked the questions she did. I hope I didn't do more harm than good.

Darian thinks I need to leave her alone to figure things out. That she's obviously going through something and needs to continue down her path of discovery. Perhaps Darian's right. She usually is.

We're all now sitting around the table hearing about Jess and Hayden's honeymoon. They were in the Maldives and had an amazing time.

I can't help myself and ask, "You stopped by Mom's earlier today, right?"

Hayden nods.

"How was she?"

He and Jess smile at each other. I look at them in question.

"Mom's good. *More* than good." He smirks. "Some guy came by. He didn't realize we were there at first, and he dipped Mom and kissed her hard. Then she made some comment about him returning. He had clearly slept over last night. They were all over each other. I've never seen Mom like that.

Trevor scrunches his face in disgust. "Ugh. Mom and her men. She's too much."

I look at him in surprise. "What does that mean?"

**“It means Mom’s getting plenty of action. Too much. No one needs to worry about that.”**

**I see Cassandra smirking.**

**“What do you know?”**

**She looks at me in challenge. “Why do you care?”**

**“Because she showed up here last night a mess, asking all kinds of weird questions about our marriage and love. She had clearly been crying. She was emotional. I’m worried about her.”**

**Cassandra smiles. “You don’t need to worry about her. She’ll be fine.”**

**“Explain that.”**

**“No, I won’t betray her confidence. Jackson, she’s an attractive woman and garners a lot of interest from men. She’s just sorting through her feelings and figuring out what she wants. She’s fine. Leave it alone.”**

**Darian gives me an *I told you so* look. I decide to drop it for now.**

**Reagan changes the subject. “Is everyone free two Saturdays from now?”**

**It appears everyone is.**

**“Good. Carter and I are going to get married that day. I’d like for you all to come.”**

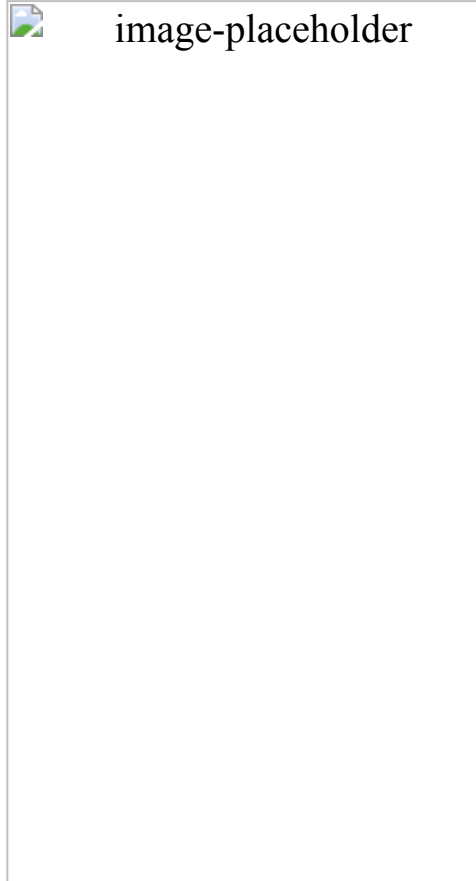
**Trevor lets out a laugh. “You just said that so matter of fact. Like you’re running to the dry cleaners that day.”**

**“Well, I don’t want to make a big thing of it. We want to keep it low key and out of the press for now. We’ll have a big party in a few months to celebrate, but we’re just having a small ceremony with you guys and a few friends right now.”**

**Harley offers, “Do you want to use our shore house?”**

**Reagan nods and smiles. “That would be great. Thank you. We’ll stay in a hotel though. I don’t need to hear Mom and Jackson going at it on my wedding night.”**

**Everyone laughs. I wink at Darian and she smiles at me.**



**After everyone leaves, and I help Darian clean up, I tell her that I need fifteen minutes in my office before I come to bed.**

**She gives me a knowing look. “You’re going to check in on Melissa, aren’t you?”**

**I nod.**



**She brings my face to hers and gives me a kiss. “I knew you would. You’re a good man, Jackson Knight.”**

**She stares at me and rubs my face in a loving way. “Did Skylar talk to you tonight?”**

**I give her a small smile. “She did.”**

**“Are you okay?”**

**I shrug my shoulders. “I understand why she wants to go work with her sister. Admittedly I was excited at how big of a family business Knight Investments was becoming, but I know it’s still a family business with Payton and Trevor. I just want her to be happy, and if working with Reagan makes her happy, I support her decision. I’ll miss her though.”**

**She gives me a soft kiss. “I love you.”**

**I smile down at her. “I love you too.”**

**“Go make your call. I’ll be in our bedroom wearing the same outfit I wore last night. Better yet, maybe I’ll wear that skirt you liked from our first date.”**

**My eyes widen, and she giggles.**

**I have to adjust myself at that image. “I think I’ll make it five minutes.”**

**She gives me a sexy smile as she pulls my face in for a deep kiss. I grab her ass and pull her tight to my growing erection. I whisper into her lips, “Forget it, I’ll call her tomorrow.”**

**Darian shakes her head. “No, call now. You’ll be worried otherwise. I’ll be waiting, Knight.” She turns and leaves for our bedroom. I watch her perfect ass sway as she goes.**

**I reluctantly go into my office and sit down at my desk to dial Melissa’s number.**

**She’s laughing as she answers. “I knew you’d call. You’re so predictable.”**

**“What made you so sure?”**

**“Because I knew Hayden would tell you about our lunch and that you’d be worried. You don’t need to worry about me, Jackson. I’m fine.”**

**“You didn’t seem fine last night.”**

**“I just needed to figure out a few things. Like I told you at the time, you helped me. I know you think you hurt me, but you did just the opposite. You helped me gain some clarity.”**

**“I’m glad to hear that. Who’s this guy Hayden mentioned? He said he’s never seen you all touchy feely with a man before, like you apparently were this morning.”**

**“That’s what he said?” I can almost see her smiling through the phone.**

**“Yes.”**

**“It’s new, but he’s special to me. He’s different from you and other men I’ve dated. I was a little uncertain at first, but I know what I want now.”**

**“How so? How’s he different?”**

**“Not to be rude, but it’s not really your business. I appreciate you checking in, but I’m fine. I’m an adult. I can handle it.”**

**“Okay. Maybe we should meet him.”**

**“No, not yet. Let’s see how things go. I’ll decide if and when it’s time. Thanks for calling, Jackson. I appreciate your concern. I’m fine. More than fine.”**

**She hangs up. She did sound much better. I guess I have other pressing matters to attend to. Like my naked wife waiting for me in our bedroom.**

# Chapter Fifteen

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## *Declan*

We've spent most of the past week at Melissa's place, but tonight she's coming to see my place for the first time.

She walks in and her eyes widen. "Wow, Declan. This apartment is amazing."

It's so different from hers. She lives in complete luxury. Mine is fairly big, but it's an artist's studio with a huge open space and a lot of windows. I have exposed brick walls on all four sides. I have an entire portrait studio set up in one of the corners. There are pictures everywhere, both hanging and loose on tables. My pictures.

She walks around taking everything in. Eventually, she turns to look at me. "Declan, you're incredibly talented. I had no idea."

I laugh. "Did you think I was bad at my job?"

She smiles. "No, I just didn't know you were this talented. It's all so different and all very beautiful. I love that you photograph such a variety of things."

She carefully looks at the hanging pictures. First through some landscapes, and then the animals. "You've been to all of these places? All over the world?" Her eyes light up.

I nod. "I have. It's been an amazing ride the past ten years. I've been to so many different countries. I've lost count."

**“Has anyone ever traveled with you?”**

**I shake my head. “No, I’ve always gone alone. I guess I never had anyone to bring. Is that something you’d be interested in?”**

**She slowly nods. “Yes, I would. I’ve traveled some, but looking at these pictures, you really immerse yourself in the culture. I would love to experience that.”**

**“I’ll gladly take you. It would be amazing to have you with me.”**

**She smiles as she continues looking at all of the pictures. Eventually she gets to portraits.**

**She runs her fingertips across one of them. “Is this Jade?”**

**“It is.”**

**“She’s stunning. Her eyes are incredible. They look so familiar. They’re exactly your eyes. Was her mother a model?”**

**I shake my head. “No. She looks nothing like her mother. Amanda’s a petite brunette with dark eyes. For better or worse, Jade is all me. Amanda often jokes about it.”**

**“How tall is she? Her body looks so long in the pictures.”**

**“These pictures are a little dated, but now she’s nearly six feet tall.”**

**“Wow, I thought I was tall. Is she comfortable in her skin?”**

**“I assume so. Why wouldn’t she be? Look at her.”**

**She gives me a knowing smile. “While I appreciate my height and body a bit more now, it’s hard as a teen to be different. I was tall and unattractively skinny at a very early age. I towered over all the girls, and most of the boys for a long time. It’s not easy.”**

**I shake my head. “No, Jade has a lot of self-confidence. I think she’s happy with the way she looks.”**

**“You better lock the doors, McGinley, because boys will be knocking them down.”**

**I widen my eyes. “What? Boys? She’s too young for that. I don’t think she’s into that yet.”**

**Melissa smirks. “That you know of. I promise you, she’s getting a lot of attention from the boys.”**

**I run my hands through my hair. Boys? I hadn’t even thought of that. She’s still my little girl. My baby. I growl, “We need to change the topic of conversation.”**

**She laughs. “Okay. Why don’t you show me where you’re thinking of putting her. We can figure out the space.”**

**We spend the next hour laying out what will become Jade’s room. Melissa’s extremely helpful.**

I want her to meet Jade, but I know it's early on in our relationship. I want to respect what Amanda asked of me and make sure this is the real deal before I bring Jade into things. I know it is, but I also know that we need some more time together to progress things.

We order Chinese food for dinner and enjoy a bottle of wine. In addition to being beautiful, Melissa's smart and funny. I enjoy spending time with her. I'm so enamored with her.

At some point I ask her, "What did you mean earlier when you said you didn't appreciate your body when you were younger?"

"Exactly what I said. I was always the tallest girl. Until my junior year, I was taller than all the boys. Despite my efforts to eat, I was incredibly skinny. Not in a remotely attractive way."

"I can't imagine you as anything but attractive. When did you start to feel comfortable in your skin?"

She thinks for a moment. "I suppose I felt good when I got to college and started attracting a decent amount of attention from the boys. But then I was a giant pregnant hippo by the end of my sophomore year and in a marriage I didn't want, so it was short-lived. It's not like you ever feel quite the same after you have kids."

I think for a moment. "You know, I've never been with someone who has kids until you. You're my first."



**“How’s that possible? I imagine you’ve had plenty of girlfriends and plenty of sex over your lifetime.”**

**I smirk. “I have, but...they’ve all been a little bit younger. I got older, but my bedmates remained the same age.”**

**“So you went from younger, childless women straight to a grandmother?” She smiles. “That’s a big jump.”**

**I laugh. “I guess I did. If I’d known grandmothers were like you, I would have started there a long time ago.”**

**She narrows her eyes in a playful way. “I’m teetering somewhere between flattered and terrified. Terrified what you must think of me after being with younger women your whole life.”**

**I don’t like this lack of confidence I’m seeing. “You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever been with. I wish you saw what I see.” I motion over to the portrait studio. “If you let me take your picture, I’ll show you what I see.”**

**“Clothed or unclothed?”**

**“Unclothed.”**

**She shakes her head. “Not now, Declan.” She shrugs. “Maybe at some point in the future.”**

**I nod. “Definitely at some point in the future.”**

# Chapter Sixteen

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## *Melissa*

Declan and I have spent the past month together. Our relationship has blossomed into something special. I've completely fallen for him.

At times he's sweet and tender, at others he's rough and demanding. He can be controlling, unreasonable, and possessive, but then he'll spend hours worshipping my body as if I'm the most precious thing he's ever been around. I get off on all of his sides, especially when I don't know what's coming. There's just something so exciting to me about an unpredictable man. I've never been with one before.

I walk into the chosen restaurant for lunch with the girls. The four of us sit and order our normal drinks.

Once the waiter leaves, Cassandra looks me up and down. "Wow, you look all sexed up. Someone has been getting it good, besides me." She winks.

I'm so happy, I won't even scold her for the last bit she slipped in. I smile as I lean back in my chair. "I *am* sexed up, and I *am* getting it good. *Very* good."

They all laugh. Izzy asks, "Are we ever going to meet him? I'm not sure he really exists."

I give a small smile. "Oh, I promise you he exists. I just wanted him to myself for a little while. He's...different. I don't know how you'll react to him."

Izzy pinches her eyebrows. "How so?"

“He’s unfiltered. He doesn’t particularly subscribe to normal social propriety. He always says what he’s thinking. He can also be a Neanderthal at times. He’s possessive, jealous, and bosses me around. He manhandles me and controls everything about our sex life.” I moan. “I fucking love it. It’s all such a turn on.”

They all laugh, but I sigh. “Our private bubble will get popped this week. Rayne and Grant are meeting him on Saturday night.”

Rayne’s eyes light up. “We’re so excited. This is the first time we’ve been out as couples in over ten years. I can’t believe it’s been that long.”

I grab her hand. “I’m sorry you guys lost Jackson in the divorce. I know how much you and Grant always liked him.”

She gives me a sheepish look. “He and Grant actually still play golf together sometimes. You know Jackson uses Grant’s engineering firm on his projects, so they have a business relationship. And he still calls me for some of his advertising needs. Honestly, we did have him over a few times before he met Darian, but I won’t go out with him now that he’s married to her.”

Cassandra clears her throat. “Excuse me, but don’t sit there and trash my best friend. Darian is fucking awesome. She’s not the bad guy. She’s done nothing wrong. You guys would love her if you just gave her a chance.”

Rayne shrugs. “I don’t think it’s right that they’re all over each other in front of Melissa. It’s disrespectful.”

Cassandra shakes her head. “First of all, it’s him all over her ninety-five percent of the time. That’s not Darian’s fault. Secondly, it’s not like Jackson and Melissa had some big scandalous falling out where she’s the scorned woman. She doesn’t long for him. Darian came into the picture way after the divorce. And thirdly, they don’t do it to hurt anyone. I don’t think they’re aware of it half the time. It’s just how they are. There’s no reason to begrudge them their happiness. You’re being petty.”

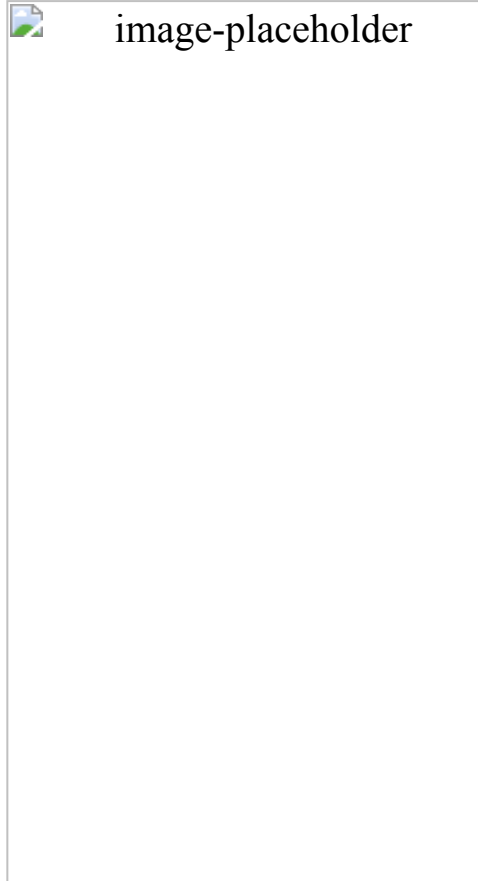
Rayne shakes her head. “Melissa’s my best friend. If it makes her uncomfortable, it makes me uncomfortable. I’m sure if something bothered Darian, it would bother you, Cassandra.”

Cassandra starts to respond, but I interrupt. “Both of you stop. Cassandra, you’re right.” I turn to Rayne. “If you want to have a social relationship with Jackson and Darian, it’s completely fine with me. Honestly, I’m starting to get used to it. It’s like white noise now. And I’m happy with someone else. I’m sure that will make it easier too. If they want to have sex in the middle of the street, more power to them.”

Cassandra gives Rayne an overexaggerated grin in triumph.

Izzy attempts to change the subject. “I wish I was coming with you guys on Saturday night. I have a date though. Someone I met online.”

Cassandra holds up a glass. “Here’s to hoping it’s successful enough to require dog piss pads.”



Tonight, we're having dinner with Rayne and Grant. Declan's clearly nervous as we walk to the restaurant. He's been silent, squeezing my hand, walking at a rapid pace. I turn to him just before we enter the front door. "What's wrong with you?"

He shakes his head. "Nothing. I know I'm a handful at times. I just want your friends to like me. I know she's your best friend and her opinion matters to you."

He's such a dichotomy. He's so sure of himself in certain areas, and so insecure in others. I stop him and turn his body to mine. I reach up and wrap my arms around his neck as I look him in the eyes. "There's nothing not to like."

He smiles. "There's plenty not to like, but as long as you still like me..."

Before he can finish, I pull his head down and softly kiss him. He returns my kiss, and before I know it, his tongue is in my mouth and he's pulled me tight to his body. The kiss is getting deeper and I'm completely absorbed in it. I'm absorbed in all things Declan McGinley.

After a few moments, I hear a familiar female voice, "Oh no, they're one of those couples."

I smile against his lips and then eventually turn to see Rayne and Grant standing there grinning at us. I wink at Rayne, and she smirks at me.

I introduce them to Declan, and we make our way into the restaurant. Rayne mouths to me, "He's hot." I nod in agreement. She leans over and whispers, "And you can officially no longer complain about Jackson and Darian's PDAs."

I laugh as Grant grabs her hand and kisses it before leading her through the crowded restaurant.

Rayne and Grant met just after college. I was home with a toddler, and Jackson had just started working. I watched with mixed emotions as they got to fall in love completely

naturally. Admittedly, I was both happy for and jealous of my best friend. They have an incredible marriage and two beautiful children.

We get to our table. It's one of those tables with a booth on one side and chairs on the other. Declan turns to Rayne and Grant. "Do you mind if we sit in the booth? I have a bad back."

I glare at him. He has no back issues. He can fuck me holding me upright leaning against nothing. He smirks at me. Oh boy. He's got something in mind for tonight.

Rayne and Grant are blissfully unaware of my man's dirty intentions and happily acquiesce.

We sit down and chat as we look through the menu. Rayne tells us about the young man her daughter Quinlan is dating. Apparently, it's getting serious. Grant shakes his head in disgust, but Rayne is clearly excited about it.

The waiter comes over. He's young and attractive. He smiles warmly at both Rayne and me. Declan immediately stiffens.

The waiter goes around to get the drink orders. When he gets to me, he says, "What will the pretty lady be having?"

Before I can reply, Declan interrupts, "She'll be having a waiter that doesn't drool all over her. Keep your eyes on your pad of paper, not my girlfriend."

I sigh. Rayne giggles. The poor waiter looks shocked. He stammers, "I'm...I'm...I'm so sorry, sir. I didn't mean any



disrespect.”

“Well then, keep your eyes away from her. She’s mine.”

I look up at the waiter. “I’m sorry. He’s not fully evolved. I’ll have a double Patron on the rocks, please.”

He keeps his head down, writes everything, and quickly leaves.

I turn to Declan. “Is the caveman routine really necessary? He’s young enough to be my son. He was being friendly. He didn’t mean anything by it.”

“I don’t like other men looking at you.”

Rayne interrupts. “You better get used to it, Declan. She’s always gotten looks from men. She always will.”

I roll my eyes at her. “Stop it. That’s not true. Look who’s talking.”

Declan turns to Grant. “It doesn’t bother you?”

He shrugs and looks over to Rayne and smiles. “I know I have a beautiful wife.” He strokes her face. “So what if men look at her? I can’t control that. I don’t blame them. She’s gorgeous. I’m not going to complain that I have a wife that men want to look at. I trust her though, so no, it doesn’t bother me. They can look all they want. I know they won’t ever get to touch her.”

Rayne reaches over and softly kisses him. They have such a healthy, loving marriage. I can’t help but smile. I’m so happy for them.

I turn and give Declan a knowing look. “See? You can trust me, so there’s no need to go crazy. No need to piss around and mark your territory like an animal.”

Rayne and Grant laugh. Declan nods his head, but his eyes say something else.

He pulls me close to his body and throws my leg over his under the table, spreading my legs wider. I try to pull it away, but he grabs my thigh and holds it in place. He turns to me and subtly shakes his head as if to tell me not to defy him.

I wish this behavior didn’t turn me on, but I can’t deny that it does. The way he handles my body, as if it belongs to him, does things to me.

We continue chatting with Rayne and Grant, but Declan gradually moves his fingers up the inside of my thigh. As he reaches my panties, he moves them aside and sinks two fingers inside of me.

My eyes open wide and I swallow hard. I turn my head to him and he smiles innocently as if this isn’t going on under the table.

He pumps his fingers in and out of me, with his thumb moving in circles over my clit. I attempt to stay focused on the conversation, but he’s making it difficult.

I grab his thigh with my nails as my orgasm is about to hit, but he quickly withdraws his hand. I gasp.

Rayne looks at me. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, I just spilled a little water.” I pretend to wipe something off my leg.

Over the course of the next hour, he does the same thing to me three more times. I’m a complete mess. I remain on the cusp at all times. I’m starved for the orgasm that he keeps depriving me of. I’ve never had this done to me. I’m furious and frustrated.

I’ll go take care of this problem myself. When he’s distracted, I pull away and stand. “I’m running to the restroom.”

Declan stands. “I have to go too. I’ll come with you.”

We walk toward the restroom. As we get close, he shoves me in, locks the door, and then pushes me against it. He kisses me hard as I wrap my legs around him, lock my ankles, and rub against him. I’m so desperate for the release he’s teased me with for the past hour.

He pulls his mouth away. “If I don’t want men looking at you, that’s the way it will be.”

I bite his lip. “I can’t believe you edged me. I’ve never in my life had a man do that to me. It’s torture.”

“It’s torture for me to watch men ogle my property.” He bites my lip back. “You’re my property. You better get used to it.”

God, he turns me on. I try to rub against him harder, but he pulls his hips away from mine. “You want your orgasm?”

“Yes. Give it to me. Now!”

I grab his shirt to pull his mouth back to mine, but he pushes me away and places my legs on the ground. “Then be a good girl and get on your knees and suck my cock.”

He takes a step back, unbuttons and unzips his pants, and pulls out his big dick. He gives it a few pumps and looks at me in challenge. “You’ll get what you want, when I get what I want.”

My mouth opens wide as I stare at him in shock. He’s legitimately crazy. And I must be legitimately crazy too, because I want to suck his cock right now. I look at him stroking himself and feel my body ignite. I’m practically gagging for it.

I know this is a pivotal point in our relationship. This is a control moment. He’s exerting his control. He’s showing me who’s boss. I either acquiesce and tell him, or rather show him, that he’s the boss, or I refuse him and take back some of the control.

I’m torn. I can’t let him act crazy like this all the time, but I know I’m also insanely attracted to his crazy. So, I do what any deranged woman would do. I drop to my knees and grab his cock.

I give him a few pumps as I slowly lick the tip with my tongue. The second I slide him deeper into my mouth, he reaches down, pulls me up, turns me around, lifts my dress, pulls down my panties, and impales me.

I yell out.

The bastard just wanted me to give into his control. I'm literally dripping at the notion.

I place my hands on the wall as he grabs my hips and hammers into me over and over. I push onto him as I'm clawing at the wall. The pleasure quickly builds to the breaking point.

I've been so worked up. I'm so damned turned on. After only a minute or two, I finally get the orgasm I've been chasing for the past hour.

As soon as I come, he does too, on an unnecessarily loud grunt, clearly intended to let anyone standing outside the bathroom know what he's doing to me in here.

When he pulls out, I turn around and go to slap him, but he catches my hand. He brings his lips close to mine, and whispers, "I control who looks at you. I control who touches you. I control your pleasure. Don't pretend you don't like it, because your perpetually wet pussy tells me you do." He runs his fingers through me, gathering a healthy handful of his come. He spreads it out all over the insides of my thighs.

I narrow my eyes at him. "You're an animal. I hate you sometimes."

He shakes his head. "No, you don't. I think you love me. I *know* I love you."

I widen my eyes. "What? This is how you're telling me you love me? You're an asshole."

He smiles. “It’s kind of my style to tell you like this. Don’t you think?”

I can’t help but smile at that. It really is his style.

“Don’t edge me again. That was horrible.”

“Don’t fall out of line and I won’t.”

I take a deep breath. This guy.

I clean myself up as best as I can, and we head back to the table. Rayne looks at me in question, asking if everything’s okay. I nod that it is. I’m not sure that’s true. I’m drunk on this animal that I can’t seem to get enough of.

We actually enjoy the rest of our evening with Rayne and Grant. Despite his behavior with me, he’s sweet and engaging with Rayne and Grant. Declan and Grant seem to get along well.

At the end of the night, Rayne gives me a big hug goodbye. She whispers in my ear, “He’s great. You guys are adorable together.” She squeezes me extra hard. “I’m so happy for you.”

I can’t help but smile. Admittedly, Rayne’s approval means something to me. I suppose I was more nervous than I realized about this evening at the notion of her possibly not liking him. I’m so relieved that she does.

It’s a beautiful night, so we take the long route home walking hand-in-hand. He’s sweet and loving as we take our leisurely stroll. Completely different from the man in the bathroom.

We get back to my building fairly late. We walk into the lobby. Jerry looks exhausted as he cleans the floor. I look at him with concern. “Is everything okay with you, Jerry?”

He looks up at me. “Good evening, Mrs. Knight. I’m fine. Mrs. Bevil’s dog must have eaten something bad. I’ve been scrubbing these floors half the night.”

I shake my head in sympathy. Declan pats Jerry’s back. “I have something that will brighten your evening, Jerry.”

He holds up a small brown bag that I hadn’t noticed he was carrying.

Jerry stands and smiles. “Is this what I think it is?”

Declan smiles. “You bet, buddy.”

Jerry opens it and pulls out a plastic container that seems to have a slice of cake in it. “Thank you, Mr. McGinley. I really appreciate it. It’s my favorite dessert in the world.”

Declan winks at him. “I know. Enjoy.”

We enter the elevator. As soon as the doors close, I turn to Declan. “What did I just witness?”

He shrugs as if it’s no big deal. “I was talking to Jerry earlier today. When I told him where we were going to dinner, he suggested I get the strawberry chocolate chip cheesecake. He said it’s the best around. I grabbed him a slice before we left.”

I shake my head and smile. “Declan McGinley, you’re a dichotomy wrapped in an enigma.”

He laughs. “You find it irresistible, don’t you?”

I sigh as I lean my head back on the elevator wall. “I suppose I do.”

As we step off the elevator, Declan asks, “Does this building have a pool?”

I nod. “Yes, an outdoor pool on the roof and an indoor pool on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor. They’re both closed now though.”

He has a devilish look. “That’s the best time to go. No one else is around.”

I look at him in question. “Do you have a bathing suit here?”

He gives me the same devilish look. “No bathing suits will be needed for what I have in mind.”

I shake my head. “Declan, there’s security and...”

He clamps his hand over my mouth. “Shhh. We’re going.”

He deepens his voice. “Don’t defy me twice in one night.” He runs his hand up my inner thigh between my legs and applies light pressure to my core. “You don’t like what happens when you defy me.”

And just like that, I’m a panting puppy who will follow him anywhere he wants to go.

He grabs my hand, and we head back into the elevator up to the roof.

When it reaches the top floor, we step out. I’ve never been up here at night. You can see the whole city. It’s actually



beautiful. I can't believe I've never seen the nighttime view before.

It's fairly dark up on the roof. There's only one light illuminating the pool area. Even the water is dark.

He leaves me and walks to the opposite side of the pool, pulling a chair up to the edge and sitting in it. He spreads his big legs wide and rubs his thighs, looking me up and down with lust in his eyes. "Give me a show. Take your clothes off for me. Slowly."

I give him a pleading look, but he just nods in demand. I sigh, but eventually move my hands down my legs and remove my high-heeled shoes, tossing them to the side. I unzip my dress and let it slip down my body and pool at my feet before bending and then throwing it to a nearby chair. I'm standing there in a lace bra and panties, feeling entirely exposed.

The heated look he's giving me right now is enough to make my entire body flush. He licks his lips. "Everything. Take everything off."

A shiver now runs through my body at his command and his demanding tone. My nipples are hard, and I'm breathing heavily. He smirks, knowing exactly what he's doing to me.

I stare at him, his overt masculinity practically oozing out of him. "What about you? I want you naked too."

"Do as you're told and you'll be rewarded."

My heart rate picks up and a throb is forming between my legs, but I do as I'm told and remove my bra and panties,

throwing them on top of my dress.

I'm fifty-two, standing outside on the roof of a building, completely naked, completely at his mercy. Who am I right now?

He rubs his cock through his pants, clearly adjusting it to make room for its ever-increasing size. "Sit on the side of the pool with your feet in the water." I walk over and sit down as he instructed.

"Now spread your legs wide. I want to see everything." Again, I do as I'm told. I lean back on my hands, on full display for him.

He unzips his pants and pulls his big cock out. He starts to stroke it. I can see his breathing has picked up. I wish he was touching me right now.

"Tell me, are you wet?"

You bet I am. I nod in confirmation.

"Touch yourself. Show me. Show me how wet you are." Why is this so hot?

I run my fingers through my folds and hold them up, the evidence of my arousal more than clear for him to see.

He licks his lips again. "Taste it. Tell me what it tastes like."

Without breaking eye contact, I slowly lick my fingers. I hear him moan. "It tastes like come. Mine and yours. It tastes like sex. Wet, dirty, restaurant bathroom sex"

He shakes his head. "You know what you taste like to me?"

“What?”

“Like mine. Your arousal is mine. Your come is mine. It all belongs to me. You belong to me.” I’ll never understand it, but the way he talks to me ignites my body in way I’ve never before experienced.

I whisper, “Declan. Come over here. I need you to touch me.”

He shakes his head. “No. Touch yourself. Make yourself come. I want to watch you touch your wet pussy and pleasure yourself. I won’t touch you until you come.”

Oh. My. God.

I lean back on one hand, and with the other, I move my hand down and begin the slow circles over my already wet, severely swollen clit.

“That’s it, baby. Now slide it inside. All the way in. Give yourself a few pumps.”

I do as I’m told. It’s not enough. I breathe, “Declan, please. I need you.”

He licks his lips. I wish I was the one licking them right now. “Not yet. Are you wet enough?”

“I’m dripping for you.”

“Good. Now back to your clit.”

I do as I’m told, hoping he’ll come over here and finish the job for me.

“Faster circles. You know what it takes.”

I keep moving. I'm close. I close my eyes. He lets out a growl. "Fuck, I can hear how wet you are from over here. It's so fucking hot."

I feel my legs getting numb. My toes are starting to curl.

He yells out, "Come now, Melissa."

And like the dutiful, whipped woman I am, I listen and come while panting his name.

It takes me a moment to regain my senses and catch my breath. When I return from the blissful darkness of my orgasm, he's somehow naked, in the water, charging at me.

I start to move to get in, but he shakes his head. "You'll get in when I tell you to get in."

As soon as he gets to me, he buries his head between my legs. The instant his tongue swipes through me, I yell out, "I'm too sensitive. Stop."

He looks up at me, his face already covered in my juices. He gives an over-exaggerated lick of his lips. "No, now it's my turn to have a taste of what's mine."

He attacks my pussy with what can best be described as fervent vigor. The over-sensitivity quickly morphs back into deep arousal. Maybe even more so than when we started.

As if I didn't come moments ago, I'm barreling headfirst toward another orgasm. I grab fistfuls of his hair and push myself onto him. He moans into me as he eats me like a man starved.

He's got his arms around my thighs as he sinks his tongue into me. "Oh god, Declan. So good."

He deeply licks and bites his way back to my clit. He swirls it around causing my inner walls to tremble.

He sinks his fingers inside of me. He gets so deep. When he curls them, my eyes roll back in my head.

His lips wraps around my clit, and as soon as he sucks on it, I explode. My entire body shakes as I scream a bunch of unintelligible words.

I don't know how he made that happen so quickly on the heels of the last.

As I come back down, I blink my eyes a few times remembering where we are. I may have woken the whole building.

As soon as Declan lifts his head, he pulls me into the pool and spears me with his giant cock. "Ah, Declan." I'm so sensitive, but he doesn't care as he starts right off at a brutal pace.

He turns us so his back is to the wall of the pool. "Lock your ankles around me." I do as I'm told. His hands grab my ass hard pulling me onto him over and over. I'm gripping his shoulders for dear life.

He crashes his lips to mine. I can taste myself on him. I lick around his mouth savoring the taste. All I can think of are his words. That I taste like I'm his. That my arousal is his. My come is his. He's right. It's his. He can have it all.

Once again, what started off as overly sensitive, has now got me building back up toward out of this world pleasure. How does he get me here so fast?

He grabs a handful of my hair in the back and yanks it hard, exposing my neck to him. He kisses and licks his way down my neck to my nipples. He circles each with his tongue, eventually taking time to suck each one into his mouth.

He's moving inside me at a pace that seems near impossible considering we're in the water. I squeeze my legs to help him get as deep as possible.

I'm close. We're both close.

All of a sudden, we hear a throat clear. We freeze.

Declan's big body is mostly blocking mine from the intruder, though obviously my arms and legs are visible. I press the front of my body tight to his. I don't want to look around him because then the person will see my face. I basically do my best to hide buried in Declan's chest.

"Mr. McGinley." It's Jerry's voice. "I just wanted to let you know that I go off duty in a few minutes. While I often turn cameras off to afford residents some privacy when they need it, the overnight crew does not. Perhaps it's time for you to rejoin Mrs. Knight in her condo."

I close my eyes in humiliation. Obviously, Jerry knows I'm here. He's just trying to spare me the indignity.

Declan smiles at me. "Thanks, Jerry. I'll be out of here in a few minutes and will head down."

“Very well, sir.”

I hear Jerry’s footsteps move a little closer. It sounds like he places something on the chair. Then he turns and leaves.

As soon as we hear the elevator door close, Declan starts up again.

“Are you crazy? We need to get out of here. Only one security guard a day is allowed to see me naked.”

Declan laughs but doesn’t stop. “We can leave as soon as you come. Not a minute before. It’s up to you how quickly we leave.”

I shake my head. “I don’t know if I can.”

As soon as I say that, he envelops my mouth with his and drives into me at a feverish pace. It seems I can, in fact, forget all about the security crew.

He moves to my ear. He bites my earlobe before he whispers, “Tell me who you belong to.”

I lick up his neck and bite his earlobe back. I whisper, “You.”

He grips my ass and uses it to drive into me, reaching the deepest abyss of my body. Within only another minute or two, we both climax together.

As soon as we do, I try to pull away but he doesn’t let me. I give him an exasperated look and manage to breathe out, “Please can we get out now?”

He smiles, but doesn't let me go. Instead, he walks us toward the steps, with him still inside of me. He steps us out of the pool, again, with me wrapped around him.

He pulls me tight. "I don't want the cameras catching your front." I nod in understanding and gratitude.

As we get to the chair with my clothes, and my bra and panties on top, I see that Jerry left two towels next to them for us. I may never be able to look at Jerry in the eyes again.

Declan carefully places me down with him blocking my body from the camera I now see by the elevator doors. He brings the towel to me, making sure my body isn't exposed at all. We wrap ourselves in the towels, grab our clothes, and head for the elevator.

Once we're in the elevator, I lean my head against the wall. "Remind me to give Jerry an especially large Christmas tip this year."

Declan just smiles. "I think you already gave him his tip."



# Chapter Seventeen

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## *Melissa*

I'm meeting my nephew for lunch today. I can't believe how long it's been since I've seen him. I hope I recognize him.

I walk into the restaurant and look around. I smile as I spot him. He looks exactly like our side of the family. It's uncanny.

I walk up to the table. "Lance?"

He looks up, smiles, and then immediately stands. "Aunt Melissa?"

I nod and he gives me a warm hug. I look him up and down. "Wow, Lance, you've grown up so much." I laugh. "The last time I saw you I had to bend to talk to you. Now you tower over me." Lance must be seven or eight inches taller than me. He's well-built with dirty blond hair and dark blue eyes like mine. His hair is a little longer than I would have expected. The boys always had military-style buzz cuts when they were younger. Besides the hair, he looks so much like my brother Craig did at that age.

He smiles. "We have a very tall family, don't we?"

I nod. "Yes, we do." He motions for me to sit, and I oblige.

I can't help but start to tear up a bit. I wasn't expecting to be so emotional about seeing him. "Thank you for reaching out, Lance. I can't tell you what it means to me."

"Thanks for meeting me. I wasn't sure you'd agree to it."

I look at him in confusion. “Why in the world wouldn’t I agree to it? I’m thrilled to reconnect with you. It’s been such a long time. More than a decade. It’s almost hard to believe.”

He shrugs. “I don’t know. I guess from what my father has said, I just wasn’t sure you’d want to see me.”

I have no clue what my brother has told his children about why we don’t speak, but it’s not really my place to fill in those gaps. I’m just happy to be here with him. “Well, I couldn’t be happier. Tell me about yourself. I know nothing past you being a baseball star when you were a little kid.”

He laughs. “It’s been a while since I played baseball. You know where I grew up, and you know I have three brothers and a sister. What you don’t know is that I’m now the black sheep of the family.”

I can’t help but laugh. “Are you trying to steal that title from me?”

He smiles. “No ma’am. Apparently, it comes naturally.”

“What did you do to earn that title?”

“I didn’t want to go into the military.”

“Ah, I see. I can’t imagine that went well. What is it you want to do?”

“I always knew that small town, military base life wasn’t for me. I’ve always wanted to live in a big city.” I can certainly relate to that.

“When I wouldn’t enlist like my brothers did after high school, or even consider officer’s training in college, my father made me a deal. If I went to college near home and spent three years after college working close to home, if I still wanted city life away from military life at the end of that time, I could move away and he’d support my decision. I think he expected me to either change my mind or get married to my high-school sweetheart and stay put. He never thought I’d actually leave. He’s pretty upset with me, but he made the deal and he’s sort of sticking to it.”

“What do you mean, sort of?”

“He did let me go without a fight, but he had initially agreed to paid for grad school. He’s financially cut me off.”

“I’m happy to pay for school, Lance. It’s not a problem at all.”

He shakes his head. “No, ma’am. I wouldn’t be comfortable with that. Thank you for offering, but I got a job waiting tables and took out some student loans. I also saved some money when I was working after college. I’ll be just fine.”

Hmm. I may have to stop by the bursar’s office in the next few weeks.

“It’s certainly admirable, Lance. If you change your mind, don’t hesitate to ask for help. I’m honestly happy to take care of it for you.”

“Thank you, ma’am, but I didn’t call you for that. I called because I don’t know anyone in town, and I don’t have any

other family here. I don't know all the details about why you and my father don't speak, but you've certainly never harmed me. Just the opposite. Despite not talking to my father, you've never missed a birthday or Christmas, always sending presents for me and my siblings. I want you to know how much I appreciated that through the years."

I smile. He's a good kid. "Thank you for saying that. It was always my pleasure."

I grab his hand. "You do have family nearby, Lance. I live right here in town, so don't ever hesitate to reach out. I'm always available to you."

He smiles. "Thank you. I will."

"You haven't met anyone from school yet?"

He shakes his head. "No, classes haven't started. I came a little early to find a job. I wasn't sure how easy it would be. I can also work a lot of hours now before school starts to save a little more money. I... um..." He seems a little choked up.

I grab his hand. "What is it?"

"I left a girl back home. She was having trouble with me leaving our hometown. I needed to go and make a clean break for her sake. I don't want the same small-town life she wants. The long goodbye was only hurting her. It was time for me to go."

I nod in understanding. I see that he's emotional about it. I want to change the topic of conversation. "Tell me, Lance, what are you studying?"

His face lights up. “I’m attending business school. I’m still figuring out exactly what I want to do, but I’m pretty good with numbers and I know I want to be in the fast-paced business world. A small town isn’t really conducive to that.”

“Lance, my ex-husband owns a large, successful business. One of the biggest in Philadelphia. Two of my sons work with him. Would you have any interest in working there? I can discuss it with him. I’m sure he’d be open to it.”

He looks surprised. “Do you still speak to your ex-husband?”

I can’t help but smile. He’s probably never met a divorced person before. No one in our hometown ever gets divorced. “Yes, Lance. We weren’t right as husband and wife, but we’re good friends. We have children and grandchildren together. I see him all the time.”

“Wow, that’s pretty cool.”

I smile again. “I’m happy to talk to him about it. I’m actually going to a party at his and his wife’s house this weekend. The whole family is meeting my boyfriend for the first time or I’d bring you. I’ll definitely bring you next time though. You have a lot of family here, Lance. You’re not alone.”

“Thank you, ma’am. I appreciate it.”

He looks confused. “Just so I understand it, you bring your boyfriend to parties at your ex-husband’s house with his new wife?”

I can't help but laugh again as I nod.



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## *Declan*

I've picked up Jade, and we're on our way to my place. She's meeting Melissa for the first time today. We're all going to paint Jade's room together. I'm both excited and nervous. They're the two most special people in my life, and I really want them to get along.

I smile at her in the car. "Are you okay meeting my girlfriend?"

"Of course. I've never met anyone you've dated before. I'm excited. It must be pretty serious."

I nod. "It is. I care a lot about her. I hope you like her."

She shrugs. "If you like her, I'm sure I'll like her too. Chill out, Dad." I scowl at her. I hate when she tells me to chill out, and she knows it.

She just smiles, but fortunately changes the subject. "We're painting today, right?"

"Yep, I have all of the supplies and the color you chose. I put up a few other colors on the wall so you can see them before we commit to one color."

"Great. My friend Jaime is picking me up at your place in a few hours. Hopefully we'll be done by then. I brought a bag of clothes so I can change after we paint."



**“That works. It’s no big deal. Melissa and I can finish painting if we’re not done when your friend arrives. I want you to go out and have fun with your friends. I’m looking forward to meeting one of them.”**

**She smiles and nods.**

**We arrive at my apartment. I look around, but Melissa isn’t here yet. I know she was having brunch with her nephew and then said she had a few errands to run.**

**I show Jade her room and the paint colors. She seems to really like the space. Looking at all the paint samples I put on the wall for her to see, she likes them all, but decides on the original one she had chosen.**

**I hear Melissa eventually arrive. We walk out of Jade’s new room, and I see Melissa with arms full of bags. They’re piled so high, she can’t see us.**

**She places them down on the table without noticing us. “What did you buy, woman?”**

**She turns around startled. “Oh. I didn’t know you guys were here yet. I thought I had more time.”**

**She sees Jade and smiles warmly. “You must be Jade. It’s so nice to finally meet you.”**

**Jade shrugs and deadpans, “Who’s Jade? I’m Declan’s girlfriend Sonia. Who the hell are you?”**

**Melissa’s eyes widen. I start laughing. I walk over and pull Melissa into my arms. I give her a soft kiss. “She’s**

**kidding, babe. She has a...rather unique sense of humor. This is my daughter, Jade. I promise.”**

**Jade smiles. “Sorry. It was too easy.” She walks over to Melissa and shakes her hand. Melissa relaxes and shakes her hand back.**

**“It’s nice to finally meet you, Jade. I’ve heard so many nice things about you.”**

**“You as well.” Jade looks her up and down. “You look more like you could be my mother than my own mother.”**

**She turns to me. “Are you sure Melissa isn’t my mother?”**

**Melissa laughs. She’s catching on to Jade’s sense of humor. She responds, “I think I would have remembered. Especially since I only seem to be able to produce boys. No beautiful girls like you.”**

**Jade’s eyes widen. “You have boys? How many? How old are they?” I can see Jade’s face light up. She must be excited at the possibility of a growing family circle. She wants that so badly. Just another reason for me not to screw this up. That, and I’m completely in love with Melissa. She didn’t say it back to me, but I’m hoping that’s because we were in a bathroom, not because she isn’t feeling it.**

**“I have three sons...”**

**Jade interrupts, “Are they cute?”**

Melissa turns to me and gives me an *I told you so* look. I guess Jade's into boys. I don't like that at all.

I narrow my eyes at her. "They're older, and they're all married. Since when are you into boys?"

"Since puberty."

Melissa laughs. She throws her arm around Jade. "I like you, Jade. Make him sweat a little. He deserves it."

Jade smiles. "I'm going to be living with him now. I'll give him a run for his money, don't worry."

I look at her. "Who are you right now?"

She smiles. "Your new roommate."

I look at the pile currently sitting on my kitchen table. "Melissa, what's in all those bags? Did you buy an entire store?"

She throws her hands up in obvious excitement. "Oh. Right. Jade, I got about five or six different comforters for you to choose from."

Jade looks surprised. "For me?"

Melissa nods. "Yes. We can compare them to the paint color and then you can choose which one you like." She turns to me. "When are the painters coming?"

I laugh. "You're looking at them. We're painting today. I told you that."

She pinches her eyebrows together. "*We* as in the three of us?"

**I nod.**

**“I didn’t realize it was us doing the actual painting.” She looks down at her designer clothes and bites her lip. It’s so damn cute. “I didn’t exactly dress for it.”**

**“I think you left shorts in my bathroom. Just throw on one of my shirts with them.”**

**She slowly nods. “Okay. Just so you know, I’ve never done this before.”**

**Jade and I smile. “You’ll be fine.”**

**She walks into my bedroom to change. Jade and I begin walking into the other bedroom. “She’s *really* pretty, Dad.”**

**I smile. “I know.”**

**“She seems nice.”**

**“She is.”**

**“She’s kind of fancy.”**

**I laugh. “I know. She’s always dresses extremely well.”**

**“I like her clothes a lot. Maybe she could teach me about that stuff. Mom is sort of a ripped jeans and T-shirt kind of person. I really like the way Melissa dresses.”**

**I’ve never heard Jade talk like this. “Is that what you want? Nicer, fancier clothes?”**

**She shrugs. “I guess. I told you I’m thinking about getting a job. I want to get into graphic design, and if I want an internship this year, I think I need to dress a little nicer.”**

**My baby girl is so grown up. “I’m happy to get you whatever you need.”**

**She smiles. “Thanks, Dad.”**

**Melissa comes back in the room. She’s in a flannel button down of mine. I swallow hard. She looks sexy as sin. I assume she’s in her shorts, but I can’t see them with the size of my shirt. Her long legs are on display. I have to adjust myself at the sight of her sexy body.**

**She notices, and I see the corner of her mouth rise. She shakes her head and mouths, “You’re a dirty man.”**

**I can only raise my eyebrows and nod.**

**We lay down the plastic and get everything ready to paint. We all grab our various brushes and begin painting.**

**At some point, I say, “Melissa, Jade needs some clothes for a few job interviews she’s hoping to get. If I give you my credit card, would you be able to take her shopping sometime? You have such great style.”**

**Melissa’s eyes light up. “Hell yes.”**

**Jade laughs.**

**“I had three boys who didn’t start dressing well until after college. I would *love* to take you shopping for girl clothes. Excuse me, women’s clothes. I’ve never been able to do something like that. I have two granddaughters, but they’re not quite old enough for that fun yet.”**

Jade asks Melissa a lot of questions about her family. Melissa gives her the whole rundown. At some point, I realize the two of them have been talking and laughing on one side of the room for over an hour while I've been on the other side by myself. I'm thrilled they're getting along so well.

Melissa walks over to me and smiles. "Declan, did you get any spray paint?"

"No, why would I get spray paint."

She looks behind me. "Forget it, I see it."

I turn around. Jade is standing there with a smile. She runs her fingers through the bristles of her paintbrush causing paint to splatter all over my body and face.

The girls both giggle. I turn back to Melissa and she does the same thing to me. They giggle louder.

I take a towel and rub my face. "You two are going to pay for that."

I chase them both as they scream. It turns into an all-out paint war. Them against me. The room is a complete mess, but it's worth it for the fun we've had.

When it's finally over, I look around the room. "These walls are a mess."

Jade shakes her head. "Actually, Dad, I kind of like it this way. It's unique. Let's leave it." She's such a good kid.

**She looks at her watch. “Jaime will be here in like fifteen minutes. Can I grab a quick shower?” She looks down at herself. “I’m covered in paint.”**

**I nod. “Of course. Go ahead.”**

**Melissa adds, “I have girl shampoo and soaps in your dad’s shower. Feel free to use whatever you want.”**

**Jade gasps and puts her hand on her chest. “You shower and sleep here, Melissa? I had no idea.”**

**I widen my eyes for a moment, but then Melissa and Jade start laughing. How did they become a team working against me so quickly?**

**As soon as Jade disappears into my bathroom, I turn my gaze to Melissa. “You’re gonna get it so bad when she leaves.”**

**She gives me a sexy smile. “Promises, promises.”**

**I grab her into my arms and kiss her hard. There’s paint all over our faces rubbing on each other. I smear hers just a little more, and she laughs into my mouth.**

**“This was fun. Jade’s fantastic.”**

**I smile. “I know. I’m so lucky she’s like her mother.”**

**Melissa shakes her head. “She’s all you, Declan.” She turns her head to the side. “You don’t see that?”**

**“No. She’s way better than me.”**

**She runs her fingers through my hair and looks up at me with so much affection. “I wish you saw what I see in you.”**

**She brings her lips back to mine for a sweet kiss.**

**We're interrupted when the doorbell rings. "Oh, that must be her friend Jaime. I don't think I've ever met any of her girlfriends. I'm excited." Melissa smiles at me.**

**I open the door. I'm expecting a seventeen-year-old girl. Instead, I'm looking at a grown man, about my height, though much skinnier. He smiles at me and holds out his hand. In a deep voice, he says, "You must be Mr. McGinley. I'm Jaime. It's nice to finally meet you."**

**I look at him and slam the door shut in his face.**

**Melissa shakes her head and gives me a disapproving look.**

**Jade walks out then. "Did I hear Jaime's voice?"**

**I growl, "Jaime had to leave."**

**She rolls her eyes and walks to the door. She opens it. "Sorry, Jaime. My dad has issues."**

**"I have no issues. I thought there was a teenaged girl named Jaime coming to pick you up. Not a grown man." I turn to him. "How old are you?"**

**"I'm nineteen, sir."**

**I look at Jade. "He's an adult. You're a child. You can't go with him."**

**She rolls her eyes again. "Dad, I've been seeing Jaime for six months and have known him forever. Mom likes him. Relax."**



I scream, "What? I didn't know about this! You're too young to date! You're not going anywhere with him."

Melissa comes over and grabs my face to look at hers. "Relax. She's seventeen, not seven. Going out with other teenagers is normal. Going out with teenage boys is also normal." She rubs her thumbs over my face. "Take a breath. If Amanda's fine with him, you should be too. Jade's a smart girl. She knows what she's doing."

I take a few breaths before I slowly nod. Melissa turns to Jade and mouths, "Just go."

I catch Jade smile out of the corner of my eye. She gives me a quick peck on the cheek. "Bye, Dad. Love you." She looks at Melissa. "I'll see you tomorrow?"

Melissa nods. "I'll see you then. I'll pick you up at around eleven."

Jade and Jaime leave. I look at her in question. "Why are you picking her up?"

"We're going shopping."

"You two are awfully chummy."

I motion toward the door. "I don't like him."

She smiles. "I know you don't. I imagine the father of every teenage girl hates their daughter's boyfriends."

"I didn't know she was dating. An older man at that. I don't like it."

**“I know you don’t, but you’re going to have to deal with it. You were seventeen once too.”**

**My eyes pop open. “I don’t want her doing any of the things I was doing at seventeen.”**

**She smiles. “I know how to take your mind off of this.” She grabs my hand and leads me toward my bedroom. “Let’s go take a shower to clean off the paint. We can finish what we started a few minutes ago.”**

**I pull her to me hard, our faces only inches apart. “It’s adorable that you think you’re in charge.” I lean down to whisper in her ear as I cup her between the legs. “You may have controlled the Jaime situation, but I control this situation.” I squeeze her.**

**Her breathing picks up as she swallows hard. “There’s nowhere in here to go that we won’t make an even bigger mess with all of this paint.” She motions down to our paint-covered bodies.**

**I pick her up and wrap her legs around me. “It’s adorable that you think I give a shit.”**

**I move us toward my kitchen table and lay her back on it. Her arms and legs are wrapped around me tightly as I kiss her like I’m going to eat her alive.**

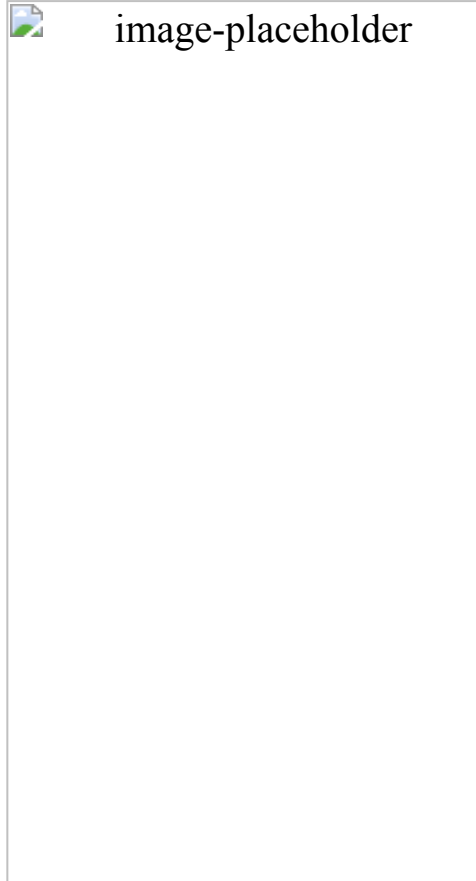
**All of a sudden, the front door flies open. I turn my head and Jade is standing there wide-eyed. “Jesus, I knew the sexual tension between the two of you today was high, but you couldn’t even wait until I left the building?”**

**We're stunned into silence as she walks by us and grabs the keys she left behind. We're completely frozen in place.**

**She heads for the door. Before she closes it, she smiles. "Have fun, kids." We can hear her laughing in the hallway.**

**I look at Melissa. "How does she know what *sexual tension* is?"**

**Melissa shakes her head and laughs.**



**The next morning, when I get a moment alone, I call Amanda.**

**“Hey, Dec. What’s up?”**

**“Did you know that she’s dating a grown man?”**

**Amanda laughs. “Jaime? He’s hardly a grown man. She’s known him for years. He was coming around well**

before he started looking like a man. He's a good kid. You don't need to worry."

"I don't like her dating. I don't like it at all."

"Too bad, Dec. That's what teenage girls do. Is this really why you called?"

"No, it's not. Umm...well...Jade met my girlfriend yesterday and asked if she could take her shopping today. Is that okay with you?"

"I suppose. What for?"

Part of me wants to just say that it's for her bedroom at my house, which is partially true, but I don't like to lie. "Jade said she needs some fancier clothes for upcoming job interviews and the like."

"Oh. I didn't know that. She never mentioned it. I can take her. Your girlfriend doesn't have to."

I feel like such a dick. "Well, Melissa, that's her name, dresses really stylishly. Jade liked it and asked specifically if she could take her. She doesn't have to if you don't want her to or if you're uncomfortable with them spending time alone together."

Amanda sighs. "No, it's fine. If that's what Jade wants. I only saw her for a minute when she got home last night, but she seemed to like your girlfriend. If you really like this woman, and you see her sticking around for a while, I guess it's good for her and Jade to spend time together. I

suppose my drawers full of concert T-shirts aren't exactly the style Jade's going for." She laughs.

I laugh too. I hit the jackpot with the mother of my kid. She always puts Jade's wants and needs first.

"Thanks, Amanda. I really appreciate it. Melissa told Jade she'd be there to pick her up at around eleven."

"Okay, Dec. I'll meet her then. Have a good one."

"You too. Bye."

About five minutes after eleven, my text tone rings. I look at my phone.

*Amanda: Who is this woman? She picked her up in a hundred-thousand-dollar car.*

*Me: I'm pretty sure she has money. I don't ask, but she has a lot of nice things and a nice place.*

*Amanda: She was dressed like a model from a designer catalog.*

*Me: I told you that she dresses stylishly.*

*Amanda: What's her full name?*

*Me: Melissa Knight.*

A few minutes later, my text tone pings again.

*Amanda: Have you ever googled her?*

*Me: Of course not.*

*Amanda: Her ex-husband is one of the wealthiest, most successful men in Philadelphia.*

**What? She's never mentioned that.**

*Me: Well, she told me that they started their marriage with nothing and ended it with plenty.*

*Amanda: It's more than plenty, Dec.*

*Me: She's down to earth if that's what you're worried about. She volunteers at a ton of charities and teaches languages to underprivileged kids. She's a good person.*

*Amanda: Okay. If you say so. She's in the big leagues. She's not like us. Be careful.*

**A few hours later, I meet Melissa and Jade for a late lunch. I kiss them both hello as I look down at what seems to be one hundred shopping bags.**

**“Wow. I guess you guys found a lot of great things. Did my credit card melt from overuse?”**

**They both laugh. Jade says, “We didn't get much. Melissa just got me a bunch of condoms and birth control pills. A few sex toys too.”**

I stand so abruptly that my chair falls over. “What? What did you just say?”

Melissa grabs my arm and shakes her head. “Declan, relax. She’s obviously kidding. I’ve known her for twenty-four hours and understand her sense of humor. Calm down and sit down.”

I pick up the chair and sit. Jade’s grinning. I scowl at her. “You’re grounded for a year.”

She giggles. “You’re such an easy target, Dad.”

She turns to Melissa. “When can I meet your family? I’m looking forward to meeting your sons and their families.”

Melissa looks at me for guidance. I shrug. She turns back to Jade. “Your dad has only met one of my sons. He hasn’t met anyone else yet. My ex-husband and his wife are having a pool party this weekend and they invited us so that your dad can meet the whole extended, complicated family. Why don’t we see how it goes with your dad meeting them, and then we can figure out a time for you to meet them all, as long as both your mom and dad are comfortable with it.”

Jade nods. “Okay, but you may be better off introducing me before this Cro-Magnon over here.” She points at me, as I continue to scowl from her earlier comment.

Melissa laughs. “You may be right but let me handle him.” She winks at Jade.



At some point, Melissa excuses herself to go to the bathroom. I look at Jade. “Everything went okay today? You two got along well?”

Jade’s eyes light up. “It was amazing, Dad. She’s incredible. She took me to really nice places. All of the salespeople knew her and fell all over themselves to help us. I felt like Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman*, except not the whole hooker thing. I got the nicest clothes. But...” She bites her lip.

“But what?”

Jade scrunches her nose. “She wouldn’t let me use your credit card. She paid for it all.”

“What?” I point to the large pile of bags. “All of this? It must have cost her a fortune.”

She nods. “It definitely did. Please don’t say anything. We had a really good time. She’s so nice. Don’t go all crazy and ruin things with her. She really likes you.”

I’m doing my best to feign calmness. “She said that to you?”

Jade nods. “Yes. She likes you a lot. I see your face turning red. Don’t be a crazy man and make a mess of this.”

# Chapter Eighteen

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## *Melissa*

Declan was quiet through lunch after I returned from the bathroom. Something's obviously bothering him.

He's about to leave to take Jade home. I look up at him. "Are you coming by tonight?"

I see his jaw tense. "I'm not sure yet. I'll let you know. I have some work to catch up on."

Yep, something's wrong. We've rarely spent a night apart the past few weeks. I can't imagine what I've done to upset him. I spent the whole day with his daughter. I loved every minute of it, and Jade seemed to have fun as well. What more does he want from me?

I'm in my car on the way home, and I pick up the phone to call Rayne but remember that Grant is taking her to a show in New York City tonight. They're probably already on their way. I don't want to bother her.

Izzy is away at her son's college for the weekend.

I guess I'm calling Cassandra. I dial her number.

She answers after a few rings. "Trevor's in the middle of ringing Satan's Doorbell, what's up?"

"I don't know what that means, but I'm confident I don't want to know."

She laughs. "Brush up on your urban dictionary terms. There are some good ones in there."

“I’ll be sure to do that,” I say sarcastically. “Do you have a minute?”

“For my second favorite mother-in-law? Always.”

“Cassandra, when my son decided to marry a woman twice his age, I honestly never thought she could possibly be less mature than him, but you’ve proven me wrong.”

She laughs again. “Flattery will get you everywhere, Melissa. Now tell me, what’s wrong?”

“Declan’s mad at me and I don’t know why.”

“Did you put out last night?”

I roll my eyes even though she can’t see me. “As a matter of fact, I did. Several times.”

“Hmmm. What did you do today?”

“I took his daughter clothes shopping.”

“Did he know you were doing that?”

“Yes. He was excited about it.”

“Who paid?”

“He gave her a credit card, but I wouldn’t let her use it. I paid for it all.”

“There’s your answer. You emasculated him in front of his kid.”

I think for a moment. “Shit. I didn’t think of that.”

“Yep. That’s definitely it.”

“The fact that you’re always all-knowing is both impressive and concerning.”

“I’m wise beyond my years.”

I smile. “I don’t know about that. It’s a lot of years, Cassandra.”

“You’re mean. I can be mean too, though. Don’t worry, your son keeps me young. *Very* young.” She laughs again.

“Ugh. Good-bye.”

She hangs up, but then sends me a text.

*Cassandra: Definition of Satan’s Doorbell: A religious term for the clitoris.*

*Cassandra: You’re welcome. LOL.*

She’s truly a child. A funny and wise one, but nonetheless a child.

When I get home, I call Declan, but it goes straight to voicemail.

The entire evening goes by and I don’t hear from him.

I get into bed. I toss and turn for hours, unable to sleep. Eventually, I decide to send him a text.

*Me: I’m sorry if I offended you by paying for Jade’s clothes. It wasn’t my intent. I made the decision to take*

*her to a few upscale boutiques, and I thought I should pay. Perhaps I was wrong. I'm sorry.*

I see dots indicating he's typing, but they eventually stop and nothing comes through. He can be so frustrating at times.

Hours later, still unable to sleep, I decide to send him one more text.

*Me: The way grown-up relationships work is that you communicate when something is bothering you. Just talk to me.*

*Declan: Is that what you and your money bags billionaire ex-husband used to do?*

Ah, that's what this is about. He must have looked up Jackson. We've never discussed money. He must now realize what kind of money Jackson and I both have.

*Me: I can't help that I have money.*

*Declan: I don't think we're in the same league. Find someone who can give you what you need.*

Is he breaking up with me over money? Over a text? Continuing this conversation via text is unhealthy. We need to talk about this in person. I don't write back.

I have a terrible night's sleep. I'm in a robe, sleepily standing at my coffee machine in the morning when all my

boys come walking in. Crap, I forgot that we had plans for this morning.

All three of them stop short when they see me. They look at each other. Payton walks over and puts his arm around me. “Mom, are you okay? What’s wrong?”

I shake my head. “Nothing, why?”

Hayden eyebrows shoot up. “Because you clearly forgot we were coming for breakfast, you’re not dressed, and you look like shi...not yourself.”

I take a deep breath as tears well in my eyes. Trevor comes over and gives me a big hug. “Just give us his address. We’ll go over and kick his ass.”

I let out a small laugh. “I’m sorry. Obviously, I didn’t remember our plans for this morning. Let me get my phone and I’ll order us some food.”

Hayden rubs my back. “Don’t worry about us, Mom. We’re fine. We’re worried about you.”

He looks over to Trevor and Payton. “I’m going to get her cleaned up. I’ll be right back.”

He grabs my hand and walks me into my bathroom. He turns on the shower and leaves a towel for me. “Take your time. We’ll be out here.” He closes the door behind him.

I take off my robe and take a long, hot shower.

Afterward, I get dressed and feel a little better.

When I walk back out into the kitchen, I see a big, full breakfast is set up. Obviously, the boys went out and bought everything we needed. I even see coffee from my favorite coffee shop. My boys are so good to me.

I put on my best smile and sit with them. Trevor rubs my arm. “Are you going to tell us what happened?”

I take a deep breath. “Just a few issues with the man I’m seeing. Nothing for you to worry about.”

He shakes his head. “You don’t always have to put on a happy face, Mom. If something’s bothering you, tell us. Maybe we can help. Or at least give us a name so we know where to go.” He smiles.

Hayden asks, “I assume it’s that Declan guy that I met a few weeks ago. You two seemed pretty hot and heavy when I saw you.”

I nod with a fresh set of tears in my eyes. “I thoughtlessly paid for some expensive items for his daughter. I think he likely felt emasculated. I didn’t mean anything by it. He only just realized my financial situation. He’s clearly struggling with it.”

The boys all nod in understanding. Payton says, “It’s not easy for them. Kylie struggled with it too. She’s always afraid people will think she’s with me for my money.”

Hayden agrees. “Jess too.”

Trevor smiles. “Cassandra embraces it. She calls me her sugar daddy. Though she obviously makes a lot of money, so



it's easier for us to joke about it.”

I look at both Payton and Hayden. “How do you overcome it?”

Hayden shrugs. “Just reassuring her that love isn't about dollar signs. Money is something we have. It doesn't define us. It doesn't change how we view people or who we are.”

Payton agrees with him.

Trevor asks, “You're really down about this, Mom. You clearly care a lot about him. Are you in love with him?”

I think for a moment. “He's told me that he loves me. I haven't expressed it to him, but I'm pretty sure that I am.” I know I am.

Trevor looks surprised. “Wow, Mom. Is this a first for you?”

I'm not really sure how to answer that, so I'm silent.

Trevor rolls his eyes. “We never believed that you and Dad were really in love. You didn't fool us.” Hayden and Payton both nod in agreement.

Tears well in my eyes again. I whisper, “I'm so sorry.”

Trevor shrugs. “It's okay. We're just happy that maybe you're finding your way now.”

He stands. “While we do love spending quality time with you, I think you have somewhere else you need to be right now.”

They tell me to just go and that they'll clean everything up. I hug and kiss them all goodbye.

I head over to Declan's apartment at around noon. He answers the door looking miserable, in nothing but boxer briefs and an opened button-down shirt. He looks like he didn't sleep either.

He doesn't say anything. He just opens the door wider for me to come through, which I do.

Once he closes the door, I look at him. "Declan, I'm sorry if my buying the clothes for Jade upset you. I didn't mean anything by it. I was excited to take her shopping and got carried away."

He slowly nods. "I want to pay you back."

"Okay. If that will make you happy. Fine, you can pay me back." I take a breath. "I missed you last night."

I try to touch him but he pulls away. I sigh.

He's silent.

"I'm not going to apologize for having money, Declan. Jackson and I both sacrificed a lot for that to happen. But money is something I have, not something I am or something I care all that much about. Have I gotten used to having nice things? Sure. How could I not? But it doesn't remotely factor into what I'm looking for in a man. I don't know or care about how much money you have."

He shakes his head. "I can't keep you in the lifestyle you're accustomed to."

"I'm not asking you to. I can manage that aspect of my life just fine. That's not what interests me about you."

“I don’t want you to think I’m with you for your money.”

“It never even crossed my mind. I’ve dated a few men where it did. Never once have I thought of it with you.”

He sighs. “I’m not good enough for you. I never will be. You deserve someone who’s not as fucked up as I am. Someone without baggage. Someone who treats you well. Someone who can give you the kind of life you want and deserve.”

“That’s for me to decide, not you.” I run my hands up his broad chest, and this time he lets me touch him. I look him in the eyes. “I’ve dated those guys. *Lots* of them. They didn’t do it for me. I didn’t want them the way I want you.”

I take a long, deep breath as I stare into his eyes and prepare to say something I’ve never said before. “Declan, I’m in love with you. I don’t care about money, your past, or anything else. I love you for the man you are now, and I want to be with you. I love that you’re different. I love that you’re flawed. Your dash of crazy is everything I never knew I wanted. I need it. I need you. You know I’ve never been in love before. You know these words mean something to me.”

He swallows. “You love me? Really?”

I whisper, “Yes, I do. Very much.”

He returns my embrace as he brings his forehead to mine. “I love you, too.” We stand there in silence for a few moments with our faces inches apart.

At some point, he pulls his head back up. “Do you trust me?”

I nod. “Of course I trust you. Completely.”

He motions his head over to the portrait studio area of his apartment. “Show me. Let me photograph you the way you know I want to.”

I close my eyes for a brief moment. I cornered myself into that one. I know what he’s doing. He’s testing me to see if I truly trust him. I’m quiet for a moment, but I know the answer. The simple fact is that I do trust him.

I open my eyes and whisper, “Okay.”

A smile breaks out on his face. “Okay? You trust me enough for that?”

I nod. “I do.”

He pulls my head back to his and kisses me deeply. I wrap my arms around him. It’s so good to have him close again. I feared I may have lost this. I can’t believe how much I missed him last night.

We eventually pull apart. He rubs his hands on my face. “Take off all of your clothes and put on your silk robe. It’s hanging in my bathroom. I’ll get everything ready out here. Don’t worry, I’ll take care of you.”

I nod again.

I make my way to the bathroom. I take off all of my clothes and look at myself in the mirror as I touch underneath my

eyes. I really wish I had gotten more sleep last night. I'm glad my boys at least made me shower.

I throw on my robe and try to freshen up my face a bit. I put on a little make-up and brush my hair.

I can feel my heart pounding in my chest. I take a few deep breaths and give myself a pep talk. I want to be confident. I'm fifty-two, not twenty-five. I'm not one of those women who tries to dress young or generally tries to look like something I'm not. It's okay if I'm not perfect. I think I look pretty damn good for my age. Despite Declan's past with younger women, I know he's attracted to me. He's never, for one second, made me feel anything other than beautiful. I'm going to put on my big girl panties and own this.



image-placeholder

## *Declan*

I've pulled the room darkening shades down. The studio lights are set up, but they're dim, not too bright. I moved the sofa and a chair over to the portrait area. I want to create a relaxed, comfortable, sensual atmosphere for her.

I have two cameras hanging over my neck while I anxiously wait for her. I can't believe she's trusting me to do this. I want it to be perfect. I know she's nervous, but I want her to enjoy it.

She eventually walks back out to the living area looking gorgeous, breathtaking. I don't think she realizes just how effortlessly sexy she is. I want to make her feel that today. That's my only true goal.

I walk over to her, grab her hand, and kiss it. "You're so beautiful. Thank you for trusting me. It means everything."

She nods and looks up at me with her dark blue, big eyes. "Be patient with me. I'm a little nervous."

I bend down and softly kiss her lips. "I will. I promise."

Despite it being early afternoon, I hand her a small glass of tequila. She takes a few large gulps. "Thank you."

I take the glass from her. "Keep your robe on for now. We'll ease into this. Just lay on the sofa and relax. You have a long, beautiful body. We're going to accentuate it."

I point to the studio. “You see the lights are dim?” She nods. “They’re set to cast shadows. Things won’t be as visible as you’re imagining them to be. This is art, not pornography. I want these pictures to be sensual, not vulgar. There’s a difference, and you’ll see it in the end.”

She nods. “Okay.” She walks over and tentatively sits on the couch.

“Lay on your back with your front leg straight and the back leg bent a little.”

She does. *Flash click. Flash click.*

“Raise your hands above your head.” *Flash click. Flash click.*

“Bend your elbows a little more.” *Flash click. Flash click.*

I spend the next few minutes taking photos like this. I move her in various positions, all with her robe on.

I’m hard as a rock watching her like this. I probably should have put on some pants, as I can’t exactly hide it in what I’m wearing.

She’s now standing, leaning on the sofa, as I take more photos.

“Pull the tie on your robe. Let it fall open naturally.” *Flash click. Flash click.*

She takes a deep breath and pulls the tie. It falls slightly, exposing only her cleavage, stomach, and a bit more upper



**thigh. *Flash click. Flash click.***

**“Turn around and let the robe drop off your shoulders. Just a bit.” *Flash click. Flash click.***

**“Turn your head so I can see your profile.” *Flash click. Flash click.***

**I walk over to her. I slowly rub my hands down her shoulders and her back as I remove the robe. It falls to the floor. I can feel her swallow as her breathing picks up.**

**I run my hand up her thigh. Goosebumps break out all over her body.**

**I whisper into her ear. “Do you want me to help you relax first?”**

**She breathes, “Yes. Please.”**

**I reach around and run my fingers through her folds. She’s soaking wet. “Is this turning you on?”**

**She nods.**

**I slowly slide my fingers into her and move them in and out a few times. She leans back into me and moans.**

**I move my thumb to her clit as I begin kissing her shoulders and neck.**

**I establish a rhythm that has her writhing in my arms. She’s completely lost in the pleasure. Her body is like Jell-O against me as I hold her up.**

**She reaches back and pulls me tight to her. My hard cock presses up against her ass. She squirms against it. It**

takes every ounce of restraint I have to not just bend her over this couch right now.

I can feel her body start to shake. “Ah, Declan. I’m almost there. Keep going.”

I pull her even tighter to my erection and put my lips to her ear. “Feel what you do to me. You’re so fucking beautiful. You have no idea how hot you look doing this. I want to bury my cock in your wet pussy so deep it never comes out.”

“Oh god. Declan.” As if my words were a command, she immediately shatters in my arms, panting my name.

When I know she’s done, I pull my fingers out and bring them to my mouth to suck on them. I make a loud sucking noise. “Hmm. I love the way you taste.”

She’s still leaning back onto me, recovering from her orgasm. I bring my hand to the crack in her ass and run it up. “Has anyone been here before?”

She looks over her shoulder at me. “I’m fifty-two, not twenty-two. What do you think?”

I can’t help but give a small laugh at that answer. She gives me a sexy smile as she turns around and wraps her arms around my neck. “It’s yours to do with as you please though.”

I suck in a breath. Just when I thought my cock couldn’t get any harder.

She grabs my head bringing my lips to hers for a kiss.

She attempts to deepen it, but I quickly pull away. “I don’t want your face red.”

She licks around her lips. “Hmm. I do taste good.”

“You’re trying to goad me into fucking you so I stop taking pictures.” She gives me a guilty, knowing smile. “Let’s keep shooting. Lay back down. Let’s do all the same poses now that you’re naked.”

She nods and then lays on the couch. I return to my position with a cock that couldn’t possibly get any harder.

She’s stunning. She’s a walking, talking piece of art. *Flash click. Flash click.*

“Move your left arm over the sofa.” *Flash click. Flash click.*

“Put your right arm behind your head.” *Flash click. Flash click.*

“Sit up with your legs closed, cupping your breasts with one hand while the other remains on your thigh. Move forward just a little.” *Flash click. Flash click.*

She’s clearly getting more comfortable with this. Her confidence is growing with every picture. It’s so damn hot. *Flash click. Flash click.*

I move her around into all different positions for the next fifteen minutes. I have to squeeze my cock several times to give it a little relief. I’m oozing pre-ejaculate.

**She keeps looking at it, licking her lips, which is only making it harder for me to concentrate on what I'm doing.**

**At some point, she lifts her eyes to mine. "Is taking my picture like this turning you on?"**

**She knows damn well it is. I close my eyes for a brief moment. "More than anything ever has in my life."**

**She motions toward my dick, now poking well above the waistband of my boxer briefs. She can most definitely see it weeping for her. "I can take care of that whenever you want."**

**"Can I take pictures of it?"**

**She hesitates for a moment and then nods her head.**

**I set up a camera on a tripod. I have it facing the large chair, just slightly behind where she'll be positioned. It's angled to capture our bodies in a way that shows the idea of what we're about to do, but not too close and personal. Sensual, not pornographic. There's a difference.**

**I set the timer and sit on the chair. She takes one step toward me but I hold up my hand. "Stop. Get on the ground. I want you to crawl to me. Slowly. Very slowly."**

**Without any hesitation, she drops down and crawls over to me on all fours. It takes everything I have not to blow my load at that sight. *Flash click. Flash click***

**I love that she's all class to the outside world, but all vixen when we're alone like this. I get off on the fact that**

I'm the only person who gets to see her like this. *Flash click. Flash click.*

She does everything I ask of her, and I'm pretty demanding. She never says no to anything. *Flash click. Flash click.*

She's almost to my legs. *Flash click. Flash click.*

She kneels in front of me as she rubs her hands appreciatively up and down my legs and chest. *Flash click. Flash click.*

Without breaking eye contact, she slowly pulls down and off my boxer briefs. *Flash click. Flash click.*

Licking her lips, she spreads my legs wide and crawls between them. *Flash click. Flash click.*

She nibbles and bites her way up my thighs. *Flash click. Flash click.*

She grabs my cock with one hand, giving it a few pumps as she takes my balls into her mouth, swirls her tongue around, and sucks on them. *Flash click. Flash click.*

I let out a loud moan as her other hand applies pressure to the area behind my balls. *Flash click. Flash click.*

Her tongue works its way up the underside of my shaft all the way to my tip. She flicks it with her tongue. *Flash click. Flash click.*

She closes her lips around the tip, and only the tip, sucking hard while her hand is still around my shaft. *Flash*

*click. Flash click.*

Her plush lips open and she moans. “Hmm. I love the way you taste too.” *Flash click. Flash click.*

She then feeds my cock all the way into her warm, wet mouth until it reaches the back of her throat. Her hand remains at the base. *Flash click. Flash click.*

She starts to move me in and out of her at a perfect pace. She’s taking me deep down her throat each time I go in, hollowing her cheeks. *Flash click. Flash click.*

I gather her hair in my hand not wanting to miss any of this image. *Flash click. Flash click.*

Her hand and her mouth move in skillful unison. With her other hand, she uses her nails and runs it up my inner thigh to grab and squeeze my balls. *Flash click. Flash click.*

Her tongue begins to swirl all over, as she sucks hard on me, continuing to move me in and out of her mouth. *Flash click. Flash click.*

I don’t want to come yet, but I’m getting close. She’s too good at this. I’m teetering close to the edge. I have been since the second she walked out of my bathroom in her silk robe. *Flash click. Flash click.*

I grab under her arms and pull her up so she’s straddling me. She’s panting. The lust in her eyes right now is an image that will forever be imprinted in my mind. *Flash click. Flash click.*

She positions her knees on either side of me. We stare at each other. Before I can ask, she answers, "I'm yours." I smile. *Flash click. Flash click.*

She lifts up so I can bring my tip to her entrance and she immediately sinks down onto me. All. The. Way. Down. *Flash click. Flash click.*

She throws her head back. "Ah, Declan. I won't last long. I'm so turned on. You feel too good." I don't think I've ever felt anything better. *Flash click. Flash click.*

My hands are on her hips as she grabs the back of the chair and begins to move up and down on me. Her lips find mine in a wet, deep kiss. *Flash click. Flash click.*

Every time she comes down, she grinds her clit on me. *Flash click. Flash click.*

She's a waterfall right now. I'm covered in her juices. I love it. *Flash click. Flash click.*

We maintain this delicious pace for a while until she throws her head back again. I grab her lower back to keep her upright. She continues to ride me hard as I meet her strokes and thrust up into her. *Flash click. Flash click.*

I can't hold off any longer. "I need you to clench that pussy and come, baby." As soon as I say that, her entire body convulses into her orgasm as she screams my name. *Flash click. Flash click.*

When her tremors grip my cock, that's it. My whole body goes numb as I grunt into my own release. *Flash*

*click. Flash click.*

**I come hard. Very hard.**

**She starts to slow her movements. She leans her head forward and kisses me again. *Flash click. Flash click.***

**She whispers into my lips, “I love you.”**

**I whisper back, “I love you too.” *Flash click. Flash click.***

**We sit there exhausted for a few moments. The camera keeps taking shots, so I eventually stand and turn it off.**

**I carry her sated body into my bedroom. We fall onto the bed together. I tuck her hair behind her ear. “Did you enjoy that?”**

**She smiles as she nods. “I did. You were right. It was incredibly erotic. I was insanely turned on by all of it.”**

**“I can’t wait to see the pictures. You looked so perfect.”**

**We spend the rest of the day in bed watching movies, eating food, and making love.**



# Chapter Nineteen

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## *Melissa*

I don't know what time it is when I wake. It must be the middle of the night because it's dark outside. I feel the other side of the bed, but Declan isn't there.

Did I dream yesterday? It was unexpectedly amazing. It was the most erotic thing I've ever done in my life. I can't believe how much I enjoyed it. I can't believe how much it turned me on to both be photographed and to see him in his element like that.

His reaction to me, and the sex we had at the end, was simply unforgettable.

I get out of bed, throw on my robe, and walk into the main living area. I smile as I see him sitting naked at his desk. His large computer screens are on and he's looking at the pictures he took of me. He's so focused.

His cock is laying hard and heavy as he looks at picture after picture of me. I smirk at the fact that he's sitting there naked, hard as a rock, wearing reading glasses. Every man should look as sexy as Declan does in reading glasses. I'm so damn attracted to him.

I drop my robe on the floor and walk over to him, but it's not until I'm right next to him that he realizes I'm here. He reaches his arm out and pulls me onto his lap, without any care that we're naked. I love how confident he is to be like this. He's making me feel the same.

He adjusts his stiff cock so that he's poking out through my thighs. I'm not sure how it's possible that I want him again, but I do.

His arms surround me as he fiddles with the computer. A slide show begins to play of all of my photos. I lean back into his broad, warm chest as we both watch the screen.

Sitting here on him naked while watching photos of me naked feels so incredibly intimate. I've never experienced the level of intimacy that I share with him.

“Look how sexy you are. I wish I could wallpaper my house in these photos.”

I look back and smile. “I don't think Jade would approve.”

I grab his glasses off of him and throw them on so I can better see the screen. We watch the slideshow as his hands aimlessly roam my entire body, from my legs to my nipples. I'm not sure he realizes how much it's all turning me on.

The pictures are amazing. He was right. They're sexy and sensual. Not at all vulgar or pornographic. It's more the illusion of things than showing too much. A lot is hidden by the shadows he created with the lighting.

I rub my fingertips up and down his sexy forearms as the pictures continue to scroll. “They're amazing. You're very good at what you do, Declan.”

He kisses my neck. “I had a spectacular subject. It makes it so much easier.”

He runs his own fingertips over the screen. “Look at your ass in this grouping from behind. You have such a perfect, tight, round ass.”

I wiggle it on him and he moans.

“Careful, I remember what you said to me earlier. I intend to take advantage of that.”

I lean back, turn my head, and smile at him. “I meant what I said. It’s yours to do with as you please. I’m into it.”

He rubs his hands down my body. “You’re so perfect.”

“Who knew your version of perfect was open access to my ass?”

I feel him smile against me. “I think that’s every man’s version of perfect.”

I giggle. That’s true.

The slideshow then turns to the pictures of us together on the chair. I gasp. We look magnificent together. “Declan, I love them so much.” You can visibly see the lust and love running through us. You can’t manufacture the euphoric looks on our faces or the synchronicity of our movements. The eroticism is incredible. I’m getting more and more aroused seeing it on the big screens.

I take his hand and run it through my folds. “There’s plenty to work with there, sailor.”

He slowly runs his fingers through me a few times as I roll my hips on him. He gathers my juices and brings it to my back

entrance, spreading it all around.

I lift up just a little to give him better access. When he's done preparing me, he brings his tip to my back entrance. I lean back as he enters me there for the first time.

I moan as I slowly slide down onto him and he fills me. He's all the way in. We're both still as I take a moment to acclimate to him. I turn my head where his lips briefly find mine.

I turn back to look at the screens. He brings one of his hands to my front and starts a circular motion on my clit.

We begin our fluid movements. As the pictures of our lovemaking play on repeat in front of us, we make love in a totally different way.



image-placeholder

## *Declan*

I kiss Melissa as she sleeps in my bed. We had a pretty wild day and night. She's probably exhausted.

I leave her a note, in case she wakes, that I'm having coffee with Freddie this morning before our afternoon plans.

I arrive at the coffee shop and, as always, Freddie's waiting with my favorite coffee in hand. He stands as I get to the table. "Are you okay?"

I had called him yesterday morning when I was feeling down about things with Melissa. We were supposed to meet yesterday afternoon to talk, but I texted him after Melissa arrived that I was doing better. He still wanted to meet today though.

"I'm fine. Really. I was having a moment...or maybe an entire evening and morning."

"Your moments are sometimes earth-shattering, Declan."

I nod. "I know."

"Tell me about it. What set you off?"

I run my fingers through my hair. "I learned what type of money she has. It's pretty extreme. I honestly never thought about it or realized just how much it was. I

obviously knew that she's comfortable, but I didn't realize just how comfortable. I freaked out."

He nods. "I see. What happened to help you calm down?"

"She came over. Kind of barged in. She told me that she doesn't care about our differing financial situations. She then gave me her complete and total trust."

He tilts his head to the side in question. "How so?"

"It doesn't matter. It was private and deeply intimate. It meant a lot to me. And she finally told me she's in love with me. She's never been in love before, so I know how much the words meant for her to say. It was really special. She's special."

He smiles. "I'm happy for you, Declan. Seeing you like this with a woman, a seemingly mature, appropriate woman, is a really big step for you."

He pauses with a concerned look on his face.

"What? You obviously have more to say."

"I'm always worried about something bad happening though. You never react well to adversity. You fall off the deep end quickly. Love has ups and downs, no matter how deep it runs. You're going to have to better learn how to weather the downs."

I nod. "I'm trying, Fred. There's just a lot going on for me. I have this amazing woman that I'm completely in love with. I'm honestly thinking long-term. I want her in my



**life for good. On top of that, Jade's going to live with me for the first time ever. I'm worried how it will impact our relationship. It took us so long to get to this good place we're in right now. I'm terrified of something happening. There's no way I'm going to be easy to live with. I just don't think I can handle anything else right now."**

**He nods in understanding. "Hopefully you won't have to, but if something else comes your way, you need to learn to manage it."**

**"I'll try."**

**"You'll call me again if you're feeling down?"**

**I nod. "I promise."**

# Chapter Twenty

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## *Melissa*

Today's the day that Declan's meeting the whole family. Jackson and Darian invited us to a pool party and barbecue. I'm both nervous and excited for him to meet everyone.

We're in the car, and I look over at him. He seems a little on edge. I grab his hand. "Are you okay?"

He nods. "Yep. I just don't want to mess up today. I really want your boys to like me."

He's so cute. I smile. "They'll like you because I like you."

He raises his eyebrows. "Like?"

"Love. I love you."

He smiles as he kisses my hand. "I never tire of hearing it. I love you too."

"One other thing. Fair warning, my ex-husband and his wife are super touchy feely. It can be a bit much. My kids and hers make faces and joke about it, but it's excessive. Bizarrely excessive."

He winks at me. "We won't be outdone today."

That wasn't really my goal, but I suppose I won't be too upset if he's all over me today. I've spent years watching Jackson paw at Darian. I find myself smiling at the thought of giving them a dose of their own medicine.

We pull into their driveway. He looks up wide-eyed. "Holy shit. This house is insane."

I shrug. “You like it?” He barely nods as he stares in shock at Jackson and Darian’s mansion. “Jackson designed it. It’s a bit much for me, but I guess I prefer city living. I wouldn’t have interest in living out here in the middle of nowhere like this. I only agreed to it when the boys were younger and they needed space. As soon as we got divorced, I moved into the city.”

“Did you live in this house?”

I shake my head. “No, he built it after the divorce. But we had a decent-sized house not too far away from here. It’s honestly not what I like. I really do much prefer to be in the city.”

I think my downplaying it calmed him a bit. I probably should have warned him about this house. I didn’t think of it because I genuinely wouldn’t want to live here.

I hope he can keep it together today. Otherwise, I’ll have my boys and Jackson all breathing down my neck.

We park and walk up to the door. He bends down and kisses me softly. “Don’t worry. I’ll behave. I promise.” I smile in relief and let out a breath I didn’t know I was holding.

We ring the doorbell. Jackson answers the door with a big smile. He warmly greets me and kisses me on the cheek hello. I can feel Declan squeeze my hand and let out a low growl when he does. So much for behaving. That lasted two seconds. I can’t help but both roll my eyes and inwardly smile at my possessive lunatic.

“Jackson, this is Declan McGinley. Declan, this is Jackson Knight.”

Jackson smiles and offers his hand. “It’s nice to finally meet you, Declan. I’ve heard so many nice things about you.” I raise my eyebrow at Jackson. I haven’t told him anything about Declan. He just smirks at me.

I’m not entirely sure whether Declan will shake his hand back, but fortunately, he does. He even musters a smile as he pulls me close. “You as well, Jackson. Thanks for having us.”

Jackson nods. “Of course. We’ve been looking forward to it. My wife’s already out by the pool. She’s excited to meet you too. Let’s head inside so you two can get changed.”

We walk inside the house to the large, main living area. It’s an open floor plan, so you can see straight through to the back from where we stand.

Declan looks around the spacious house taking it all in, but my eyes head to the back pool area. Through the back windows and glass doors I see Darian by the pool walking around in a bikini. She has a ridiculous body. No wonder he can’t keep his hands off of her.

She has a totally different body type than me though. I’m tall and narrow, without too much in the curve department, especially compared to her. She’s much shorter than me, with a true hourglass figure, including huge breasts. There’s certainly no denying that Darian’s a stunning woman.

The girls are built similarly to her, though Reagan and Skylar have much more height. Scott must have been tall. Harley could be Darian's twin, but Reagan and Skylar are fairer skinned with lighter hair. They're all beautiful though.

I smile to myself. It's kind of remarkable that we were with the same man. We couldn't possibly look more different. Though I suppose Jackson and Declan look pretty different from one another as well. Both handsome, just in different ways.

As we turn the corner to walk through the kitchen, I see Harley sitting there feeding Ellie. Declan stops short as soon as we see them. His breathing picks up as he stares at her. "Darian?"

Harley looks up and smiles. As she walks over to us, she says, "No, that's my mom. I'm Harley. You must be Melissa's friend. It's nice to meet you." She extends her hand.

He shakes it, but his mouth is wide open. Harley moves to kiss my cheek. "Hey, Melissa. How are you?"

I'm in a little bit of shock at Declan's actions, but I manage to answer. "I'm good, thanks. This is Declan."

She smiles at him, but he's white as a ghost. He turns to me. "How do you know Harley?"

I pinch my eyebrows together. "She's Jackson's stepdaughter. How do you know Darian?" I don't think I've ever mentioned her name before.

Just then, the doors from the pool area open and Darian walks in. She smiles at me, but her face drops as soon as she sees Declan.

Tears well in her eyes and her hand goes over her mouth. “Declan?”

Jackson looks between Darian and Declan, as do I. Both of us are clueless as to what’s going on.

Jackson walks over to a clearly shaken Darian and pulls her into an embrace. “What’s wrong, sugar? How do you know him?”

Darian looks up again at Declan as if she’s seeing a ghost. Declan looks like he’s going to pass out. I can see a thin coat of sweat now covering his forehead.

She pulls out of Jackson’s embrace and starts walking toward Declan with tears streaming down her face. She initially touches his face, seemingly making sure he’s real, but then reaches up and hugs him. He reluctantly hugs her back. She whispers, “Declan, it’s so good to see you.” She squeezes him hard. I see tears coming down his cheeks and he eventually hugs her just as hard.

Jackson and I look at each other in complete shock. What the hell is going on? How do they know one another?

Harley puts her hand on Darian’s shoulder. “Mom, what’s going on? How do you know Melissa’s boyfriend?”

Darian pulls away. She looks at me and then up at Declan. “You’re dating Melissa?”

He nods.

She tilts her head to the side. “You didn’t make the connection until just now?”

He shakes his head. “I had no idea at all.”

She tries to stop a smile, but fails miserably. Eventually, Declan smiles too. The two of them seem to be amused by something the rest of us are clueless about.

Darian grabs Harley’s hand and pulls her close. “Harley, you haven’t seen Declan since you were about four or five, so you probably don’t remember him, but this is Declan McGinley, your father’s brother. Declan’s your uncle.”

I think Jackson and I both might need to sit, as both of our chins drop to the floor.

Jackson looks at Darian and then at Declan. “I thought she said your last name is McGinley?”

Darian responds, “They had different fathers. After Scott’s father passed, his mother remarried and they had Declan.”

Declan looks at Harley. More tears stream down his cheeks. “Darian, she looks just like you the last time I saw you. It’s unbelievable.”

Darian smiles. “What are you saying, Declan? I don’t still look like that?”

He lets out a small laugh through his tears. He holds out his arms to Harley and looks at her in question. “Can I?”



She slowly nods. He hugs her hard, and now both he and Darian are completely covered in tears.

“Mommy?” We hear Scotty’s sweet little voice. He walks down the stairs, holding a stuffed animal, seemingly just waking from a nap.

“I’m right here, baby.” Harley holds out her arms and he runs into them.

Declan looks between Scotty and Ellie wide-eyed. More tears streaming down his cheeks. He then turns to Darian. “They’re your grandkids? You have grandkids?”

She nods as she reaches for and squeezes Ellie close. “This is Ellie. She’s almost two. And this...this...” She starts getting choked up, unable to speak.

Harley speaks for her. “This is Scott Lawrence Cooper. We call him Scotty.”

Declan is visibly shaking. I’m not sure what to do. I grab for his hand and he tightly squeezes mine back.

He looks at Harley and whispers, “They’re so beautiful.”

She smiles. “Thank you. They resemble both our side of the family and my husband’s.” That might be the case for Scotty, but Ellie’s all Harley. She’s a pretty little girl.

Declan bends down and smiles. He introduces himself to Ellie and Scotty, though he’s clearly struggling with getting the words out on what they should call him.

Darian interrupts. “It’s Uncle Declan. This is your Uncle Declan.”

Scotty sticks out his little hand for Declan to shake. Declan smiles and shakes his hand back.

We all turn when we hear the glass doors from the pool area. Skylar walks in but stops short when she sees the madness happening. “Mom? What’s going on? Who’s this?”

Declan stands and stares at Skylar. He asks, “Is this Skylar or Reagan?”

Darian responds, “It’s Skylar. Skylar, this is your father’s brother, Uncle Declan. You were just a baby the last time you saw him, but he’s your uncle.”

She looks as shocked as me, Jackson, and Harley.

He walks over and gives her a hug. She reluctantly accepts it.

I can’t stay silent any longer. “Can someone please explain what in the world is happening right now?”

Declan walks back over. He and Darian look at each other and start laughing through their tears. The rest of us are in shock, but they fucking laugh.

They stop when they appreciate that the rest of us don’t find this so comical. Darian looks at Declan in some sort of silent question. He nods. “She knows my past. You can shoot straight.”

Darian nods. “Melissa, as I guess you know, Declan’s an addict.”

“*Was* an addict. He *was* an addict. He’s been clean for over ten years.”

Darian looks at Declan with a fresh set of tears welling in her eyes. “Ten years?” He nods. “You could have seen him before he passed.”

Declan closes his eyes and nods. “We’ll talk.”

She nods and then turns back to me. “Anyway, we tried for years to get Declan the help he needed, and Scott and his family had already tried for a few years before I came into the picture. I don’t need to go into details right now, but when things got too out of control and unsafe, we made the tough decision to give Declan an ultimatum. Family or drugs. Not both. He couldn’t have both in his life anymore. We were hoping it would be the final wake-up call he needed.”

Declan interrupts. “I foolishly chose the drugs and lost my entire family that day. It was the worst day of my life.” He turns to Darian. “I would give anything in the world to do it over again and make a different choice.”

She smiles. “I’m sure you would. But you’re here now, and you’re clean. We can’t control the past, but we can control the future. For whatever reasons, you’re back in our lives now, and we’d like for you to stay here.”

He can barely get out, “Thank you.”

I can't take him being so emotional anymore, so I go over and wrap my arms around him. I look up. "Are you okay?"

He squeezes me back. "I'm not sure. I obviously didn't expect this today. I'm just in shock."

I let out a small laugh. "You and me both."

We hear the front door open and then close. Reagan and Carter are hysterically laughing about something as they walk into the kitchen. We all turn their way. Reagan stops short when she sees Declan and me.

She stares at us for a moment. Her eyes toggle back and forth between the two of us. "What in the actual fuck? Melissa, my mom married your ex-husband, so you had to go find a guy that looks just like my dad? That's completely fucked up. You've got to get over it."

Declan and Darian start hysterically laughing. He looks at Darian. "I see she hasn't changed since she was two years old."

Darian shakes her head and smirks. "Not even a little bit." She looks at Reagan. "Sweetie, this is your Uncle Declan. He's Dad's brother. You haven't seen him since you were two years old."

She sucks in a breath and stiffens. She looks shocked. Carter pulls her close and kisses her head to soothe her. "What? Why now? Where the hell have you been our whole lives?"

Darian attempts to calm her. “Reagan, relax. Uncle Declan has had some substance abuse issues in the past. We wouldn’t allow him to be around you girls when you were younger. But he’s clean now. I didn’t know that until a few moments ago. It seems by some miraculous coincidence, he’s dating Melissa. She brought him here today to meet the family. I take it by her extreme shock that she, like Declan, didn’t realize the connection.”

I nod my head in confirmation.

Reagan is never one to hold anything back. “Holy shit.” She looks between me and Darian. “Psychiatrists could have a field day with the two of you and the men you’re attracted to.” At that, everyone laughs.

Reagan looks at Declan up and down. “You really do look just like him. It’s freaky.”

He looks at her. “The same could be said for you.” She smiles.

He holds out his arms. “Can Uncle Declan have a hug?”

She smiles again and walks over to hug him. When she pulls back, she looks up at him. “You owe me like twenty-seven birthday gifts.”

He laughs. “No problem.”

She looks at me. “What number is he?”

I can’t believe she remembers our conversation from a few months ago. “Well, I was at one-hundred and eighteen, but he was number ninety-six.”

Her eyes widen as she nods in understanding.

Declan looks at me in confusion, but I just shake my head.

He's silent for a moment looking down at me, but then looks back up at Darian and the girls. "Obviously we have a lot to catch up on, and it won't all be today, but I do have one other thing to tell you."

He looks at me again and I nod. "I have a daughter. You guys have a cousin. She's seventeen. Her name is Jade. She's amazing. She's smart and beautiful. Reagan, she actually looks a lot like you." He's right. Jade does look a lot like Reagan. I obviously hadn't considered it.

Just like that, Darian's crying again. She rubs his arm. "We can't wait to meet her." She smiles. "I hope she has more diplomacy than Reagan."

He chuckles. "Not really. Though she's mentioned wanting to meet her cousins. She's going to be pretty excited about this."

Naturally, at that moment, Trevor and Cassandra walk in with the twins. Cassandra stops short when she sees Declan and me. "Declan McGinley? Holy Shit. You've got to be kidding me."

She notices my close proximity to him. "I didn't even think about the first name connection. I haven't seen him or thought about him in decades. Declan McGinley is your big-dicked, crazy alpha, manhandling, great in bed, boyfriend?"

I momentarily close my eyes and let out a breath. What in the hell is wrong with her?

Darian's girls all start cracking up. Darian's trying hard not to, but failing miserably. She smiles at me. "You chose to add her to your friendship circle. I would have warned you if you had asked me." I can't help but smile back.

Trevor looks like he's going to puke. "Sexy, was that sharing really necessary? I don't need to know that kind of stuff. Haven't I been through enough this year? I'm already scarred by my mother's sexual prowess."

I shake my head. "You can't complain. You married that batch of crazy."

Declan looks at Trevor, who no one would miss as being Jackson's son, and then at Cassandra. He turns back to me. "Your son is married to Crazy Cassandra Blackstone? She's the older woman he married?"

I nod as I hold up my hands. "Don't even get me started."

He turns to Cassandra and smiles. "You're like a rash that never goes away. It's good to know you haven't matured in the past thirty years."

She gives him her special Cassandra smirk, and proudly announces, "Never."

He moves toward her and they hug. It's an extremely familiar hug. Suddenly it occurs to me. They may have slept together. Oh God. Please don't let that have happened. I don't

think I can come back from having shared more men with her. Especially this man.

I clear my throat. “Did you two ever...?”

Cassandra lets out a laugh. “Oh hell no. Though not for lack of Declan trying. Right Declan?” She winks at him and he laughs. “That was a hard line for Scott. He made it crystal clear to me that it was a no go. I had to respect that if I wanted to stick around. Though now that I’ve gotten the full report on him, I think I regret that decision.” They both laugh.

Once the laughter subsides, Cassandra looks over at Darian. “Kind of a big day. Are you okay?”

Darian nods. “I’m honestly thrilled.”

Cassandra looks Darian’s bikini clad body up and down. “Dare, I think your boobs are getting bigger. Is that even possible? I hope you’re not pregnant.”

Darian fake chokes. “Bite your tongue.”

Jackson walks over and covers Darian’s body with his arms. She leans into him. He whispers in her ear and she smiles. She turns her head and they briefly kiss.

I see Declan immediately stiffen. I grab his hand. “Let’s go change. Hayden and Payton should be here soon.” I turn to Darian and Jackson. “Can we use one of the guestrooms?”

Darian nods. “Of course. You know where they are. Use whichever room you want.”

“Thank you.”





image-placeholder

## *Declan*

Melissa pulls me up the stairs and into a bedroom. I don't think I have full control of my body right now. She closes the door behind us. She grabs my face. "Are you okay?"

I slowly nod, but I don't think I'm okay. I'm a bit dazed. "I...I...It's just obviously been a crazy, unexpected day."

She rubs my face with her thumbs. "I know, and we'll get into that, but I meant what you saw toward the end. It hurt you to see her with Jackson. I saw it in your body language."

She knows me well. "It was just weird seeing my brother's wife with another man like that. She and Scott had a really good marriage. My brother worshipped the ground she walked on. They were completely in love. It's hard to see her with a man that's not Scott. I know logically that I haven't seen them together for twenty-five years, and he's been gone for seven, but for me, time stands still. Darian's my brother's wife."

She nods in understanding. "I don't know Darian extremely well. I told you she's always been good to me and my family, but I purposefully maintain a distance. In large part because of how handsy they are. I admittedly struggle with it at times. Not because I want him, but

because it magnifies the inadequacies of my own marriage and how long I let it go on.”

“I understand.”

She continues, “I do know from my sons and Cassandra that she had a really hard time when Scott passed. As I understand it, she was massively depressed and basically didn’t leave her house for three years. I think they told me she barely left her bedroom for most of that time period. Cassandra confided in me that at some point she even discussed hospitalizing Darian with the girls.” I can’t help the tears rolling down my cheeks at hearing that.

“She had to sell their house because she couldn’t handle being in it without him. After three years, Cassandra all but forced her to start leaving the house and to start being social. One night out she met Jackson. He fell hard and fast. She didn’t. It took a bit of convincing for her to go out with him. Once she did, things progressed quickly for them, but she was in a really bad place for a really long time. I don’t want you to think she just moved on. She didn’t. She struggled way more than her fair share with losing him.”

I nod. “Thanks for telling me that. Though now I feel like the world’s biggest asshole for not being there for her. I should have been.” I’m a terrible, selfish person.

“Maybe, but you had your own demons to battle. What matters is that she’s happy now. They have a really good marriage. I know firsthand that she’s married to a good

**man. I have zero doubt that he loves her and will always take care of her. He worships the ground she walks on too. You should be happy for her that she found that again.”**

**I let out a long breath. “You’re right. I’m sorry. I know I’m acting irrationally.”**

**She shakes her head. “You don’t need to apologize. You’re allowed your feelings. Just try to information gather before you freak out about things.”**

**“I’m trying. I really am. I want to be a better man for you.” I wrap my arms around her. “I love you. So much.”**

**She looks up at me. “I love you too.”**

**I bend and kiss her. I deepen the kiss as I move my hands up her skirt and grab her smooth, firm ass. I’m craving contact with her right now. I need it to settle my nerves.**

**I pick her up and sit down on the bed with her straddling me. I expect her to attempt to stop me because of where we are, but she just further deepens the kiss and grinds down onto me.**

**She briefly pulls her mouth away. “We need to be quick.”**

**I smile into her mouth. “No problem.”**

**She reaches into my bathing suit and pulls out my cock. She gives it a few pumps before she lifts up, pulls her panties to the side, and sinks down onto me.**

**She breathes out, “Declan.”**

**Her mouth is open, and her eyes are completely shaded over with lust. It’s so damn sexy. She’s so damn sexy.**

**I kiss her hard as I thrust up into her over and over. She throws her head back and I suck on her neck. I then move down to her chest. I pull her top down and suck one of her nipples into my mouth. She lets out a loud moan.**

**I quickly cover her mouth, but she’s still moaning. I can’t let them hear her. I stand and pull out of her. She whimpers and looks at me in question.**

**“You’re loud, naughty girl. Now I need to smother your mouth. Maybe I should shove my cock down it. That would quiet you.” She smiles at that.**

**I move to the other side of her and bend her over. I push her face into the bed as I pull her panties down a few inches and slam back into her from behind. She yells out, but it’s mostly muffled by the bed.**

**I grab her hips and pummel at a hard pace. She’s gripping the blankets on the bed, trying to hold herself in place. She’s moaning into the bed.**

**I go as long and hard as I can until I feel her spasm around my cock. Once she does, I let go too.**

# Chapter Twenty-One

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## *Melissa*

I'm not exactly thrilled at the notion of having sex in Darian and Jackson's house, but Declan needed the release to maintain any composure today. I know him well enough at this point to recognize that.

It ended up being a pretty enjoyable chore, though we were upstairs for more than a reasonable amount of time.

As we head down, Declan grabs my hand for me to stop. He turns to me. "Just to be clear, I *am* an addict. Not *was*. It's never past tense. I will always be an addict. I'm not an active user, but I'm still addicted. I just want to make sure you understand that."

I nod. "I know that. I just didn't want Darian to think you were still using. I understand though."

He nods as he looks me up and down. "You look gorgeous by the way. I'll be hard all afternoon looking at you like this. You may have to sit on my lap to hide the evidence. Or maybe bury the evidence." He smiles at me.

I narrow my eyes at him but then smile back and pinch his hard ass. "You look pretty hot yourself."

"I know. I *am* hot." I laugh. He doesn't lack for confidence with regard to his looks.

We walk out to the pool smiling. Cassandra gives me a knowing look. She taps her neck. I feel my own. I whisper to Declan, "Is there something on my neck?"

He looks down and smirks. “Just a little mark to make sure everyone, including Jackson, knows you’re mine.”

“You did it on purpose? I now have a giant hickey in front of my kids and grandkids?”

He winks at me.

“You’re a dick.”

“You love my big dick. Apparently, you talk about it with Crazy Cassandra.”

I bite my lip to stifle my smile.

Declan walks over to Trevor and holds out his hand. “I’m sorry we didn’t properly meet before. I was in a bit of shock over everything that’s gone on here today. I’m Declan. It’s nice to finally meet you. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

Trevor shakes his hand. “I’m Trevor, her most handsome child. It’s nice to meet you as well.”

Declan laughs. “I have to ask, how in the hell did you get Crazy Cassandra to settle down? I never thought that would happen.”

Trevor’s eyes move to his own lap. “I have a particular set of skills.”

I roll my eyes, but Declan laughs again. He turns to me. “I take it the two of them are a lot alike.”

I nod. “In the worst possible way.” Trevor laughs.

Declan and I spend a few minutes with the twins, though they’re peacefully sleeping. At some point, Payton, Kylie, and



Paisley walk in, followed a few minutes later by Hayden and Jess.

As always, Paisley runs into my arms. I shower her with kisses. She's my special girl. Not only my first grandchild, but the first girl in our family.

I find myself wondering if it's weird for Declan to see me in my role as grandmother, but he's done nothing but smile at our interaction.

He meets everyone he hasn't already met, except Brody, who will be coming later from a surgery.

Declan is doing his best to get to know my boys and to catch up with Darian's girls. It's a lot, but he seems to be managing fairly well.

Trevor and Reagan are sitting together in the pool laughing. The two of them are always laughing together. I can't help myself. "What are you two laughing about?"

Reagan smiles at Trevor and then at me. "I went with Trevor the other night to buy his new car. Let's just say that he scarred the salesman for life." The two of them start laughing again.

I look at them in question. "Oh boy. What did he do?"

"The salesman was showing us what all the crazy buttons in the car can do. There's an audio command button. The salesman had the audacity to tell us that it will literally do anything you ask it. He pressed the button and challenged us to give a command. Trevor yelled out, *give me a hand job*. The

salesman almost passed out. You should have seen his face.”  
The two of them are in hysterics.

Declan smirks at me. I nod in confirmation. “Like I said, he and Cassandra are two nuts in the same crazy shell.”

Once she stops laughing, Reagan looks over to Carter, who’s talking to Jackson, and yells, “Yo, hubby, can you please grab Trevor and me more drinks?”

I turn to her. “Hubby? Did you two get married?”

Her eyes widen. She clearly didn’t mean to say that. “Actually, yes. We got married quietly a few weeks ago. We don’t want the press to know just yet. Please don’t tell anyone. It’ll be public soon.”

I shrug. “Of course.”

Declan looks confused. “The press? Why would the press care about you and Carter getting married?”

Everyone smiles. Trevor looks up at Declan from the pool. “Do you live under a rock? Carter and Reagan are Philebrities.”

She splashes him with water and they both laugh.

Declan turns to me and whispers, “What’s a Philebrity?”

I giggle. “Someone who’s Philadelphia famous but not true celebrity famous.”

“Ah, I see.” He turns back to Trevor. “I was in Africa for most of the past few months and since I’ve been back, I’ve been holed up with your mother.” He gives Trevor a big, over-

exaggerated smile, and Trevor's smile turns into a scowl. "Tell me why the press would care."

Jackson interrupts. "Declan, Carter and Reagan are about to take over a Fortune 500 company as the president and CEO. That's not public knowledge until later this week, but they're both well-known, well-respected business people in the area, and soon, the entire country and world. They're both pretty remarkable."

I thought Carter had resigned and that he was working at Reagan's company, but clearly I'm clueless.

Declan looks at Reagan wide-eyed. "Wow."

She smiles at him. "I know what you're thinking, but Carter isn't just a pretty face, Uncle Declan, he's smart too. Not as smart as me, but he can hold his own." She laughs as Carter jumps into the pool, picks her up, and dunks her under the water.

When she pops up laughing, Carter kisses her. They're an adorable couple.

Declan shakes his head. "You're amazing, Reagan. Your dad would be crazy proud of you." I see her get a little choked up. Carter wraps her in his arms. His gigantic arms.

We hear the sliding glass doors open. Brody walks out to the pool area in his scrubs. I hear Reagan shout, "Uh oh, here comes batshit crazy Brody."

Huh? I've never seen Brody as anything other than cool and calm.

Brody makes a beeline for Harley. She seems to knowingly brace herself for impact as he grabs her face and kisses her long and hard. At some point, he even lifts her body off the ground. It's an oddly aggressive and intimate kiss for a pool party, even for this crowd.

Reagan smiles at us. "He's always a little worked up after surgeries. It's actually kind of hot."

Declan stands up looking angry. "That's my niece. It's not hot. It's an assault." Reagan, Trevor, and Carter all laugh.

Reagan looks up at him from the pool. "You're going to have to get used to it. Brody has a severe case of tunnel vision for Harley. There are times where I'm not sure he's remotely aware that anyone else is in a room."

I grab his arm and whisper to him, "Considering what you do to me, you should probably just sit and be quiet."

He narrows his eyes at me before he picks me up. I screech, "Don't you dare."

He wraps his arms around me and jumps in the pool with me. When we pop up, I playfully smack his chest, but he just smiles and pulls me tighter into his big arms.

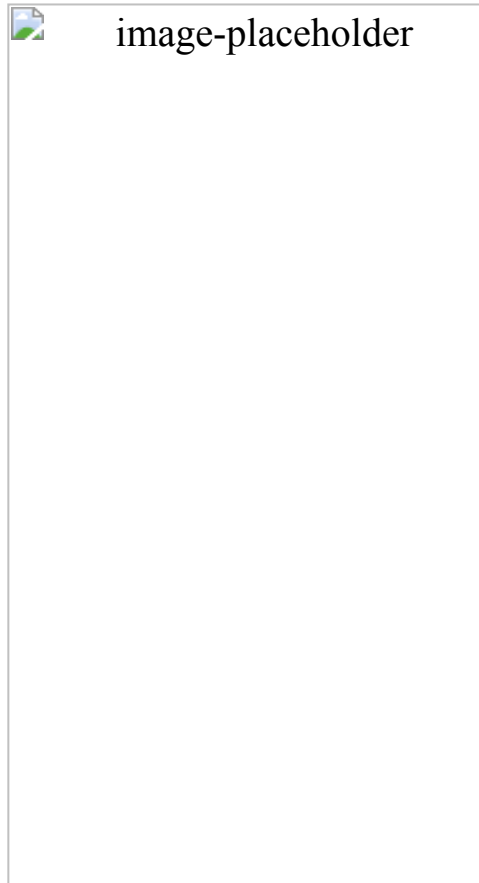
Brody comes over to the side of the pool. "Hi, I'm Harley's husband, Brody. She just told me the good news. It's nice to meet you." He smiles as he sticks out his hand to shake's Declan's.

Declan glares at him, clearly not liking how he attacked Harley. He walks over to the side, grabs Brody's hand, and

pulls him into the pool fully clothed.

Brody pops up with a shocked look on his face. Declan smiles at him. “Watch how you treat my niece.”

I shake my head. All of the kids are hysterically laughing. I see Darian smirking.



At some point during the afternoon, while Declan's in the pool with everyone and I'm on a chaise lounge, Jackson walks over and sits next to me.

I keep my eyes closed as I enjoy the sun, but can't help my smile. "I'm surprised it took you this long to come talk to me."

He lets out a small laugh. "It's the first time his hands haven't been fused to your body the whole day."

Now it's my turn to laugh. "Hello, pot. Meet the kettle. It's also black." I turn and smirk at him. He smiles in return. "It doesn't bother you, does it? That would be *mighty* hypocritical of you, Jackson Knight." I can't help my teasing tone.

"If it's what you want and he makes you happy, it doesn't bother me in the slightest. It's just...weird to see you like this with someone. It seems so out of character for you."

I bring my feet to the ground so that I'm now facing him. I look into the emerald-green eyes that I stared into for so many years. "Jackson, you weren't a touchy-feely man until Darian. Until you met the right person for you. The one you wanted to touch *all* the time. Why can't the same be true for me?"

"Is he the right person for you? That's how you feel?"

"Have you met a single man I've dated in the nearly ten years we've been divorced?"

He shakes his head.

"Don't you think it means something that I brought him here today?"

He nods.

“Right.”

He pauses for a moment as if choosing his words carefully. “It was only six weeks ago that you showed up at my door a complete mess asking questions about our marriage and love. It’s all changed in such a short period of time?”

“Wasn’t it you that night who told me that your deep attraction to Darian was instantaneous? You knew right away she was the one. I think your precise words were that it was a shock to your system.”

“It was, but...”

“There is no but, except that maybe you need to butt out. I don’t owe you an explanation of my feelings for my boyfriend.” I’m getting mad. I’m not sure why he’s all of a sudden in my business.

He holds up his hands. “Okay, relax. I just worry. You’ve been out of sorts for the past few months, and he obviously has a lot of baggage. I’m just making sure you’re okay. Your happiness is important to me. I know I didn’t make you happy.”

I sigh. “I’m sorry. I appreciate that you care and want me to be happy. I care about you too, and I’m thrilled that you’re happy. I really am. Now I need you to just be happy for me too. I know Declan’s different. Honestly, Jackson, I like that he’s not a perfect package. You were a perfect package and look at what happened to us. You seemed to understand before

I did that I'm attracted to men with a little edge. Maybe even a little less than perfect. He constantly pushes me out of my comfort zone. He keeps me on my toes. I didn't realize how much I needed those things until I found them with him."

"Fair enough." He grabs my hand. "Melissa, you're my friend and the mother of my children. I don't want to see you hurting. I hate how unhappy you've been. If you're happy, then that's the end of this conversation." He gives me a small smile. "Even if it's with a man that gave you a hickey in my house." He smiles as he nods toward my neck.

We both laugh. I put my hand on my neck. "Well, I suppose he's also a little possessive."

As if sensing my words and the fact that another man is touching me, big, wet arms suddenly circle me and then lift me. I screech out as he sits in my lounge chair and pulls me tight between his legs, not remotely caring that he's dripping water all over me or that he's rudely pulled me from my conversation with Jackson.

Jackson smiles at me as he stands. "Can I get either of you anything?"

"You cannot..." I pinch Declan's leg knowing what's about to come out of his mouth. "...possibly get us anything more. Thank you for having us." I can't see him, but I know Declan's smile is anything but authentic.

"Our pleasure."



I look up at him before he turns to leave. “Jackson, do you remember Craig’s son, Lance?”

“Yes. I haven’t seen him since he was a little boy. He must be all grown up.”

“He is. He’s huge. He looks just like Craig. Anyway, he’s in Philly for business school. He’s putting himself through school. Do you think you could find a job for him at your company?”

“Of course I can. Does this mean you and your brothers are speaking again?”

I shake my head. “No. I’m still the jezebel that got knocked up out of wedlock and then committed the worst cardinal sin of all, I got divorced. Lance reached out to me. He’s hoping to connect with family in the area. Craig cut him off. He’s waiting tables to make ends meet. He won’t take any money from me, but I’d like to at least help him out with a better paying job.”

Jackson smiles. “I think we’ve got a nice, high paying job for business school students. He’d be perfect for it.” He winks at me.

I smile. “Thanks, Jackson. I appreciate it.”

He nods and walks away.

I rub Declan’s legs. “Thank you for controlling yourself.”

“I don’t like him holding your hand.”

“Don’t be silly. He was just checking in on me.” I turn my head to look up at him. “You’re the only man I want.” I take a breath as I turn my head back around. I breathe out, “The only man I’ll ever want.” I’m realizing how true it is.

I feel him swallow hard. I hear him mumble, “I might mark your entire body so it’s crystal clear.”

I lean back on him, relax, and close my eyes again. “Fine by me.”

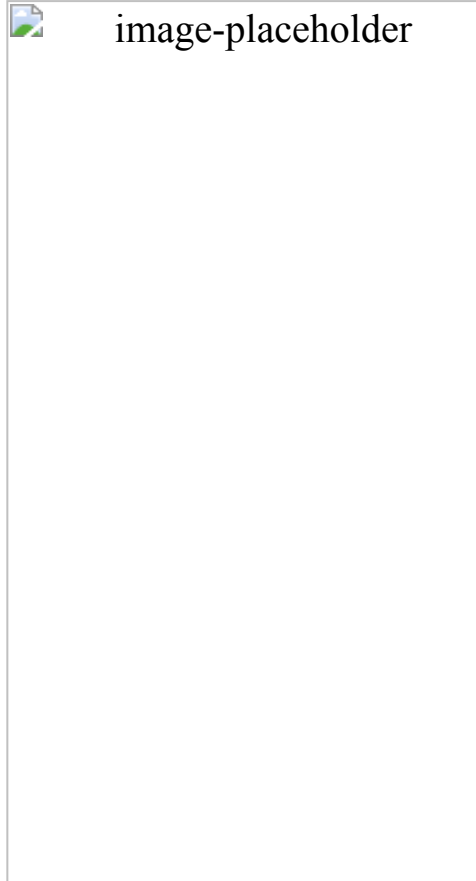
I feel him harden under me. I wiggle a little. “Does that thing ever go down?”

“Around you? No. Do you want it to?”

I let out a breath. “No, I suppose I don’t.” I wiggle a little more and smile.

“Watch it. I won’t hesitate to bend you over out here.”

I laugh, though part of me thinks he’d actually do it.



As evening approaches, everyone gets ready to leave. I grab Declan's arm. "We should get going too."

"Do you mind if we stick around? I'd like to talk to Darian a little more. It was hard with so many people around this afternoon."

I look over. Darian and Jackson are in the hot tub. She's sitting on his lap and he's all over her. They're laughing and

kissing as if no one else is around.

I'm not sure I care anymore, but I know it upsets Declan.

I motion toward them. "They're going to be like that the whole time. Can you handle it?"

He looks over and pauses, but then says, "I can if you can."

I'm not sure he can handle it, but I reluctantly agree.

We walk over to them. Declan asks, "Do you mind if we join you? Now that it's quieted down, I'd like to talk to you, Darian."

Darian responds, "Of course. Please." She motions for us to join them in the hot tub but doesn't remotely consider removing herself from Jackson's lap. Nor does he remove his wandering hands. It's like they're completely unaware of it.

Jackson looks at Declan. "Would you two prefer privacy? Melissa and I can make ourselves scarce."

Declan shakes his head. "No. It's better for me if she's close by. I tend to react emotionally. She soothes and centers me."

Darian smiles. "Still a hothead, Declan?"

Declan and I both answer, "Yes," at the same time. Darian laughs.

We get in, and Declan pulls me to sit between his legs. He wraps his arms around me, and I lean back into him.

He looks between me and Jackson. "Is this weird for the two of you?"

I smile. “I’ve been watching the two of them go at it for nearly four years. It’s only fair for them to get a dose of their own medicine.” I reach up and softly kiss Declan’s lips.

Jackson and Darian laugh.

Jackson shrugs his shoulders. “Honestly, it’s not weird for me. I’m incredibly happy, and I want Melissa to be happy too. She deserves it. She’s sacrificed enough of her own happiness in her life for the sake of others.” I smile at Jackson in both sadness and gratitude.

Declan looks at Darian. “You’ve done a great job with the girls. They’re each amazingly impressive. All in different ways. I wish he could see them. He’d be so proud of them.”

Darian nods. “Thank you, but he was a big part of that. I know you hadn’t seen them since they were little girls, but they were all adults when he died. Young adults, but adults. He was a hands-on, incredible father. He equally molded them into the dynamic women they all are. He missed nothing while he was alive, and he still manages to give them guidance and love in death.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, he knew his father and grandfather died young of heart disease, and knew of the possibility that he would too. You’re lucky you don’t share the same genes from that side of the family.” Declan nods. I hadn’t remotely considered that.

“Unbeknownst to me, he prepared for his death. He wrote many letters for each of the girls that they receive at different

milestones in their lives. I've chosen to keep the milestones a secret, but when they reach them, I give the girls their letters. I still have a pile of them in my safe. I can't begin to tell you not only what it means to the girls to get them, but how well they hit the mark. He knew what to say to them and when they'd need to hear it. It's almost spooky."

Jackson smiles. "He helped Darian too. She turned me down when I originally proposed to her. She felt like she was betraying him in some way. The girls had a letter from Scott that he entrusted to them. It basically released her. It gave her the permission she felt she needed to fall in love and get married again. He valued her happiness above his ego. I'm forever grateful to him for that."

I didn't know that. How incredible. Tears well in Darian's eyes. I look up. Declan's too. He wipes them before asking, "How did the girls take it when you started dating Jackson? Were they upset?"

Darian shakes her head. "Actually, no, not at all. They adore Jackson. They very much encouraged our relationship. I was alone and unhappy, and then this wonderful man came into my life and turned it all around. They saw that he made me happy, and they valued that over anything else. They formed immediate bonds with the boys." She smiles. "They embraced the Brady Bunch jokes. They all spend time together even without us. I think Reagan considers Trevor one of her best friends, and Skylar and Hayden have grown particularly close lately."

She looks up at Jackson. “Obviously they know full well who their father is, but they do come to Jackson now and then when they need some paternal advice. Reagan and Carter have very much relied on him for their upcoming business decisions, and Skylar now works for him, though she’ll be leaving to work for Reagan soon. He’s been wonderful all around for us. No one sees it any differently.”

Declan’s silent. I imagine he’s not loving the fact that the girls see Jackson as a father figure. He’s undoubtedly kicking himself for not stepping into that role.

Darian asks him, “Once you got clean, why didn’t you come to us? We would have welcomed you back with open arms.” I’ve actually been wondering the same thing all day.

Declan takes a deep breath. “Honestly, the first few years of sobriety were shaky for me. My first priority was trying to build a relationship with my daughter. I had rarely seen her the first seven years of her life. She’s extremely stubborn and didn’t make it easy for me. I had so many ups and downs, and nearly lost control again and again. For whatever reason, I had it in my mind that I needed to hit the five-year mark before I could consider coming to you guys. I didn’t know if Scott would believe that I was sober. I felt like I needed to prove I could actually stay sober for an extended period before you’d allow me back in your lives. It was at the three-year mark that he passed. That’s the day I came closest to relapsing. I bought the drugs. They were sitting in front of me. I was about to take them when the fire alarm went off in my building.” He lets out a small laugh. “I swear I thought it was Scott stopping me.”

Despite the tears in her eyes, Darian smiles. “It was.”

Declan nods. “After that, I was just ashamed of everything and basically too much of a wimp to come to you. I also felt like it was too late. A little underhanded. Like I was only doing it because Scott wasn’t around to stop me. I honestly wasn’t sure if you’d welcome me.”

She swallows. “We would have.” She pauses for a brief moment. “I wish you were at the funeral. So many people spoke about him. He was so loved.”

Declan squeezes me under the water. “I was there, Darian.”

She looks shocked. “What? I didn’t see you.”

He shrugs. “There must have been over a thousand people there. I just stayed in the back. I didn’t want to make a spectacle of myself. I didn’t know how I’d be received. You looked like you were barely upright. I think Cassandra physically held you up the whole time.”

Darian nods. “She did. For a long time. Well beyond that day. We can give Cassandra all the crap we want for her mouth and crazy antics, but at the end of the day, there’s no better friend or person than her.”

I’ve come to a similar conclusion. Cassandra is definitely crazy and has a mouth, but she’s an amazing person. She’s truly become one of my closest friends.

Darian continues, “I was pretty lost for a long time after he died. I just couldn’t function properly. I forgot to do my most important job, to be a mother.”



Declan shakes his head. “I doubt that.”

“No, it’s true. I can admit that. I was completely caught up in my own grief. Cassandra was a better mother to them those first few years. She was their only true parent for a long time. I can never repay her for what she did for my girls and how she was there for them when I couldn’t manage it. It wasn’t until Jackson came into my life that I really began to escape from my self-imposed prison. Again, that’s because Cassandra forced me to get out of the house to meet people. I wouldn’t have met Jackson if it wasn’t for her, and he completely changed my life for the better.” She looks up at Jackson with so much love. He returns it.

I look up and see tears streaming down Declan’s cheeks as shame clearly washes over him. “I’m so sorry. It should have been me. I should have been there for you. I should have been there for the girls. Typical selfish Declan. Dealing with his own problems. Not considering your needs.”

Darian shakes her head. “I meant what I said earlier, Declan. We don’t control the past. We do control the future.”

He shakes his head. “The things I’ve done are unforgivable.”

“I forgive you. We forgive you.”

Darian starts moving toward Declan. I pull away from him to give them their moment. She hugs him and he stoically hugs her back. He’s hurting. He’s trying to hide it, but I see it. I know he’s beating himself up inside right now.

I look at Jackson, whose tear-filled eyes mirror mine. He gives me a small smile.

Darian pulls back and returns to her spot with Jackson. She looks at peace. Declan doesn't.

I reach for his arm. I need to get him out of here. "I think that's enough for tonight. Why don't we get going? You and Darian can make plans to continue your conversation another time."

Darian nods. "We do have more to discuss, Declan."

He nods. We all get out and towel off. Declan and I gather our belongings and say good-bye.

Jackson shakes Declan's hand but pulls him in close and whispers something to him. Declan then whispers something in return to Jackson.

When we get in the car, Declan's silent. He's not okay. I can tell. He almost looks haunted right now.

I break the silence. "What did Jackson say to you before we left?"

Without taking his eyes off the road, he answers, "He told me if I break your heart, he'll break me."

That's kind of un-Jackson-like. "What did you say back?"

"That I'll do the same if he ever hurts Darian."

"I know you're upset. Do you want to talk about it?"

He shakes his head. "There's nothing to discuss. I abandoned my family when they needed me the most. It's been

my M.O. for a long time.”

“I really don’t think Darian sees it that way.”

“She’s just being nice. That’s exactly what happened. I’ve done the same thing to everyone I’ve ever loved.”

“Do you think that maybe you should call Freddie? It’s been a pretty emotional day for you. It’s a lot to handle.”

He shakes his head. “No, I saw him this morning when you were sleeping. I’m fine.” He’s definitely not fine.

“I think that maybe...”

“I said I’m fine,” he yells out. “Let it go. I don’t want to talk about it anymore. I’m not a good person. I never have been. I’m fifty. I’m not going to change now.” He mumbles, “If you knew what was good for you, you’d let me go.”

I can’t help the tears building in my eyes. I turn away so he doesn’t see me. He’s going to self-destruct over this.

As soon as we walk into my condo, he practically attacks me. In some way, I knew this was coming. I knew he’d need this connection as an outlet for whatever storm is building inside of him right now.

He picks me up and carries me to the bedroom. He tears my clothes off of my body and I let him do whatever he wants to me.

We go at it for hours. It’s all over the place. It’s rough at times, and softer at others.

I can feel his tears through much of it, though he whispers words of love and need constantly. But when I wake in the morning, he's gone. The only thing remaining is a note on my pillow.

# Chapter Twenty-Two

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## *Declan*

I look at Melissa sleeping. As always, she looks like an angel. She is an angel.

I softly rub my hand down her cheek. She stirs a little but remains peacefully asleep. I love her so much. Enough to know that I'm no good for her. I'm no good for anyone.

I've spent my entire life thinking of myself above all others. I wasn't there for my daughter, I wasn't there for my brother, and I wasn't there for Darian and my nieces when they needed me.

I don't want to do the same to Melissa. I don't want to drag her and Jade into my dark world. I need to save everyone I love from me. I know what I need to do.

I leave her a goodbye note and head into the elevator for the final time.

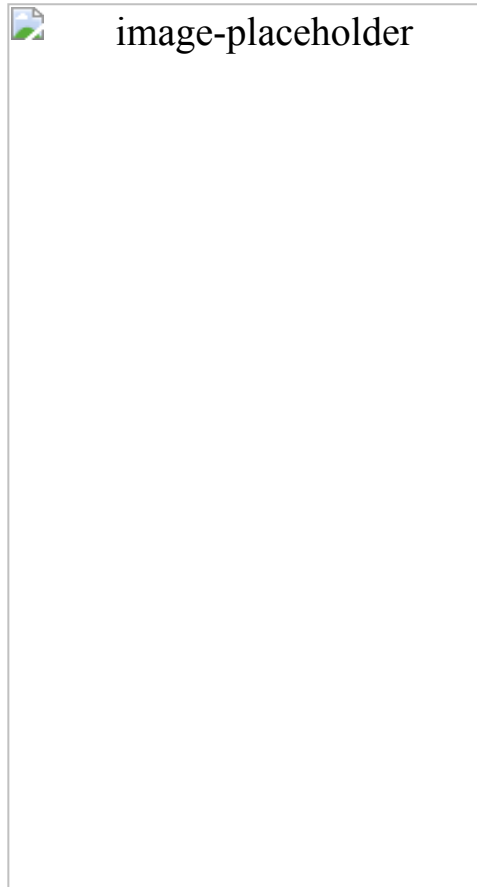
When I get to the lobby, I see Jerry. I've grown pretty fond of the old guy.

He looks up and smiles when he sees me. "Leaving so early, Mr. McGinley?"

I shake his hand. He doesn't know it will be for the last time. "Yes, Jerry. I need to take a little stroll down memory lane this morning."

I pause before I head out onto the street. I turn around to him. "Take care of her. She's very special." I see his

**smile turn into a confused look, but he nods. He'll eventually understand.**



## *Melissa*

I knew he wasn't okay last night. I should have insisted on talking when we got home. Instead, I let him use my body as an outlet.

I quickly unfold the note.

*Melissa,*

*I'm sorry, but I can't do this anymore. I've let everyone I've ever loved down in one way or another. I'm selfish and I'm toxic. I love you too much to bring you into my world. A world where I self-destruct. A world where I let down and hurt all of the people I love. I want to save you from the inevitable pain I'll cause you.*

*Know that I do love you. I'm doing this for you. Find someone who can give you everything you deserve. It's not me.*

*Declan*

I pick up my phone and call him, but it goes right to voicemail without ringing. His phone's off. I'm not surprised.



I'm pacing, unsure of what to do. I dial Jade's number. She answers. "Hello?"

"Hi, Jade. It's Melissa."

"Oh, hi, Melissa. What's up?"

"Is your dad with you by chance?"

"Um, no. You don't know where he is?"

I don't want her to worry. "He left his phone and I couldn't remember where he said he was going. No big deal. I'll catch up with him later."

"Okay. If I hear from him, I'll let you know right away. Please do the same if you hear from him." She's smart. She knows something's off.

"Okay sweetie. Don't worry. Have a good day."

"You too."

I should go check his apartment. I'm afraid he's going to hurt himself. I quickly throw on clothes and head down to the lobby. Jerry looks up at me. "Good morning, Mrs. Knight."

I quickly move past him and give him a small smile. Before I leave, I turn back. "Jerry, did you see Mr. McGinley this morning?"

He nods. "I did."

"Did he say anything out of the ordinary?"

Jerry slowly nods, as if in thought. "As a matter of fact, he did. He said something about needing to take a stroll down

memory lane. He also told me to take care of you. Seemed a bit off to me.”

I nod as my eyes fill with tears. What’s Declan doing to himself? I choke out, “Thanks, Jerry.”

I head toward my car as I call one last person. I dial her number.

“Melissa?”

“Hi Darian. Is Declan by chance with you?”

“No. Why?”

“Have you heard from him since we left last night?”

“No. What’s going on?”

I take a long breath. “I think he’s about to go off the rails. I’m afraid he’s going to hurt himself.”

“What? Why would he do that? He just came back to us.” She sounds panicked.

I sigh. “Darian, he’s a mess. He thinks he failed you by not being there for you and the girls after your husband died. I was hoping you offering forgiveness would be the end of it, but I don’t think he really heard you. He can be a self-hater at times. He carries so much guilt, and last night just added to it. I think it was his tipping point.”

“I’m so sorry. That wasn’t my intention.”

“I know. Just let me know if you hear from him. I’m going to run by his apartment, though I’m confident he’s not there. I

don't know where he'd go. I know he loves the river area, but I don't think that's where he is. That's his happy place."

"Did he say anything before he left?"

"He said nothing to me. I found a note this morning telling me that he's toxic and I'm better off without him. He did tell my building security guy that he was going for a stroll down memory lane. Any idea what that might mean?"

"If he's on a self-hating trip down memory lane, I know exactly where he'll go. It's near me. Come pick me up. I want to go with you."

"Just tell me where it is. I don't think you should come. Seeing you and hearing about your struggles is what set him off in the first place."

"Melissa, we're on the same team here. I know we don't know each other terribly well, but we want the same thing. Trust me, I need to be there. Please."

I sigh, having no fight left in me. "Okay. I'll be there in thirty minutes."

I do a quick stop-by at his apartment and, as expected, he's not there. I head for Darian and Jackson's house.

When I arrive, she speed-walks out to the car with Jackson hot on her heels. She opens the passenger door and turns to Jackson, shoving him away. "You're not coming. Go back in the house. I'll call you when I know something."

"It may be unsafe. He's unstable. I'm not letting you go alone." He looks in the car at me. "I don't want either of you

going alone.”

She kisses his cheek. “Jackson, I love you. I love how protective you are. I promise you Declan wouldn’t harm a hair on anyone’s head. He’s a good man. He’s troubled, but he’s not a bad guy.”

Jackson looks at me. I shake my head. “The only person Declan hurts is himself. We’re fine, Jackson. Really.”

He lets out a deep breath in defeat. He grabs Darian’s face and tilts it to his. “If I don’t hear from you in thirty minutes, I’m going to break down the door. I have the address.”

“Fine. I’ll keep you updated. I promise.”

He kisses her lips. “I love you. Be careful.”

“I will. I love you too.”

She gets in the car and closes the door. “Just go before he changes his mind and jumps on top of the car.” She mumbles, “Possessive lunatic.”

I can’t help but let out a small laugh. She thinks Jackson’s a possessive lunatic? She has no idea. I guess it’s all relative.

I look at her. “Where are we going?”

“Make a right at the end of the street.” She takes a breath. “We didn’t get into specifics last night, but there was an incident. The straw that broke the camel’s back. Has he mentioned it to you?”

I shake my head. “No. He’s just spoken broadly about messing up and letting you all down. I never knew if he was

speaking in generalities or if something specific happened. It sounds like there was something specific though.”

She nods. “Declan was over at our house. I guess he was high. Scott was at work. Harley was at preschool and Skylar was asleep in her crib. She was just a baby. He was outside playing with Reagan on our playground. She was a toddler, but she was a handful of a toddler. Always on the move. He offered to watch her while I was studying for a law school exam. He passed out. At some point I came outside to him sleeping and Reagan gone.”

I gasp and my eyes widen.

“For two full hours we didn’t know where she was.” Tears well in her eyes. “It was the worst two hours of my life.” I can certainly understand that. “Scott rushed home. The police were involved. The entire neighborhood was searching for her.”

Tears now roll down her cheeks. “Melissa, I thought we were going to find her at the bottom of a pool.” I grab her hand. Obviously, I know the story ends okay, but I also know that scary feeling as a mother.

“Two hours later, she was found in a treehouse like three or four blocks away by a policeman. I’m not sure how the hell she got that far at her age, but she did. She was completely fine, oblivious to what was going on. She didn’t have a mark on her body.”

She swallows hard. “For Scott, that was the last straw with Declan. He told him to get clean or get away from our family. He offered to pay for rehab. Whatever it took.” She shakes her

head. “I really thought it was the thing that would scare him straight. He was such a mess over it. Completely blaming himself. Totally freaking out.”

She blows out a breath. “But it didn’t scare him straight. It sent him further in the other direction. I think he hated himself so much for what happened, he decided distancing himself and numbing the pain were the best ways to go. That’s the last time we saw him before yesterday.”

I nod, understanding his self-loathing a bit more. Tears drip down my face.

She squeezes my hand back. “How deep are you in with him?”

I swallow. “All the way. I love him. He’s the one for me.” I whisper, “I’m so scared right now. I don’t know what he’s doing to himself.”

She wipes her eyes and straightens her back with conviction. “He’ll be okay. We’ll do whatever it takes for him to be okay.” She nods at me. “Don’t worry. We’ll fix this. He has no choice this time. We’ll choose for him.”

I nod. “Where are we going, Darian?”

“To my old house. That’s where things really fell apart for him the first time around. I have a feeling that’s where he’d go. I called the current owners, but there was no answer. I think I remember that they have a shore house. They’re probably down there right now.”

She directs me to the house, and we pull up the driveway. It doesn't look like anyone's home. The only car I see is Declan's. I breathe a sigh of relief that at least we now know where he is, though I'm terrified of how we'll find him.

We quickly walk around to the back of the house. He's sitting on the ground of what must be a newer playground. His legs are straight out and he's surrounded by drug paraphernalia. He's hunched over and has tears streaming down his cheeks. He looks completely out of it and lost.

I yell for Darian to call an ambulance as I run to him. I fall to my knees on the ground in front of him and grab his face. "What did you take? Tell me."

He's silent.

"Declan, tell me what you took. I need to know so I can help you."

He shakes his head. He whispers, "Nothing. I didn't take any of it. I couldn't. I can't even do that right." He puts his head down in shame.

I look around. I think he's telling the truth. Nothing looks opened.

I sit down on the ground between his legs, facing him, and drape my legs over each of his thighs. I wrap my arms around him and pull him to me as he sobs into my chest.

I hear Darian canceling the ambulance and gathering the drugs. She throws them in her bag to get them away from Declan.

I kiss his head and rub his back. I whisper how much I love him and that everything's going to be okay.

Darian sits down next to us. She rubs his arm. "Why were you triggered by seeing us? I told you we forgive you. We're your family. We want you back in our lives. That's not what you want?"

He lifts his head and looks at her. His eyes look so sad and haunted. "I've failed you so many times. What I've done is unforgivable. He didn't forgive me. I can't rejoin his family just because he isn't around anymore to stop me. It's not what he would have wanted."

She shakes her head. "You're wrong. He did forgive you. All he ever wanted was for you to get sober and for you to rejoin our family. You have that chance now. Don't blow it."

He shakes his head. "It's too late. He's gone. He'll never know that I got sober. He'll never know that I have a successful career. He'll never know that I have an amazing daughter. He'll never know I met someone and fell in love. I never got to prove myself to him. He died thinking that I'm a scumbag druggie with no hope of a future."

Darian shakes her head. "No, he didn't. You're wrong. He always hoped that you'd show up clean one day. I know he believed it would happen. He wanted it more than anything."

He looks at her with hardly any fight left in him. "I guess we'll never really know, will we?"



He puts his head back down into my chest and I hold him close. I look over at Darian and she winks at me. Fucking winks. I have no clue why or what that means.

She gets up and goes over to her bag sitting on the ground. She looks through it and pulls out an envelope.

She sits back down on the ground next to us. She touches his arm. When he lifts his head, she holds out the envelope. “He left this for you, Declan. He knew the day would come that you’d show up sober and ready to rejoin our family. He was ready for it.”

Declan and I both look at the envelope. It reads, *For Declan, When You Come Home.*

Declan’s eyes widen and his back straightens. “For me? He left something for me?”

She smiles and nods. “Yes, Declan. He loved you. He wanted you to get well. He wanted you to come back to us. I haven’t read the letter, but I know Scott. I know this letter will prove that he knew you’d get better, he forgave you, and that he wanted you to come back to us.”

She hands it to him. “Read it.”

Declan looks like he’s in shock. Tears stream down his cheeks. He turns to me. His voice is shaky. “Will you read it to me? I...I don’t think I can.”

I nod and Darian hands it to me. I tear it open and begin:

*Declan:*

*If Darian's giving this to you, it means one thing. You're clean. I knew this day would come, brother. I'm so proud of you.*

*Losing you is the hardest thing that's ever happened to me in my life. It's my biggest regret. I hope you know how hard it was for me to let you go. I hope you understand why I had to do it. It had to be done for my growing family. For my four angels.*

*One day you'll find someone to love. One day you'll have children. I know it will all happen for you. Maybe a little late, but I have faith that you'll get there. You'll know what it feels like to be willing to do anything to make them happy and keep them safe. You'll understand why I had to make this sacrifice. I hope you can forgive me. Know that I never stopped loving you and believing in you.*

*Know that you never strayed far from my thoughts. There wasn't a day that I didn't think about you and what you were doing. Not a day that I didn't wish you would show up at our door and tell us you'd done what was necessary to come back to us.*

*If you're reading this, I'm not there. But if you're reading this, it also means that you're clean and you came back to our family. Darian, Harley, Reagan, and Skylar are your family. I need you now more than ever. I need you to watch over my girls. Protect them. Love them. I want you with them. I want you in their lives.*

*Darian always had a soft spot for you. I have no doubt that she's welcomed you back with open arms. Take what she gives you and come back to our family. We forgive you for everything that happened. We love you so much. We just want you home and safe.*

*I love you, brother. Welcome home.*

*Always,*

*Scott*

The three of us are snotty, sobbing messes. I didn't even know Scott, but I can recognize what this letter must mean to Declan. I'm so happy he has it. I'm grateful to Darian for bringing it to him.

Darian reaches over and kisses Declan on the cheek. "Welcome home."

She stands. "I'm going to give you two some privacy." She mouths to me, "Are you okay?"

I nod and mouth back, "Thank you." She smiles, and then turns and leaves.

He presses his forehead to mine. We sit in silence as we breathe and share the same air for a few minutes. He wipes my tears and I wipe his.

I'm not going to force him to talk. I think he needs to let the weight of that letter sink in before he's able to have a conversation.

Though I don't think I can get any closer, he manages to try to pull me as close as possible to him.

He eventually breaks the silence. "Do you want to know why I couldn't do it? Why I couldn't take the drugs?"

"I do, but only if you want to tell me. You don't have to. I can call Freddie if you prefer. Whatever you need."

He shakes his head. "Because of you and Jade. I love you both so much. I couldn't do it to you. I couldn't hurt you. I need you both so much. I can't imagine my life without either of you in it. Do you think that makes me selfish?"

I shake my head. "No. Of course not. We both need you too. It was selfless for you not to take the drugs." I softly kiss his lips. "I love you Declan."

"I love you too, but I think you may be better off without me. Maybe we should part ways. It's for your own good. I tend

to self-destruct. I don't want to take you down with me. You're too good for that. You deserve better than that."

I shake my head. "Sorry, but I'm not going anywhere. I don't want to be without you ever again. You're the one for me. I'll never feel for anyone what I feel for you. I know that. I have no doubts this time around. But I want you to get some help. Your lows are too low. You have to learn to cope. You have to learn to forgive yourself for things from the past, and better control your actions and emotions moving forward."

He takes a deep breath. "I can't be medicated."

"I know, but you can talk to someone and figure out how to manage your emotions. How to let go of your past baggage. You need more than just a sponsor. He's not enough. He's not equipped to deal with everything. You need a mental health professional."

He's silent for a moment, but eventually says, "Okay. You're right. I'll do it."

I look at him in shock. "Okay? Did you actually just agree to something I asked you to do?"

He smiles. "How about I'm the boss of your body and you're the boss of my mind."

I smile. "That sounds good."

# Chapter Twenty-Three

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**Six Weeks Later**

## ***Declan***

**I'm on my way to pick up Jade from Amanda's house. Next week she's going to start living with me three days a week, but today we have something important to do. Something a long time in the making.**

**I waited six weeks to do this because I needed to spend a little time on myself. Okay, a lot of time on myself. I've undergone some pretty intensive daily therapy for the past few weeks. Melissa was right. I need to learn to better cope with my lows. I also need to forgive myself for some of my past actions. Those are the things I've been working on.**

**I'm feeling better about everything. For the first time ever, I have some clarity in my life. I'm looking forward to the future, not fearing it. Scott's letter helped me release a lot of the guilt and regrets running on repeat through my mind. I've spent so long assuming he didn't want me to reconnect with his family. Knowing it's the very thing he did want has changed me and lifted the weight of my sins that I've been carrying for so long. I'm ridding myself of those demons and giving in to Darian's offer to welcome me with open arms. To welcome *us* with open arms.**

**I also reached some clarity on my relationship with Melissa. I already knew I was completely in love with her, but now I know without any doubt that I want to spend the rest of my life with her. I know she wants me too, and that**



means everything. I'm going to do my best to be the man she deserves. I'm also learning that I can't be perfect every day. Some days things won't be ideal, but I know she'll still want to be with me the next day.

My therapist thinks I rely on her a little too much, that I potentially traded one addiction for another. She may be right on some level, but I refuse to see my addiction to Melissa as unhealthy. Being addicted to drugs and being addicted to the woman you love are not the same. Maybe I'll toe a line there, but I also know that my passionate need for her is something she likes. I'll figure out that balance as I go along. I'll always be a work in progress, and I'm finally okay with that.

I arrive at Amanda's house and she opens the door immediately. "Hey, Dec. She's really nervous about today. Try to keep her calm."

I swallow. "Me too. But they're awesome people. They're excited to meet her. They'll be incredibly welcoming to her. Are you sure you don't want to come? She may need you."

She shakes her head. "No, you do this with her. You can handle it. I trust you." She has no idea how much that means to me.

Jade walks to the door. I smile. "Are you ready, honey?"

"Yep. Let's do it. Let's go from single in the city to the Brady Bunch in the burbs." I smile.

We're driving in the car. She looks over at me. "I just want to make sure I have this straight, Dad. Melissa's ex-husband is married to my Aunt Darian, who used to be married to your brother, Uncle Scott?"

I nod. "That's right. It's just a crazy coincidence."

"I have three girl cousins, Harley, Reagan, and Skylar. Two are married. Their husbands are Brody and Carter. And Harley has two children, Scotty and Ellie."

I laugh. "I see you've been studying your family tree." She smiles as she nods. I squeeze her hand. "You've got it. They're all beautiful, smart, and funny, just like you. So there's no need to be worried. They're great people and they're thrilled to meet you."

"Okay. I'm nervous but excited." I see her deep in thought for a moment. "What are Melissa's sons to me?"

I take a breath. "I wanted to talk to you about that. I'd actually like them to be your stepbrothers."

It takes her a second for that to register. I see the smile break out on her face when it does. "You're going to ask her to marry you?"

I nod. "I am. Are you okay with that?"

"Of course. I love Melissa. She's good for you, Dad." That's certainly true. "And I'll get three brothers, their spouses, and their kids. I'm going from barely any family to an enormous family. I can't wait." She looks like a kid on Christmas morning right now.

I smile at her enthusiasm. “We’ll probably move into her place soon. As you know, it’s much bigger and nicer than mine. It means we’ll need to do your room again.”

She laughs. “Maybe we should get a professional painter this time?”

I smile. “I imagine Melissa will insist on it this time around.”

Though we haven’t discussed marriage, Melissa and I have discussed moving in together. Her place makes more sense. She’s more than fine having Jade a few nights a week. I think she’s looking forward to it. She never had any daughters, so this is something I think she’s always wanted.

She and Jade have spent a lot of time together the past few weeks. Though Jade hasn’t officially moved in, she started spending a few nights here and there at my place. The three of us watch movies together at night. I often hear her and Melissa talking and laughing in the morning when I wake. It’s music to my ears. I’m getting a small taste of the family life I missed out on. I’m going to savor every moment of the next year that I get this special time with Jade.

Jade knows of my breakdown and near slip. She and Melissa together supported me. There were times where they came to therapy with me to help my therapist better understand me.

Hearing their thoughts was pretty eye-opening for me. Knowing how deeply they both love me and want me in their lives is all the motivation I'll ever need to stay on the right path.

We pull up to Darian and Jackson's house. I see a lot of cars already in the driveway.

She looks around. "Holy shit. My cousins are loaded."

"Watch your mouth. Yes, they're comfortable. They're also all very successful and accomplished. You stand to learn a lot from them."

I park the car and turn to her one last time. "Are you ready? It's okay if you're a little overwhelmed. No one expects you to remember all the names and faces right away."

She nods. "I know. This is what I've wanted though. A big family. Let's do it."

She's about to get that on steroids.

We walk up to the door. I'm about to knock, but it flies open. Darian comes running out and immediately engulfs Jade in a big hug. "We're so excited to meet you."

Jade looks at me wide-eyed and I can't help but smile.

Jackson pulls Darian's shoulders. "Why don't we actually let her in the house before we tackle her, sugar."

Darian pulls away and wipes the tears forming in her eyes. "Oh. Sorry. I'm just so excited to meet you." She

sticks out her hand. "I'm your Aunt Darian."

Jade reaches around her hand and gives Darian a more appropriate hug. "Nice to meet you, Aunt Darian."

We walk in the house to the entire big crew standing there. Melissa walks up and grabs Jade's hand. She whispers something in her ear, and I see Jade smile and relax.

Melissa then slowly introduces her to everyone. I see Jade taking it all in and trying to memorize the faces.

At the end, they get to Reagan and Carter. Jade says hello to both. Reagan and Jade look each other up and down.

Reagan smiles. "Holy shit. We really do look alike. If we were closer in age, we could pull some Parent Trap type crap. We could probably still switch spots for a day here and there."

Jade doesn't miss a beat. "Does that mean I get Carter for the day? If so, I'm game."

Carter's eyes widen in shock, but Reagan laughs hysterically. "Oh my god, I love her."

Harley shakes her head. "Oh no. We have a mini-Reagan on our hands. This is not good."

Reagan winks at Jade. At that moment, I know all will be good. She's going to fit in with them perfectly.

We all head through the house to their big, outdoor seating area. Everyone is rapid-firing questions at Jade. She's handling it all pretty well.

At some point she's asked what she plans on studying. She lets them know of her interest in graphic design and her hope to get some sort of internship during her last year of high school.

Jackson immediately offers her a job whenever she can fit it in her school schedule.

Reagan interrupts. "Excuse me, Jackson, but she's *my* cousin. We have a huge design department. She'll obviously work for us."

Jackson shakes his head. "Your company is too big. She'll get more hands-on experience with management at my office."

Reagan shakes her head. "When I don't feel like going in, she can sit in my chair. No one will notice the difference. You want to play CEO, Jade?"

Jade looks between Jackson and Reagan, eventually landing her eyes on Reagan. "Would I get to work with Carter?"

Carter nearly chokes, but Reagan just smiles. "I'll throw in a weekly lunch with Carter."

Jade holds out her hand. "Deal."

Reagan laughs as they shake hands. Darian smiles at me and I smile back.



image-placeholder

## *Melissa*

We've left Jackson and Darian's house and are on our way to drop Jade off at Amanda's. I turn back to her in the car. "Was everything okay today? I know it's a big, overwhelming, loud family. It's okay if it was too much for you."

Jade smiles. "It was amazing. More than I could have dreamed. I all of a sudden have an enormous family. I'm honestly thrilled about it. Christmas this year is going to be epic." She pauses for a moment. "I did realize, however, that I have an exceptionally attractive, very funny, very inappropriate, yet bizarrely affectionate family."

I laugh. She has no idea. They were all on their best behavior for her today. "You'll get used to them. It took me a while too. It's a little easier when they're separate and not all together. They feed off of each other. Trevor and Reagan in particular. They're two peas in a pod."

Jade laughs. "Reagan was really sweet to me. Obviously, it was awesome that she offered me the job. I'm excited about that. She also pulled me aside at some point and invited me to her birthday party in a few weeks."

I smile. "That was nice of her. It's actually a pretty big party at a fancy downtown hotel. We were invited too. If you want, we can all go together. We can even go dress shopping beforehand."



Her face lights up. “Sounds good.”

“I was thinking of asking them if they’d mind if I brought my nephew. He’s new in town and doesn’t know many people. Hopefully he’s making friends at school, but I imagine they’re younger than him and this might be a nice opportunity to meet people his age.”

Declan smiles at me. “That’s a good idea. I’m sure they’ll be happy to have him. He’s working with Jackson, Trevor, and Payton now, right?”

I nod. “Yes, Jackson said he’s just finishing up the training aspect and is now ready to start the real work. He said the training coordinators were impressed with Lance. I’m glad it’s working out. With Skylar having left, it sounds like Jackson may slot Lance into her old position, which is fantastic.”

Declan nods. “Skylar is loving working with Reagan and Carter every day.” He looks back at Jade. “Sweetie, you’ll be working with all of them. I’m so excited about it.”

Jade nods and then looks out the window for a few moments and sighs. “Carter is *really* good-looking. Like, the best-looking man I’ve ever seen in my life. Brody too. Where did my cousins find these guys? I want one just like them.”

Declan has a look of disgust. I fail miserably at trying to hide my smile.

Declan growls, “They’re both more than twice your age. Perhaps you should date boys your own age. Or better yet, don’t date until you’re thirty.”

Jade rolls her eyes and mumbles, “I prefer older, more mature men.”

Declan looks like his head might explode. Jade smiles at me. I can’t hold in my laugh any longer.

She puts her hand on Declan’s shoulder. “Relax, Dad. I’m just messing with you. You’re such an easy target.” She turns to me when Declan isn’t looking and mouths, “I do like older guys.” And then she places her finger to her lips indicating I need to keep quiet about it. Oh boy. This girl’s going to be a handful, just like her father.

We drop Jade back at Amanda’s and then head to my place. We walk in the door to see Mrs. Bevil spread out on the lobby floor. I look at Jerry. “What happened?”

“Mrs. Bevil’s dog had an accident, and Mrs. Bevil slipped and fell right into it.”

I can’t help but grin. I see the corner of Jerry’s mouth lift, and he gives me a wink as he helps Mrs. Bevil to stand.

We step into the elevator, and as soon as the doors close, Declan pushes me to the wall and kisses me. I initially start to push him away, but then I can’t think of a single reason to do so. I grab his shirt and give into the kiss.

He presses himself onto me. I have no idea what’s got him worked up, but I’m not complaining.

As soon as the elevator doors open into my living room, he picks me up. He carries me into the bedroom and sets me on my feet.

We're staring each other, only inches apart, nearly out of breath from the kiss.

He licks his lower lip and smirks when he sees me watching it. "Who do you belong to?"

I breathe, "You." I can't believe this behavior continues to turn me on, but it does.

He tilts his head as he studies me for a moment. He's always so calm in these moments. I'm always the one panting and salivating like a rabid dog.

He runs his finger over my parted lips. "We'll see how much you mean it. I need to mark you. Get on your knees."

I drop down and lick my lips in anticipation of what's to come. I'm already throbbing.

He puts his hand out. "Give me your hand."

I give him my right hand. He rubs it up and down his jeans covered erection and then drops it.

"Give me your other hand."

I give him my left hand. He pulls it up, and before I know what's happening, he slides a diamond ring onto my finger. "Now you're mine."

My chin drops. I look up at him. "What just happened? Did you just tell me, not ask me, to marry you?"

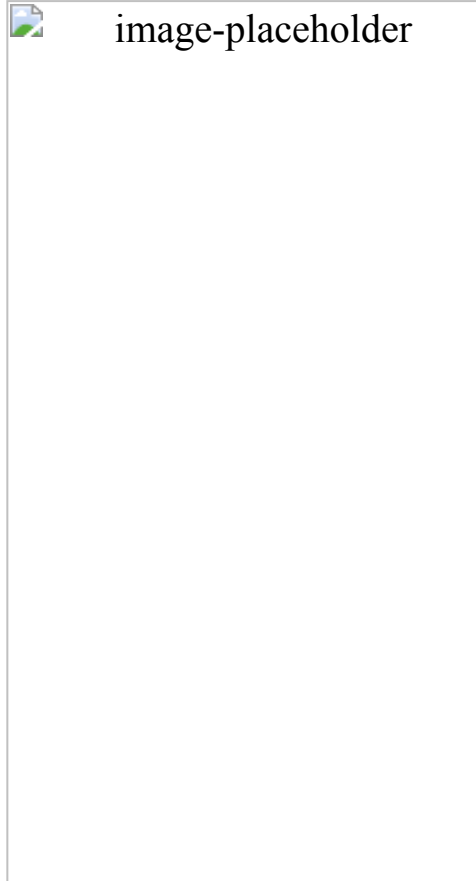
He smiles. "Correct. I'm not asking, I'm telling you that you're marrying me. We're engaged."

I look at him in bewilderment. “You’re telling me that we somehow just got engaged while I was the one on my knees, without you actually asking?”

He pulls me up and holds me close. He smiles. “That’s right. You got a problem with that?”

I smile back as I shake my head. “No, I don’t.”

He pulls me tight to his body and gives me a storybook love type of kiss.



The next day I'm meeting my friends for a celebratory lunch. They were all excited when I texted them last night. They insisted on lunch today to celebrate.

I walk in and see Rayne, Izzy, and Cassandra standing by the hostess area. They greet me with big hugs and congratulations. Rayne has tears in her eyes.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m just so happy for you. You deserve this, Melissa. It’s what you’ve wanted. Your time has finally come.”

Now I have tears in my eyes. She’s right. It’s finally happening for me. Everything I felt I missed. Everything I always wanted.

The maître d asks us how many people in our party.

Izzy answers, “Four.”

I shake my head, “Actually, we’re ten.”

The three of them look at me in question just as Darian and her girls walk in, followed shortly thereafter by Kylie and Jess.

“We have a big group celebrating today.” I take Darian’s hand. “And our party’s going to be adding one more person on a regular basis moving forward.”

Darian squeezes my hand back and Cassandra gives me a big smile.

I point my finger at her. “Rule number one still stands for you, so watch your mouth.”

Darian lets out a small laugh. “Good luck with that. I haven’t been able to muzzle her in nearly thirty-five years of friendship.” I have no doubt about that.

We make our way to the table.

A big tray of red and yellow fruity-looking drinks arrive just as we’re sitting. I look at Cassandra and she just smiles. I’m afraid to ask the waiter what we’re drinking, but I do. “Excuse me, what are these drinks?”

He replies, “They’re called Pop My Cherry.”

Cassandra grins. “I thought it was appropriate since you have your wedding night coming up soon.”

Everyone laughs. I just smile and shake my head.

While no one else is paying attention, Cassandra whispers, “Just be happy I didn’t order the Porn Star. I checked my email the other night on Declan’s computer. He’s got lots of interesting pictures on there.”

My eyes pop open and she just smirks at me in her special Cassandra way.

Rayne clears her throat, pulling all of our attention her way. “Everyone, thanks for coming to celebrate Melissa. I’m so happy for my best friend. She deserves all the happiness in the world. Can we all hold up our glasses and cheers to love, happiness, and sisterhood.”

As a big group, we all say, “Cheers.”

# Epilogue

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## One Month Later

### *Melissa*

It's our wedding day. I'm feeling incredibly emotional about this day. It's been a long time coming for me.

We're having a small family wedding. There's a well-known restaurant with a huge open patio overlooking the river. I know how much the beauty of this location means to Declan, so I decided to have our wedding here.

I personally don't care about the location. I care about the man I'm marrying. I honestly never thought I'd get here. I didn't believe I'd ever have my day.

Rayne, Izzy, Darian, Jade, and all three of my daughters-in-law are with me as I put the finishing touches on my make-up. There's a knock at the door. Cassandra opens it. I turn and see Jackson standing there.

Darian suggests everyone give us a few minutes of privacy. We're silent until the room empties.

He smiles at me. "You look beautiful." I'm in a cream-colored dress. It's form fitting and falls to just above the knee. I know how much Declan likes my legs, so I chose not to hide them.

"Thank you."

"Are you nervous?"

I shake my head. “No. Honestly, I’m not. I feel a sense of calm I’m not sure I’ve ever felt before.”

He nods. “I’m glad you’re getting the wedding day you always wanted. I’m sorry you didn’t have it the first time around. I wish I could have given it to you.”

I let out a breath. “It’s not your fault, Jackson. You’ve always blamed yourself for my unhappiness. It’s not on you to make me happy. It never was. It’s on me.”

He nods. “You’re happy with him, though, right?”

I smile. “I am. Very much so.”

He wipes his eyes from the tears that have formed. “Good. You deserve it. Better late than never.”

He’s quiet for a moment. “Would you allow me the honor of walking you down the aisle?”

I hadn’t considered anyone walking me down. I’m fifty-two. Do I need someone to *give me away*?

I think for a moment. He’s not giving me away. I’m not his to give. I never was. He’s helping me on my path to happiness. He’s always been the one there cheering me on. It actually seems kind of perfect. I nod. “I’d like that. Thank you.”

The ceremony begins. We decided that we’d each have one person standing by our side. Jade is already at the altar, ready to stand with me. My boys played rock, paper, scissors to decide who would stand by Declan. I see Hayden proudly standing next to him now.

Jackson and I step out into view. I look at Declan for the first time today. The enormous grin on his face matches my own.

On a warm, early fall day, on a beautiful patio overlooking the Philadelphia skyline and scenic river, surrounded by a smile-filled group of family and friends, I married Declan McGinley. A man I love, who loves me back. A man I'm crazy for, who's crazy for me. A man who I know I can't live without, who can't live without me.



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## **Twenty-Five Years Ago**

*Scott*

**Darian's been in Reagan's room for over two hours. Harley and Skylar are asleep.**

**I decide to look in to make sure Darian and Reagan are okay. I see Reagan is fast asleep. Darian's sitting at her bedside, stroking her hair in the loving, maternal way she often does. She's just staring at Reagan.**

**I quietly walk in. Darian looks up at me. Hours of crying still stinging her eyes. I motion my head for her to follow me out, but she shakes hers back.**

**I walk over and take her hand in mine. I kiss it and then whisper, "It's time to go, baby. She's asleep. She's fine."**

**She sighs and reluctantly stands. I close Reagan's door behind us while Darian and I silently walk into our bedroom hand in hand.**

**As soon as I close our bedroom door, she buries her head in my chest and starts sobbing. I hold her and let her sob for a few minutes.**

**I kiss the top of her head whispering words of reassurance. "She's fine. She's going to be okay. She doesn't even know what happened."**

**She looks up at me with her tear-filled, big green eyes. “I was so scared, Scott. Those were the worst two hours of my life.”**

**I rub her back. “I know, baby. Me too.”**

**I lead her over to our bed. I lay on top of the blankets while she tucks herself into me, laying her head on my chest. I pull her close, taking in her delicious orange scent. It comforts me. It always has.**

**I swallow at what I’m about to say. “I don’t want Declan around you or the kids anymore.”**

**She lifts her head to look at me. “What? We can’t do that. He fell asleep, Scott. It could have happened to any of us. You know how Reagan is. She’s always curious and wanders off. She never sits still for a minute.”**

**Darian only sees the good in people, especially Declan. She adores him. “He didn’t just fall asleep. He passed out because he was high. There’s a difference. He’s completely out of control. He can’t be around any of us until he gets his act together. *If* he gets his act together.”**

**She shakes her head. “He loves the girls. We can’t do that to him. We need to find another way.”**

**“We love our girls too, and we need to keep them safe. I need to keep you safe. I’ll talk to him. If he wants to be around our family, he needs to get clean. It’s us or the drugs. He can no longer have both. It’s time to dig in and**

really draw the line in the sand on this. We can only hope that he'll make the right choice."

She pinches her eyebrows in concern. "We'll pay for the best rehab facility, right?"

I smile at her. "Of course. We'll get him whatever support he needs, but he has to want it for himself, or it won't work."

She sighs. She knows I'm right. "Okay. Maybe you're right. He was beside himself. Maybe this will be the thing that scares him straight."

"He should be scared. He messed up and he knows it. We all know this day could have ended very differently."

She nods as she lays her head back down on me.

We lay in comfortable silence for a while. Her head is pressed to my chest as she aimlessly rubs her fingers across it. "I love listening to your heart beat."

"It beats for you and the girls."

I don't voice my concerns to her about that heart. I'm only a few years younger than my father was when he passed. My biggest fear is leaving my girls too early. I want to be here for them always. I want to see them grow up. I want to grow old with Darian.

I know the reality is that I probably won't. My father and grandfather died so young.

**What if I don't get to say all the things I want to say to them? What if I'm not there to guide them through life? What if they don't realize how I feel for them?**

**I vow in that moment to never hold anything back and make the most of every second I get with them. I tilt Darian's chin up so our eyes meet. "I love you so much. You're my everything."**

**She smiles and crawls up my body to join her lips to mine. I think we intend it to be a sweet, loving kiss, but as is often the case for us when we're alone, it gets heated.**

**Without breaking our kiss, she moves to straddle my body. At some point, she pulls away and breathes into my mouth, "I need you. Make me forget today, Scott."**

**I nod as she sits up on me. I lift her shirt over her head. She removes her bra and tosses it to the side.**

**I can feel my heartrate pick up. I run my fingers up the sides of her body. "You're so incredibly beautiful."**

**She smiles as she leans forward and finds my lips again. I roll us over and work my way down her perfect body, pulling her pants and panties down along the way.**

**I make quick work of my own clothes as I kiss my way up her body and settle between her soft, warm legs.**

**I give my wife what she needs, making love to her until she's relaxed and sated.**

**Afterward, we lay there tangled in each other's arms, as we've done a million times before.**



I hear her breathing eventually start to even out. I'm glad she fell asleep. She needs it after today's events.

I can't seem to sleep though. The fragility of life is weighing heavy on me. My mind is racing.

I carefully slide out from under her. She instinctively reaches for me, despite being fast asleep. I smile at her need to be close to me all night. I love it.

I make sure she's snuggled in. I probably don't have long before she wakes looking for me.

I head down to my office to think.

If I learned anything from today's events, it's how precious life is and how in a moment, it can all be taken away. I want my girls to know how much I love them. I always want to be with them.

Suddenly, an idea occurs to me. A way to make sure I can be here for my girls and guide them, whether I'm physically with them or not. I take out paper and a pen and start to write.

*Dear Darian,*

*If you're reading this letter, I'm no longer with you...*

**THE END**

I hope you've enjoyed the City of Sisterly Love Series. While this is the end of the full-length novels in the series, there will be novellas, and my next series will take place in the same universe. The first novella is Love Always, Scott: A City of Sisterly Love Prequel Novella. It's coming on March 16, 2023. You can pre-order it [here](#). The prologue appears at the end of this ebook.

# Acknowledgements

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**To the Queen, TL Swan:** This amazing journey would never have begun if not for your selflessness. This unexpected new path in my life has brought me so much joy. I owe it all to you. You are a shining example of the quotes I place in each dedication. Those are for you. Please know that I try every single day to pay it forward.

**To Jade Dollston and Carolina Jax:** Our badass girl gang and daily texts mean the world to me. You both make me belly laugh at least a dozen times every single day (which helps burn calories, so thank you for my figure). The circle of support we have for each other is unique and valued. If I don't sell a single book, this journey was worth it to have met the two of you. **Carolina Jax:** You're always full of help and encouragement. You're selfless and giving in a truly genuine way. Despite your poor taste in football teams, you're an amazing and talented woman. I'm grateful you came into my life. **Jade Dollston:** I'm gonna get through this without crying (not really). You were my first book friend. You reached out to me when you realized that we're both middle-aged women

who completely lack age-appropriate humor. The level of support you give me and other authors is nothing short of inspirational. You've inspired me to do the same for others. You are a generational talent. I take true pleasure in watching you shine.

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**Katy Brown & The Hype Girls:** I look forward to the next part of this journey with you crazy bitches.

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## About The Author

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AK Landow lives in the USA with her husband, three daughters, one dog, and one cat (who was recently chosen because his name is Trevor). She enjoys reading, now writing, drinking copious amounts of vodka, and laughing. She's thrilled to have this new avenue to channel her perverted sense of humor. She is also of the belief that Beth Dutton is the greatest fictional character ever created.

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## Also By

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If you'd like to read more about the Knight and Lawrence families:

[City of Sisterly Love Series](#)

[Knight: Book 1](#)

[Dr. Harley: Book 2](#)

[Cass: Book 3](#)

[Daulton: Book 4](#)

[Love Always, Scott: Prequel Novella](#)



Prologue ~ Love Always, Scott:  
A City of Sisterly Love Prequel  
Novella

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# PREAMBLE

## **STOP**

If you haven't read the entire five-book City of Sisterly Love series, this book will make NO SENSE to you. It also contains several spoilers for the series, so please don't ruin it for yourself by reading this before you've finished the entire series. I repeat, DO NOT continue on until you've read all of the previous books.

## **WARNING**

Since you've only gotten to this point because you've read ALL five previous books, you know what happens to Scott. While this is a happy, sweet story, you know going in that there's no long-term HEA. Prepare for the emotions. You'll need tissues (for lots of reasons).



image-placeholder

## PROLOGUE ~ Love Always, Scott: A City of Sisterly Love Prequel Novella

### *Cassandra*

It took me an extra-long time to find the love of my life. Well, the male love of my life. The truth is, in some ways, Darian is also the love of my life. My best friend. Though not blood, she's my sister in every way that matters.

I've learned that love comes in all different forms at all different times in your life. No two love stories are the same. There's no perfect formula.

My sisterly love for Darian began our freshman year of college. My brotherly love for Scott began nearly two years later.

My first dose of motherly love came when Darian gave birth to Harley. I've never fallen so hard or so fast for anyone in my life. I felt the exact same way when Reagan and Skylar were born. Of course, I now have that for my own two children, Dylan and Brandon.

Darian lived in blissful happiness for a very long time. While I didn't have my own life partner at that time, I did have Darian, Scott, Harley, Reagan, and Skylar. They always loved and treated me like family. They meant everything to me. They still do.

Despite many moments in my life that were less than ideal, the worst day of my life was the day Scott passed. I not only lost Scott that day, I lost Darian.

I watched as my best friend's heart physically shattered into pieces. It shattered my heart too. Not only to lose Scott, but to watch Darian suffer that much pain. To watch the girls lose their deeply beloved father. It was nearly unbearable to witness.

It was a long and bumpy road to get my best friend back to the land of the living again. She suffered three years of massive depression. Though I maintained otherwise with the girls, I wasn't sure we'd ever see the Darian we knew again. I wasn't sure the girls would ever get their mother back.

I'm thankful every single day for Jackson Knight. He brought Darian back to life. He also brought Trevor Knight into mine.

Maybe Trevor is right that I had a small hand in saving Darian, but I simply kept her afloat. I helped maintain the status quo with the girls. It was Jackson who injected her with life. Literally.

After years of pain and suffering, where the shine in her green eyes had dulled, Jackson helped her find laughter again. Her love for life. Her participation in life. He helped her eyes shine bright again. He brought that big, beautiful smile back to her gorgeous face.

After some internal struggles, Darian eventually came to understand that it was okay to love two men at two different

times in her life. Scott was her soulmate for the first half of her life, and Jackson the second. I hope she knows how lucky she is to have two men love her so deeply. I think she does.

There have been so many great love stories for our family in the past few years. I was able to bear witness to all of them. I even had one of my own.

Our (yours and mine) journey together started the day we lost Scott, but twenty-five years before that, a beautiful, innocent, pure love story unfolded right before my eyes. It was one for the ages. It began with a trip to the library...

[Pre-Order](#) Love Always, Scott: A City of Sisterly Love  
Prequel Novella

Prologue ~ Knight: City of  
Sisterly Love Book 1

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## *Darian*

“Baby, I don’t know how to be without you. How is it that you’re no longer by my side? Why did this happen to us?”

I sit with my elbows on my knees, looking at the fresh dirt that has just been thrown over my husband’s coffin. Tears are free falling from my eyes.

Now that I’m finally alone with him, I remove my sunglasses. I’m sure I look a mess, but I really don’t care. I’m only forty-five years old and my fifty-three-year-old husband dropped dead from a heart attack last week. I’m barely keeping my head above water.

“The service was standing room only. So many people love you and will miss you. I hope you know how much you’re loved. You were, and will always be, my everything. I’m forever thankful for the time we had together. I wish it didn’t end, but I will carry on for you. I will carry on your legacy through our children. I promise to come here every week and keep you up to date on everything going on with the girls and me. I can’t believe how much you’re going to miss in their lives.” I pause as more emotion overwhelms me. He’s going to miss so damn much.

“Harley, Reagan, and Skylar all spoke so beautifully about you. They adore you. I will make sure they never forget you, what an amazing husband you were to me, and father you were to them. We are all forever your girls.” I take a breath.



“Alan and Nelson spoke as well. They told a few funny high school-era stories that had everyone laughing in between their tears. All of your friends have been amazing to me. They promised to take care of us.”

I look back and I see my best friend Cassandra in a group embrace with my girls as they head back toward me. I needed a few minutes alone with Scott today after all of the insanity of the past few days. Cassandra has been an amazing friend, holding us all together, and making the necessary decisions when I couldn't.

“Bye baby. I love you always. I'll see you next Friday.” I blow him a kiss and turn as the girls return to me and hold me up, not sure I can even make it back to the car on my own. We hold each other up because we have to. Our rock is gone. Now we will have to be each other's rocks.

We collectively head to the limo to begin our new life without Scott.