

Arriving in separate cars, Jason and Carrie acted as if they had merely bumped into each other by accident, making small talk while waiting to be seated. That was done on a purely first-come, first-serve basis, meaning they also got to sit right by each other at a large table with Leah, her boyfriend Mark, two other couples, and an older, attractive woman named Mildred, whom neither had met before.

When everyone was seated, John Hennessy officially began the evening with a presentation. After cracking some jokes and describing the antics of a few employees, the CEO started extolling the company's virtues and talking about their successes during the past year. Then he wrapped it up by thanking everyone for their hard work.

"It's a real honour and privilege to work with such talented and dedicated employees," he said. "Your efforts made our firm number one in New England. So, on behalf of the executive team and the Board of Directors, I want to thank you and wish you all a Merry Christmas and God's blessings in the coming year."

With that, John Hennessy finished his speech and left the platform. Then several people rose from their chairs and began applauding. Soon everyone was on their feet, clapping and cheering for the kindly man many admired as a great businessman and community benefactor throughout their home region.

John soaked up the adulation, smiling and gently bowing his head. Though he didn't seek attention, this spontaneous show of affection touched him.

As it turned out, it would also be one the last. Before the end of summer next year, he would be behind bars, his reputation destroyed, along with the façade of being a benevolent capitalist he'd cultivated over the last four decades.

Ironically, John's downfall began as soon as the applause ended, and dinner began. By then, Carrie and Jason had introduced themselves to everyone at the table, greeting each guest and cracking jokes about how rubbery the chicken felt and tasted.

Leah and her beau made the same observation, fuelling the mirth and inviting similar good-natured comments from the others. Before long, everyone ate and chatted, sharing stories about their jobs, relationships, and hopes for the new year.

“And what about you two?” Mildred asked Jason. “How long have you guys been married?”

Panic briefly appeared on Jason’s face as he looked at Carrie. Though they had, in passing, brought up the ‘m-word’ and joked about what kind of wedding they might have, it wasn’t on their radar. Moreover, in the months since Carrie’s public meltdown, they worked extra hard to suppress any lingering rumours that they were more than just friendly co-workers.

Had the mere act of sitting together and chatting blown their cover story? Was their friendly demeanour and easy chemistry a giveaway that something serious was happening between them? Jason was thinking of a way to answer that when Leah came to his rescue.

“Oh gosh, Milly, Jason, and Carrie are just friends,” she said. “They share an office and work together on historic renovations.”

“Oh, I see,” Mildred replied. “That’s too bad. You two seem like you’d make a wonderful couple.”

“Company policy frowns on office romances,” Carrie said. “Besides, we have a great working relationship and don’t want to muck it up.”

“Nonsense, dear,” Mildred replied. “You can’t muck up love. That’s ridiculous.”

“Who said anything about love?” Jason asked.

Mildred smiled at him. “Son,” she said, “listen to me. Everyone here has noticed how cozy both of you are. You can’t keep your eyes off each other. So whatever’s going on, or not going on, between you, trust me, you’re not fooling anyone.”

Carrie blushed, her whole face becoming beet red. Leah, trying to lighten the mood, smiled, and said, “and that’s why we call Carrie *Red* now.” That led to a friendly round of laughter and more jokes.

Finally, dinner was over, and the floor was open for dancing. The band started with some classics from the nineteen eighties, including Karma Chameleon by Culture Club, which got almost everyone rocking in their seats and on the dance floor. That was followed by songs from The Rolling Stones, Michael Jackson, and even Weird Al Yankovic.

Several people asked Jason and Carrie for a dance, and both happily obliged, the idea being that if they mingled freely, it would be easier to maintain the fiction that they were nothing more than co-workers.

After dancing with various people, they sat down and chit-chatted. They were also wondering how they might leave without raising some eyebrows. At that moment, however, the band struck up a version of Chris De Burgh's "Lady in Red."

Feeling confident their deception was working, Jason stood up and offered Carrie his hand. "Well, *Red*, how about we start some new rumours?" he joked.

Carrie smiled and walked with him to the dance floor. In moments, they were moving gracefully together, totally lost in one another, their mutual affection now fully displayed.

Caught up in the moment, neither cared what people thought or said, even as several camera flashes lit up the floor while they moved to the music. All that mattered was that, for the first time since their secret relationship began, they could be together in a way that (they thought and hoped) even the gossip mongers at Hennessy couldn't hold against them. What they didn't understand was just how much of their true feelings it revealed; and how obvious a lie their constant denials had now become.

Finally, the song ended, leaving Carrie and Jason staring into each other's eyes. For a moment, they were tempted to kiss and openly confirm what everyone suspected. But instead, they opted for a smile and walked back to their seats, not realizing they were still holding hands.

"That was beautiful," Mildred said. "I've never seen two people dance like that."

"Well, uh, Carrie's quite a woman, and we're, you know, good friends," Jason said.

Mildred looked at him and raised an eyebrow. "Nice try, sonny, but I'm not buying that, and neither is anyone else who saw you two," she said.

"Jeepers, Mildred, this isn't high school," Jason replied, shaking his head. "Give it a rest. Carrie and I had *one* dance together. We've danced with others tonight, including a few slow ones."

"Going down swinging, huh, Jason?" Mildred shot back. Then Leah chimed in.

“Yeah, sorry, Jay, but if you guys aren’t already swapping spit and shagging your brains out, then I don’t know who is,” she said, her voice a mixture of suspicion and certitude. “*Friends* don’t dance like that. I’m surprised you guys didn’t start making out when the music stopped.”

Then she rounded on Carrie.

“And don’t think we didn’t notice how intently you were staring when Jason danced with Pam and Cindy,” Leah said. “You looked like you would die when he was with them. But when he offered to take you on the floor, your face lit up like a Christmas tree.”

“Ok, yes, we like each other,” Carrie said, trying to tack into the wind, hoping that some tiny breeze of truth would push them through an ocean of lies. “But nothing’s happened between us, and nothing’s going to.”

“Yeah, right,” Leah shot back. “And you guys holding hands while walking back to the table was just so you wouldn’t get lost, I suppose?”

“Are you jealous, Lee?” Carrie challenged her. “Look, Jason is my colleague and my friend only. We didn’t arrive here together and won’t be leaving together, either. Besides,” she glanced over at Mark, who looked very uncomfortable, “it looks like you’ve already landed yourself a handsome guy.”

Carrie stood up and walked over to Leah’s beau. “Hey, sailor,” she asked, holding out her hand, “care to help a lady cut a rug?”

Mark looked at Leah. She nodded. Then he got up and walked with Carrie to the dance floor just as the band started playing Bon Jovi’s *Living on a Prayer*.

‘Nice touch,’ Jason thought to himself. Leah, though, wasn’t buying it.

“Touché,” she said. “Well, I’ll say this much; if you guys aren’t f-cking each other’s brains out, you’ve got us all fooled. But not me, Jay. I saw what I saw. So did Mildred and everyone else.” Then Leah moved closer to Jason and whispered, “but if you want to f-ck someone’s brains out tonight, just let me know.”

Jason raised an eyebrow. Leah smiled a devious smile back. “I thought you were with Mark?” he whispered back to her.

“Mark and I have only been going out for a few weeks,” she said. “It’s not serious. He’s nice, but I’m not sure this will last past Christmas.”

Then Leah pulled away and smiled again. The band then started playing Careless Whisper by George Michael.

“So, *sailor*, how about it?” Leah asked.

“You’re insane, Lee,” Jason replied. Then, smiling cheerfully, he took her hand and walked to the dance floor.

When the dance ended, Carrie was gone. Jason looked at Mark, who shrugged. “She just said she was tired and decided to leave,” he said.

“Oh well, that’s too bad,” Jason said, sounding unaffected. “But the night’s still young.”

“She also seemed quite upset,” Mark added.

“Ha,” Leah said, vindication in her voice. “So, I guess we *do* have a little green monster in the company, and it’s not me. Maybe Carrie’s nickname should be Jade, not Red?”

“That’s a horrible thing to say, Lee,” Jason said, anger in his voice. “Carrie’s a wonderful gal. You should know better than to talk like that about her.”

Leah’s jaw dropped as she realized her mistake. Worried that she had gone too far, she apologized, blaming it on drinking too much wine.

Jason was about to say something to her when his phone buzzed. He picked it up and saw a text from Carrie. She was upset he’d danced with Leah, whom she considered a rival. She then said this was a colossal mistake and didn’t want to see him anymore.

“What’s going on?” Leah asked, noticing the concern on Jason’s face.

“I have to go,” he said. “It seems my mom fell down the stairs and needs help.”

“Oh gosh, I’m so sorry. Is there anything I can do?”

“No, Lee. Thanks. I should get going. Nice meeting you all.”

Then Jason got up and quickly left. Meanwhile, Mildred looked at Leah, sympathy written all over her face.

“Poor girl,” she said.

“What do you mean, Milly?” Leah asked.

“I mean *you*,” she said.

“I don’t understand.”

“Yes, you do, Leah. You know very well that Jason’s not going to help his mom. He’s going to be with her.”

Leah nodded. “I know. Damn it, I know.”

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Jason’s heart was racing. Before arriving at the party, he and Carrie had agreed to play it cool. If they could manage that without causing a scene, he felt the chances were good that their little secret could remain their secret a bit longer.

Now Carrie had gone off-script. He didn’t know what to expect when he got to her place, but he was determined not to lose her tonight.

Arriving at her condo’s main entrance, he convinced the security guard to let him pass so he could surprise Carrie. After having seen him come and go many times with her already, he did, giving him a knowing nod as he ran up the stairs rather than wait for the elevator.

Jason quickly arrived at Carrie’s third-floor apartment and pounded on her door. When she didn’t respond, he hit it even harder until, at last, she spoke.

“What the hell do you want?” she asked, her voice revealing signs of stress.

“You, damn it,” he said. “Now let me inside.”

“Why? So you can have your way with me after you fiddled with Leah?”

“You’re f-cking crazy! Did you know that?”

“I saw you two dancing, Jason. Don’t tell me that you were pretending. Leah was all over you, and you didn’t resist.”

“I *did* resist, but maybe I shouldn’t have. I doubt Leah would leave me outside *her* door while she sulked inside.”

“I’m not sulking. I’m mad. There’s a difference. This is the second time you made a fool of me, Jason!”

“I didn’t make anything out of you, Red. I was following our plan. We both knew that if we could get through this night without causing a scene, it would crush any remaining rumours. But I think it will be almost impossible after you stormed off, especially since I left shortly after.”

Carrie unbolted the door, opening it to where only the chain held it. He looked inside and saw her face. It was wet. She’d been crying.

“F-ck the rumours,” she said. “I can’t take this anymore! I can’t go to the office, see you, work with you, and pretend that’s all there is between us. It’s killing me. And tonight, when I saw you dancing with that cheap slut, I couldn’t take it anymore.”

“Lee’s not a slut, Carrie,” Jason said. “She’s, f-ck, I don’t know what she is. But I’m not standing outside *her* door begging her to let me in.”

“And what do you think will happen if I let you in?”

“What do you want to happen?”

Carrie shut the door to slacken the chain, then opened it. Jason then walked in, closed the door behind him, and secured the deadbolt.

“Don’t you ever, and I mean *ever*, run out on me like that again,” he demanded as he walked towards his girlfriend. “This whole thing could have blown up in our faces, and then we’d be f-cked six ways to Sunday!”

“And don’t you ever, and I mean *ever*, let me catch you with that stupid tramp again,” Carrie shot back. She wore a bathrobe but slipped out of it as Jason got close.

“It’s just business with her,” he said, taking off his shoes. “It’s *only* ever going to *be* business with her.” Then he pulled Carrie close and started kissing her.

Before long, they were in the bedroom, ravishing each other. Soon they were spent, exhausted from the power of their lovemaking.

Carrie reached over and gently caressed Jason's chest, letting her fingers meander through its dark hairs. Then she lay back down and stared at the ceiling.

"I'm a mess," she said. "A few months ago, I was a professional, put-together woman. Then you came along and turned me into *this*."

"A sex-crazed maniac?" Jason suggested. Carrie reached over, grabbed a pillow, and threw it at him. Jason deflected it and smiled at her.

"This is on you, Cowboy," she said. "Almost from the moment I met you, you've been causing me grief."

"I see. So, you going crazy is my fault?"

"I'm not crazy. I'm in love, damn it."

"With me?" Jason asked in his best innocent-sounding voice.

"No, with Chet, the security guard downstairs, you idiot," she replied.

Carrie then grabbed another pillow and threw it at him. Jason deflected that, too. Then he stuck out his tongue.

That only made his girlfriend angry. She then tried to punch him, but Jason blocked that, too.

Their mock battle continued for some time, with Carrie trying to land a punch and Jason managing to block it. Finally, after she threw another jab, he grabbed both her arms and pinned her to the bed.

"Give up?" Jason asked.

"Never," Carrie replied while trying to break his grip.

Then Jason kissed her, and the tension in Carrie's arms released. "I think you'd better tell Chet it's over and that you've moved on," he said.

"I love you, you stupid cowboy."



“And I love you too, Red. Damn it, but I do.”

“It took you long enough to say it.”

“I was waiting for the right moment.”

“I see. So, getting me to act like a jealous fool was your way of finding it? Nice.”

“No, this is.”

Jason slid down Carrie’s body and began amusing himself. Before long, things heated up, and their lovemaking started anew. Then, as their excitement peaked, they did, too.

That was followed by exhilaration and another release as they expired together. For a while, they just lay there, neither awake nor asleep, spent and lost in the moment.

“I swear, one day you *will* ruin me, Cowboy,” she whispered in his ear. “But I don’t care anymore. I love you! I love you!”

Jason, half-awake, smiled. He didn’t know what she was saying but realized what he had to do.

The next day was Sunday. After a quick shower, he returned to bed and kissed Carrie’s behind. Then he told her he had to get something from the store and left.

Jewelry stores were hard to find in Hopkinton, where Carrie lived, so Jason drove to a Walmart on the community’s outskirts. There he found one, along with a Dunkin Donuts.

After finding the jewellery counter, he started looking at the ring selection. He considered several before settling on one with two stones: a red ruby for Carrie’s nickname, and a small white diamond.

“You sure you don’t want something more elaborate?” the clerk asked.

“It’s not the size of the rock,” Jason answered. “It’s what you do with it that counts.”

“Sure it is,” the lady said, smiling. “You keep believing that.”

Jason laughed. At that moment, his cell phone rang.

“I see you’re finally awake,” he said.

“Yeah, but where the hell are you?” Carrie asked.

“I had a craving for some Dunkin’ Donuts. Do you want some?”

“No donuts, but coffee will work. How long before you get back?”

“I dunno. Maybe twenty minutes? Why?”

“I’m a horny slut, that’s why.”

“Oh. Well, yeah, I’ll be over soon. Do you want to do anything else today?”

“I think we must get our stories straight and discuss our plans for Christmas. After that, I plan on spending the rest of the day buck naked. Sound good to you?”

Jason gulped. “That works for me. Okay, see you soon.”

The girl at the jewellery counter smiled, hearing every word. “Just some advice,” she said, glancing toward the seasonal department. “We have a nice selection of flowers. You might want to bring some with you.”

“Gotcha,” he replied. After paying for the ring, Jason headed to the seasonal department.

At that moment, his phone rang again. Now it was Elena calling.

“Hey, big brother, how are you doing?” she asked.

“Great, sis. What’s up?”

“Mom and dad wanted to know if you and Carrie could come for dinner tonight?”

“We’ve already made plans, but I’ll ask how she feels about it.”

“You’re spending a lot of time with her, aren’t you?”

“And you’ve got to mind your own business, Elena.”

His sister let out a laugh. “I can’t help it. She’s a lot of fun.”

“Oh, that she is. That’s why I’m buying her a ring.”

“Oh, my freaking God, no! When are you going to propose?”

“Christmas Day. But if you even hint at it, I’ll strangle you.”

“Can I at least tell mom and dad?”

“Hell no. If mom finds out, it will be all over the state in minutes. Just keep your mouth shut for a few more weeks, ok?”

“Gotcha. You know Carrie’s invited everyone to her family home for Christmas dinner?”

“Yes, I know. But dad told me he and mom couldn’t come because they’ve rented a place in West Palm Beach for the holidays. Are you sure *you* still want to come? Vermont isn’t known for its warm beaches at this time of the year.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t miss this for the world, especially since you plan on proposing.”

“Great. Just keep this under wraps until then. I want this to be a complete surprise.”

“Got it,” Elena said. “I’m so proud of you. I can’t believe it. I’m finally going to have a sister!” Then she hung up.

Jason now sent up a quick prayer to whatever gods might be there, begging them to keep his sister’s mouth shut. Then he walked to the checkout, paid for the flowers, and drove off.

After getting coffee and donuts, he returned to Carrie’s building. Before he got out of the car, he found a secret pocket on his coat and quietly slipped the ring box into it.

As he walked through the lobby to the elevator, he stopped and smiled at Chet.

“You in trouble with the lady?” the security guard asked, pointing to the dozen roses in his arm.

Jason pulled one out and gave it to him. “This one’s from Carrie,” he said. “She said she’s sorry, but it’s over between you two.”

Chet smiled. “Tell her I understand,” he said. “Tell her I’m relieved I no longer have to keep secrets from my wife and kids anymore.”

Both Jason and Chet burst out laughing. They were still laughing as the elevator door opened.

After arriving at Carrie’s apartment, he saw her sitting on the couch, naked and watching TV. She smiled as he put the flowers and coffee cups on the kitchen counter.

“Are those for me?” she asked, looking at the roses.

“They’re actually for Chet,” Jason said. “Well, the first one was. I told him it was over between you guys. He said he understood and was glad he didn’t have to keep lying to his wife and kids anymore.”

“You didn’t say that, did you?” Carrie asked.

“Do you see eleven flowers or twelve?”

Carrie got up from the couch and walked to the kitchen, her hair flowing over her breasts as her hips swayed slightly side-to-side. Between her legs, however, Jason noticed something was missing.

“I see you did some landscaping,” he said as she approached him.

“Do you like it?” she asked. “I decided to change things up for us. Besides, gynecologists say a shaved pussy is more hygienic.”

“Well, it certainly *looks* more hygienic,” he said.

“You’re so full of sh-t,” Carrie replied. Then she walked past him and pulled a vase down from the cupboards. She filled it with water and put the roses in it, counting each one.

“You bastard,” she said, giving Jason a sharp look. “You gave him one, didn’t you?”

“It seemed like a good idea at the time,” he replied.

Carrie turned around, grabbed her coffee, and returned to the couch. Unfortunately, this also gave Jason a full view of her behind, making it even more challenging to focus on what he needed to say.

“Elena called,” he said. “My folks invited us to dinner tonight. How about it?”

Carrie looked at him and stretched like a cat, making her relatively large but firm breasts seem bigger.

‘Calm, must stay calm,’ Jason told himself as he walked towards her and sat down. She looked at him and the growing bulge in his crotch.

“Well,” she said, “I suppose I can do the ‘naked-all-day-thing’ another time.” Then she got up, wiggled her butt, and strolled to the bedroom. When she reached the doorway, she looked back and smiled.

Catching her meaning, Jason followed. Finally, after another vigorous round of lovemaking, they lay on the bed, spent.

“I could do this forever,” he said. “But duty calls. We must get our stories straight when we arrive at work tomorrow.”

“I know. But how long can we keep lying, Cowboy? They’re going to find out sooner or later.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m pretty sure we haven’t blown it completely.”

Carrie laughed. “I’ve blown *it* a lot in the last few months, mister.” Then she reached down and grabbed Jason’s crotch.

“I didn’t mean *that*,” he replied.

“I know what you meant, Jason. But things can’t continue like this indefinitely. At some point, we’ll have to tell the truth and take our lumps.”

With that, Carrie, once more, slid down Jason’s body. Very soon, their latest round of lovemaking began. Within forty minutes, they reached their crescendo. That was followed by an almost simultaneous collapse as they fully surrendered to the moment.

“Uh, yeah,” Jason said, breathing heavily and trying to recall what he was going to say before Carrie intruded on his thoughts. “We’re, uh. Sorry, Red. What was that thing we were talking about?”

“Something about taking our lumps and blowing, I think,” she answered. Then she looked over at Jason and smiled. “Ah, who the hell cares anyway?”

“Right,” he replied. “Let’s also not forget about going to dinner tonight.”

“And later?” Carrie asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Oh honey, you’ll give me blue balls at this rate,” he said. “Why don’t we just go to my place afterwards, cuddle, and watch television for a change?”

“I told you on the phone, Cowboy. I’m a horny slut. But, okay, maybe tonight we can drink hot cocoa and watch cheesy Christmas shows. Deal?”

“Deal.”

A few hours later, they were at Jason’s parent’s home. They were greeted at the door by Elena, who hugged Carrie more than with her usual enthusiasm. Carrie hugged her back, glad to see her again after trading emails for several months.

“So, how’s the weekend treating you guys?” his dad, Robert, asked as they walked into the den. “I heard the Christmas party was a big hit.”

“I’ll say,” Jason’s mother, Alice, replied. “We found this on the Globe’s social page.”

Jason looked at the photo and gulped. Then he passed it to Carrie, who was equally dumbfounded.

There, in colour, was a large photo of him and Carrie dancing. The outline said, “Love and magic at the Hennessy Brothers Christmas Party.” Below it, the caption said, “This loving couple stole the show during a slow dance to the tune of Lady in Red, leaving everyone stunned by their public show of affection.”

“Oh, we’re totally screwed,” Jason said. “How in blazes did they get this photo? I didn’t see any reporters there. Did you?”

Carrie shook her head. “Someone at the party must have submitted it,” she said. “Maybe it was your *other* girlfriend?”

“Other girlfriend?” Robert asked.

“It’s nothing, Dad,” Jason replied. “Carrie’s just mad because I slow-danced with Leah at the party.”

“Why did you do that?” Alice asked. “Carrie is your girlfriend, not her.”

“He probably did it to confuse people,” Elena offered. Then she looked at Carrie, who nodded.

“Why don’t you guys just come clean about your relationship?” his father asked. “This is crazy. You can’t hide it forever.”

“That will be almost impossible now,” Carrie said, still looking at the photograph. “They’re going to have a f-cking field day with this at the office.”

“I still want to find out who took this and sent it to the Globe,” Jason said. “If I had known someone was taking pictures, we might have been more discreet.”

“Bullsh-t!” Robert shouted. “There is nothing *discreet* about this. And do you know why? It’s not simply a photo of a cute couple dancing. It’s a photo of two people desperately in love. You’re dreaming if you think you can hide it anymore. And the sooner you both come clean about it, the better.”

“Okay, damn it, we’re in love,” Jason said. “Hell, we’re freaking crazy about each other. But you must understand that we’re also professionals and co-workers. You can’t just let the cat out of the bag, not at Hennessy anyway, and certainly not with their damned Non-Fraternization Policy. We both have great jobs there. The president even told me I represent the company’s future and counted on me to set a good example.”

“You do, son,” his father said. “You’re damn good at what you do. But you guys can’t keep lying about this. If you do, it will ruin what you have, and what you have is extraordinary.”

Jason nodded. “Dad, you have to trust me on this. So do you, Carrie. I know what I’m doing. This photo *is* wonderful, and one day, we’ll proclaim the truth about it. But this is not the time.”

“Just don’t futz this up,” Robert told him. “Proud of you as I am, I may still trade you in for this lovely lady.”

“*May?*” Alice asked. “I’m ready to do it right now. Run along, stranger, and stay away from my new daughter.”

Alice stared at Jason for a moment. Then father, mother and sister broke out laughing, Carrie joining in.

“Seven billion people on Earth, and I get the Beverly Hillbillies for a family,” he said, provoking even more laughs.

“Would you have preferred the Addams Family, instead?” Elena asked.

“Shut up, Wednesday,” Jason replied. More chuckles followed that remark.

As the five sat down for dinner in the kitchen, Alice pointed out the value of being a good cook, especially considering how picky Jason was.

“He’s such a fussy eater,” she said. “It will take a very patient woman to put up with him.”

“Oh gosh, yeah,” his sister chimed in. Ignoring the warning look her brother shot her, Elena discussed all the foods her brother didn’t like and the culinary gymnastics their mom had to do to keep him fed.

“Grandma spoiled you,” his sister continued. “But then you always were her favourite.” Before Jason could rise to that, Robert spoke up.

“Yeah, about that,” he asked. “Have you guys had the *talk*?”

“The talk, Dad?” Jason asked.

“The talk about marriage, you dumb schmuck,” his father answered. “When will you make an honest woman out of this charming lady?”

Jason looked over at Carrie for some help. She offered none, ignoring his unspoken plea as she took another spoonful of her Irish stew.

“Look, gang,” Jason said, “when and if we decide to move forward on that, you’ll be the first to know.”

“You know, Dad,” Elena said, “some guys are naturally *slow*. That doesn’t mean they’re morons. But, on the other hand, not every university grad is a genius, either.” She then looked at Jason and gave him a wink.

“This is why I seldom come home for dinner anymore,” Jason said, looking at Carrie. “Sorry, Red, but I should’ve warned you. Mom’s got grandkids on the brain, and my little sister worries I’ll return home and claim back my old bedroom if she doesn’t marry me off.”

“They’re not wrong, Cowboy,” Carrie said. “You *are* rather slow. It took four months and some serious persuasion to get you even to make a move. And that was *after* I made the first move.”

Jason rolled his eyes and headed off to the bathroom. Behind him, he could hear giggles and chatter as his family and Carrie continued to amuse themselves at his expense.



When he finished, he found his dad watching TV in the den while Carrie, Elena, and his mom cleaned dishes and gabbed endlessly in the kitchen. He then sat on the leather sofa beside his dad and tried to relax.

“You know, son,” his father began, “the only reason we pick on you is because we love you and want the best for you?”

“Dad, sometimes I wish you guys loved me just a *little* less,” Jason said. “It’s hard enough navigating my personal life at the office. I don’t need to start navigating it here as well.”

“What’s to navigate?” Robert asked. “She’s a great gal. And pictures don’t lie.”

Jason nodded. Ten minutes later, his mom and Carrie arrived, carrying a tray of drinks, nacho chips, and dip.

“So, what is it you men talk about when us women aren’t around?” Alice asked. Both her son and husband gave her blank stares. “Ah, the united male front. Well, I guess we little women will never know, will we?”

“What’s to know?” Elena chimed in. “When men get together, talk usually revolves around fart jokes, Elmer Fudd, and women. And they only talk about the first two because they have no damn clue about the latter.”

“Your wrong, Elena,” Robert said. “We talk about the first two *because* we know about the latter.”

Jason smiled and raised his hand. His dad saw the gesture and slapped it with his.

“Just for that, you’re both sleeping on the couch tonight,” Alice said.

“You forget, Mom, I already have my own place,” her son said.

“Don’t be a smarty pants,” she replied. “Just because you’re bigger doesn’t mean I still can’t chase you down and whip you as you deserve.”

Alice gave Carrie a knowing look. “Remember, no matter how big they get, they’re still just little boys. Call me if he ever pops the question, and I’ll tell you what to expect. If he’s anything like his father, you’re in for a rough ride.”

Carrie blushed at those words, remembering how many rides she and Jason had already shared. She kept thinking about this as the hours went by until, around nine-thirty, they said their goodbyes and drove to Jason's place.

"Do you think he's ever going to propose?" Alice asked Robert as the lights of her son's car disappeared into the distance. "She's quite the woman. Maybe she's too much for him to handle?"

Her husband shook his head. "He'd be a fool if he didn't," he said.

Elena, for her part, kept silent, doing her best to keep her secret while waiting for the moment when it was no longer necessary.

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The trip to Jason's place was relatively quiet. When they parked, however, Carrie turned to him and smiled.

"They played you pretty rough tonight, huh?" she said.

"It's how it goes," Jason said, shrugging his shoulders. "But you understand. I mean, I have thought about it. I just don't want to force the issue. We've got a good thing here, and I want us to be ready before taking it to the next level."

"Okay," his girlfriend said. Then they kissed and got out of the car.

Hand in hand, they walked up to Jason's apartment. It had been a few days since he'd been there, and the place felt stuffy.

Carrie, meanwhile, walked into the bedroom and stripped. Then, naked, she went to the living room and stretched out on the couch.

"Oh, honey, you're killing me," Jason said, sitting beside her.

"We don't have to do it," Carrie said. "I just wanted to lie with you, watch tv, and doze off."

"Sounds like a plan," he agreed.

"You know that photo of us dancing is quite nice. But it will be all over the office tomorrow, and I doubt John can ignore it."

“John’s gone until just before Christmas, Red. So even if our resident tattletales send him a copy, he won’t be able to do anything about it until he gets back. Besides, you’d have to be a real lout to fire someone before the holidays.”

“A real what?” Carrie asked.

“A lout,” Jason repeated, barely getting the word out as Carrie began touching his crotch.

“I thought you only wanted to cuddle?”

“I do. But I’m also horny.”

“I see. So, do you really want to know what a lout is?”

“Yes. I also want to know what warp drive is, where Jimmy Hoffa’s buried, and the meaning of life.”

“Oh, that’s simple,” Jason began. Carrie, however, put a finger up to his mouth and shushed him.

“Sometimes, Cowboy, you have to shut up and just live in the moment,” she said.

Jason smiled and stood up, motioning for Carrie to join him as he walked to the bedroom.

After an hour, they were done. When Jason was sure Carrie was asleep, he got up and walked to the closet where his jacket was. Then, removing the ring box, he walked back to the bedroom and put it into the second drawer of his dresser, underneath several layers of shirts. Then he lay back down.

Just then, Carrie stirred. “Where’d you go?” she asked, half awake.

“Bathroom,” Jason replied. “Go back to sleep, sweetheart.”

“Oh, you’re so romantic,” she replied. Then she quickly dozed off.

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The alarm went off at seven, indicating that their workday had begun. After showering and getting dressed, Jason raced off to the office while Carrie searched his dresser to find some fresh underwear she’d put there a few weeks before. However, as she yanked the top drawer open, the second one also opened.

Carrie tried to close it but found it difficult because Jason's clothes had bunched up. Then, while trying to smooth them out, she felt the contours of a little box.

Curiosity got the better of her, and she shoved them aside, revealing a small white box. Opening it, she found the ring Jason had bought the day before.

"Oh my God," she said, slipping it on her finger. "That son-of-a-b-tch. Damn him."

Carrie quickly grabbed her cell phone and texted Elena. "I found the ring," she wrote. "Did you know?"

A moment later, Elena responded. "Oh, f-ck. It was supposed to be a surprise."

"When?"

"Christmas Day, at the dinner."

Carrie quickly decided that two, or in this case, three, could play this game. She then sent Elena another text describing what she wanted to do. Jason's sister agreed, telling her this would be the most exciting proposal ever.

Smiling to herself, Carrie thought Jason had this coming. Pulling a fast one on their boss and the staff was one thing. It was quite another to pull one on his future fiancée.

She looked at the ring again. It was very nice, and she would be proud to wear it when he officially offered it.

But what if he couldn't? What if, when he needed it most, it disappeared? She smiled inwardly before placing it back in the box and closing the drawer. Then she dressed and headed off to work.