

Love IN THE City

EPILOGUE

Michael

“Where did you get the inspiration for the characters?”

The young woman in front of us will not stop talking, but Alex doesn't seem to mind. In fact, she's in her element.

“I love them,” the woman continues. “Especially Matthew. He's *divine*.”

Alex glances at me with pink cheeks, then turns her attention back to her new friend. “Isn't he just? I'm totally in love with him.”

I suppress a smile at the way she side-steps the question. She leans closer to the woman, speaking in a low voice, and I take the chance to slip away and grab another glass of champagne. When I turn back and they're both looking at me, I get the sense that Alex didn't side-step the question at all. I take a long swig from my glass, trying to pretend I don't notice the way they're sizing me up. I'm going to have to ask Alex to keep that piece of information to herself when I'm around.

It's kind of flattering, though. She wrote a romance novel about me—about *us*—because she was falling in love with me and didn't know how to tell me. All guys should be so lucky. Some days I still can't believe this is real—that she's mine, and she lives with me and is helping to raise my son. She's the best damn thing that's ever happened to me and if that means a few people read about our sex life, so be it.

I watch as Alex wanders around the room, greeting people, talking and laughing. Tonight it's her book launch at *Between the Lines*, the small bookstore where she works in the Village. Three months ago she met with a literary agent to look at getting a publishing deal, but when they told her it would take a good six months to a year to even find a publisher—let alone release it—Alex realized she couldn't wait. She decided to publish it independently, and after two months of working with a freelance editor, she's ready to share it with the world.

Watching her take this dream of hers and work so hard, move past all her self-doubt and make it a reality... I've never felt so proud in my life. Not to mention it's

pushed me to work towards my own dream of writing a historical novel. She's inspired me in ways I'd never imagined, seeing what she's achieved and how passionate she is.

But that's Alex. She does everything with her whole heart—including loving me and Henry. And Henry needs that; he needs a positive female role-model and a mother figure who truly loves and cares for him. Because he sure as hell isn't getting that from his real mother.

I take another swallow of champagne, nodding at Alex's two best friends as they approach.

"Having fun?" Geoff asks, grinning. "You're basically the star of the show tonight."

"Geoff," Cat admonishes. She rolls her eyes, turning to me. "Ignore him. No one knows the book is about you guys."

My gaze slides to Geoff, where he's biting his lip to hold back a snicker. I raise my eyebrows and he straightens up, reaching for an egg roll from the food table. I have to chuckle. With Alex's friends, it's no secret that she's been writing about us, and I've just had to get used to that. Well, she wrote about all the dirty things she *wanted* us to do, then we decided to go about making each of her little fantasies a reality. It's been an adventurous couple of months—and the most fun I've had in a long time.

"So, did Alex talk to you?" Cat asks.

I rub a hand over my beard, thinking. "About what?"

"Mel."

At the mention of my ex-wife's name, Cat and I share a scowl. "No," I mutter. "What happened?"

Cat takes a sip from her glass. "Just... talk to Alex."

I sigh, wondering what it will be this time. Knowing Melanie, it won't be good. Nothing ever is with her. Which is why it was so suspicious that she greeted me with a *smile* when I picked Henry up earlier today. I don't think I've seen that woman offer me a smile in years—especially not since Alex and I got together. In fact, she's spent the past few months threatening to take me back to court. Not for any real reason; just to piss me off, to try and hurt me because I'm happy. But it's like she doesn't even realize how much she's hurting *Henry* when she does that. Or she does, and she just doesn't care.

It's making things difficult. I'm ready to ask Alex to marry me, but I know that when I do it will only exacerbate the situation with Melanie. And while I'd never let that stop me, I'd be lying if I said I wasn't worried about the fallout. The last time I stood up to Melanie a couple months back, I got a court summons the next day. It took two weeks for my lawyer, David, to talk her down.

I catch Alex's eye across the room. When the corner of her mouth turns down in concern, I realize I'm clutching my champagne glass in a tight fist and my jaw is like granite. It takes a deep breath to get my shoulders down from my ears. I hate that Melanie isn't even here and I'm still ready to punch something.

I try to send a smile Alex's way, but she's already weaving across the bookstore to me. "Hey," she murmurs when she reaches my side, taking my hand and pulling me away from the others. "You okay? You look like you're about to kill someone."

I force out a long breath. This is her special night and I'm ruining it by being all in my head. "Yeah." I press my lips to her hair, lingering and inhaling the soft scent. "Sorry, beautiful. I was just distracted by..." I grind my molars, unwilling to sully the evening with Melanie's name. "... Something."

Alex's gaze meets mine, and a flicker of recognition passes over her face.

I frown, irritated with myself. I have this amazing woman in front of me and I'm worrying about things beyond my control. "Don't worry," I say, focusing all my attention squarely on Alex. "I'm here for you. This is your night."

She rises up on her toes to speak into my ear. "Well, I have something for you, something that will... help."

When she draws back to look at me meaningfully, I get the distinct impression she's talking about sex, and I have to stifle a chuckle.

"I'll show you after everyone leaves, okay?"

Now I'm *certain* she's talking about sex, and I'm definitely on board with that. I know she's thought about us doing it here, because it was one of the scenes in her book. One of the scenes we haven't gotten around to exploring. Yet.

A mischievous smile tilts her mouth and I can't help but grin in response. Is that what she has planned, after this? Just thinking about it makes my blood heat, and I have to fight the urge to trail my eyes over her fitted crimson dress, her generous curves, and the smooth, creamy skin of her cleavage. God, she's beautiful. If she wanted to have sex right now beside the register in a room full of people, I'd have trouble saying no. I imagine setting her down on the counter and wrapping her legs

around my waist, sliding into the wet warmth of her, and there's a twitch below my belt.

Shit. Stop.

I throw back the rest of my champagne, willing myself to think of something—anything—else.

The rest of the party passes quickly, and when Alex is finally ushering the last guest out the door and closing it behind her, I'm relieved. It's been wonderful watching the woman I love achieve something she's dreamed of forever, and I'm unbelievably proud. But now I'm aching to get her out of that dress and celebrate in the way I know she loves best.

She turns to me with a grin, and I'm about to pull her close and kiss her, when she reaches for her phone. "Here," she says, tapping away at the screen before handing it to me. "I was going to wait until tomorrow to show you this, but I think you should hear it now."

I take the phone and hold it to my ear, intrigued. Right away, I can make out Melanie's voice.

"He had it coming after what he did to me."

"After what he did?" Another female asks. "You mean after what *you* did?" That's Cat—I recognize her voice now.

"Whatever," Melanie mutters in the background.

"But *why* did you lie? Why would you go around telling everyone that he cheated when it was you?"

There's rustling and when Melanie speaks, her voice is louder, closer. "Because I can. Because I want to hurt him. Because I always get my way."

There's a pause then the recording goes dead. I pull the phone away from my ear and look at what it is, exactly, that I'm listening to. It's an audio clip sent to Alex from Cat, with the message, *This is for Michael. Tell him not to worry about Mel taking him to court anymore.*

I look at Alex in disbelief and she gives me a tentative smile.

"It was Cat's idea. She said Mel was always in the store with Mark talking shit, and she decided to record it. She told Mel that she sent the recording to me, and Mel just lost it."

That explains the unusually friendly interaction earlier today. Melanie was just trying another tactic to manipulate me, trying to get on my good side. As if a few polite words could ever make up for the destruction she's caused.

Alex takes the phone from my hand and slips it into her purse. "I've already forwarded a copy to David, I hope that's okay."

"You—what?"

"He said it was proof of defamation, and that's all you need to ensure she has no case against you. It's over."

I blink, processing this. She has no case against me. It's over...

Oh my God.

"Yes." I slam a fist down on the counter. Adrenaline floods my system and I thrust both hands up into my hair, pulling at the roots. "Fuck," I mutter, shaking my head in shock. It's over. It's finally over. I've won—Melanie can't take Henry away from me.

It's over.

I suck in a breath, sagging back against the counter. I'm trembling with relief, and I reach for Alex, feeling tears well in my eyes. She pulls me close and rubs my back, not saying anything, but I know she can feel my heart racing as I hold her. It's several minutes before I can even speak, until I can finally compose myself enough to pull back and look at her.

"Alex, I can't believe..." I don't know where to start. It's like the weight of the world has been lifted off my shoulders. My chest feels like it could burst. "Thank you. This is everything. This is... the best thing to happen since..." I trail off, searching for the right words.

"Since meeting me?" she jokes, smoothing a hand down the front of my shirt, and emotion tightens my throat. I was so worried that this gorgeous woman would think my life was too complicated, but she's here beside me, helping me untangle it. She's made everything so much better, and now... I feel like a new man.

"Come here," I say roughly, sliding my hands around her waist and pulling her against me. I run my eyes over her face—her wide, hazel eyes, her full, soft lips, the blush in her cheeks from a few glasses of champagne. "I love you so much, beautiful girl. Thank you for everything, for being you. I'm so proud of you. Your book, what you've achieved..."

“I wouldn’t be here without you,” she says, a smile playing on her lips. “And not just because you inspired all the dirty bits.” Heat flashes in her eyes as she hooks a teasing finger into my belt.

I lean down to take her mouth in a hungry kiss. Her sweet tongue grazes over mine and all the blood in my body rushes south. And I decide that tonight is definitely the night we make her bookstore fantasy come true.

“Go turn the lights off,” I whisper, moving my mouth to her neck, cupping her round ass in my hands and squeezing. “Meet me in the travel section.”

I feel her heartbeat quicken under my lips. “Okay,” she breathes, then she slips away to the back of the store.

I adjust the arousal behind my zipper and find my way down the aisle, to the spot where I first realized just how hard I was going to fall for this woman. What I didn’t know then was how much she’d change my whole life, how much she’d make *me* better.

The lights flick off and it takes a second for my eyes to adjust to the darkness. There’s a faint light coming in from the street, and even though this aisle is angled away from the front windows, the light falls through the bookshelves, casting long shadows along the floor.

Alex appears in front of me, her eyes sparkling in the dim light, a sexy grin curving her lips. I reach for her, hauling her against me. She lets out a little gasp of delight, pressing her hips into mine, and I slide my hands into her hair, walking her backwards and pinning her against the bookshelves, lowering my mouth to hers. Her tongue sweeps over mine and molten heat shoots along my limbs. Usually I like to take my time with her, but tonight I don’t know if I can.

She lets out a moan as I lower a hand to cradle her breast, pinching her nipple through the thin fabric. Another moan as I drag my mouth over her jaw, her neck, her chest.

“God,” she murmurs, hands dropping to grip the hard thickness in my pants. My breath catches and I grunt into her ear, sliding a hand up her bare thigh. When my fingers find the damp lace of her panties, she moans again.

“Is this how you imagined it?” I ask, massaging my fingers in gentle circles, feeling her quiver. “Me fucking you right here?”

“Yes,” she rasps. She fumbles with my belt buckle, pushing her hand into my boxer-briefs and taking hold of me. My knees weaken as she slides her hand up and

down, using her other hand to unbutton my collar. She buries her face in my neck, inhaling, sucking on my skin.

I grasp her panties and tug them down her legs, forcing her to take her hands off me and give me a second to catch my breath. This woman drives me crazy—in the best possible way.

She steps out of her underwear and I capture both of her hands in one of mine, pinning them up above her head against the bookshelves. The dirty smile on her mouth tells me just how much she likes me taking control, and it only turns me on more.

Lowering my free hand between her thighs, I slide my middle finger inside her warmth. I watch with satisfaction as her eyes roll back and she grinds against my palm, breathing hard. It only takes a few minutes until I feel her tighten around my finger, groaning my name as she lets go.

When I release her hands, she draws my mouth to hers for a blistering kiss. “You need to fuck me *now*,” she says against my lips, and there’s a throb in my rigid length, pressed against her thigh.

“I do,” I growl. “You have no idea how much.”

I take her leg and hook it up over my hip, pushing into the wet heat of her. A blinding white light of pleasure obliterates every thought from my head. All I can do is focus on the way I fit inside her just right, the feeling of her fingernails digging into my shoulders, the way her tongue slides against mine and her moans spill right into my mouth.

She feels so good, and the knowledge that we’re doing this down the book aisle at her work seems so illicit, that I can feel the release rushing up my thighs, building below my navel. I have to make myself slow down—to make sure she gets there first. If there’s one thing I’ve learned about Alex it’s that she’s had some mediocre sex in her life, and I’ve made it my mission to ensure she never does again.

I pull my mouth off hers, gripping her thigh and pressing deep, slow. Her cheeks are flushed, her eyes glassy, her lips swollen from being crushed against mine.

“I love you so much,” she whispers, sliding her fingers up into my hair and tugging.

I lower a hand between her legs, circling my thumb over the spot that drives her wild. Rolling my hips forward again, I drive myself deeper into her, until she’s panting and clenching tight around me, coaxing my orgasm closer. “I love you more,”

I manage, my voice grating against my throat because I'm so close to exploding inside her.

I move my thumb faster and when she closes her eyes, whimpering, "Yes, Michael, yes, right there," I know I've lost the battle. Just as she lets out a long groan, shuddering and clutching my shoulders, my walls break. I drop my face into her hair, burying myself deep inside her, riding the waves of pleasure tearing through me.

It's a good few minutes of us heaving against each other before our breathing returns to normal. I lower her leg and draw out of her, tucking myself back inside my boxer briefs with a contented sigh. I will never get tired of making love to her.

"Um..." She holds a hand over her crotch with an embarrassed laugh. "My bag, can you—"

"Right, sorry." I dash up to the counter and grab her purse, handing her some tissues. Ever since she went on the pill and we stopped using condoms I keep forgetting about, you know, the aftermath.

"Thanks."

"Hey, it's my mess," I say, and she cleans herself up with a giggle. Panties back on and tissues disposed of, I pull her close, pressing my mouth to hers in a soft kiss.

"We should probably get home," she murmurs, warm and relaxed in my arms. "Your brother will want to be relieved of his babysitting duties."

I chuckle. "Are you kidding? They're probably having a *Star Wars* marathon. We told him to have Henry in bed by nine, but there's no way that happened."

Alex smiles. "Yeah, but it's nice. I love how close those two are."

"It is nice," I say, slipping my hand into hers. We head out of the store and I wait for Alex to lock the door. While we wander home through the Village in the cool evening air, Alex's hand snug in mine, I think back over the events of the evening, feeling strangely light. Alex's book launch was a success—and, yes, we had hot sex between the stacks—but it's more than that. After hearing that recording from Cat, I know Melanie can't hurt us anymore. And that makes me feel like I've got my damn life back, like my future with Alex is wide open and anything is possible.

As we turn down our street, I think of the little box I have sitting up in the apartment—the one with my grandmother's ring inside, waiting to be slipped onto Alex's finger. Now, I know it won't be long before I make that a reality. Because I can't wait for her to be my wife.



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