

DAYS OF AULD LANG SYNE

Episode One

By Lena Hart

“Ay dios mio. Novia, be careful!” Joanne Vega watched as her twelve-year old cousin attempted to do a twirl on the crowded ice rink, the blade of her rented skates coming too close to the back of her own sister’s legs. *“Yana, will you watch her?”*

Both of her young cousins continued around the ice rink, giggling, laughing, and ignoring her shouted warning. Joanne frowned and kept a vigilant eye on them through the crowd of skaters. Though she was born and raised in New York City, she had never spent her holiday in a tourist trap like the Rink at Rockefeller Center. But it was Christmas, and her mom’s side of the family was visiting from Puerto Rico. Joanne didn’t want to steal her cousins’ fun, but this was their first time skating on ice, and as the oldest, it was her responsibility to make sure they returned home in one piece. Since she couldn’t ice skate, she was reduced to worrying and scolding from the sidelines.

Their parents had decided to stay up in Harlem, not willing to make the trip downtown or take their chances with the weather. So far, despite reports for heavy snow, they had only gotten a few flurries. Because of that, the Rink was packed with people. Joanne looked past the throng of skaters and trained her camera phone on her cousins’ bright purple and pink coats. Her aunt and uncle would love to see their daughters’ first ice skating experience. With the large Rockefeller tree glowing in the background, it was a pretty magnificent sight.

Joanne tilted her camera lower and followed her cousins around the large rink. Though she had a pile of clips to edit for her fashion and beauty video blog, Joanne was happy for the distraction and to be showing her cousins a good time around her city. Lately, her life was consumed by either her day job or her vlog, which left little room for anything else. Her social life had seen better days, and though she had managed to spend some time with her bestie, they were both too busy for much else besides church and brunch. With her family in town, Joanne could use an excuse to go out and “play”—even if it meant chaperoning her tween cousins who were trying to give her premature grays at twenty-three.

Joanne was so focused on getting clear video of her cousins, she completely missed the tall male figure that came up beside her.

“Jojo?”

Joanne froze then turned to the familiar deep voice and her mouth almost gaped open. *OMG*. It couldn't be...

"Shawn?"

She didn't have to ask. Only one man had ever called her by that very old nickname, and she would have recognized those sexy, maple brown eyes anywhere.

Shawn Davis.

Her old classmate—her old high school crush. He was the one guy no others had ever lived up to. The one she had tried but failed to forget these past five years. The one she had yearned for more than just friendship with...

Longing fluttered in her stomach as she stared at him—wishing she had done more with her long, curly hair then pile it on top of her head in a messy bun. She suddenly felt like the shy, awkward girl back in high school again.

When Joanne didn't move or say anything quick enough, Shawn held out his arms. His dark, handsome face broke into a crooked smile. "We can continue this staring match, Jojo... Or you can give me a hug."

Episode Two

By Valerie Twombly

Shawn pulled his old schoolmate into an embrace. Though her body was stiff at first, it only took a second for her to relax and melt into him. He buried his nose in her piled-up locks and took in the scent of coconut shampoo. He remembered it had always been her favorite. When he finally released her, he took a step back and held her at arm's length.

"You look stunning, Jojo." She gave a bashful smile, just like he remembered.

"Thanks. It's been a long time." She wiggled free. "I heard you got married and moved away. Do you have any children yet?"

He cast his gaze to the skaters on the rink and watched a couple of children tumble to the ice. "We divorced after six months."

"Oh..." She touched his arm. "I'm so sorry."

He looked back in time to watch her push a stray curl out of her eyes and tuck it behind her ear. God, he'd always loved her hair and had spent many nights imagining running his fingers through the silky mass. "It's okay. We were young and the entire thing was a mistake. We both agreed it was time to end it before we ended up hating each other." It had been a brief fling and in the heat of passion, he and Brittany had flown to Vegas and eloped. He'd never regretted anything more. Well...except for never telling Jojo how he really felt about her.

"What about you? Married? Kids?" *Please say no.* He'd come back home several months ago and had meant to look her up. Had even gone so far as to stalk her vlog, but nowhere could he find out if there was a mister in her life.

"Me? Nope. I'm still single. No man in my life, I'm sorry to say."

"I can't believe no one has scooped you up and taken you away."

She let out a familiar soft laugh. Nothing had changed with his Jojo except maybe she'd grown more beautiful. "Well, I'm back in the city on business. Plan to be here awhile and I'd love to get together. Can I take you to dinner?"

"Oh... umm, I'm not sure. You know it's the holidays, and I have family visiting from back home." She took a step back and he could sense she wanted to put some distance between them. Why? He wasn't sure. They'd always been good friends in high school. He'd wanted more, but she seemed untouchable to him. Now though... Now they were adults and he wasn't backing down.

"I refuse to take no for an answer. If not dinner then how about coffee?" He put on the biggest grin

he could muster. "Certainly you can find even thirty minutes for an old friend."

She touched her hair and pushed it around then shoved her hands into her coat pockets. "Well... Okay. How about tomorrow, say ten? I can meet you at the Starbucks here at the Plaza."

"Perfect." He may not be able to wine and dine her but this was a start, and he intended to do everything in his power to make it perfect for her.

Episode Three
By Chanta Rand

Joanne stared at the hunk who'd brought back a flood of memories. Though she'd last seen him five years ago, she'd never forgotten her high school crush. He was a young man then, hovering on the precipice of adulthood. Now, he stood before her even more handsome, if that was possible. Dark, brown eyes. Sable hair. Dimples she could swim in. Hell, he could be a model if he really wanted. An errant breeze swept flurries of snow through the air. A lone snowflake landed on his feathery eyelashes, instantly melting into a diamond-like bead, glistening on the tips. The tiny drop melted into a pool of warm liquid—just liked she'd wanted to when she first saw him.

Get it together, girl!

"Okay," she said, regaining her composure. "See you tomorrow."

"Looking forward to it." His frosted breath was in direct contrast to his heated gaze.

Shivers salsa-danced down her spine. The sensation had nothing to do with the cold temperatures. She was bundled up tighter than Ralphie's brother on *A Christmas Story*.

As Shawn walked away, her eyes feasted on his impressive physique, following the heels of his tobacco-colored boots all the way to the dusting of shearling that ringed the back of his coat collar. The leather jacket stopped at his waist, showcasing his muscular backside through the corduroy pants he wore. His Burberry scarf flapped in the wind as he disappeared into the crowd.

The nervous churning of her stomach competed with the rapid-fire staccato of her heart. On her vlog she was fearless, outgoing, independent, and full of spirited advice. She talked about the latest fashion styles and the best ways to dress and impress a guy. Shawn was the very embodiment of the man she had in mind when she wrote each article. Every must-have dress she mentioned, every pair of designer shoes she drooled over, every hairstyle she recommended were all to catch the eye of a man like Shawn Davis.

He was high class personified. On top of that, the guy was super smart. She remembered throughout school that he was a brainiac. Math club. Chess club. Debate team. Back then she'd been quiet and shy, years away from breaking out of her shell. She'd stayed in the background watching the events of high school unfold as though everyone else were on stage and she was a spectator in the audience.

Now, Shawn Davis wanted to take her to dinner. She'd talked him into coffee instead. The thought

of sitting through an entire meal, drowning in those dark pools he called eyes, was intimidating. What if she wasn't smart enough? Good enough? Pretty enough?

"Ay, papi. Who was that?"

Joanne turned to find her fourteen-year-old cousin, Yana, at her elbow, gawking in the direction Shawn was retreating. The girl's eyes shone with appreciation.

"An old friend of mine."

"Humph. With friends like that who needs lovers?"

Joanne gasped as Yana's bubbly laughter floated up over the crowd of skaters. Joanne tweaked her on the nose. *"Girl, he is too old for you."*

Even as she playfully scolded her cousin, Joanne recalled her first day of ninth grade—the day Shawn had walked into science class and sat in front of her. Her life had never been the same.

Yana adjusted her Betty Boop earmuffs over her thick mane of dark curls. *"I heard the lyrics to a song once—age ain't nothing but a number."*

"Yeah? Well the state of New York does not agree with you. There are laws against that sort of thing. And even if there weren't, Tío Bernard would dispense his own justice. I can't have your daddy mad at me."

Yana grinned. *"I'm just pulling your leg, cuz. I'm a sweet teenage girl attending a catholic, girls-only school. I steer far away from trouble."*

"Good."

"For now, I will live vicariously through you."

Joanne laughed. *"Trust me, I am not living vicariously. I barely have time to do anything but write, eat, and sleep. That's why I'm glad to be hanging out with you and Novia today—my two favorite cousins."*

"We're glad to be hanging out with you, too, Jojo. This is going to be the best Christmas ever."

At that moment, Novia glided by, arms wide open, face joyfully lifted up to the winter sky. *"I'm the Queen of the World!"* she announced.

Yana raced after her sister. Joanne cracked up at the girls' antics. For the first time in months, she felt light-hearted. Maybe it was this place with its happy skaters. Maybe it was the holiday spirit. Or maybe it was the fact that she had a date with a hot guy.

Panic stabbed the center of her heart.

Dear God. It is a date. What am I doing?

She dug her cell phone from her coat pocket, and then used her teeth to pull off one of her gloves.

She punched in a number she knew by heart. She needed reinforcements.

Episode Four
By Angie Daniels

Shawn was already in the lot waiting when he spotted Joanne come around corner. He drew a deep breath. Ever since he saw her at the Rockefeller Center, he couldn't get her off his mind.

That beautiful butterscotch complexion, dark sultry eyes, and kilowatt smile sent his libido into overdrive. He never thought he'd ever see Joanne again, so it had definitely been a pleasant surprise. One he planned to use to his advantage, especially since he'd spent years imagining running into her, how he would approach her, and what he would say. While in high school he never could get his brain to function in her presence, but he was no longer an inexperienced teenager when it came to women. Nope. This time, there was no way he was letting Joanne go without making his feelings known...amongst other things. Explicit thoughts caused him to groan inwardly.

Last night Shawn had allowed his imagination to run wild. He wanted to hear her screaming out in climax, to feel her French-tip nails clawing at his back, and her vivacious body riding... Shawn stopped and laughed as he commanded himself to get a goddamn grip. They hadn't even had coffee, and he had already allowed his lust to get out of hand.

Get it together, Davis, he scolded then pulled himself off the bench. He watched Joanne sauntering toward the entrance. "So much for getting my libido under control," he muttered under his breath. Instantly, his cock leaped forward in greeting. Damn! Her luscious hips swayed in a pair of denim jeans that possessively hugged her thighs. A bomber length coat hung open over a pink sweater that exposed creamy flesh, descending down to the swell of breasts that had Shawn clamping down on his lips so he wouldn't groan out loud. Today, her long, curly hair hung wild and free, bouncing around her face and shoulders. Joanne wasn't wearing any makeup and didn't need to with those wide brown eyes and high cheekbones. A smirk started and spread across Shawn's lips. By the time Joanne reached him, he was grinning like a damn fool.

"Hey," Joanne greeted and licked her bottom lip.

"Good morning gorgeous."

Shawn hugged her close, filling his nostrils with her scent. With his hands at her back, he could feel the nervousness she tried so hard to hide. Drawing back, he met her wide-eyed stare.

"Come on let's get you out of this cold," he said, hoping to make her feel at ease.

He draped an arm loosely across her shoulders and ushered her into the coffeehouse and over to a barista behind the counter, ready to serve. While Joanne studied the menu on the wall, she stiffened

and stepped away from his touch, putting a little distance between them. Frowning, Shawn again wondered why she was drawing away but decided to let it go—for now.

“What’s your poison?” he asked.

Joanne tucked a lock of hair behind her ear, but it immediately bounced back out. “Triple grande caramel macchiato. What about you?” She turned and looked over her right shoulder at him. The gesture was so sexy it practically stole his breath away.

“An umm...expresso macchiato.”

Their gazes locked for the briefest moment before Joanne turned away, but not before Shawn saw the combination of desire and uncertainty burning in the depths of her eyes.

While they ordered, anticipation hummed through his veins.

Episode Five

By Kishan Paul

Joanne's heart thudded against her chest so loud she worried everyone in Starbucks could hear it. Then there was her brain and ability to speak, both of which appeared to have powered off in the past few minutes. She prided herself in not being shy anymore. Yet here she was five years later, behaving the same as that insecure eighteen-year-old girl, and it was all because of the man standing beside her. Torn between wanting to kiss the heck out of him and running away from him, she opted to just stand there like an idiot, frozen and awkward.

She stared at Shawn's profile while he gave the woman behind the counter their order. From the way the barista's cheeks reddened, it was clear she wasn't the only woman in the room currently Shawn-struck. The crazy thing was he seemed clueless about the panty-melting powers he obviously possessed.

Why was someone like him here...with me? She shook the question from her head and replaced it with one of the empowering ones she'd practiced in counseling. *Why wouldn't he want to be here with me?* For some reason it didn't sound nearly as convincing as it did in the therapist's office. Maybe it was because he was standing right next to her, smelling amazing, and flashing that dimpled smile at her every other second.

Whatever the reason, the little voice of insecurity inside her was getting louder. While Shawn paid for their drinks, Joanne walked off to the corner and scanned the room for an empty table. She shouldn't have come and was stupid to think she could handle this. The wounds of her past obviously hadn't healed as well as she thought they had.

A whiff of cold air hit her when the door opened. Thick strands of her hair came loose from the gust and slapped her across the face. She blew at it and watched it float up, only to smack her cheek on the way down. Her curls probably looked crazy by now. Before she got a chance to move the hair out of her face, Shawn was in front of her running his fingers through the strands.

"I've always wondered if your curls were as soft as they looked."

Joanne's face heated and when she saw the way his gaze lingered on her mouth, she sucked in a breath. "And?"

His knuckles brushed against her skin. "Amazingly soft."

Her feet were rooted to the floor, all sounds and people drifted away to nothingness as she savored the feel of his touch.

“Almost as soft as your skin,” he whispered before brushing his thumb across her cheek. “Which was something else I always wondered about, by the way.”

She blinked a couple of times, processing it all. *He wondered about touching me?*

Joanne cleared her throat and stared at his full lips, one of the many parts of him she’d dreamed about touching. “The tables are all full.”

He smiled and leaned in so close that his breath warmed her skin when he spoke. “Once we get the coffee, we could always go somewhere else. Take the train over to Central Park.”

This was the perfect opportunity for her to tell him she needed to leave. Run, like her fears screamed for her to do.

She nodded and smiled, “Sounds like a great idea.”

Episode Six

By Luanna Stewart

Woo boy, alone with her at last. But where to go? Sitting on a crowded subway wouldn't allow him to concentrate on Jojo and what she said. And wouldn't give him nearly enough time to look at her. He'd wait until they got to Central Park and maybe inspiration would strike.

This date had to be perfect, and Shawn was getting the signal it wouldn't be easy. Sure there was interest in her eyes; he'd experienced it enough from other women over the years to spot it. But there was also a reticence, a distance he aimed to bridge.

Silence fell between them as they headed for the train. Heck, he hadn't felt this nervous around a girl since high school. *Say something, you idiot!*

"So, how've you been?" Oh yeah, really cool.

"Busy lately, with the holidays coming up."

"I've seen your vlog." He sensed the tension from her body as soon as the words were out of his mouth.

"You have? Why?" She laughed, seemingly nervous and unsure herself. Not at all the image she conveyed on screen.

"I like to keep up with what my friends are doing."

"Yeah, but you're a guy."

"I had noticed."

"No, that's not what I meant. You can't be interested in shoes and make-up." She cut him a glance. "Can you?"

He laughed. "Only when they're on a woman." He reached for her hand. "You were talking about these gloves the other day." He gave her hand a squeeze and didn't let go.

"Wow, you really have been watching."

"Like I said, I like to keep up. Should I buy a pair for my sister?"

"Definitely. The hat that goes with them is cute too."

"There's half my Christmas shopping done, thanks to you."

They got off half a block from the park, pausing in the sun by a wrought iron bench. "You feel like a walk?"

"Sure." She scampered ahead, relieved to be in the fresh air. Holding hands was too much, too soon. She took a deep breath, concentrating on the oxygen filling her lungs, her chest, her muscles.

Smooth and easy. There was plenty of air, plenty of space. She didn't *have* to be here, she could leave. She *chose* to be here.

Shawn joined her on the sidewalk and reached again for her hand. Who would have thought that she'd be walking through Central Park holding hands with Shawn Davis? Not her, except in her fantasies.

Out here, with other people milling about, her heart rate stayed normal and she wasn't breaking out in a sweat. She could do this. She could be a normal person.

Now for some casual banter. Work was always a safe topic.

"You mentioned being in town for business. What do you do?" Of course she already knew, having spent several minutes the previous evening checking all the social media sites.

"I'm an architect."

"Very cool. What have you designed? Anything I'd have seen?"

He chuckled. "No, not yet. I'm in a large firm and just getting established. I'm with a team designing a remodeling project over on Seventh Avenue."

They came to a fork in the path and she moved to the right, while Shawn moved to the left. They laughed, he gave a slight tug on her hand, and just like that she was chest to chest with the sexy man of her dreams.

She started to shake and felt like she was choking.

Run!

Episode 7

By Kris Calvert

Shawn could feel her warm body shudder in his arms, and he knew it wasn't because she was chilly. Snow began to fall right on cue as if he'd ordered the white stuff from the heavens himself, and he stared into her eyes and thought of nothing but kissing her.

"Well, this is what awkward looks like," she said looking everywhere but his face.

"No." Shawn pulled on her hands begging her to catch his gaze. "Awkward would be having you in an embrace like this," he said, pulling her so close their hips collided. "And your ex-boyfriend, grandmother, or priest happened to catch me."

Her breath quickened, the clouds of warm air giving away her excitement. "Catch you...what?"

"C'mon," he said, pulling her along the pathway and quelling his urge to engulf her red lips. "I want to show you something."

They walked in the gentle quiet the blanket of snow provided, as he weaved the two of them hand in hand through the lower part of the park. Content in their silence, Shawn lived on the intermittent squeezes she gave his fingers each time he ran his thumb across her knuckles.

When they made the turn into the Shakespeare Garden, Shawn turned to take both of her hands as he walked backwards. "I know a bank whereon the wild thyme blows, where oxlips and the nodding violet grows," he said. "Quite over-canopied with lush woodbine, with sweet musk-roses and with eglantine."

"Why are you quoting *A Midsummer's Night's Dream*?" Joanne narrowed her eyes and gave him the kind of suspicious smile that said she didn't know where he was headed with his reference, but she was willing to play along.

"Don't you like Bill?"

"Bill?"

"Shakespeare. I might be an architect, but I believe in art—art in structure, art in performance, and most certainly art in words."

"Words?"

Shawn let go of one hand to beckon Joanne into him. Looking to her feet, she reluctantly agreed to follow and rolled her eyes, nervous as to where he was taking her and the conversation.

"Well, just like you choose your words carefully in your video blog, which by the way I loved the

post about scarves. I think you're absolutely correct. They *are* fashion statements and not just something to throw around your neck in the winter."

She dropped his hands, crossing her arms in front of her chest. "Now you're just mocking me."

"I'm not," he exclaimed. "I think you're right. Form *and* function."

Unmoving in her stance, Shawn knew he had only a moment to put the magic back in the moment.

Moving into Joanne, he refrained from touching her but matched her posture, crisscrossing his arms over his chest. "This is my point exactly. Words matter. It's why one needs to choose them carefully. If you don't," he said, leaning his forehead into hers. "Someone might get the wrong impression."

She broke into a smile. Shawn knew he'd finally tapped into the unspoken feelings he always believed were hidden just below the surface of their friendship.

"Come here," he said, pulling her farther into the garden. "I'll prove it."

"Prove what?" she asked, taking his hand once more while he pulled her along begrudgingly by the arm.

He stopped them both in front of a twenty-foot granite bench that curled inward at each side. Placing his hand in the small of her back, he ushered her to the right hand side of the bench, setting her snugly against the curve.

"It's cold," she said as he walked away.

"It's worth it," he replied. "Something remarkable is about to happen."

Walking to the opposite end, Shawn sat and winced. She was correct. The granite was freezing.

"So?" she asked.

Shawn gave her a sly smile, turned his back, and began to whisper as softly as he could into the frigid granite. "Welcome to the whispering bench, Jojo."

She didn't have to say a word. The look on Joanne's face told him everything he needed to know.

"What is this?" she whispered, turning into the bench herself.

"This is the whispering bench. Here, you can only tell the truest truths ever known."

"What kind of truths?" she whispered into the bench.

Her words were loud and clear in Shawn's ears.

"The kind of truths you keep to yourself deep in your heart. And remember, words matter."

Shawn and Joanne sat in silence for only a moment.

She wasn't sure if it was the buzz in her head or the butterflies in her stomach that spurred her bravery, but she opened her mouth and exactly what she was thinking came out. "I've always thought

you were handsome.”

At first, she was stunned at her words but then she took a deep breath, deciding to buy into the *only truths* rule of the whispering bench. That and the fact that she didn't have to look him in the face when she said it.

“I've always thought you were beautiful.”

“What?” Joanne said at full volume.

Shawn laughed soft and low as he turned around to gaze upon her flushed face. Circling his finger, he silently asking her to turn around again. Shawn leaned into the cold granite and whispered what he'd longed to say for years. “Jojo, I've always loved you.”

Episode 8

By Mina Khan

Joanne sat stunned, her heart racing. Had she heard that right? Could he really have said those words? She clasped her hands together and stared straight ahead at a tree that had lost all its leaves. Not daring to believe. “Uh, can you repeat that?”

“I said,” his deep, sexy voice pronounced each word slow and deliberate. “I have always loved you.”

Oh wow. Okay. So she’d heard right. Her lips spread into a slow smile as she turned around and looked into his warm, caramel eyes. She’d dreamt of this moment, these words, forever. “I —

The loud, hi-pitched yapping of a dog filled the air, followed by a “Shawn? Shawnie-poo!”

Joanne blinked and closed her mouth as a short, but buxom blonde wrapped Shawn in a hug. Her fluffy, white poodle danced around them barking its tiny head off. After a moment—a long—Shawn extricated himself.

“Angie, Angela. When did you get back?”

The woman shook her head, her riot of curls bouncing around. “I had to cut my theater tour short because my Meemaw got sick.” Her baby blues filled with tears and her full lips trembled. “Of course, I rushed back as fast as I could, but it was too late.”

“Oh, Angie,” Shawn stood and pulled the woman into another hug. “I’m so sorry.”

The cold from the bench leaked into Joanne’s bones, freezing her inside and out. She leapt to her feet. Time to make her excuses and get the hell out of this awkward threesome. “I need to be going.”

Two heads swiveled towards her and then the couple parted. “Oh, I’m sorry. Did I interrupt something?” The blonde blinked and held out her hand. “I’m Angie. Angie Davis.”

“Sorry.” Shawn stuffed his hands in his pockets as a red flush spread across his sharp cheekbones. “Joanne meet Angie, my ex-wife. Angie, this is a friend from high school.”

Joanne shook Angie’s hand on autopilot. A friend from high school. What happened to he’d always loved her? Didn’t that make them more than friends? Her head spun. She should have kept her distance, listened when her instincts shouted Shawn was too good to be true.

She studied Angie, who looked like the stereotypical fantasy of a European milkmaid, with her rosy cheeks, big blue eyes, pert little nose and, of course, the golden curls. They couldn’t be more different.

And the woman still held onto Shawn's last name. All signs that said one thing: *Run*. "Nice to meet you, Angie," she said. "I have to go. Adios!"

Shawn eyes widened. "Wait. Give me a second and I'll take you back to the coffee shop."

"No, don't worry." Joanne shook her head. "Looks like you both have a lot to catch up on."

His face darkened as he crossed his arms.

As she flounced off, she heard Angie say, "Oops! Did I cause trouble in paradise?"

Episode Nine

By J.A. Coffey

Shawn tamped down his smoldering irritation as he watched Jojo's curls bounce angrily through the trees, up the pathway, and onto the gray, wintery city street. No way in hell he was going to let the spicy siren of his dreams get away again, not even for Angie's melodramatic tricks.

"Look, Angie. I'm sorry for your loss. But there's someplace else I need to be." He didn't wait for his ex-wife's response, just ignored Angie's squawk of surprise and hurtled past the low concrete walls and barren trees. He caught up to the woman to whom he had a lifetime of words to speak. The one woman he'd wanted. The woman he'd left alone for far too long.

"Jo...Jojo..." He called out. She didn't stop. "Joanne, wait!"

His grip on her upper arm was firm enough to stop her in her tracks when his pleas wouldn't. She whirled to face him, her cheeks reddened, and her eyes snapping angrily.

"An old friend?" She splayed her hands on her hips, just grazing the waistband over skin he desperately wanted to touch. "So much for loving me. Seems like you have more designs in your portfolio than you know what to do with, Mr. Architect."

"No plans, Jojo. And no games." Either it was the worst case of coincidental timing, or his ex-wife was following him for some scheme of her own. "If I've got any designs, it's to build something with you. Why else would I track you down after all these years?"

He saw a light kindle in her eyes and closed the space between them. His heart skipped a beat when she didn't move away. Yeah, there was definitely hope there.

Still her eyes were skeptical. The set of her pert chin jutted in a way that told him she was ready to take another insult to her pride, if not her person. He'd be damned if he'd do either.

"C'mon, Jojo. I know you want me. You want this." He reached up, brushing her hair back from her pretty pinked cheeks. That scarf she was wearing made her outfit, but it made him think of all kinds of things he could do with it, if she were willing. His king-sized bed had long tapered posts and an iron scrollwork headboard for that very purpose, but he'd rarely found a woman that could match his passions.

"I might." She glanced at his hand manacled over her puffy jacket sleeve and bit her bottom lip in a way that made his cock surge to full throttle. Something told him she just might be willing. But he'd have to convince her that he was sincere. Joanne Vega wasn't the one night stand kind of woman. She was the kind you held on to, cherished... "Then again, I might not."

Damn. She'd need some serious convincing. But from the breathless parting of her lips, he knew he was more than man enough for that job. He cursed his tailored gloves as his hands stole up the length of her elegant neck to cup her chin. More than anything, he'd love the heat and feel of her silken skin beneath his fingertips. He'd save that for another day. In this moment, she was his to claim.

He shifted position, her body following his naturally as the wind gusted. She shivered as his lips captured hers but not, he suspected, from the cold. The connection between them was real and alive, as electric as the strung holiday lights flashing overhead.

Joanne sighed and he deepened the kiss. He willed every lost word and phrase into his actions, letting her sweet, coconut scent fill his nostrils.

"Joanne," he whispered against her lips. "Don't go."

Episode 10

By Aubrey Wynne

Jojo shook her head. “I have too much work today. I need to get an article finished by tomorrow. And... And I’m meeting Lara tonight for dinner.”

She gazed down at her boots as the excuse came to her.

“Lara? The redhead from high school?” He rubbed his chin. “I vaguely remember a Lara O’Brien—tall, lean, on the track team. Pretty but no filter.”

She laughed and dared a glance up. Big mistake, his penetrating gaze locked onto her. It was hard to lie when he stared through her like that. “Yep, that would be her.”

“Where are you going? I’ll meet you both.” His hands rubbed up and down her arms and she could feel his heat through the thick leather.

“We were, uh... We were having a girl’s night out.” *Really?*

He tipped her chin up and she thought he might kiss her again. “I’ll stop in, buy you both a drink, and when you want me to go just say so.”

“Say what? It’s time for you to leave?” *Please god, let Lara be available tonight.*

“No arguments, no persuading you to change your mind.”

She bit her lip and dug her fists deeper into her pockets. “Okay. Seven o’clock at BLVD. It’s the old Boulevard Bistro on Lennox at 122nd. Look for us in a back booth.” What will she do if her bestie skips out on her? Or has plans? The tangled webs we weave...

Shawn tried to walk her back to the train; it had taken some quick thinking to get rid of him. She sat next to an old woman holding a shiny black vinyl purse and a crinkled, paper shopping bag. Her lips moved as she mumbled to herself and rocked slightly with the rhythm of the train as it hummed along the tracks. Jojo wondered if that would be her someday if she didn’t get over the past.

Her therapist said she’d made excellent progress. It was typical for victims of an attack to be leery of a relationship. Joanne had been lucky. A cop had scared the guy away just before the actual deed had been committed. The officer had found her half naked, beaten, and hysterical. The cuts and bruises healed in a few weeks. But she still struggled emotionally.

Shawn had been the first man to touch her without her soul going cold. His kiss had swathed her with a warmth that had been missing for over a year. *Move at your own speed. You’ll know when you are ready. Don’t be afraid of intimacy and it will happen.* Great advice but not so easy to follow.

She knew from Shawn’s kiss that he would want more. What if she broke down? Would he look at

her as if she were a freak? Most guys didn't want to deal with baggage and she certainly carried a big suitcase.

Fumbling for her cell, she tapped her foot and waited for the reassuring sound of Lara's voice.

"You almost blew off Shawn Davis for me? Are you crazy?" Yep, that's what she needed to hear. "Of course I'll be there. Tell me he's just as gorgeous."

"He's just as gorgeous." Better. The years had added a sensual maturity to him. A man with confidence who knew what he wanted.

"Ask him to bring a friend. Guys like that don't have ugly friends." Lara had many qualities but chastity was not one of them. "I'm in the middle of a dry spell."

"Um, no, and did I tell you we are exchanging Christmas presents?" Jojo held the phone away from her ear.

"And I'm supposed to buy you something? You owe me," she ranted. "I'll come by around 6:00 and make sure you look presentable. No turtlenecks or I go home. It's time, my friend, it's time."

Episode 11

By Caroline Lee

She'd been stood up a few times on dates over the last couple of years, but this one hurt the most. Joanne had been *counting* on this... but here she was, sitting in their usual back corner booth at BLVD, and her phone had just vibrated.

Sorry hon. Not going to make it. YOU GOT THIS!

She was really, really tempted to text something rude back to her best friend. How *dare* Lara bail when she so desperately needed her support? Only the knowledge that she'd pushed her friend into tonight stayed her hand.

Lara must've been waiting for a response, because when she didn't get one, Joanne's phone vibrated again. *Jo? It's going to be OK. I know UR freakin out, but you look hawt, and Shawn is going to love you.*

He already did love her, according to that super-awkward conversation from this afternoon. How in the heck was she supposed to know what to believe anymore? Not least of all about her bestie. *How do you know how I look?* Her fingers shook so hard—in anger, or sheer terror of facing Shawn alone?—that it took three tries to spell “know” correctly.

I knew you were there! Joanne could hear Lara's triumphant smirk in the words. *You always look hawt, esp when you do that messy bun. You wearin the little blue dress?* They'd gone shopping for New Year's Eve together, but Lara knew Joanne well enough to know that she'd wear it early.

Yes.

Good. Order a drink and think sexily.

Think sexily? That was her only advice? Joanne groaned, and dropped the phone screen-down on the sticky table, hoping she didn't have to deal with any more well-intentioned suggestions from Lara. She was gathering up her purse and scarf to escape when she saw *him*, pushing his way through the crowds with two drinks in hand.

Shawn stopped by the booth, and *dios mio*, did he look fine. The same thick coat from earlier, unbuttoned inside, and he must've stashed a hat someplace, because his hair was wonderfully tousled. More than anything, Joanne wanted to run her fingers through it... and judging from the wicked sparkle in his eye, he knew it.

“Your friend isn't here yet?”

“No.” Joanne scowled. “She bailed.”

“Good.” His smile was wicked too, but she couldn’t help smiling back at his good humor. Shawn slid into the booth across from her, and passed her one of the drinks, which she grabbed, grateful for some way to occupy her hands. “Just us then.”

“How was your Christmas?” Joanne almost winced at the way she blurted out the question, knowing that it sounded desperate and awkward. But she *was* awkward, and desperate for any conversation that wasn’t about his earlier confession.

“It was nice, thanks. Low-key. I hung out with my Mom and sister and her boyfriend. How about yours?”

The genuine warmth in his maple eyes told her that he wasn’t just making small talk, and Joanne felt herself relaxing. “Good.” She chuckled a bit. “Loud. The opposite of ‘low-key’, I guess.”

“Your family visited?”

“Yeah, and you know Puerto Ricans. Get a houseful of us together, and everyone has to talk louder to be heard over anyone else. It was hectic.”

“It sounds wonderful.”

“It was.”

They smiled at each other, and it seemed to open the gates to all the discussions they’d missed. Questions about what they’d been doing over the last years mixed with updates on old classmates and mutual friends. Shawn told her all about his new business and the traveling he’d done during college, and Joanne explained how she’d been able to earn money from her fashion blogging.

It was just like old times. She was perfectly at ease with him, loving the fact that he didn’t intimidate her the way other men sometimes did. In fact, two hours and another drink went by before she realized it.

But all good things must end, and when he checked his watch around eleven, he abruptly straightened. “I’m sorry, Jojo, but I have to cut this short. I have a project due in the morning.”

She smiled, refusing to be awkward again. “That’s okay. I’ve gotta get home too.”

“Can I...” His gaze flitted to the bar, and then the ceiling, and then the table, and that’s when Joanne realized he was hesitating. Mr. Sexy himself was awkward? Around *her*? “Do you have plans for New Year’s Eve?”

“Yes.” She was watching movies with Novia and Yana and eating popcorn. But when his face fell, she hurried to assure him, reveling in this new role as the *not*-awkward one. “But nothing that can’t be changed.”

“Would you... would you like to spend the night with me? I mean—” Those gorgeous maple eyes

went wide. "I mean, spend the evening. New Years. The evening of New Year's Eve... with me?"

Joanne smiled. "Yeah. I think I'd like that."

Episode 12

By Anne Lange

Shawn rolled his shoulders, checked the time, and did a few neck rolls. Cold was beginning to seep beneath his coat.

He'd been standing outside Joanne's door for ten minutes. He'd contemplated giving her a call more than once since he'd stammered out that invitation the other night. But every time he dialed her number and was about to hit send, a sixth sense warned him that if given the opportunity, she'd bail on him like her best friend and bailed on her that night.

And he wasn't taking any chances. Not this time.

After he'd asked her out, and she'd actually said yes, he'd been racking his brain trying to come up with the perfect way to spend the evening. He'd searched out a few of the big parties in town, considering this was the night he'd wine and dine her in style. But tickets were, of course, sold out at all of the popular spots.

He'd considered taking her down to Times Square where they could watch the ball drop with the rest of the world. But the thought of spending a private, intimate moment with the woman he loved most and thousands upon thousands of other people, didn't ring his bell.

He needed something better. Something meaningful. A place where she'd hear him when he repeated the words that mattered most. And hoped she'd be willing to say them back to him this time.

Shawn raised his hand and pressed the buzzer. And then he waited. When she didn't answer, he tried again.

"Coming!"

It was muffled, but it was her. He smiled as his excitement built. There was a hum in the air. A current of electricity that if you were brave enough you could harness it and take advantage of it. Shawn planned to use every special trick in the book tonight. He'd walked away from her once, never telling her how he really felt about her. He'd tried a second time, but she hadn't believed him.

Third time was a charm.

The door opened and there she stood, looking a little flustered as she smoothed her dress over her hips and juggled her coat in one arm.

"Wow, you do dress to impress," he said. She looked beautiful. And amazing. And he loved this woman.

Shawn completed a very slow tour of her body, starting at the top of her sexy mass of curls that

she'd thankfully left loose tonight, gliding over the same blue dress she'd had on the other night at the bar, and ending at a stunning pair of silver shoes that complemented the dress perfectly. They gave her a few extra inches of height that if he leaned in just so, she'd be at the right spot to meet, and match, his kiss.

Then he backtracked because the view was worth a second look.

A current worked its way through his body, but he saw her shiver.

"You look absolutely stunning, Jojo." He cleared his throat, dislodging the frog that suddenly roosted there.

Joanne blinked back at him. She gave him a scorching look and he imagined steam rising off her naked her body as he drizzled Champaign down the column of her throat and watched it flow over her breasts to roll harmlessly into the hot bathwater they soaked in.

Fuck. He needed a cold dip in the snow or a nice big California King. The King sounded really good right now.

"Um. Thank you. You look nice, too." She cocked her head. "Though I'm feeling a little overdressed."

He could fix that problem. He shook his head to get his bearings and to escape the mental soak he currently engaged in. "Ah, maybe. You might be cold in that."

"Where are we going?"

This was one of the most important nights of the year. A night to put the past behind and start over. Which was exactly what Shawn had in mind. And what better place to do that than to spend the evening at the same place they'd started this new journey.

"I thought we'd go to Rockefeller Center."

Episode 13

By C.A. Szarek

Joanne stared for a second, then looked down at her dress. “I don’t ice skate,” she blurted, then averted her gaze from his beautiful dark eyes when awkwardness hit her smack in the chest, making her bob in her silver Louboutins.

Then she cursed at herself. Where was the comfort, the normal ease of the way he’d made her feel the other night? *Get over yourself and get it together. You’re fine...with him.*

Shawn laughed and the warmth of it washed over her, helped her to breathe. And relax.

“There’s more there than ice skating.” He extended a hand.

“Who’s at the door?” Someone called. Either Yana or Novia, from the young tone, but Joanne’s brain was too fried to distinguish it.

Crap. She hadn’t even invited him in, but didn’t want to either. Like a hundred of her meddling family was holed up at her place. Okay, so she was exaggerating, but still. They *always* poked their noses where it didn’t belong, and this...thing...with Shawn was too new.

“Umm, lemme grab my coat,” Joanne muttered, ignoring her little cousin. As if they didn’t know, anyway. Both girls had spent the previous several hours lounging on her bed as she’d gotten ready, yammering on about hot guys and basically planning their weddings—amongst the occasional dressing or dating tip. And, oh, her wedding, too. With Shawn, who’d been dubbed, “the hot guy from ice skating.”

To Shawn’s credit, he only nodded. Didn’t bat an eye at her lack of manners. He helped her into her puffy jacket that didn’t really go with her outfit, and was therefore against her fashion sense, but it was warm, and if he wanted to go to Rockefeller Center, she’d need to be warm first.

Joanne pulled the apartment door closed. “Sorry.” She winced. “My family is...overbearing.”

His smile made her heart beat faster. “It’s okay. I get it. It’s only our second date. Third if you count Starbucks.” Shawn winked.

She stilled. *Date? It is, isn’t it?*

Glancing up at him resulted in their gazes colliding and locking.

Shawn hadn’t told her he loved her again, but it was there, in those lovely maple eyes, every time he looked at her.

Am I okay with that?

Joanne had been thinking about those words—okay, obsessing—since he’d told her that day in the park. She’d examined the feelings she’d had for him five years ago. Were they still there? Was her crush

just a crush or more?

More, of course. She'd always been a glutton for punishment. But in this case, did it have to go that way? The guy had said he *loved* her. If she didn't actually love him—attaching the actual word made her want to fidget in her Louies—it was damn close to that.

Always had been.

She gulped. Sucked in a breath when he released her gaze only to entwine their fingers and lean down.

Shawn brushed his mouth against hers. He'd pulled away before she could process the much-too-short kiss.

"I've been wanting to do that since you opened the door."

Joanne swallowed. "I'm okay with that." And she was. But, she wanted more than just the surface lip-lock. Like he'd kissed her in the park.

She'd been obsessing about that, too.

He flashed those dimples. "I'm glad."

"Do you want to do it again?"

Shawn paused, cocking his head to one side. Like he didn't believe he'd heard her right. "Well, yes. Jojo, I thought I made it clear, I want you. I love you."

There it was again. Those words that made her whole form flush hot.

She gathered all the courage she could and held it tight.

Joanne grinned and grabbed the collar of his tailored coat. At least her old friend-turned-new man had impeccable taste. "Then kiss me." She didn't care that she was in the hallway right outside her apartment. She should, because she *did* have a peephole, but if her family was that nosy, they'd just get a show.

He didn't hesitate to pull her to him, and she went, wrapping her arms around him and meeting his mouth when Shawn dipped down to her again.

She opened for him, and desire—not fear at his closeness—spread slowly downward, warming her belly, her sex, her whole body. Shawn delved deeper and she met his seeking tongue with her own.

The kiss went on forever, their tongues dancing, dueling, fighting for the lead, but Joanne wasn't bothered when Shawn won the battle.

Their bodies were melded, hips to hips, breasts to chest, but their stupid coats were in the way. They panted against each other, and she was overheated. Overdressed, too.

Joanne hadn't been with a man since before the attack, but she wasn't scared to take the next

step—as long as Shawn was on board. As long as it was with *him*. Only him.

He broke the seal of mouths and rested his forehead against hers. “I don’t want to go to Rockefeller Center.”

“Oh?” Joanne whispered, but a thrill raced over her body. Through his dress pants, she could feel his erection; it was tucked neatly against her. A tremor shot down her spine, but it wasn’t dread—it was desire.

“I want to take you to my place. We can grab some champagne and watch the ball drop. On TV, instead of out in the cold. Would you be up for that?” The look in his brown eyes was a mix of hope and desire.

And love. So much love.

Her pulse pounded in her temples, but anticipation dominated her body.

Joanne would have to tell him what had happened last year before they went to bed. She didn’t think she’d freeze in his arms, but maybe the heads up would help them both.

“I mean, I don’t expect...I just want you. I mean, to spend the evening with you.” His cheeks went pink and for a second he was that hot, but geeky, guy from high school again. Shawn shifted in his shoes, staring her down.

Adorable.

“I do. Expect more of what we just started. A lot more. As long as we go slow.” She’d tell him why when they got to his place.

His gorgeous eyes went wide, but he nodded. Shawn got down on one knee and grabbed her hand.

Joanne gasped.

He grinned, his composure obviously back. Shawn was still adorable though. “Relax, I’m not proposing.” His dimples made her return his grin.

“What then?”

“Jojo, would you do me the honor of ringing in the New Year with me at my home? And maybe, we can make plans for the year. *Significant* plans. For *us*. Together.”

She beamed and squeezed his fingers. “I think I’d like that.”

Shawn shot to his feet and tugged her to him again. He kissed her as if the ball had already dropped.