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CHOICES

Must Linda's sexual awakening destroy her marriage?



KORIN DUSHAYL

Author of *Broken* and *Shattered*

Choices

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DEDICATION

To my college chum, Laurie, who stepped up on short notice to provide the final copy edit.



CHAPTER ONE

The man pressing the entire stack on the weight machine stared at her. Linda ignored him and bumped up the speed on her treadmill, switching from fast walk to slow jog. She fixed her gaze on the television, but tuned out the chatter of the news anchors. Instead, she mentally reviewed the presentation she'd give in front of her boss' boss and the rest of the division in less than three hours. When the machine automatically slowed its speed twenty minutes later, she turned it off, figuring she could cool down on the way back to her hotel room.

Room service breakfast arrived precisely on time. She finished buttoning up her white silk blouse and opened the door. The waiter who set her tray on the small table rewarded her with an appreciative smile even before she added a tip and signed the voucher. Working at home saved a fortune in wardrobe expenses, but she enjoyed the opportunity to occasionally dress to impress.

Her phone rang while she reviewed printouts of her presentation slides over a mushroom omelet and sourdough toast. "Morning, Love. Did you sleep well?"

"You know I toss and turn when you're away from home."

She'd never known of anything that could disrupt Jason's ability to sleep, but the sentiment was sweet.

"Listen, you're probably getting ready to head to the office, but I wanted to let you know I saw an article on social media metrics and e-mailed you a link. Don't know if it will help..."

"Thanks, Love. The more ammunition I have the better. I'll check it as soon as I get to work."

"Hope it goes well. Love you."

“Love you, too.” Linda ended the call and dropped the phone in her laptop case.

Tucking notes and printouts into her bag, she slipped on the tailored red jacket that matched her slimming straight skirt, ran her fingers through her short, curly black hair to make sure it was dry, and headed down to the lobby.

Stepping out into the withering heat just as the shuttle arrived, Linda noticed the man from the fitness center waiting at the curb. He turned aside to allow her to board. “Thought you looked familiar,” he said with a wink as she slid into the seat behind the driver. “Phil Walker, Data Architecture, Seattle.” He sat next to her and extended his hand.

“Linda Aaronson, Customer Service.” She accepted his outstretched hand, but he turned hers palm side down and leaned over, bringing his lips close enough so she could feel their heat. She yanked her hand back and settled her computer case on her lap.

“From?”

She scowled. “Also from the Pacific Northwest.”

“Do you like coming back East this time of year?”

She kept her tone cold, but if he was a colleague she couldn’t indulge in her intense desire to tell him to go to hell. “I’m from Ohio. I don’t consider Chicago back East.”

He laughed, “When did you move West?”

“Late nineties.” Since Phil obviously was determined to make small talk, Linda pulled her tablet out of her bag. She downloaded the link Jason sent while the driver negotiated heavy traffic, steering the half-full, twelve-passenger van from their hotel near the airport toward the sprawling headquarters campus in Elmhurst. The article gave her additional data points for her presentation, and she ignored the rest of Phil’s questions to study it.



By the time she caught the shuttle back to her hotel, Linda only wanted to put her feet up, order room service, and talk to Jason. The exhilaration of successfully presenting to one hundred eighty-five people had dissipated as she participated in meeting after meeting after meeting throughout the day. Even lunch, a buffet in the board room, had been a meeting with her department managers. Tomorrow’s schedule was just as intense and would

end with no time to relax and only a few hours to sleep before she caught her crack-of-dawn flight home on Friday.

As the van pulled away, the driver stopped to pick up one more passenger. Linda placed her bag in the seat next to hers and leaned back into the plush leather even before she saw Phil the inquisitor climbing aboard.

"Mind if I sit here?" He braced himself on the seat back as the bus lurched forward.

"Yes, actually, I do." Linda didn't bother opening her eyes. "I'm wiped."

She felt Phil lean toward her and his breath against her ear. "I give a pretty mean foot massage."

Linda lifted her left hand in the general direction of his eyes. "Married."

"What does that have to do with one colleague helping out another?"

She felt his weight next to her and opened her eyes to see he now held her laptop case. She snatched it back.

"I'm off work. I just want to relax, *alone*, and get ready for tomorrow's meetings." She clutched her bag to her chest.

"Actually, I can help you with your project. I heard your presentation today. I've some ideas about how the company can improve its CRM databases that dovetail with your SM metric tracking."

Linda took a deep breath.

"Why don't we talk over dinner?" He leaned over and lowered his voice. "After, I'll make up for stealing you from your solitude by giving you a foot massage in the hot tub where we will be in full view of the rest of the guests."

She resisted rolling her eyes and decided not to claim she hadn't brought her swimsuit. Apparently, he accepted her not answering as acquiescence. When they climbed out of the van, he stated: "Meet you in the Mirage in half an hour."

Linda kicked off her pumps as soon as she reached her room. Even though they only had inch-and-a-half heels, her feet ached from standing on them most of the day. She stripped off her panty hose and washed the Chicago-area grime off her face. She wanted to change into jeans and slippers, but while she probably could have gotten away with that at a hotel restaurant in Portland, in Chicago one was still expected to dress "appropriately."

She settled for leaving her jacket in the room and slipping her bare feet into the comfy black ballet flats she wore while traveling.

She found Phil already seated in the center of one of the half-circle booths. Whichever side she chose she would have to sit next to him. She put her laptop bag on the curved bench between them and sat on his right side so she could wave her diamond and platinum wedding rings in his face.

Phil grasped the laptop case. "Here, let me move this out of your way."

Linda opened the zipper. "Not necessary. I want to have it available to refer to while we talk about CRM and social media."

"You don't want to spill food on your computer." He pulled it out of her hands and set it on the bench to his left. "I can always e-mail you any documentation you might find helpful."

She accepted the menu handed her by the waiter.

Phil perused the wine list. "Do you like white or red?"

"No thanks, I'm too tired. It'll put me to sleep."

The waiter asked, "Can I get you something to drink?"

"Ice tea, please." Linda handed him the dinner menu. "I'll have the onion au gratin soup and the garlic butter filet, medium rare."

"And for you, sir?"

"I'll take a cup of decaf, a Caesar salad, and the penne." Phil turned to Linda. "Too funny. They serve Seattle's Best coffee."

"I prefer Stumptown, myself. Tell me how you would improve our CRM?"

"I'd much rather find out how an Ohio girl ended up in Stumptown."

Linda waved her left hand under his nose. "I got married. We really do need a way to track SM metrics in the CRM database. Can you make that happen?"

"Of course. So, how did you meet your husband?"

Linda added two packets of sugar to the glass the waiter set in front of her and held her hand over the lemon while she squeezed it dry. "I've developed some spreadsheets that my people use to track their interactions with customers and prospects."

Phil offered her the bread basket and extracted a dark roll when she waved it away. "Did you have a long distance relationship for a while or did you just take the plunge and move across the country?" He buttered the roll.

"The spreadsheets don't integrate with the CRM. We have no way to incorporate the data except in the notes field, which is useless, of course."

"How long have you been married?"

Linda tilted her head. "Databases. That was supposed to be the topic of conversation."

He brandished his half eaten roll. "We've been working all day. Can't we talk about something else besides business, at least over dinner?"

The waiter delivered their soup and salad. Although the soup was mediocre, Linda devoured it. She hadn't realized she was ravenous until the scent of onions and Parmesan steamed up from her bowl.

Phil continued to ask personal questions, despite her refusal to answer them. She tipped her bowl, scraped out the last of the soupy bread, and slid out of the booth just as the waiter arrived with dinner plates held in cloth napkins. "I'll take mine to go, please." She stepped around and grabbed her laptop. "I only joined you because you said you wanted to talk about work."

Phil reached for the case, but she slipped it off the bench toward the floor and then pulled it to her, evading his grasp. After signing for her meal, she hurried toward the elevator, her case over her shoulder, balancing the take-away container and napkin-wrapped tableware in one hand so she could keep her room key in the other.

When she reached the fifth floor, she turned left, went half way down the hall, and waited. When the elevator didn't return, she ducked into the stairwell, walked down one flight, and passed the elevator to get to her room. Inside she put chain and latch in place before setting her dinner on the table and kicking off her shoes. She collapsed into the plush corner chair and dialed Jason on her cell before opening the take-away container.

"Hey, Love, how's it going back there?"

She smiled at the comforting sound of his deep voice. "Not bad. My boss really liked my presentation and so did the V.P." Linda unrolled the napkin. "Thanks for sending that article, those numbers helped."

"Fabulous. And, you'll be happy to know I finally talked to Richard about tenure again."

Linda sliced off a hunk of the steak. "And?"

"First time he didn't ignore the question. Said I could apply at end of term."

She swallowed a mouthful. "Think he'll support you?"

"No telling, but this is the most positive response I've gotten from him in three years."

She managed to get an "Mmm hmmm" through while chewing her second bite. Talking to Jason restored her appetite and she wished he were sitting across from her so she could rest her feet on his knee and cuddle with him after dinner. But then, if she were with him he would have found her something tastier to eat than overcooked steak with barely a hint of garlic.

"Tomorrow going to be any easier on you?"

Linda sighed. "Of course not. I have one-on-ones with my directs in the morning, then there's some sort of team building exercise all the afternoon. I'm guessing I won't get back here 'til after dinner."

"At least you'll be home for the weekend. Want me to get tickets for something?"

“Don’t. I just want to stay home and relax. We can order take away and stream a movie.” What she really wanted was to spend all day Saturday in bed making mad, passionate love to her husband, but she didn’t want to say anything that would put him on the defensive.

“Your wish is my command, Love.” He made a kissing sound. “I’ll let you go so you can get some sleep. Call me when you get back tomorrow night.”

Linda made a kissing sound. “Of course!”



In the morning, Linda waited just inside the second set of double doors that lead outside. She stayed there until the shuttle pulled up then dashed aboard. Phil followed her up the steps. He must have been waiting out of sight. She squished past a co-worker sitting on the aisle to take a window seat and opened the newspaper she’d retrieved from the front desk. Usually, she never read McPaper, rarely read anything in print, but it offered something to hide behind.

She managed to avoid Phil in her rush to get to her first meeting. After dinner, they had to queue up for the shuttles and Linda was lucky enough to get a seat on one of the first ones. She made short work of packing, but even skipping her workout she had less than four hours to sleep before getting dressed to check out and catch the shuttle to O’Hare.

*Learn what choices Linda makes and
how they impact her life as well as Jason's, and Phil's*

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I.G. Frederick trades words for cash, specializing in erotic and transgressive fiction and poetry since 2001. Her erotic short stories appeared in *Hustler Fantasies*, *Forum*, *Foreplay*, and *Desire Presents*, as well as electronic, audio, and print anthologies. Her novels receive high praise from readers, critics, and other authors.

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