



His Jewel

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Description: Welcome to Club Billionaire, where the rich and famous can work and play...

Josh Hall is lonely. So, when his friend and fellow billionaire Drew introduces him to Alana, the owner of a club exclusively for billionaires, he decides to pay for membership. Little does he know that this choice will change his life forever.

When her friend Alana suggests that Ruby Lock takes a job at Josh's company, she can't believe her luck. Josh has stolen business from her family, so it's time for her to go undercover and write a hit piece on the man.

But as time goes on, she finds herself falling for him, and the lines between truth and lie become blurred.

Total Pages (Source): 33

Chapter One

Josh

New York still freaked him out. Not that he'd admit it. It didn't matter that he'd lived here for three long years since moving from London, and before that, a tiny village in the heart of England. He looked out of his friend's skyscraper office building, inspecting the people below, just ants moving around, getting from A to B. That's how he felt. He couldn't remember the last time he had felt content, settled. Probably the last time he was in England, not in London, but back home, back with his parents, his brother and sister. The lonely billionaire. The press would have a field day.

Since going global with his company, Private Housing Corp, earning him the title of self-made billionaire, and the cover of Forbes magazine, he'd never felt more alone. Thank God for Drew, whose office they were currently lounging in, another self-made billionaire, owning his own brand of sportswear and exclusive membership gyms. They had met at a networking event when he'd first moved here and hadn't looked back since. The man was talking away—he'd certainly got the gift of the gab. Josh turned his attention back to him, surmising that he probably required him to reply soon, or Drew would question whether his heart was still beating.

"Sorry, bothering you, am I? As you sit in my office, drink my coffee, and stare out of my window?"

Josh ran his hand over his face, a three-day-old stubble coating it. He'd just been so busy recently he hadn't had the time to upkeep his shaving routine. Drew obviously had no such issues. Maybe he should take a leaf out of his book—in a three-piece suit

that cost more than most people's monthly salary, with his red hair perfectly slicked back.

"You need to get out, man." Don't I fucking know it. "You know you have people who can take care of business for you. Take a vacation or something. You can use my jet," Drew offered.

He waved a hand. "Nah, appreciate it, but I couldn't relax, so much to do." He sighed.

Drew rubbed the scar covering his left cheek, long and silver. He'd asked him once where it had come from, and Drew had blown him off, muttering something about his past. He'd known not to push him any further.

Drew sat forward on the couch, his hands clasped together. "Okay," he started, before reaching into his pocket and pulling out a gold card with black etchings, offering it to him. He took it.

"Club Billionaire," he read aloud, his eyebrows furrowing in confusion. "What is this?" He passed the card back to its rightful owner and Drew pocketed it with a grin.

"It's exactly what it looks like, my friend."

"A club for billionaires."

Drew clicked his tongue. "Bingo. I knew there was a reason you're worth the big bucks."

Josh suppressed the urge to sigh, swallowing it down like a bitter pill.

"What kind of club is it? Are we in the fifth grade or something? Going to sit around

and braid each other's hair?"

"Yeah, we do that on Wednesdays," Drew said, shaking his head. "Look, we were lucky we met, but at this club, you can make all kinds of friends with the right connections."

"I'm not sure what my bank account has to do with making friends—it's not some kind of requirement." As he said the words, he knew it wasn't true. He'd had trouble with people wanting him for his money in the past, in business and in his personal life.

No, he refused to think of Clara, the woman he thought he loved, the woman he thought had loved him, but was cheating on him with multiple people, living a life of leisure on his dime. Since then, love had held no appeal. Love made you weak, fragile. He'd seen other women since, mainly through dating apps, using an alias, and it had been purely physical. It was like the spark had gone out of dating and he was perfectly fine with that. Fuck, he didn't even have the time anymore. Where would they go? His office, in between his meetings, calls, emails, events ... no. He didn't have the time and wasn't interested in making the time.

"Isn't it?" Drew countered. "Wouldn't you feel so much better knowing they had plenty of zeros in their bank? Chances are high they aren't going to fuck you over."

"What does the club do exactly?"

Drew shrugged. "Anything."

"Anything?" he asked, with a raise of his brow.

"Literally anything, within the realm of the law, of course, we're not savages." He grinned.

His face must have been full of the skepticism he was feeling. Drew sighed and clapped him on his back, jolting his coffee precariously close to the edge.

“Look, just come by and meet Alana, the owner and founder. Weren’t you just complaining about not being able to find a decent personal assistant?” He didn’t wait for a response. “Well, Alana can find one for you like that,” he said, clicking his fingers. “She vets everyone to within an inch of their life, for anything and everything. The service you’ll get is second to none.”

“Why do I feel like I’m being indoctrinated into a cult right now?” He ran his hand through his dark hair. What did he have to lose? Maybe he should go. It’s not like he had any plans after work, except more work, and God knows he needed a new PA, preferably someone competent. He’d had to fire his last three, who thought the job would be easy, traveling to exotic locations and attending events. Sure, that was part of it, but what was the point if they weren’t getting any actual work done?

He drained the last of his black coffee, letting the bitterness dance over his tongue and seep into his blood. Drew stood, making his way over to his glass desk, shuffling through various papers, clearly in return-to-work mode. That’s what he liked about him. They were the same.

“Fine.” Then he remembered something. “My driver is off tonight, but I could—”

Drew glanced up, holding up a hand. “I can have Alana take care of that. A car will pick you up at 9:00 PM.”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:33 am

He nodded, moving to leave.

“Oh, and dress sharp. They have a dress code.”

He sighed. Of course they do.

Chapter Two

Josh

He had to hand it to Alana—she knew her cars. A vintage Rolls-Royce had arrived to pick him up at 9:00 PM on the dot. They were heading into the heart of the city. It came alive at night. As an observer he could appreciate it, appreciate the families, the couples, the friends, laughing and talking, not a care in the world. He could appreciate the buildings, the lights, the way the world seemed to meld and blend into a cocoon of color.

The car slowed, and the driver announced, “We’re here, sir.”

Josh thanked him and exited the car, straightening his black suit. It felt tight on his skin, restrictive. The cool breeze ate at his face as he took in his surroundings. Nothing special. Just some random building and a busy restaurant, looking to serve Italian food.

He frowned, getting out his phone ready to call Drew and ask what the fuck was going on, when the man materialized in front of him.

“Good, you’re here.”

“Yeah, I’m here. Where the fuck is here?”

Drew ignored him. “Follow me.”

He followed him into the restaurant, walking through the bustling kitchen, the smell of fresh bread invading his nose, and the din of shouts from the chefs invading his ears. He was about to grab Drew and pull him back, for he couldn’t be bothered with this bullshit, when they came to a set of double doors. There was a man standing there, big and muscled, with a communicator device in his ear. Private security. Why was private security guarding the basement?

Drew flashed his card and gestured to him. “He’s with me. Josh Hall. His name is on the list.”

The security guard looked him over, and then spoke into his communicator. After gaining confirmation, he gave a curt nod and opened the door to a flight of stairs. There were a few dim bulbs lighting their way until they came to one final door. When Drew opened it, it was like entering a whole new underground world. It was huge, with one main bar and restaurant area, thoroughly modern with black walls, gold finishings, and gleaming parquet floors. There were servers dressed in full suits with white gloves, serving drinks to groups of men and their female guests. He recognized some of them—they ran in the same circles, after all. There were various doors leading off from the restaurant, all uniform and glossy black.

“Alana’s office is this way,” said Drew, heading for a black door with a gold A on it.

He knocked once before entering.

The room was vast, with plush white carpets and mauve finishings. Actually, pretty

much everything was mauve—the computer, the flowers in a vase on the desk, even her books on the bookshelf. Alana herself was sitting behind the desk, clad in a green dress, with medium-length brown hair and sharp, assessing, hazel eyes.

“Alana, how are you this fine evening?” Drew asked, walking up to her and taking her hand and kissing it.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:33 am

She shook her head, but he could see her cheeks flush a slight pink.

“Allow me to introduce my friend Josh Hall.”

“Josh,” she said, holding out her hand.

He took it. “Pleased to meet you.”

She gestured to the two leather seats in front of her desk, and they took them.

She pressed a button under her desk. “Drink?”

“Whiskey, neat, please,” he replied.

Drew opened his mouth to answer, but she cut him off. “I know what you like,” she said, proceeding to make the order.

“Yes, you do,” said Drew.

He shifted in his seat. He had the distinct feeling he was interrupting something.

The drinks arrived not a minute later. He took a few deep gulps. It was damn good whiskey.

Alana steepled her fingers. “So, Drew tells me you have a PA problem. I can fix that for you.”

“I’m sure you can, for a fee, I’m guessing?”

“Of course,” she said. “I have my business, you have yours. But there are many other perks that come with being a member of my club, but seeing as you’re here, I’m guessing you already know that.” She took a sip of her own drink. “I’ll offer you what I offer all my members. A month’s trial. See what you think. If you’re impressed, which I assure you, you will be, you can sign up for permanent membership. I will need a deposit, of course, and I’m afraid it’s non-refundable.” She reached into her desk drawer and pulled out a contract. She pushed it toward him, her purple manicure clicking on the surface. “Look it over.”

So, he did. It all seemed pretty straightforward. A fee and, like she said, a month’s trial and if it wasn’t up to standard, he could leave, no questions asked. While she and Drew flirted, he signed his name to the contract. The instant his pen finished scratching, Alana stopped chatting and beamed, pushing a card toward him. Gold, Club Billionaire etched in black letters, alongside his name.

He raised a brow. “That confident I’d sign?” he asked.

“They always do.” She smiled.

He drained the last of his drink. “So, I’m guessing you’ll contact me when you find some suitable candidates?” he asked.

She waved a manicured hand. “Oh, I’ve already taken care of that.” She reached into her drawer and pulled out yet more papers. She sorted through them, her eyes scanning. “Here,” she said. “Your new PA.”

On the paper was a résumé. Ruby Lock. She was qualified. Very qualified. His eyes moved around the paper and then landed on the photo. Why wasn’t that the first thing he’d looked at? A woman, late twenties if he had to guess, was staring up at him

through ice-blue eyes, with long, chestnut brown hair, full, red painted lips and high cheekbones. This woman could be a model.

He swallowed, raising his gaze, trying to stop it from falling back down on Ruby.

“One candidate? That’s all you’re providing for me. You’d think with the deposit I just agreed to pay, that you’d be handing over a folder full.”

She leveled a stare at him. Why did he feel like he was in the headmistress’s office and was about to get told off? Maybe that’s why Drew liked her. Sadomasochistic asshole.

“Because she’s been personally vetted by me. And she’s a friend. She’s perfect for the role and is everything you’re looking for.”

He could’ve sworn there was a twinkle in her eye as she said that.

“Well, I’ll let you know, Alana. I’ll have to interview her.” The prospect of seeing her in the flesh made his heart race, though he’d never admit it.

Alana looked a little disappointed. “Of course. Now, please do stay and enjoy a drink on us.”

They’d been dismissed.

“Always a pleasure, Alana,” Drew drawled.

They made their way back into the main lounge and joined a table of club members, roughly eight of them. Introductions were passed around like napkins, but he couldn’t bring himself to care. Not only was the card burning a hole in his jacket pocket, but also Ruby. He had to take a deep glug of whiskey to stop himself from pulling out her

photo.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:33 am

Chapter Three

Ruby

The call had come out of the blue, but in her experience, all the best things did. And it was a sign. It was a sign that she was on the right path. Finally. It wasn't the job. Oh, no. It was the opportunity the job presented to her on a silver platter.

She squinted against the bright sunlight coming off the office building like a spotlight. Private Housing Corp. Run by the billionaire bastard himself. Oh, yes, she'd heard all about him. Her stepdad had filled her in on Josh Hall's shady dealings, stealing clients from his successful agency based in London.

In the reflection of the doors, she adjusted her outfit. She'd gone for a black skirt and blazer combination, the only pop of color coming from her red stilettos and lips. Hey, with a name like Ruby, she might as well lean into the color, right? Besides, it was kind of her trademark at this point. If any of her friends or family saw her without her red lips, they would think something was wrong, or she was ill. Hell, that was how her loved ones had guessed she'd broken up with Gary. She didn't think break up was an appropriate word for the heartache that coursed through her when she saw the messages from his colleague. The one she'd been concerned about for months, and he'd made her feel crazy for feeling that way. Now, a year on, the cheaters were happily married with a kid on the way, and she still felt as if she were putting herself back together. No, not because he was her soul mate, her one true love ... it was the betrayal, the lies, it made her question everything and everyone.

It also prompted her to move to New York for a fresh start. It wasn't like her family

was going to be far behind. Her parents were opening up an office in New York in less than a year for their luxury real estate company, finding the rich and famous houses. Her parents had offered her a job there after she'd finished college. She'd done admin for a few years and then moved to a PA position, but now, now, she was ready to actually use her degree. Journalism. She'd had a few freelance pieces published, but this was her big break. As soon as her dad had overheard her telling her mom about her call with Alana, he jumped on the call, telling her that she was to work undercover and write a hit piece on Josh Hall and all of his questionable practices. She'd laughed at him, actually laughed, but he'd been serious. And now, one week later, here she was, about to attend her interview with the devil himself. Okay, maybe devil was a bit of a stretch. Greedy, arrogant bastard. There—that suited him better. At least he was a Brit, that was the only thing he had going for him. She missed the accent.

She carried on using the window like it was her own personal mirror, running her fingers through her chestnut waves and tidying her eyeshadow with her pinky. The buzz of her phone brought her out of her preening reverie.

Alana.

Shit.

Her first friend in New York, and she'd made sure to keep her close ever since. She was a genius. She owned a lucrative club for billionaires. But that wasn't why she kept her close. She could trust her. She was a good, kind person. And she was deceiving her. She worried her lip. Thing is, once she proved what an asshole Josh really was, surely she wouldn't be mad?

She clicked the “accept call” button.

“Hey, A.”

“Hey, hey, ready for your interview?”

“Umm, yes?”

She chuckled. “Don’t worry, you’re more than qualified. In fact, you’re overqualified. I think his last few PAs have been models.”

Great, that boded well. “Only interested in looks. Another shallow billionaire, tick.”

“No, no, I’m pretty sure Drew told me they were temps from an agency. He’s on the search for a permanent employee now.”

“Right,” she said, slowly, tasting the word. “Look, I better go.”

“Well, good luck, not that you need it. The job’s yours. The interview is just a formality. Call me after!”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:33 am

“Will do, bye, honey.”

She hung up.

Ruby took a deep breath and then stepped inside the devil’s lair.

The devil’s lair was nice. Not that she expected anything less. The office was built over six floors, the lobby wide and welcoming, plenty of chairs, magazines, a coffee machine, and a fish tank, with tropical fish of all colors swimming about, the color glinting in the corner of her eyes, like tiny fireworks. A smiling receptionist told her to take a seat and that she would buzz her up as soon as Mr. Hall was ready.

A few minutes later, just as she was getting into an article about her skin type (combination, apparently), the receptionist called to her, handing her a pass to hang around her neck. “If you take the elevator over there, head to the fourth floor, and someone will be there to greet you.”

“Great, thanks,” she replied, hanging the visitor pass around her neck.

When the elevator dinged open, her breath caught in her throat. There he was. The devil. Damn, the devil was handsome. Who said he could look like that? Sure, she’d seen the odd blurred photo of him, but he looked like a model, with black hair that crested in waves, green eyes, and stubble littering his face. He looked like he hadn’t slept, though, for there were slight purple marks underneath his eyes. She scoffed internally. Probably out partying with random models. Don’t let a pretty face distract

you, Ruby, you have a job to do.

She stepped out of the elevator and shook his hand so quickly, it gave her a spark of satisfaction that she'd caught him off-guard. He quickly recovered, of course.

If she was honest, she was shocked he was greeting her himself. Don't the high and mighty have people to do that for them? Although, she supposed, that would be the job of his PA. Her. If she got it.

"Please follow me, Miss Lock." He turned on his heel and walked through the large office floor—it was bright and airy. She glanced around, drinking in the details. Everyone seemed ... happy. Chatting and laughing with each other, typing away at their desks. Appearances could be deceiving, though.

They reached his office, the only one with no glass doors, so no one could see in. He opened the door for her and gestured to take a seat in front of the large oak desk. His office was surprisingly simple, with a desk, chair, a small sofa and bookshelves. He liked to read? Nah, it was probably all for show.

"Thank you," she said, taking the seat and crossing her legs. She didn't miss his momentary glance at her. She had to stop her lips from smirking.

He pulled out her resumé. "So, you worked for Allan Group doing PA work?"

He obviously didn't seem to care that she worked for a rival company. Mind you, he didn't realize that she wasn't just an employee, but the boss's daughter...

She nodded. "That's right. I started with basic admin tasks and worked my way up."

She didn't miss the slight twitch of his jaw. She wouldn't be made fun of. She wouldn't be laughed at.

“Of course, working your way up from an admin job to a PA position might not seem like a huge leap for some people, but for us regular folk, I can assure you it is.”

He clasped his hands in front of him, all traces of mirth wiped from his face.

“My mom worked as a cleaner for most of my life, my dad as an office worker, and that’s where they met. I cleaned the office for extra money and worked my way up to a position there before all this...” he waved his hand. She watched as he bit the inside of his cheek, like he’d made a mistake in revealing this.

Well, that was unexpected...

“I see,” was all she meant to say, but then couldn’t resist adding, “what a sweet story ... about how they met.”

He gave a curt nod. “Now if we can move away from my parents’ love story and back to the matter at hand. What makes you think you’d be a good fit for the role?”

Okay, back to playing job interview.

She pushed a stray strand of hair from her face and sat up a little straighter. “Well, as you can see from my resumé, I have experience in this type of work, and I enjoy it. And I’m a hard worker.”

Oh God, she was out of practice. Way to go at selling yourself, Ruby.

To his credit, he didn’t snipe back at her, simply nodded, eyes glazed, looking bored.

“You’re hired.”

What?

She raised a brow. “That’s it? You’re not going to ask me any other questions? Other past jobs? What was the most challenging day at my old job? My hobbies...”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:33 am

He seemed exasperated. “I couldn’t care less about your hobbies. Miss Lock, do you want the job or not?”

Hell yes, I want the job, she wanted to say, to scream from the rooftops. I want everyone to know you for who you really are.

“Yes, I do.”

“It’s yours. Cathy will send you all the details and provide you with a start date.”

She was being dismissed. She held out her hand. His hand was warm in her own. When he looked into her eyes, there was something...

Stop holding his hand.

She made it to the door, but something made her turn around and look back. He already had his head bent over a stack of papers with his pen ready.

“Do you miss it?”

His eyes flew to her. “Miss what?”

“England? Home?”

A look of longing filled his eyes. “More than anything.”

Cathy accosted her on her way out. A petite woman with gold heart-shaped glasses who was just singing the praises of you know who.

“...just such a wonderful place to work. Oh, but you’ll see that for yourself! Josh is the kindest, most considerate boss you’ll meet. When my grandchild was born, he gave me a week of paid leave to go and visit my daughter, and he even paid for my flight!”

That was nice of him, I guess.

And Josh? His employees call him Josh? Was she supposed to? It all felt a little too personal now. Oh God, I’m not sure I can do this...

“Are you okay, Ruby? You’ve gone a little pale.” Cathy’s concerned gaze was fixed on her.

“Yes, fine, fine,” she said brightly. “So, when do I start?”

Cathy brought up a spreadsheet on her computer, along with a calendar. A few clicks here and there, and then she looked up, smiling. “How about Monday? I know it’s short notice, but you’re not employed at the moment, so you have no notice period to give.”

The weekend. Two days and then she would be working here. With him.

She forced a smile back on her face. It felt like it hurt. “Sounds great.”

“Wonderful! All the relevant checks have already been made, so just turn up here at 9:00 AM on Monday and we’ll go from there.”

She didn’t have the same last name as her mom and stepdad—she’d kept her

biological dad's surname even though he died when she was one. But her stepdad was her dad no matter what as he'd always been there for her. He'd earned the title of Dad. Despite the name difference, she still couldn't believe she made it through Alana's extensive background checks undetected. Well, maybe she hadn't. Maybe she hadn't done any checks at all due to their friendship.

Cathy continued, oblivious to her racing heart and guilty conscience. She may as well be wearing it like a sign. "I'll have some paperwork sent to you by the end of the day for signatures."

"Great, thanks, Cathy."

Before she knew it she was in the elevator again. Once she was edging over the lower floors, she felt a sinking in her own stomach. Maybe she wasn't cut out for this. She could back out. It wasn't too late...

Her phone buzzed. She should have known.

"Hey, Dad."

"Well, honey, how did it go?"

"I got it."

Page 7

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:33 am

“Of course you did.” She could almost hear him beaming over the phone. “Now the real work begins.”

Chapter Four

Josh

He could forget about work for the rest of the day. He wasn't going to get any real work done. Not when Ruby had been even more beautiful in person. Not when he'd been short and to the point with her. He glanced up, peering through his open office door at her as she got in the elevator. Their eyes locked and held for just a moment before the doors closed on her.

Ridiculous.

Absolutely fucking ridiculous.

He saw attractive women every day, some even threw themselves at him, but this was the one his brain has decided to latch on to.

He was clutching the pen too hard, the nib piercing through the paper. If that wasn't a sign, he didn't know what was. He finished up a few calls and meetings, before deciding he was done for the day. Turning off his computer, and making his way through the floor, he bade everyone a good weekend.

Widened eyes followed him out, as well as some calls to have a good one himself. His employees were going to think he was ill. He'd never left before any of them. He

had his dad's work ethic, first one in last one out.

The next day came quickly, like the sun was eager to chase away the moon and shine. Then the next. And then it was Monday.

She looked even more beautiful than the last time he saw her, in a blue dress that clung to her curves.

She's your PA. Stop.

He went through the basics, and she sat there with a smile, making some notes in a bright red notebook. Then, the day began. And then the next. And the one after. He found himself distracted when she was around, and that couldn't happen. Maybe he could talk to Alana, tell her it wasn't working out? No, that wasn't him. He couldn't take away Ruby's living. So, he found himself being short with her, like that was his only form of protection.

A knock at his office door brought him out of his wallowing.

"Come in."

Ruby opened the door, glancing down at her notebook. She barely looked at him, and for some reason it heated his blood.

"Okay, so you have a meeting at noon with the people about a potential client, the basketball player, and they'll go through everything he's looking for. You have a personal call at 2:00 PM with your parents booked in, and a meeting with the legal staff at 4:00 PM."

She didn't even look up as she closed her notebook, the one she was always scribbling in, and made for the door.

“You missed the 5:00 PM meeting. Maybe if you use your computer or phone, you know, technology from this century, that wouldn’t have happened.”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:33 am

Her gaze rose to meet his. It was like seeing his own fire reflected back in it.

He continued, it was like he couldn't stop himself, "So if you'd be so kind as to pay closer attention, please. If I'd missed that meeting it would have been bad for business. I know this is your first week, but there can be no mistakes."

What was that? Why was he being like this? It was like he'd never spoken to a woman before.

She bit her lip, and he had to look away. "Of course, Josh, we wouldn't want that. I promise I'll do better." There was an air of sarcasm in her voice, and he didn't blame her. He was being a dick. Maybe this would make her leave ... no, he didn't want her to leave, not really. This was his problem. He would do better. He had to do better.

She turned to leave, and suddenly he didn't want her to go. He stood, knocking his knees on the desk.

"How's your first week going?"

She turned around with wide eyes, likely wondering why he was being so hot and cold. Hell, he was wondering the same thing.

He gestured to the chair opposite his desk, and she sat down, hands clutching her notebook.

"Fine, thank you," she said curtly. Then she smiled, as if she couldn't help herself. "Cathy is great. I don't know what I'd do without her."

He nodded, smiling back. “She is.”

Then her gaze, hesitant and curious, flicked over him. “She mentioned that you gave her time off, and paid for her to see her grandchild?”

If she knew that, why was she asking? Likely wondering if he’s the same good boss that people have likely been telling her he is. Fair enough.

“Of course. She deserved it.” She did. She was one of his best, most loyal employees. He shouldn’t have favorites, but if he did, then Cathy would be number one.

Her lips parted slightly before she gave a tight nod. “Well, if that’s all...”

“Yes, of course. Thank you for the updates,” he said.

She nodded again, leaving his office.

Why did it feel so empty without her presence? The scent of peaches and cream lingered in her wake.

The day dragged on, and he attended all of his meetings, his mind somewhere else. When the inky black sky fully invaded the blue, it was only then he realized just how late it was. He blinked. He hadn’t even noticed the light leaving the world. Sighing, he turned off his computer. 8:00 PM. He needed a drink, and he needed food. Preferably in that order. Drew was probably at the club by now, three drinks in and flirting shamelessly with Alana.

He checked his phone for confirmation. Yep. Drew’s text glared at him.

Where are you? Am I being stood up? Josh, I’m so hurt.

He rolled his eyes. It was as if Drew's sarcasm leaked out of his text and into the room. He went through the office, turning off the lights as he went. He headed for the stationery cupboard to grab a few folders for the meeting he had the next day. He was distracted, glancing down at his phone at another text from Drew as he began to reply. His hand folded over the door handle, and he pushed it open, slotting his foot inside. He didn't even notice that the light was already on inside, glowing over all the stationery supplies. Which meant that he didn't notice how he tripped Ruby.

"Shit," he said, as her foot came into contact with his and they collided. She fell, but he managed to catch her, cradling her in his arms, his phone crashing to the floor.

Her face was inches from his, and her scent invaded his nose. He watched her eyes widen in shock—they must have mirrored his own expression. Her lips parted slightly.

She swallowed. "Sorry, sorry," she breathed, reaching down to grab his phone.

The sudden movement jolted her in his arms and their faces fell, their lips brushing over one another.

She staggered back, and out of his arms, backing up into one of the shelves. It was like the contact had the power of an electric shock, a current running through them.

Or maybe she was disgusted. His heart lurched at this, at this thought. He pushed it from his brain. It wasn't wanted there.

His heart was pounding as their gazes locked.

A small smile spread over her lips. "Do I need to call HR?"

What?

Page 9

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:33 am

“No. God, no, sorry,” he said, the words tumbling from his mouth.

She looked shocked and cleared the space between them.

“I was joking, Josh. Sorry, it was probably a bad one.”

He exhaled. “No,” he said.

She raised her eyebrows. “You don’t have to lie to me,” she said.

Why did this feel like a test?

He answered honestly. “I would never lie to you.”

Something in her expression, her eyes, changed, like a cloak had been pulled over them, shutting out the light. He had a feeling he’d failed.

“Well...” she said, her eyes trailing around. She walked to a shelf and grabbed the closest pieces of paper.

“That’s all you need?” he questioned.

He hadn’t had a second to think about the situation. What was she doing here so late? Although, he was here. But it was his company. His useless internal monologue was finally interrupted by her answer.

“Yes, I just had a few things to finish, but I’m going to head off now,” she said,

waving the paper in the air.

“Good,” he said, before he could think about what he was saying.

Her eyes widened again.

“I mean, I don’t want you working too hard. Or any of my employees,” he clarified.

“I care about everyone under my employ. No one should be working late unless it’s an emergency and then it’s time and a half.”

She nodded. It was her turn to use the word. “Good.”

He couldn’t help but think it was like she was looking at him for the first time. Her eyes were frank, assessing, like she was writing a novel about him, and she was studying her lead character.

He’d like to be a lead character in her life. Not just her asshole of a boss. But certain things aren’t meant to be.

She got to the edge of the doorframe.

“Have a good night, Ruby. Thank you for all your hard work. I know I can be ... tough, but everyone has been singing your praises. You fit in well. You have a real future here, if you want it.” His heart sped up at his last words, and only her answer, the right answer, could slow it down.

She turned back to face him. The light in her eyes had returned. She seemed to choose her next words carefully, like they held power.

“Thank you, Josh. I ... I feel comfortable here. I think maybe I could even be happy.” She said the last part as if it were more like a question to herself that needed

answering.

“I hope so,” he said, eyes boring into hers. They stayed that way for a few seconds, but it felt longer, like time had done him a favor.

She blinked, and the spell was broken.

“I actually have to get going,” she said, backing up. “You have a good night, too, Josh. See you tomorrow.”

He watched her leave the room, and didn’t move until he heard the elevator door ding. It was like it released him back into the realm of the living.

God. Why did she have such a hold on him? He ran his hands over his face and through his hair. He really needed that drink. He grabbed everything he needed, storing it in the relevant places, and then headed for the club, copious amounts of beer calling his name.

“So, how’s she workingout?” Drew asked, but his attention was elsewhere, his eyes flicking around the club like he was looking for something. Or someone.

He knew the feeling.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:33 am

The club was quiet, just how he liked it, with only a few people at the bar and a few tables. One guy even looked like he was working, typing away on his laptop.

“Fine. Yeah, fine I guess.”

Drew moved his attention back to him. He raised a brow.

“You guess?” Then he seemed to brighten up. “If you want, you can always talk to Alana. She might have a better candidate in mind?”

“No, no,” he said hurriedly, before taking a few gulps of his beer.

“Okay,” Drew said, frowning.

“Sorry, mate, she’s working out well. Alana did a great job. I’m grateful to her for finding Ruby.”

He was, that much was true.

Drew smiled down at his own beer, tilting it precariously. “Yeah, she’s the best.” He cleared his throat. “The best at what she does.”

He gave him a non-committal noise before standing.

“Going so soon?”

“Yeah, there’s a football match playing, don’t want to miss it,” he lied. He just

wanted to get home, have an early night.

Drew nodded.

“Coming? My driver can take you home.”

Drew waved him off. “Nah, I think I’ll stay here for a while. Maybe some of the guys will be along later.”

“Enjoy,” he said, giving him a pat on the back. It was obvious Drew couldn’t give a fuck about the other guys arriving. His attention was solely on waiting for the woman who ran this establishment.

Once outside, he gulped down the cool night air like water.

How had this happened? Both of their minds held captive by two women who had absolutely no idea. It would be funny if it weren’t so tragic.

Chapter Five

Ruby

It had been two weeks. Two weeks, and there was nothing to show for it. She sat cross-legged on her bed, the sun streaming in through the open windows. She took a deep breath, as if she needed the fresh air to help her find all of his secrets, or for Josh himself to spill all of his shady dealings. Except, what if there weren't any? Maybe her dad was mistaken.

She ran her fingers thoughtfully over the red gemstone notebook, her own thoughts drifting back to that day when she fell, and he caught her expertly. There was no denying that she felt some sort of ... heat? Charge? Between them. For her not to be able to put it into words was worrying—she was a journalist, after all. If this article went well, words would become her bread and butter. She needed to do better. But they had fallen into a comfortable rhythm ... working together. It was easy. And she was enjoying, actually enjoying, the work he had her doing, liaising with all these interesting people, the tradition she'd garnered with Cathy of them taking it in turns to bring each other coffee in the mornings, and Josh's obvious, clear, passion for hard work and—

Buzz. Buzz. Buzz.

She blinked a few times before accepting the call from her dad.

“Hiya.”

“Hi, love. I'm calling for an update.”

“Hi, Ruby, how’s it going? How are you? How’s New York?” she snapped back.

She heard his chuckle on the other end of the phone. She sighed. Sometimes the man was all business.

“Yes, those are all far more important questions,” her mom chimed in. “Answer them first.”

She really wasn’t in the mood for chit-chat. So, she filled them both in on a few updates, before turning to the matter of the call.

She took a deep breath. “Look, I can’t find anything. I’m sorry. These past few weeks, working with Josh,” she winced at saying his name out loud, it had been a swear word in her household for many years, “I think ... I think maybe he’s changed.”

She bit her lip at the silence on the other end of the phone. It was deafening but spoke volumes.

“You obviously haven’t been looking hard enough, sweetheart,” he said. “He stole our clients, our business. He made us lose millions. He’s a hunter, a poacher. We’d done all the hard work, and he stole it. Look, you know this, just because you haven’t come across any proof, doesn’t mean it’s not true. Now, I’ve sent something for you to print off. Just put the document in one of his desk drawers and take a photo. Then you can add it to your article.”

He sounded like he was simply asking her out for coffee, not to commit a crime. To falsify evidence.

“You can’t be serious...”

“For our family, for our reputation, for the sake of our business, I am serious. We’ll

be in New York soon and there can only be one king of the jungle.”

She heard the phone crackle, and then her mom was on the line. “It seems dramatic, and you don’t have to use it, but if you can do this for us, it would mean a lot. We love you, darling.”

Her heart was pounding. “Sure, Mom.”

That’s how she found herself standing in front of Josh’s office on a Sunday morning, paper in hand, staring at his office door like it was a bomb about to go off. Hell, she was the bomb. Could she really plant this? Could she really do this? Plant a document in his desk drawer of a fake email chain that basically showed how he poached a client? She closed her eyes for a moment. The seriousness of the situation seeping in.

Her hand closed over the door handle, the cool steel seeping into her body. She opened the door and went in, closing it behind her. It felt as though she was doing something forbidden, looking into a forbidden world, a kingdom without its king.

There can only be one king of the jungle...

God, her dad could be dramatic. There were hundreds upon hundreds of real estate companies in New York, fewer representing the higher levels of clientele, granted, but there would be room for both of them.

She opened his drawer. She’d snooped during her first few days and nearly got caught by the cleaner. But she found nothing, just some personal items, like letters from home.

She snapped a picture, placing the document inside his drawer. Guilt shouldn’t be stabbing at her insides like this. She should feel vindicated. But she felt anything but vindicated. Had her life come to this? What a mess she’d made of things. She caught

her reflection in the window. Her hair a mess, her teeth digging into her bright red lips. Who are you, Ruby? This isn't you.

She let a tear escape, sniffing back more. She'd never felt more alone in the big city.

She scrunched up the document, putting it back into her bag.

Time to go. She would call up Alana, get a cocktail, or maybe five, and drink her troubles away.

The thought of a strawberry daiquiri had her feet moving quicker, not looking where she was going. That's why, when she collided with him, she let out a scream. His eyes widened, his hands steadying her by the shoulders. His warmth seeped into her, as well as his scent ... his natural scent. He was in workout gear, tight muscle fit, he must have just come from the gym. His eyes widened even further when he caught sight of her face, the tears staining tracks in her foundation.

He reached out a finger and caught one, brushing featherlight against her cheek. She didn't know what was wrong with her, but she leaned into the touch, the warmth, letting her eyes flutter shut.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:33 am

No words passed between them. She opened her eyes, and she marked his frown of worry. Worry ... for her?

He seemed to be at war with himself, his jaw twitching, before he lost and pulled her toward him into an embrace. His hand fell on the back of her head, like they had been doing this for years. A sob escaped her, she couldn't help it, but this felt so good, to be held, to be held by him...

“Are you going to tell me what's wrong? So that I can fix it?”

Something like a chuckle escaped her. “Money can't fix everything.”

She felt him stiffen. “I'm well the fuck aware of that,” he said. “Tell me, what can I do?”

She broke their embrace, stepping back a little. He was asking to help her, and she was tricking him...

She waved a hand. “Just family stuff.” She sniffed, trying to regain some composure. Although she was pretty sure she had left a snot trail on his workout clothes. Wonderful. Could this day get any worse?

“Ruby,” he began, but she didn't let him finish his thought.

“Have a good rest of your weekend. I'll see you tomorrow.”

His brow furrowed. “What are you doing here?”

Her heart raced against her ribcage. She dove into her bag and brandished her notebook. “Forgot this.”

He chuckled. “Can’t have that. You’re always scribbling in that thing.”

Her heart lurched. He’d been watching her. He knew her.

Time to go.

“Yes, that would be a tragedy,” she threw over her shoulder, practically diving into the elevator like it was a life raft and she was drowning.

She sat at a table in Club Billionaire, one tucked away deep in the corner, away from prying eyes. She drained the last of her drink, staining her straw red. She couldn’t help but think that she had blood on her hands. She was a traitor, not only to Josh, but to Alana, who was roughly an hour late. She sighed and adjusted her red mini dress. She’d decided to dress up. After all, what else did she have to do? Sure, the club had a dress code, but Alana wouldn’t have cared if she turned up in a t-shirt and ripped jeans. Not if you were her friend. She would do anything for you...

That thought had her shaking her head, like she was trying to shake all thoughts of betrayal from her mind.

The server approached her. “Another, madam?”

She smiled. “Yes, please.”

She should take it easy. This was going to be her fourth, after all.

She gazed around the room from her vantage point. The club took her breath away every time she came here. It was so sophisticated—she loved all of the gold finishings. It made the restaurant and bar positively glow.

“Hi!” Alana breezed up to her. “Sorry I’m so late.” She had her hair piled atop her head in a bun, and wore a black dress, floor length and tight. Seriously, she could be a model.

They embraced. “It really is a skill, you know, to be late to meet someone in your own club,” she joked.

Alana grinned. “Well, it seems you’ve used my lateness to your advantage.”

With comedy level timing, the server brought back her cocktail.

“Want to take it to my office? We can chat properly in there.”

“Sure,” she agreed, picking up her drink and clutch bag.

As they made their way through the club, she could feel eyes on them. She recognized a lot of the club members, she’d even been introduced to a few. They were nice, regular guys (besides being billionaires) who seemed to enjoy being in a place where no one was chasing them around.

They were nearly at Alana’s office, they just had to walk through the final portion of the restaurant area. This was a classy place, so she tried not to wobble on her tipsy legs and high heels. A dangerous combination if ever there was one.

“Well, well!” a voice boomed.

Her eyes fell on the noise.

Oh, God.

Why? Why? Why?

Josh was sitting at the table, clad in a blue suit. He looked the best she’d ever seen him look. And that was saying something. The man was gorgeous.

“Hello, Drew,” Alana said, walking to the table. “And Josh, how lovely to see you.”

“Hello, boss,” she said, before she could stop her mouth from moving. “What are you doing here?”

Josh’s mouth twitched. “Hello, Ruby.” He didn’t answer her question. Probably because it was bloody obvious what he was doing there.

Alana made the introductions, and Drew shook her hand, laughing. He answered the question for his friend, slapping him on the shoulder. “Do you really think he wants to be bothered? We come here for the peace and quiet. Poor, handsome, billionaire, eh? I don’t have that problem, just the billionaire part,” he said with a wink.

He was attractive, with red hair, and a silver scar marking his face.

Alana opened her mouth as if to protest. Drew caught her gaze, and all mirth wiped

from his face.

She suddenly felt as if she were intruding.

Her eyes fell on Josh who gave her a smirk, as if to say, I know what's going on there. He dragged out the chair next to him, and she sat. Alana joined them, too. He poured a glass of water and pushed it toward her.

“Can’t have you hungover at work tomorrow, Miss Lock.” His green eyes cast over her, and she suddenly felt tipsy for an entirely different reason.

She took some gulps of the water.

“Yes, busy day tomorrow.” She had no idea if it was.

He swirled the whiskey in his glass. “It is,” he agreed. “And an even busier evening. There’s an event for the charity I chair. I think it would be good if you accompanied me.”

Chapter Six

Josh

Page 14

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:33 am

The words left his mouth before he could stop them. He didn't want to take some random woman. He wanted to take Ruby. He wanted Ruby...

It's what he'd been fighting against for the past few weeks. Fuck, it's what he'd been fighting against since he first saw her photo in this very club.

Alana and Drew had stopped their conversation to listen in, like this was some drama show, and they couldn't miss a second.

She opened her perfect mouth and then closed it before nodding.

"If you think that's best," she said.

If you think that's best? Fuck, not really the answer he was hoping for. He took a sip of his whiskey, not breaking her gaze. "I do."

Drew snorted. "Jeez, you know the club can sort that for you. Alana found you Ruby, who I've heard great things about, by the way," he said, looking at her. "But she can also find you dates, you know."

"I want Ruby."

Fuck. He didn't mean for it to come out like that.

Drew's eyebrows traveled so far up his hairline he thought they might be lost. He cleared his throat. "Well, that settles that."

“It’s a good experience for you,” he said, looking at Ruby. “You’ll get to network and see how the company gives back.”

He was trying to drag this conversation back into the realm of the professional and failing. Ruby’s chest was rising and falling, her cheeks flushed.

Alana was sitting back, looking like a smug cat. Like this was her chessboard, and she was just moving around the pieces.

“Mmm,” she murmured. “I don’t remember my da—my previous company doing that,” she said hurriedly.

This earned her an odd look from Alana.

Well, this had gotten out of hand. How had he made everything so God-damned awkward? He drained the last of his whiskey, his dinner was already long finished.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” he said, heading out the door. He didn’t want to know what kind of conversation would occur in his wake.

The day dragged on, especially as Ruby had called in sick, but not before instructing Cathy to tell him that she would see him at the event tonight. Sick. Right. It had nothing to do with the copious amounts of alcohol she was consuming last night. He’d texted Drew to escort her home, or at the very least, to pay for her taxi. He didn’t like the thought of her out on her own. Vulnerable. He’d struggled to get the image of her tears out of his mind. Mercifully, the hands of time moved faster into the afternoon, and then that bled into the evening. He’d offered to pick her up, but she’d declined, telling him she’d meet him at the event.

He sat in his limo, looking at the world, the red carpet. It always seemed ludicrous to him. It wasn't a movie premiere, it was an event to celebrate the non-profit Fight Homelessness charity he was on the board of. But the pomp and circumstance, the press, the vultures, were all a part of that, raising awareness, getting the articles out there, spreading the word.

He had to play the part.

He exited the limo, straightening his suit, and squinting against the flashbulbs going off all around him. Then there was something else in his sight line. The one all light shone around. Her.

She was wearing a floor-length gown, tight to her body, with a long skirt flowing out behind her. It was silver, like starlight, like lightning in the night. Her hair was loose in tumbling waves, begging him to run his fingers through it. Of course, her lips were ruby red, and just about the most tempting thing he'd ever seen.

Get a grip.

She caught his gaze and held it in the palm of her hand. Her lips parted as she traced his suit, his face, landing back on his eyes.

He walked toward her, his feet begging him to move faster.

"Hello, boss."

"Hello, beautiful."

She made a little sound in the back of her throat. "I could say the same about you."

His lip twitched. "Beautiful?"

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:33 am

“Oh, come on, you see your face every day, you know it’s perfect.” She blushed. “I’m going to stop talking now.”

His smile grew bigger and then fell. Clara. Hanging off the arm of a billionaire thirty years her senior. She looked at him and her dark eyes bulged, making to walk over. No. He couldn’t have that.

He took Ruby’s hand into his own. She looked up at him, eyes full of questions.

It stopped Clara in her tracks.

“Just ... hold my hand. My ex is here, and I don’t need that drama today.”

Ruby glanced over at where Clara stood. “I can do better than that,” she said, her eyes flashing. Before he knew it, she was kissing him, just a light brushing of lips on his own, but it set his blood ablaze.

She pulled back. “There. That will make her jealous, I’m sure.”

He tried to drag his thoughts back to coherent ones that made sense. Because apparently Ruby had the power to rid him of that.

“Jealous? What? No.” He tightened his hand around hers. “You’ve got the wrong idea. She... used me for my money. I thought we loved each other but...” He used his other hand to run through his hair, seeking something to do, his limbs feeling like useless things. Was he really doing this? Explaining this sad part of his life to this beautiful woman? Who, let’s face it, probably thought he was a hot and cold asshole.

He licked his lips. He could taste her lipstick. “No, I couldn’t give a fuck about that. About her. I just wanted her to see that I was with someone. That I couldn’t be bought.” He tilted his head, preparing himself for what he was about to say next. Her beautiful eyes sparkled. “I do give a fuck about kissing you, though, Ruby Red. And I want you to hold that thought until the night’s over.”

Chapter Seven

Ruby

She couldn’t sit still. The night felt like it was charged, electric, after his admission. He’d asked her to hold that thought, as if she could pause it, but she could do anything but. She’d cursed herself for not finding her voice, for not telling him she felt the same. She couldn’t even believe that she’d kissed him ... but the second he’d told her about his ex, about how she’d treated him, and he’d gotten this look in his eyes, all she wanted to do was to take it away. So, she did. But now she wanted more.

The room was giant, bustling, with people mingling everywhere. She found herself by the bar. Everyone seemed to want to shake Josh’s hand, to have a conversation with him. She knew what she wanted to do with him...

She caught his gaze across the room. It was as if he could sense her thoughts. He shook the hands of the group he was talking with and headed for her. Her breathing quickened as he did, her chest rising and falling. She hoped to God he couldn’t tell.

“Ready to go?” he asked.

“Never been more ready,” she answered, taking his offered arm as they made their way out to his car.

She shivered against the cool night air and one second later his suit jacket draped

over her shoulders. Yeah, she was in trouble. Who was this man? He was more like an angel than a devil. She could curse her past self for thinking anything less of him, for prejudging him.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“No problem.” His gaze locked on hers. “Though I have a feeling I’ll be taking it off you soon.”

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:33 am

“You better,” she said.

His eyebrows twitched, and he masked a grin as he greeted his driver. He held the door open for her. A limo. Figures. She’d never been in a limo before. Sure, her family was wealthy, too, with a couple of million in the bank, but that wasn’t her money. She had always prided herself on making her own money.

“I think I lost you for a second there,” Josh said, reaching out to stroke her cheek.

“Well, now you’ve found me, what are you going to do with me?”

He twisted in his seat. She liked that she could make him squirm.

“There are so many things I want to do to you...” he trailed off, tucking a strand of her hair behind her ear. “Are you sure about this? I’m your boss, I don’t know if that’s okay...”

She covered his mouth with a quick kiss. Mainly to shut him up. But because there was also a tiny voice in her head telling her what a bitch she was. The caring billionaire worried about the power imbalance between them when she was just masquerading at her job.

But was she? She liked this job. She liked him. Heck, she really liked him.

A half-smile formed across his face as he clicked the privacy screen shut. She moved to unplug her seat belt, but he shook his head, hand covering her own, before kneeling on the space in front of her.

Her heart was hammering against her ribcage.

“What are you doing?” she asked, breathless. This man was making her breathless.

He raised a brow, a wicked grin covering his mouth. It was the sexiest thing she’d ever seen. “Isn’t it obvious?”

He sure made it obvious when her dress was being pushed up to her knees and her legs were being spread for him. He peppered kisses up her legs, sometimes biting and chasing the small hurt away with a kiss or a lick. He had her squirming, had her fisting her fingers through his hair.

She said his name, over and over and over, and he chuckled against her.

That wouldn’t do. She needed him now. She nudged his head up with her thighs so that he had to meet her gaze.

“Please.”

The word seemed to unleash something in him, as her underwear was ripped, literally ripped, from her body and her legs were being splayed even further apart so that he could feast. That was the best way she could describe it. He was like a man starved and she was the only sustenance left. His tongue, hot and long, coursed through her, changing rhythms and patterns depending on what angle she tilted to or what noise she made in the back of her throat.

He came up for air, and she could have screamed at him.

The darkness in his eyes stopped her, though. She’d never seen anyone look at her with pure heat, pure desire.

“You taste ... incredible,” he ground out before getting back to work.

Sparks were traveling through her body, along her spine, her legs locking together. She couldn't hold it any longer. She let out a scream and tightened around him. He continued licking as she took her pleasure.

Her breath was rising and falling, she was spent. But she still needed more. She needed him.

She reached for him blindly, and he smiled, wiping her from his mouth.

“Hang on Ruby Red, just a few more minutes. We're nearly at my place. I can't fuck you properly in here.” He nibbled her ear and pulled her close. She tucked herself into him.

Time couldn't move fast enough.

She hadn't known what to expect from his apartment, but it was one thousand times nicer. It needed a woman's touch, she conceded, and maybe a splash of color, but it was perfect, all huge windows, gleaming floors and comfy furniture. She wanted to look around a little more, just to satisfy her nosey self, but there were many more important things to be doing. It seemed Josh agreed.

As soon as the door clicked shut, her back was against it, and he was over her, drinking her in. His lips trailed from her neck to her cheeks and back again, always moving across her mouth, so, so close, but never touching it. It was torture. She would tilt her head and move toward him, and he would chuckle, moving just out of her reach.

Her chest heaved ... she could feel her cheeks getting warm.

“Josh—” she began, intending to tell him off, when the wind was knocked out of her with the force of his kiss. The moan that left her throat was a noise she had never heard herself make. And all from a kiss? He hadn’t even touched her properly yet...

Page 17

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:33 am

As if he could hear her thoughts, he chuckled against her mouth, his finger trailed to the inside of her legs, finding no underwear after he'd ripped them off in the limo. She was glad for it, she wanted nothing separating them. He groaned at the wetness he found there, pushing one finger, two, inside her until she was throwing her head back and panting his name.

"Come for me," he whispered.

That was all it took. She tightened around his fingers, and she rode them through her climax.

The only thing on her mind now was him. She had to touch him.

She barely registered that they'd made it to his bedroom. She pulled off her dress and threw it to the floor, backing toward the large bed in the center of the room. His sparkling gaze followed her, and she smiled, beckoning him over and pushing him to the bed.

His brows raised, and he smirked, but she made sure to wipe that look from his face, as she traced over his hardness.

Wow.

Her mouth dried.

He was big.

Had she expected anything less? Nope.

Now she was eager, hungry, yanking his clothes off with force before kneeling and taking him in her mouth. She couldn't even get halfway down him, but he didn't seem to mind. His hips bucked at the first point of contact, and he groaned, letting his body relax into the bed as she found the rhythm he liked, coating him with her tongue. After a minute his fingers found her hair, and he set the rhythm, sharp, pushing her deeper, past her limits, but she weathered him. She didn't usually enjoy giving oral, but he'd changed her mind. Watching his pleasure, seeing the uptight businessman come undone was her new favorite thing.

He gasped. "No, stop, not yet," he said, switching their positions, so she was flat on her back on the bed, waiting for him, waiting to be filled.

He rummaged in his side drawer and put a condom on.

"Hurry, please." She didn't care how desperate she sounded. She'd wanted him, needed him, since the limo ride.

He grinned. "Greedy, aren't we?" he teased.

Her eyes must've conveyed something, that she wasn't in the mood for joking now, for his own gaze darkened. He kissed up her body, over her naked breasts, before finding her mouth. He was over her now. Finally.Finally.

His hardness pushed at her entrance, the first inch of him sliding inside. She opened her legs even wider and the rest of him slid in.

"Fuck," he moaned, hovering above her for a second. A second too long.

She moved her hips in desperation.

“Okay, okay,” he breathed, looking down on her as he rolled his hips, gently, leisurely, before building faster and harder. She took his face in her hands, so that their breath, their moans, combined.

“More,” she demanded.

He pulled out so quickly she didn’t even realize what was happening. He flipped her onto her front and slid back inside with one long thrust. A scream tore from her throat as he angled himself perfectly, his fingers finding her clit as he thrust himself into her.

Nothing had ever felt this good. She was close, so close. Her spine tingled, letting her know an explosion was about to happen.

“I-I’m going to—” she stuttered.

His breath was coming so fast. “Together,” he ground out, his commanding tone seeping down into her, and she couldn’t hold it. She screamed, and he moaned her name, twitching inside her. He sagged on top of her, careful not to put his full weight on her body. She twisted to face him.

The words spilled from her lips. “I really like you.”

He chuckled, dragging back her hair.

“I really like you, too.”

She cupped his cheek. “I don’t want this to end,” she admitted.

His eyes sparkled. “It doesn’t have to.”

After, when they were both entwined in the sheets, Ruby willed her racing heart to calm, calm, calm. But something about Josh made her feel anything but calm.

God, when had this happened? More importantly, how had she allowed this to happen? The thing is, she hadn't allowed it. It had simply, well, happened. Because of Josh. Because he wasn't who her parents said he was, he was anything but that.

Her heart lurched at the phone call she would have to make, the conversation that would have to be had. She groaned internally. She could only imagine how that would go. And then there was the small matter of betrayal ... she'd have to tell him, wouldn't she? How would she even begin to tell him? Oh, hey, yeah, so I only took this job so I could write a hit piece on you for my family. Plus, I falsified evidence and took a picture of it in your desk drawer to possibly use as part of said article. The article that would destroy his business, his reputation, him. She was the worst. She didn't deserve him.

His fingers stroked across her cheek. Her eyes fluttered open at the contact.

"Hey, what are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking about you." She swallowed. "But I am also thinking how thirsty I am."

He grinned. "Come on, I'll get you a drink." He held his hand out and helped her out of bed. He pulled on his boxers and passed her his shirt. It was a dress on her.

“I could get used to this,” he said, his gaze tracing her up and down.

“Me, too.”

They padded to the gleaming white kitchen, and he filled two glasses of water and added ice.

She sat down on a bar stool. “It’s so quiet here. I can almost hear myself think.”

He joined her, passing her the drink, which she drained greedily, the ice waking her up like a shot of caffeine.

“It is,” he agreed after a while. “It can get a little ... lonely.”

Her gaze flew to him, and it was like she was seeing him. Really seeing him. She put her glass down and stood in front of him, so they were eye level.

“I know what you mean. The loneliness can feel crushing sometimes, no matter how often I call my family or hang out with Alana. I’m still coming home to an empty apartment at the end of the day. The thing is, you told me about Clara, I had a Clara. His name was Gary. And it’s all well and good having someone to come home to, but not if they are wrong for you.” She took a deep breath. She didn’t want to scare him off, but she was speaking the truth, and it was as if it wanted to fall from her tongue, just not the whole truth, not yet. “And I’d like to do it with the right person.”

He leaned in and brushed his lips over her own, his fingers twirling in her hair.

“And what makes you think I’m the right person?”

She tilted her head. “Because you’re good and kind, and not at all how I thought you’d be. Because of how you make me feel. And have you seen yourself? You could

be a model if your business doesn't work out."

Two pink spots appeared on his cheeks. She kissed them.

He took her hand. "You know, from the second Alana showed me your photo, I think a part of me knew—knew it was going to be you."

Her breath caught in her throat, and her stomach dipped like she was on a roller-coaster ride. It was like too many emotions were warring at once, and she didn't know which way the ride was taking her. She shut her eyes against it, a tear rolling down her cheek.

Then his lips were on it, brushing it away.

"Please don't do that. I hate it when you do that."

Her lips twitched into a smile. "They are from happiness, Josh."

"Hmm, well, that I can live with." He stood, scooping her up. "Come on, let's get you to bed. You have a very demanding boss, and I'd hate for you to be late for work."

"I'm not tired yet," she whispered in his ear, stroking his arms and raising gooseflesh.

When he slid inside her for the third time that night, she felt as if she could do this all her life.

Chapter Eight

Josh

“Good morning, Josh, Ruby,” said Cathy. “Don’t you two look happy for a Tuesday,” she joked.

Happy was an understatement. He couldn’t remember the last time he had felt passion, excitement, contentment, for anything that wasn’t work. And it was all because of this woman next to him. He stole a glance at her. It was all he could do not to stare at her all day, she was like the sun—he flocked to her.

Ruby grinned and answered for them both. “Well, I can’t speak for Josh, but I had a lovely evening.” She passed Cathy a large beverage that she’d made him stop for on the way over, some kind of spiced atrocity that hurt his nose, but it drew an appreciative squeal from Cathy.

“Oh, yay, pumpkin spice! Thanks, Ruby, you really are so good to me. Good call on hiring her.”

Their eyes met. Hers sparkled. “Yes, I’d say it was a good decision on my part. Speaking of, I have a few things for you to look over, Ruby, if you wouldn’t mind coming into my office to discuss it.”

She smiled. “Of course.” Her eyes never left him. “Enjoy your drink, Cathy.”

He allowed his gaze to flick back to Cathy, as he caught the slight raise of her brows

and shake of her head. Did she know? Did it matter? It wasn't like this was some fling.

The instant the door was shut, Ruby threw herself into his arms.

He silently thanked himself for not putting glass into his door. He didn't like to be watched. Especially not when he was with Ruby.

He slid his arms around her, cupping her behind. This kiss was featherlight and tender. And silent. It had to be. When they both came up for air, they rested their foreheads against each other, sharing breath.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, hopping down from his arms. They now felt empty.

"What is it?"

"Your sister's top! I don't want to crease it—it looks expensive."

He smirked. "It was. Only the best for her."

After she'd spent the night and they'd woken up late, Ruby didn't have time to change, so he'd offered her some of his sister's clothes that he kept for when his family visited.

He sat in his office chair, opening his arms for her. She curled into him like they had been doing this forever.

Buzz. Buzz. Buzz. A video call.

He raised his brows. "Speak of the devil..."

Her eyes flew to him. “Your sister? I’ll leave...”

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:33 am

“No, stay, I won’t be long.”

She tucked herself out of sight of the camera.

He opened it to see his entire family sitting there at their dining room table. Shit. He’d forgotten all about their catch up.

“Hey, Pete, Lola. How are you? Where’s ... ah, hi, Mom, Dad.”

Their laughter exploded out of the speakers.

“Sorry, interrupting you, are we?”

He frowned at the scene until they stopped. His mom beamed, looking excited, as did Lola.

His brother spoke up. “Well, tell us about her, then, unless you’ve decided that red lipstick is your new thing, which, hey, no judgment.”

He wiped his mouth. Shit. The reddest, ruby red lipstick. He was covered in her. Ruby.

Her eyes widened before wincing. “Sorry,” she mouthed.

He muted the call.

“No, no hiding. I don’t want to hide this, if you don’t?” His heart hammered against

his ribcage. This was so new, so fresh, should he even really be asking these sorts of questions? Plus, he was having this conversation in front of (granted, he was muted, but still) his family.

What the fuck was happening? He ran his fingers through his hair and her hand caught it, stopping the motion.

“No hiding,” she confirmed, sitting up so that she was sharing the screen with him.

He put his arm around her, squeezing tight, before clicking the “unmute” button.

“This is Ruby, my girlfriend.” His throat bobbed up and down, but she didn’t flinch, didn’t even look at him, she was looking at his family.

“I’m very pleased to meet you all.”

“We’re so pleased to meet you, Ruby. How beautiful you are. Josh, you’re a lucky man.” His mom smiled.

“I see we have the same taste in clothes,” said Lola, “So I think we will get along just fine. Oh, let’s go shopping when we next come to visit, yes?”

“I’d love that.” Ruby grinned.

“So, how did you two meet?” asked Pete.

Ruby glanced at him. He nodded. “I’m his PA, so we met at work. Not so dissimilar to you,” she said, smiling at his mom and dad.

“That’s right.” His dad nodded. “Sometimes love comes out of the most unexpected places.”

Love.

Love.

Oh, God, they didn't know how new this was ... but love? He could see himself falling for her.

His hand tightened around hers, and they shared a smile, one only meant for the other. Again, it just so happened to be in front of his family, watching like a captive audience to some romance movie. God, he hated being watched. The problem was that Ruby had a habit of making it feel as if they were the only two people in the world.

He cleared his throat. "Great to talk to you all, but things are busy here."

Pete scoffed. "Yeah, we can see that."

That earned him a smack on either arm from his mom and Lola.

“Hey!”

He missed his family.

“Let’s arrange another catch up soon. I love you all.”

A chorus of I love you ensued before the call ended.

He exhaled, his breath tickling his hair.

“So ... you’ve just met my family.”

“And you’ve just claimed me as your girlfriend,” she said, wrapping herself even tighter against him.

He chuckled against her head. “I like the sound of that.”

He groaned. The ding of an elevator bell signaled the start of the working day. But now he would have something, someone, to go home to. Someone waiting for him. Her. This thought had him burying his face deeper into her.

It was as if she could sense his thoughts. She untangled herself from him, before dropping a ruby red kiss on his cheek. “There, now I’ve made my claim.”

She got to the door.

“Pizza for dinner tonight?”

He grinned. “Sounds perfect.”

It did.

Chapter Nine

Ruby

The past few months had felt like a blur, a big, beautiful blur full of light and color and fun. She'd practically been living at his apartment. He'd already asked her to move in with him, but she'd refused, stating it was too early. But it wasn't. She'd never wanted anything more, but there was that one thing ruining the otherwise perfection. Like a looming storm cloud on a bright, sunny day. It chipped at her heart like a chisel, but the longer this went on, the worse it got. But she couldn't bring herself to be brave. She couldn't bring herself to find the words. Because she would lose him.

“Shit!”

The coffees she was carrying spilled on her shoes. Look where you're going, Ruby, she scolded herself.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:33 am

She was late. Not that it really mattered, she was banging the boss, but still. She entered the elevator and bit her lip.

Banging the boss ... more like in love with the boss, which was far more dangerous. They hadn't said the words yet. She didn't even know if she could. But what she could do was talk to her family, her dad. She'd been avoiding their calls the last few months, not only because she'd been in her love bubble, but because she needed to tell them that she wasn't going to write that fucking article. It was all so stupid. She had a 10:00 AM call booked in today. She was going to take it on a walk and finally, finally, close this chapter.

The bell dinged, opening to the bustling office. She plonked Cathy's coffee on her desk with a grin. "Sorry, Cath, just kept it simple today with a latte."

Cathy looked up at her, her usual bright eyes dull. "Oh, just what I needed. Things are so busy here today, with the Matterson merge."

The merger was all set to go ahead. She'd been working on filing the last of the paperwork for the past few weeks. Everything had been kept private, with only a select few employees knowing about the potential merger. It would take the company to new heights and she couldn't have been prouder of Josh.

"Let's go out soon," she offered to Cathy. "Maybe have a few drinks stronger than caffeine."

Cathy tucked her pencil behind her ear. "Now that sounds like something I can get behind."

“Don’t work too hard.” She offered her a departing grin, and headed for her own desk, moved to be just outside of Josh’s. She was his PA, after all. She didn’t know how many people they were fooling, but they seemed to be flying under the radar so far. She took a sip of her coffee and nearly spat it out. There was a bouquet of red roses sitting on her desk. Hmm, more like crouching, waiting to pounce. It was huge. An assault on the senses. And the best thing she’d ever seen.

So much for flying under the radar. She set her latte and bag down, hands reaching for the card.

Happy four months. The best four months of my life.

Josh.

She bit her lip, her finger tracing over the card.

Then, trying to assemble any modicum of cool, she smoothed down her skirt and knocked on her boss’s door.

“Come in.”

His eyes flew up from his computer, lighting up when they saw it was her.

She shut the door and ran over to him, kissing him tenderly, deeply.

“Thank you,” she whispered against his mouth. “And happy four months to you.” She wiped her lipstick from his lips, tidying him up.

She wriggled from his arms, but he pulled her back.

“Hey, where do you think you’re going?”

She grinned. “Back to work. You have a meeting in five minutes, boss.”

He glanced at his calendar, sighing. “So I do.”

“So you’ll just have to hold that thought until later,” she said, biting her lip in the way she knew drove him crazy.

His eyes darkened. “I don’t think I’ll be able to think of much else.”

“Now why would I want you to be thinking of anything else?” She smiled and left the room.

The clock looked languid, slow, that’s how she felt time was passing. When 9:55 AM hit, she headed for the door, her phone clutched in her hand, ready to disappoint her family. She found a park bench mercifully empty and settled in for the scolding of her life. She had to remind herself that she was an adult, for God’s sake. They could scold all they like.

Her phone vibrated, and she clicked the answer button before she could change her frazzled mind.

“What is it, honey? You said you had something important for us. Have you found something?” Her dad’s eager voice bounded through the phone like an excitable puppy.

Honestly, is this all he cares about?

“Hey, Mom, Dad, how are you?” She sighed internally.

“Oh, fine, fine.”

“Yes, all good here, darling,” said her mom.

“So, the reason I’m calling you is that I have found something out, and that’s nothing. Because there’s nothing to find. His business practices check out. And I’m doing nothing with that document you fabricated. I’m sorry, but I’m not. It’s wrong.”

Silence.

Silence was never a good sign.

Some faint voices could be heard. She frowned like that would sharpen them.

“...it’s fine, I’m muted.” Her dad. “I don’t care—she’s doing it! We’re not going to stand a chance in New York if he’s there—we need to clear him out. We had to steal that client from him ... do you really think we’d be where we are now without him? That client brought us two million alone last year. I don’t care how, but she’s doing this, even if we have to write the article and slap her name on it.”

“Come on now, Jim, that’s not fair. I can’t let you do that.”

“We’re past that now. She’ll thank us for it one day when she sees her inheritance. It will all be worth it.”

She let the words slice through her, into her soul, her heart, that was racing, breaking at 10:00 AM on a park bench. Why do words have the power to crumble your whole

world?

She wet her lips and swallowed, trying to get rid of the dryness in her throat. The backs of her eyes stung. She sniffed.

“You’re not muted. And I don’t ever want to talk to you again. Either of you.”

Voices began to talk quickly, loudly, as she pulled the phone away from her ear, but she didn’t care. She could throw the phone in the water fountain for all she cared. The sensible part of her brain won out, and she quickly blocked her parents from everything. They were smart people, with a lot of resources, they could find a way to reach her if they wanted, but she wasn’t going to make it easy for them.

She was done being their pawn in their game of chess. This was her life. She sniffed again, running the back of her hand across her face, before pulling out her notebook. She would burn it. Start anew.

She had all the best intentions, but when she made to move, her limbs became dead weights, and they couldn’t support her. As people trickled past, and the sun began to set in the sky, she realized she’d been outside for hours upon hours.

Get a grip, Ruby.

She headed back to the office, not even bothering to turn her phone on. People would be asking where she was. Josh would be worried.

She came back to an empty office. Josh’s office light was on. That could wait. She needed to get her things first. She just needed that notebook to not exist anymore. She rifled around, placing it and various papers on her desk.

“Ruby? Where have you been?”

She swiped her windswept hair from her face. “Sorry, I had a bit of an emergency.” She held up her hand. “Don’t ... don’t ask me about it, please.”

The worry lining his features made her heart pinch. He cleared the space between them, bringing her into his arms.

“I’ll agree, but only because you asked me to.”

“Thank you,” she said into his chest. “Besides, I don’t want this to spoil our anniversary.”

The idea of celebrating the number of months they’d been together seemed juvenile at first. But when she sat down and thought about it, it was important. Important to celebrate all of the time they had together.

“That I can agree with,” he said. Then all the breath was knocked out of her as she landed on her desk, her legs open for him. He stood between them, bending his neck to claim her mouth. It was a position they had been in before, and one she loved. She loved being together after dark, when the office was deserted. It felt dangerous and exciting. It made her heart race. He made her heart race.

He broke the kiss, staring deep into her eyes.

“Now it’s your turn not to talk, just listen. I love you, Ruby. I’m in love with you and I’m sorry if it’s too soon for me to say, but I’m also not. Because I don’t think I can waste another second not letting you know how I feel.”

She opened her mouth to reply, but he cut off her air with another kiss.

“Tell me when you’re ready, not because you feel like you should say it back.”

She was ready to scream it from the rooftop, but a thought rang in her head like a bell, louder and louder. You don't deserve him, you've betrayed him, over and over. She needed to drown out the din.

Page 24

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:33 am

She kissed him back with a little too much force, falling further back on the desk and slamming her hands down for balance. They broke apart their kiss, laughing, as papers and notebooks flew and clattered to the floor.

He chuckled, dropping to his knees, gathering up the papers. “I think you need a PA yourself, love. Your desk is a nightmare.”

No. No, his hands were on the papers ... all the papers...

She was in a nightmare. It was like time froze as his eyes cast over the contents. Then he opened her notebook, and she was frozen to the spot. Her insides were screaming, telling her to rip everything from his grasp, but her brain said that she deserved this. This was her punishment. Watching his face fall, his eyes gloss over, as he continued to flick through everything. A muscle in his jaw ticked and his hands tightened around the notebook, like he was trying to keep ahold of himself.

He turned his back on her.

She reached out a hand toward him.

“Josh.” His name was a broken sob in her mouth.

When he turned around, he wasn’t the Josh she knew. She instinctively took a step backward, away from him, the last thing she’d ever want to do. But it was like someone had washed away everything that made him Josh. He was blank, expressionless.

“Get out.” His voice was ice. She couldn’t reach him. Not now.

“I can explain. If you ... you could just let me explain.”

She couldn’t explain. She could barely string a sentence together, barely see through her tears.

“No. You’ve lost that privilege. Get out or I’ll have security remove you.”

He reached out, and for one small second, she thought he was reaching for her, but he removed her badge. It hung limply in his hand, before he let it drop to the floor.

“And don’t bother coming back.” He stalked back to his office. It took everything in her not to follow him, to beg on her hands and knees for his forgiveness, but she did as he asked, she could do that, one last time. She gathered up what she could and ran for the elevator, throwing herself inside. She sank down to the floor and sobbed. And sobbed and sobbed and sobbed.

Chapter Ten

Josh

He didn’t know where he was going until he arrived at the fucking place this all started. Club Billionaire. There was a ringing in his ears, and his sight blurred. He curled his fingers, pushing his nails into his hands, creating crescent moons. He had to get a handle on his anger, or he was going to get kicked out.

The security guard was already squinting at him funny. He took a deep breath, calming the rage in his blood.

“Good evening,” he said, handing the card over.

After tonight, he'd burn it.

The security guard looked him over, eyes flicking up and down, before handing the card back and giving him the nod. He stormed through the restaurant, earning him stares and whispers and wide eyes from the few who were sitting there, but he couldn't bring himself to care.

It was late. The club was more like a nightclub, with music blaring and bright lights flashing. He could feel the pulse of the music, feel it in his head. He glanced around, not seeing Alana anywhere. His eyes caught on a table in the center of the room. He recognized a few of the guys. He'd been introduced to them on his first night there.

"Hall!" one of them said. Lucien, if he remembered correctly. "Been a long while. How are you doing?"

The man sitting next to him, face full of whiskey, Rick, he was pretty sure his name was. He didn't recognize the other two.

He tried to find his composure.

"Drink?" Rick offered.

Fuck it, why not?

He nodded and accepted a whiskey, downing the bitter liquid.

"Come to party, did you?" Lucien asked with a raise of his brow.

He scoffed. He knew he was being rude, but he didn't come here to party. He had come with a purpose. "Alana. Do you know where she is?"

Rick smirked and exchanged a glance with Lucien. "Yeah, in her office with Drew. They've been in there the past couple of hours. You might not want to disturb them, if you know what I mean."

Now why didn't that surprise him? He knew he sensed there was something going on between them, not that Drew would admit it. And from what he'd seen of Alana, he doubted very much that she would, either. She seemed like the type of woman who kept her cards close to her chest. But who was he to judge women? To judge people in general. Clearly his judgment was off, skewed.

He shrugged. "Need to. It's important," he said, standing up. "Thanks for the drink."

They waved him off.

"Enjoy the show!" Lucien called over the music.

He rolled his eyes. Surely they weren't. He'd knock. Loudly.

Three knocks were what it took to have Drew opening the door. Mercifully, it didn't seem like he was interrupting anything sexual. But he was definitely interrupting. Drew's face was flushed, and Alana looked upset. It set him off balance momentarily, reminding him that the world didn't revolve around him. Other people had problems. But right now, he was struggling to care, he just needed out. He walked straight past Drew, heading for her desk.

"Oh, hello, dear friend. How are you this fine evening?" said Drew.

Sarcastic bastard.

He'd forgotten how horribly purple everything was. He flung his card onto her desk, and it went skidding, landing in front of Alana.

"You knew," he said. It wasn't a question.

She had the decency to hang her head, to wring her hands.

"If you weren't getting so close, I would've gotten involved immediately. But it no longer seemed like my place."

Excuses. He wasn't interested in hearing excuses. Don't people have integrity anymore?

His lip curled, and he spewed the venom before he had a chance to school himself.

"I guess that's how you're working for billionaires but you're not one of them, huh?"

She wasn't the one he was angry with. Not really.

He felt pressure on his chest as Drew's hand pushed him backward. "Easy," he warned. His eyes flicked between him and Alana. "What's going on?"

"Why don't you explain, Alana? You likely know more than I do."

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:33 am

“I don’t, not really,” she said in a small voice. “It seems that whatever she was doing, she was doing for her parents. They own Allan Group, and they are moving to New York soon. I take it that it has something to do with what you’ve found out.”

So now you do your research...

“She was trying to get dirt on me, trying to plant dirt,” he spat.

Allan Group. The owners, Jim and Mary Allan, had poached a client from him a while back. He’d decided to let it go. He shouldn’t have. He should have taken it to court.

Drew whistled. “She was messing with your business. Heavy.”

“Yes, heavy,” he said bluntly.

“But you love this girl, right?”

Alana’s eyes widened.

Wonderful. Thanks Drew.

“Loved,” he corrected, knowing with every ounce of his being that it was a lie.

“Please, you can’t turn it on and off. Did you talk to her? Let her explain?”

“Sorry, are you actually trying to give me advice right now?”

“Answer the question,” Drew fired back.

“Why should I?”

“Is that an answer to my first question or my second?”

“Smart-ass. You sure do ask a lot of them.” He ran his fingers through his hair, slumping into a seat.

Alana sat behind her desk, and Drew joined him in one of the chairs.

“She’s broken my trust. It’s done.”

“You know you sound like a grumpy man-child right now.”

He had to resist the urge to chuck a drink over his friend.

Alana sighed in Drew’s direction, like she was disappointed in a puppy. “No, he sounds like a man who is used to being disappointed by people and I’ve facilitated that. And for that, I’m sorry. But I do know, and maybe I shouldn’t as it’s not my place, just how much she likes you. And is it really worth throwing away what you had for a mistake, without even allowing her to explain, to defend herself?”

He considered her words. Talking things out had actually helped a little, not that he’d ever have admitted that. He rose from his chair.

All of their gazes seemed to dip on his discarded card, but no one mentioned it. He was done with this place, he’d made that clear. In a shit way. He made a mental note to send Alana a dozen purple roses tomorrow with an apology note. He’d been an ass, and the thought didn’t sit well with him.

Drew rose with him. “You’re not in a good way. I’ll take you back home.”

He snorted. “Drew, I don’t need a chaperone. Stay here with...” he trailed off, not having the first clue what was going on between them, but from their shy glances between one another, maybe they didn’t either. If it was fragile, he wasn’t going to pry. Things had a way of working themselves out on their own ... until they didn’t.

His mind took him back in time before he could school it, to first seeing her photo. Ruby. His Ruby. His jewel. Gone.No. He wouldn’t think of her name again.

He cleared his throat. “Seriously, stay.”

It seemed as if Drew didn’t need much persuading, and Alana’s shoulders sagged in relief.

“Let me know if you need anything. Just a phone call away, mate,” said Drew, smacking him on the shoulder.

“I really am sorry, Josh,” said Alana, sadness lacing her tone. He believed she was sorry.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:33 am

“Me, too,” he said, making his way out of the room. Before he closed the door, he turned back. Drew had made his way around Alana’s desk and was standing in front of her. One hand on her shoulder, the other on her face. His heart lurched at the sight. Jealousy. It was a bitter monster. He needed alcohol. Before leaving, he stopped by the table he had left previously. They were all far drunker than when he left them.

“You need to get on our level!” Rick declared.

Not going to argue with you there, he thought bitterly. He wanted to be on their level, more than anything, for the blissful numbness to take over, for his cares, his anger, to wash away like the tide into the horizon, where they would wait for him like a looming monster.

That was the morning’s problem.

As the night escalated, the room began to spin. A group of scantily clad women joined their table, draping themselves wherever there was a spare lap. He felt a pressure on his own lap, a blonde woman with a face full of makeup wearing a skin-tight dress sat there.

She grinned. “Hello, handsome.”

His stomach lurched in disgust. Who was this woman? Why did she think she could just sit on him?

“This lap is taken.”

She laughed. A horrible, grating sound. “No, it’s not, I’m sitting in it.”

This only angered him more, and he pushed her out of it, off of him.

“It belongs to another,” he slurred.

He couldn’t say her name. Not yet.

This brought a chorus of outraged shouts from her friends, and the guys were looking at him like he’d fucked up. Maybe he had.

The pressure of a hand on his shoulder. Security. Great, he was being kicked out of a club. Seriously, was he a teenager again?

He raised his hands in surrender. “I’m going, I’m going,” he said. That didn’t stop the security guard guiding him out of the club and all the way out of the restaurant and onto the streets, where there was a car ready and waiting to take him home.

Suddenly, he couldn’t be gladder to go home. He felt like a fucking child, being looked after in this way.

“Don’t come back,” said the security guard.

He clambered into the car.

“Wasn’t fucking planning on it,” he murmured. He wanted to add, this place will find you your person, the one you love most, but not before they are ripped away from you. Why would I ever want to come back?

Once he was back in his apartment, he poured himself a large glass of whiskey. He needed to numb whatever this was, this raw wound, until he could even think about

talking to her again. He would, he vowed. But not yet. Just not yet.

Chapter Eleven

Ruby

It was done. It was over. There was no going back. No going forward. She was stuck, like she was being buried. That's how the first week felt, like she had the flu. Cathy had been messaging and calling her incessantly, seemingly desperate to get hold of her. She should be a better friend and call her, or at least text her to let her know she was okay. She looked at the latest one.

Please, Ruby. I don't understand. Josh said you had to leave effective immediately because of an emergency. What emergency? Just let me know you're okay. I miss you xx

She squeezed her eyes shut against the message, against the bright light.

He hadn't told anyone—he was still protecting her. He hadn't even told Cathy that she'd been fired. Not just fired from her job, but as his girlfriend, fired from his life.

“Shit!”

She opened her eyes and glanced at her phone again. She was meeting Alana in an hour at the club. It would be the first time she'd gone out since ... it happened. She figured she couldn't leave Alana hanging for much longer. It was her job, her reputation that she was ruining. She would tell her everything.

She groaned, rolling off the couch and stepping over copious amounts of takeout and

wine bottles as she headed for the bathroom.

When she caught sight of her reflection, she did a double take. She looked like the girl from *The Ring*, for fuck's sake. She'd really let herself go. She tilted her head, her hair spilling with her. It wasn't often that the outward appearance reflected perfectly what the inside was feeling. But, hey, there's a first time for everything. She set to work tidying herself, showering and shaving, and putting on some make-up. She looked almost human again. She rooted through her closet and found an old black dress and some silver thigh-high boots. Now all there was left to do was her lipstick. She hovered over her lips, looking at her reflection in the mirror.

Ruby Red. His nickname for her sang through her mind.

She closed her eyes and pocketed the lipstick without putting any on.

Fifteen minutes later, she gave her name to the security guard and was let in, but not before throwing a quick text over to Cathy to let her know she was okay and to ask how the business was going. In other words, to ask her how Josh was doing. With any luck she'd get an answer. To her surprise, Alana was already there waiting for her at the bar. She took a seat next to her.

"Hey," she said.

Alana turned and wrapped her in an embrace. She patted her back awkwardly, but Alana clung to her, rubbing her back in circles. She held her friend tighter, and that's when the tears fell. To her credit, Alana held her through them all.

"I fucked up. I really, really fucked up and I don't know my way out of it."

Alana listened to her sorry tale, making sure that their glasses of wine never dipped below half. She was way too good to her.

Alana took a sip of her wine, considering. “Sometimes there is no way out of it. We have to live with the consequences of our actions and move forward.”

Ruby reached out and took her friend’s hand. “I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry I put your reputation on the line, your business...”

Alana squeezed her hand. “Yes, I don’t think Josh Hall is going to be leaving me any five star reviews any time soon. He’s angry.”

Her heart sank. “You saw him?”

She nodded. “He came to return his card. I was the one who explained everything to him, who your parents are.”

She gasped. “You knew?”

“I knew. Well, I guessed and then I did my research, you’re not as good an actress as you think, you know.”

“How long have you known?”

“Since our drink with Josh and Drew at the club.”

She opened her mouth, but Alana held up her hand. “It’s on you, yes, but it’s also on me. I should’ve vetted you properly. But I think you’ve been through enough, don’t you? Let’s just move on. Have you talked to your parents?”

She hadn’t. And she wasn’t interested. Maybe someday there would be a reconciliation between them, but, no, she explained to Alana, who nodded.

“And Josh?” she asked tentatively, like she was a glass doll on the cusp of breaking.

“Are you going to talk to him?”

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:33 am

“Yes. No. I don’t know. I need to apologize, I know. I just don’t know how. He’ll never trust me again.”

“Second chances are second chances for a reason. I can see how much he loves you. That doesn’t just turn off. Give it time.”

Suddenly, she knew what she needed to do. What she needed to write. She grabbed her coat off the chair, shrugging it on.

“I don’t know what I’d do without you, A. Thank you.” She threw her arms around her.

“And where are you off to in such a hurry?”

“To work. I need to get to work.”

Fifteen minutes later, when she turned the light on in her apartment, she felt as if she’d been revealed. It was like the cold light of day had rushed in, except it was the middle of the night.

She sighed. “Well, no time like the present.”

She tidied and cleaned everything from top to bottom, until the place was gleaming, and sunlight was spilling through the open windows.

Then, making sure her kitchen table was clear of any distractions, and that there was a large pot of tea, she opened up her laptop and began to write. And write and write

and write. Words poured out of her like water, like they were begging to be placed on the page.

The buzz of her phone brought her out of her writing reverie.

It was Cathy, responding to her message.

Her heart thrummed, picking up speed when she skim-read the message and saw Josh's name.

I'm so happy you're okay! Please let me know if you need to talk. You're always welcome to come over, my door is always open for you. Josh is ... okay. A little more reserved than usual. I hope I'm not overstepping here, but I think perhaps it has something to do with you leaving. Sending hugs, I miss our coffee time xx

Me, too, she thought. She took a deep breath, stretching out her muscles. She could do with a coffee right about now. She could also do with Alana and her connections, but first she needed to edit, edit, then edit some more. But first, Cathy.

Thank you, Cathy, that sounds great. Let's catch up soon xx

She'd lost Josh, but she refused to lose Cathy, too.

She returned to her article, her first-person piece. She'd wondered about exposing her family for their shady dealings but thought better of it. Instead, she preferred to focus on the love and bore her soul in the piece, titling it *10 Reasons Why I Love Josh Hall and Why You Will Too*. Alana was going to contact some online business magazines to see if they could get it published. She'd listed every amazing thing he'd done, his charity work, his kindness, and so on. But at number ten, she couldn't resist getting

more personal.

10. I love Josh Hall because he makes me feel alive.

Three weeks later, she was heading out for a job interview. She was three hours early, but she was too nervous. She needed to expend some energy, and if that meant walking for a few hours through the streets of New York, then so be it. She examined her reflection. Maybe it was too much, but she figured she'd be bold today. Her signature red lips were back on, and she was wearing a matching blazer and skirt combination, in ruby red, leaving her dark hair cascading down her shoulders. She nodded to her reflection, grabbing her briefcase and phone as she headed for the door. Her eye caught on a headline. Successful merger of Private Housing Corp and Matterson Housing. Good for Josh. Her heart faltered at the name. She'd done a good job of pushing it down. Healthy right? But no. No, not now. Push it away, she told herself. With her eyes screwed shut, she opened her door and ran straight into a solid wall of muscle.

She gasped. "I'm sorry—"

Josh.

Standing at the door of her apartment.

There were dark circles marring his perfect face, and his chiseled jaw looked to be even more defined. His eyes skittered over her.

He held her article, printed on a piece of paper. "Ten reasons I love Josh Hall, huh? Could've fooled me."

Her face fell and his features softened. “Let’s talk. We’re not so good at that.” He walked past her into her apartment, and she suddenly lost all ability to speak. She thought she’d never see him again. She had nothing to say, nothing prepared.

He sat down at her table. “Ruby?”

“Yes,” she whispered. “Let’s talk.” She shut the door and walked to the table to join him, her hands shaking.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:33 am

She met his gaze. He was the one who suggested they talk, and now it seemed he had nothing to say. She found her voice.

“I know you’ll never be able to forgive me, or trust me again, but I’m so sorry.” She swallowed. “There’s obviously more to it. I know you’ve spoken with Alana. My parents, especially my dad, wanted me to do this. They told me about you, your business practices, how you stole clients from them. That you were shady and a bad man. You proved them wrong, me wrong, on every single count. Before I knew it, I was head over heels for you, and it was too late. I couldn’t tell you. I don’t expect you to understand.”

A tear trickled down her cheek.

He nodded. She watched his hand clench and unclench and she had to touch him. She covered his hand with her own and allowed his warmth to seep into her. His gaze flew to her, and she squeezed harder, thumb rubbing over his palm. His eyes fluttered closed against the touch, his face a mask of confusion.

“I don’t know why I’m here.”

“Because you love me. And I love you,” she admitted.

His eyes flashed open at her admission. He swallowed. “And because Drew and Alana basically told me I’d be a fucking moron if I didn’t come find you.” His jaw flexed. “I’m so in love with you it hurts.” He tilted her face toward him. “Never again. You can never lie to me again.”

“I promise.”

“This will be a fresh start for us.”

Her heart lurched at the words.

He stood. “Come here,” he commanded, voice low and gravelly, traveling all the way up her spine.

She practically ran to him, the force of her eagerness set them both off-balance. The second his lips touched hers, she saw stars. She moaned against his mouth, and she felt his sharp inhale, his hands roaming through her hair, tracing her face.

Suddenly, he broke the kiss, leaving them both panting, cheeks flushed.

“You’re going somewhere? You look like you’re going somewhere.”

“Job interview. Not for hours.”

He licked her lipstick from around his mouth. “Good. Because we’re going to need hours with all I have planned.”

With that, she was off her two feet and in the air.

“Where’s the bedroom?”

She could feel his hardness through his jeans, and it was making her ache, desperate.

“No here, right here,” she said.

He may have had elaborate plans, but she needed him now. It had been too long since

he'd been inside her.

She jumped from his arms, turning so that she was planted over the table, her back to him. She pulled down her skirt and underwear and reached back behind her to stroke over his hard length. He seemed to agree. She heard his belt unbuckle and clatter to the floor. Then he was pressed behind her, sliding in with one deep thrust. He growled at the wetness he found there.

They both moaned in unison.

“So ready for me,” he grit out, pumping into her. There was nothing controlled about his strokes, and the erratic nature of them was building her pleasure. Her head lolled back, and he seized on her neck, peppering kisses, finally landing on the sensitive part of her ear.

She gasped. She'd never felt closer to anyone in her life.

A sudden burst of honesty rushed from her lips. “I've missed you. I love you so much, Josh.”

That was the final straw for him, as he pushed himself deeper inside her than he'd ever been. She let out a scream as she clenched around him.

She turned, breathless, wrapping herself in his arms.

“So, it turns out there are better ways to expend nervous energy than walking around New York.”

He pulled back, grinning. The sight of him sweaty and tousled took her breath away.

Page 31

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:33 am

“You still have some left?”

She bit her lip.

“Well, we can’t have that.”

He dropped to his knees.

Epilogue

8Months Later

Ruby

She was being crushed. She might not survive it. But she didn’t care. She’d never felt happiness like it, it was like a flower blooming in her chest. Josh’s family finally released her, and she could breathe again, but not before Lola had pulled her left hand toward her.

She still hadn’t gotten used to it—her finger felt heavy.

Lola tilted her finger, so the ruby glinted in the light. “It’s just so beautiful.”

She couldn’t agree more. She glanced up at Josh, the sparkle in his eyes mirroring the ring as he took her out of his family’s grasp and held her firmly in his own. “It’s perfect,” she said. “A bit like my fiancé.”

Pete scoffed. “Easy, now, don’t go giving my brother an ego complex.”

Josh had proposed a few days ago, before his family’s scheduled visit. He’d done it on holiday, whisked her off to a private island in the Maldives and proposed under a blanket of stars. She thought she’d been dreaming, and someone was going to come and pinch her to wake her up.

Lola and his mom were chatting between themselves, discussing wedding dresses and venues. Josh and his dad talked football. She clung to Josh’s arm and watched them all. She couldn’t wait to become a part of their family.

Speaking of family ... she unhooked from Josh and went to find her phone. She loaded up the scheduled FaceTime call and a series of congratulations sang out.

She thanked her parents.

“Let us congratulate Josh, too, and say hi to his family,” her mom said.

She did as she was told, and everyone exchanged awkward pleasantries for a few minutes before she hung up the phone. Josh had insisted on building a relationship with them, and on her repairing it, as he didn’t want to be blamed for a fractured family. She’d reassured him this wasn’t the case, but he was adamant. He was a better man than most. And he was hers.

She glanced down at her watch. “Oh, I’m sorry, I have to run. I have a few things to get done at the paper before tonight.”

Page 32

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:33 am

She'd finally found a job. A job she loved. She was a real writer, making a living in New York. It was no mean feat.

She gave her new family a hug before Josh walked her to the door.

She reached up on her toes to kiss him.

"I miss you already," he told her.

"Don't make it hard to leave," she protested, tucking into him, inhaling his musky scent before tearing herself away.

She smiled down at the ruby glinting in her ring the whole way to the office.

Josh

He couldn't deny that talking with her family was hard. It was. He breathed an audible sigh of relief when the call hung up, but he was trying. For her. Even though they had each other now, forever, no one deserved to be lonely. He said goodbye to his family, who were heading out for a day of sightseeing, glad to have the apartment to himself. He had plans.

A few hours later, the key turned in the lock, and the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen walked through the door. And now she just so happened to be his fiancée.

Her breath caught in her throat before her stunning face cracked into a grin as she looked around.

He grinned. “Care to join me for dinner?” He held the chair out for her.

She shrugged off her coat, walking deeper into the room, her eyes taking in the butler, the chef, the five-course meal being prepared. Rose petals littered the floor, red, her favorite, naturally.

“I thought we could wedding plan in style.”

To be honest, he also wanted to do this before his mom and sister took over.

“I love it, almost as much as I love you.” She smiled and took her seat.

He could lose himself in her eyes for hours.

She laced her fingers with his. “So, let’s get started.”

“Can I be honest? All I really care about is marrying you. And I want it to happen as soon as possible.” He raised her hand to his lips, kissing the soft skin and inhaling her peaches and cream scent.

“Mrs. Ruby Hall,” she said.

It did something to him.

His voice deepened. “Say that again.”

She said it again. Slowly, like she was savoring the words, like they were the most delicious meal. Her gaze locked onto his, her lips parting.

He needed her. Now.

The meal ... the chef...

They could wait. He was hungry for something else now. He went over and whispered in her ear, before dragging Ruby's chair back and carrying her to the bedroom.

“Just giving you a preview of our wedding night.”

When they finally stumbled back into the room, Ruby profusely apologizing to the chef and butler, they tucked into their first course.

“Guests?”

“Intimate. Just family and close friends,” she said.

He nodded. “Agreed.”

He couldn’t believe his luck that Ruby wanted something small, for it to be about them and not all the pomp and circumstance that came with it. She really was his dream woman.

They moved their way simply and efficiently through all the planning. By the time dessert came out, he chuckled.

“You do realize we haven’t chosen the location?”

She grinned, pushing her dark hair from her face. The smile fell as her thinking face took over. He smiled at the small crease of her brow, the bite of her lower lip.

“Got it,” she said, triumphant.

He sat back with a raise of his brow. “Oh, yeah?”

“Where it all began.”

He couldn’t hide his confusion. “The office?”

She rolled her eyes. “Okay, yes, well technically we did meet there, but I’m talking about the first time you saw me...”

“Your photo ... the club.”

She nodded. “Club Billionaire. I’m sure Alana would die to host our wedding. Good job you renewed your membership.”

He stood, holding out his hand and pulling her into his arms, beginning a slow, swaying dance.

“Where it all began,” he echoed before dipping his head to kiss her.

The End