



Keeping The Virgin

Author: *Paige North*

Category: Erotic, Romance, Billionaire Romance, Adult

Description: A standalone alpha billionaire romance with a guaranteed HEA...

A plaything. That's what I am. My virginity auctioned off to ice-cold, gorgeous billionaire Cage Bryant.

He's twenty-seven with thick, unruly brown hair, a pair of blue eyes that seem to penetrate my soul, and a luscious mouth that doesn't seem very used to smiling. He towers over me, filling out his designer suit with his broad shoulders and thick arms.

But as handsome and sexy as Cage is, he's just as cruelly cool, seemingly without normal human emotions.

When he's near me, I can't breathe. My heart can't start itself up again. My belly tightens and the spot between my legs begins to ache, then pound. I can't take my gaze off his body—and those muscles. Bunched, beautiful, sleek muscles that I want to reach out and touch. His chest is hard, his abs ridged, and my lust is immediate, getting me wet as I think of what he'll feel like against my naked skin.

After our first night together, he's already got me hooked. Hooked on the dirty things he does to me, things I never imagined in my wildest dreams. Things I love way more than I should.

I know I have to be careful not to get too close, because Cage Bryant is a man with darkness inside him. I see it every time I look deeply in to his eyes, and it chills me to the bone.

One moment he's pulling me closer and closer to that blue flame, and the next he's pushing me away, those dark demons once again visible in his penetrating gaze.

I need to be very careful, because it feels like I'm falling. Falling for this twisted, mysterious man, head over heels into the darkness...

But I can't help it. I don't know how to stop this compulsion to move closer, to push the boundaries, to take our twisted desires to new and uncharted territory.

And it's too late to turn back.

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:04 am

Chapter 1

The driver from the Highest Bidder escort service stops our town car in front of a set of massive iron gates. Behind the ornate bars, a breathtaking Tuscan villa-like mansion waits for me, palm trees waving in the Miami summer breeze.

The driver turns to me and offers a creamy envelope, and I swallow, trying to calm my raging heartbeat.

“You’re to give this to Mr. Bryant when you see him,” the man says.

“All right.”

I take the sealed envelope as the driver waits. He has a kind face, and I wonder if he looks at every Highest Bidder girl with this mixture of sympathy and curiosity. I shouldn’t be that much of a mystery to him—every girl he drives has signed up with the exclusive website to be auctioned off to a rich client, and I’m sure he’s met more than one escort who’s given away her v-card for \$50,000.

I’m just not sure that every virgin has needed the money because she’s in as much trouble as I am.

Can he read the desperation on my face?

My hand shakes as I clutch the envelope. My nerves are screaming, but I’ve come this far, and I’m going to go through with this and then get back to my normal life, including finishing my final semester of college. There’s no other choice for me.

The driver hands me one more piece of paper. This one is just a strip with typed numbers on it.

“This is the passcode for the gate,” he says.

“Oh. Thanks.”

He winks at me. “You’ll do fine. All the girls do.”

All the girls. I suddenly feel like a product fresh off an assembly line, a sex toy that walks and breathes and is designed for a good screw, but that’s what I signed up for. And even if a flush of embarrassment is covering my skin, I won’t complain.

After I thank him and get out of the car, he drives away, leaving me standing in front of the massive gates with only an overnight bag, the passcode, and the envelope. The hem of my flirty little summer dress plays around my thighs, tickling them as if to cheer me up.

So I put on my best cheer face. I’ve seen pictures of Cage Bryant, and he’s... Well, to put it mildly, I lucked out in the sex sweepstakes. He’s beyond hot. This job won’t be as tough as it could’ve been under other circumstances.

I’m going to get this done.

I walk up to the gate’s keypad and punch in the code. As the iron bars swing open, I feel like Dorothy walking the yellow brick road, except the bricks here are as red as sin, the road lined with hovering palm trees instead of gnarled, thick ones.

I refuse to think about lions and tigers and bears, and in their place, I start running over the details of my client that I read in a dossier the site sent to me.

Cage Bryant, 27, billionaire.

Boss and money and brains (oh, my).

Then I think of those pictures of him—his thick, unruly brown hair; his dark eyebrows over a pair of blue eyes that seem to penetrate the camera lens; a luscious mouth that doesn't seem very used to smiling. He towers over every woman he's been photographed with, filling out his designer suits with his broad shoulders and thick arms. His skin is tanned, bringing out the color of his eyes, but in every picture, those eyes make it seem as if he's ready to stalk over to the paparazzi and tear the camera out of their clutches. The thing is, he doesn't seem to give a shit about what anyone thinks of his stone-cold moods.

In those pictures, there's also a barely contained anger in those eyes, a challenge to anyone who gets too close.

He's a boss, all right. Some googling told me that, by the tender age of twenty, he started working at a low-end car dealership where he became a top salesman. He quickly graduated to a luxury vehicle dealership, and his kick-ass boss reputation only grew as he voraciously worked his way up to management, landing better and better positions one right after the other.

When he was twenty-one—twenty-one! Only one year younger than I am!—he started a headhunting/recruiting business, Bryant Industries. It went from a one-man operation to an enormous behemoth headquartered in New York City, and it now does business all over the world.

All of this before thirty. And now, besides conquering the business world, he's listed in New York Magazine as the number one eligible bachelor in the city, and the paparazzi loves him. Women crawl all over him, and I'll be one of them tonight.

Sex and money and freedom.

Oh, my...

Thinking of what I already know about him soothes me. Giving my virginity to someone so handsome might not be as bad as my nerves are warning me it'll be, and, after tonight, I'll have enough money to buy my freedom. I'll be able to breathe again.

I arrive at the arched doorway where huge dark-wooded doors loom. After exhaling, I ring the bell, hearing it chime inside. It echoes, as if traveling through a cavern.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:04 am

No answer.

I try again, and the same echo answers me.

I'm ready to ring one more time just as the door opens.

At first sight of him, I can't breathe. My heart can't start itself up again. My belly tightens and my clit begins to ache, then pound. The pictures I've seen of Cage Bryant don't do him justice because, in real life, he's even taller, more intimidating, and I can see a hell of a lot more of him now because he's shirtless, dressed in board shorts with a towel slung around his shoulders. His hair is damp, carelessly ruffled, as if he's just come out of a pool. His skin is smooth and tanned.

I can't take my gaze off his torso—muscles. Bunched, beautiful, sleek muscles that I want to reach out and touch. His chest is hard, his abs ridged, and my lust is immediate, getting me wet already as I think of what those muscles will feel like against my naked skin tonight.

Just like that, this job doesn't feel like a money-making necessity for me. This is something I want with every beating inch of my body, and a flush roars through me. I'm probably wearing it like a filmy red veil.

His blue gaze is cool as he looks me over. Can he tell how turned on I am already? Or is he only seeing the perfectly ordinary, average girl with light brown hair and big gray eyes that I always saw in the mirror growing up? Or...maybe...

My confidence grows. Maybe he's seeing the college coed in the surprisingly

flattering picture that was posted on the Highest Bidder site.

My pulse continues to kick through me as I eagerly wait for him to say something. One heartbeat...two heartbeats...

Then I realize that Cage Bryant isn't looking at me with the same kind of desire a client should have for an escort. He has no idea what he's staring at, and I get the feeling he doesn't even know why I'm even on his doorstep with an overnight bag.

Okay. Strange.

I shove the envelope at him then realize what a gauche move it is. Too late now.

"I'm Karini Lively," I say.

He doesn't take what I'm offering, and my blush burns.

He only narrows his eyes and frowns, anchoring his hands at the ends of the towel around his neck. My gaze lingers on his wide, powerful shoulders, and slick heat creams me even more.

"Is this a joke?" he asks.

Whoa. "A joke? No. Of course not."

As I keep holding the envelope out to him, my pulse tangles, flailing with anxiety because, my god, just look at him: drop-dead gorgeous with a body that's carved out of granite. With every passing second, my blood pumps, priming me, and he hasn't even made a move yet.

But what makes me even more nervous is that I'm pretty sure he genuinely has no

idea who the hell I am or why I'm here.

"How did you get in?" he asks in a low, wary tone. "Did someone give you the passcode?"

What? "The Highest Bidder did."

I sound like a mouse—like the girl who always felt so invisible growing up, the middle child who barely existed for anyone until she got the attention of the wrong someone.

As Cage finally takes the envelope I'm offering, he looks at me again. This time, he does it slowly, his gaze running down my body, making me hold my breath. I shift out of carnal discomfort. My clit is so tight that I have to bite the inside of my lip.

When his gaze lingers on my breasts, I feel my nipples pucker. I know he can see it through my thin dress, too, and something flickers in his eyes. For a second, I think it might be the same lust I'm feeling. It's as if there's a hot, tenuous, quaking connection that's about to snap.

Then he looks away from me, and I stop biting my lip. I swallow once again, coating my dry mouth.

Without giving anything away with his expression, he efficiently opens the envelope. It's as if he never looked at me at all, and I begin to think I imagined it.

Embarrassment creeps up on me like a deeper, more pervasive kind of blush, and I hope he doesn't see it.

He pulls out the thick, fancy parchment from the envelope and reads its contents. Then he shakes his head, his frown only intensifying.

“Is there a problem?” I ask.

“There’s been a big mistake, Miss Lively.”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:04 am

I don't like the Miss Lively thing. He sounds distant, uninterested.

He stuffs the paper back inside the envelope. "I don't pay for sex. Ever."

Then what I am doing here?

When he holds the envelope out as if expecting me to take it, I cross my arms in front of my chest, warding it off.

He can't be turning me down. I need this to happen.

"If you don't pay for sex," I say, "then why did you join the auction for me on the Highest Bidder site?"

"I didn't do any such thing." As he keeps extending the envelope to me, his other hand is on the door, ready to shut me out. "According to this message, you're a gift from one of my clients—a wealthy one who's very happy with the business transaction that just went through between our companies."

I start to say something, although I'm not sure what. I only know that he can't close that door on me.

He's clearly losing his patience. "My client has a habit of making assumptions and acting on them without thinking much about the consequences."

I'm still not taking the damned envelope back. "But he already paid for this."

“I’m not interested in taking advantage of this ‘gift.’”

Then, as if he’s some kind of god’s gift, he gives me a final, arrogant once-over, his gaze burning me wherever it goes. It leaves me weak and wishing for more of the humiliating heat.

When I still don’t take the envelope, he merely tosses it to a table near the entry. “You need to go now, Miss Lively.”

He begins to close the door.

“Wait!”

He stops, and there’s a look of such irritation written all over him that I feel as if I’m shrinking, reduced to a hurt ball of rejection right here on his doorstep. I search for what to say next, but how can I put all my fears and feelings into words?

I need this money so badly, but even more than that, I’m trying to make sense of the looks he’s been giving me. He talks like he’s not interested, but my body is telling me something different. There’s fire between us, isn’t there? There’s something that could damned well happen if he would just let me in.

But, jeez, maybe this is only wishful thinking. I mean, what girl wouldn’t be attracted to this incredibly hot guy, even if she’s only imagining that he’s lusting after her in return?

As I stand there saying nothing, his mood doesn’t improve. I’m wasting his precious billionaire time, and I realize that I was wrong about any kind of attraction.

My stomach sinks and panic sets in. Maybe I can try for a repeat auction on the Highest Bidder site, seeing as this has been a total bust. I’ll have to in order to get that

money...

I'm back to feeling like the girl who was never the prettiest in her class or the smartest or the one people noticed. I still feel like a teenager who's inexperienced and so damned awkward, especially around this intimidating man.

"I'm sorry for the confusion," I say, knowing that I'm about to go from awkward to mortified if I don't back down. "I'll call an Uber to pick me up."

As I turn around and walk away, the door closes behind me.

Holding back tears—how much of a fool was I to think a guy like him was interested in a Jane like me?—I hike up my bag all the way onto my shoulder as I head for the gates. Then I unzip it and fumble inside to get my phone.

When I turn it on, the screen stays dead.

Seriously? Seriously?

Shit.

I look around at the palm trees, at the view of the nearby docks in back of his grand house and the sun gleaming off the water.

I need a phone, dammit, and there's nowhere to go for one but here.

After I huff out a breath, I march back to his house and ring the bell again. Hours seem to pass before he jerks open the door. My heart jolts in my chest and my body heats up again as he stares at me.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:04 am

“Sorry to bother you,” I say stiffly, “but my phone battery is dead. May I use your phone to call a car?”

He wrinkles his brow, halfway between amusement and disbelief. Then he holds out a hand. “Let me see that.”

Wow. He thinks I’m lying about my phone just to get myself back into his amazing presence. God’s gift, for sure. Maybe it’s a good thing that my night with him fell through, because it turns out he’s a prick. A good-looking prick, but really?

I slap my phone into his hand, and he wraps his fingers around it. Long, strong fingers. Sexy fingers that could’ve been all over my body.

As my sex pounds for him, reminding me of how wet I still am, I steel myself. He doesn’t deserve my v-card. And you know what? At least I learned a valuable lesson today: Cage Bryant has verified that all guys are pricks—not just the one who got me into the trouble I’m in.

He inspects my phone. He actually tries to turn it on.

Yup. Definitely a prick.

With a lowered gaze he looks up at me, and it’s such a sexy move that my stomach swirls. I hate my stomach. I hate everything that my body does every time I’m near him. I hate my eyes, too, because they’re telling me that there’s something about the way he’s looking at me that...

God, he's not interested, and after what he just put me through, neither am I.

Then he opens the door wide and steps aside, and all I can do is blink. Now I'm the one staring at him in utter bewilderment.

"Get in here while I call one of my own personal cars to take you back to the airport," he says in that cool, measured tone of his.

Okay. All I have to do now is move, go inside, get this over with so I can go forward to another more welcoming client who'll actually appreciate my company. It could happen.

On trembling legs, I enter his house, my skin tingling as I walk by him, close enough to feel the warmth of his bare, rocked torso.

Close enough to start wanting him even more than I did before.

Chapter 2

As Cage shut the door behind me, I gaze at my surroundings: marble tile floors, a grand iron staircase that sweeps up past arched stained-glass windows, a sprawling iron chandelier hanging from a high ceiling with dark brown, beige, and blue paneling. I feel as if I've stepped into the house of one of those great banking families from medieval Italy that we studied in one of my college classes—dark, powerful, brooding bosses who ruled entire civilizations.

And they were mostly all cruel, nasty people who treated everyone around them like disposable trash. Of course, they were living in medieval Italy so they at least had an excuse for being ignorant and cruel.

The man in front of me has no such reason. He's just doing it because he can.

I wait for Cage to make that phone call so I can just get out of here and to the airport, but I think he's still lingering in back of me by the door, checking me out again. As I imagine his gaze on me, prickles rain down the nape of my neck under my hair, then shimmer down my spine. It all culminates in a disturbing full-body shiver that I can barely contain.

“So you're with the Highest Bidder,” he finally says.

His sexy voice only adds to my reluctant arousal. “You say that as if you're familiar with the site.”

“I run in certain circles, so I hear rumors every once in a while. This is the first time

I've become acquainted with it, so to speak."

God, he thinks he's really the shit. So above it all.

"Right," I say. "You never pay for sex, so you'd never take part in an auction for someone like me. You must be fascinated by this new discovery that landed on your doorstep today."

"Maybe I am."

The way he says it... It's not cutting. It almost sounds like he's relishing the words, imagining things about me behind my back that involve taking off my sweet little dress and exploring every throbbing inch of me.

But he couldn't be doing that. Five minutes ago he couldn't get me out of his sight quickly enough.

I pick at the hem of my dress, fidgety. "Listen, I hate to impose, but after you use your phone to arrange a ride, can I also call my travel site and see what their soonest departing flight back to Colorado Springs is?"

My subtle hint to have him just hurry up already and get on that phone seems to entertain him, because I think I hear him laugh quietly, then say, "You came half a country away for this job?"

I only nod. When he doesn't say anything else, I risk a slow look behind me.

He's leaning a strong shoulder against the front door, his chest still unbearably bare and rippling. One hand grips both ends of the towel around his neck, and the other holds my dead phone. But most obviously of all, he's gazing at a spot where the hem of my dress meets the back of my upper thighs, almost as if he is thinking about

easing up the fabric, exposing the curve of my bottom for a naughty peek.

I angrily tug down my hem and face forward, my heart punching at my chest. My clit echoes every beat, wet and wild.

He laughs again. I think he enjoyed getting caught.

I don't understand what kind of game he's playing, because surely he hasn't changed his mind about not paying for sex—or even accepting the gift his client arranged for a night with a virgin.

I think I hear him moving away from the door now, and I keep staring straight ahead.

“Clearly you've never worked for the Highest Bidder before.” His voice is closer now. “The message in that envelope says you're a virgin.”

I don't say anything. If I try, the words might get caught in my throat.

“Tell me, Karini Lively.” He's even closer now, his voice combing down my skin. “Why did you auction off your virginity?”

His prying is testing me, and when I finally find my voice, I sound as annoyed as he was earlier.

“My reasons for signing up with the Highest Bidder are none of your business—especially since you told me you're not going to make use of my services.”

I feel him walking past me before I actually see him. My skin heats up, almost as if every one of my cells is tracking him as he moves in front of me. I look down at the floor while he circles me, obviously re-inspecting this gift he's already refused.

The ache between my legs is agonizing now, sharp and juiced. Damn him for making me feel like this.

“My client,” he says, “should’ve known that I don’t have a thing for virgins, yet he sent one.”

“His mistake,” I say.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:04 am

Cage halts on the other side of me, and I can sense something tense and predatory about him. As the lining of my belly trembles, I finally break down and bring my gaze up to meet his.

I suck in a harsh breath at the look in his eyes—a spark of something dark and exciting that my backtalk has kindled in him, something frustrated, something crazy that tells me that, in spite of everything he said at the door, he wants me to keep this game going.

Whatever it is feels like it's threatening to flare into a fire. I can already feel the heat scorching me from the inside out, ready to burst.

Slowly, he moves to a marble table, and when he puts down my phone, he does it with such deliberation that I tense up.

He lazily pulls the towel from around his neck and sets that down next to the phone. The full sight of his torso—chiseled and smooth and beautiful—drills me with more lust.

“On second thought,” he says, “I’m not so sure I want to let you off that easily.”

What does that mean?

But I think I know and, god, despite everything, I hope I’m right. I want him to be the one who makes me cross that line from virgin to experienced woman. I want to feel every one of his muscles under my palms, exploring what a man really is. I want him inside of me, even though I’m afraid it might hurt this first time.

But a man of the world like this will know how to make me feel pleasure...

Then I remember how he treated me at his doorway, and my guard goes up, even as everything else in me melts for him to touch me.

But he doesn't. Not yet. He merely prowls toward me again, his muscles rolling under his tanned skin with every cocky step. As he slips behind me, I don't turn to face him. Even so, I know he's standing right in back of me now.

My throat works as I gulp. The sound seems to fill the room along with my heavy breathing.

"Will you be honest about something with me?" he says.

I quake at his nearness and close my eyes, still trying to resist. "What?"

I expect to hear the rest of his question but, instead, I gasp as I feel him gently lifting the sides of my skirt. My pussy gushes at the slow sensation of the light fabric sliding up my thighs, then my hips.

He speaks as if nothing is happening. "Why did you wait so long to give it up, Karini?" he asks.

In this piercingly erotic moment, I could tell him that I wasn't ready for sex, that there was always something indefinable missing, even though I'd been intimately touched before. But as Cage hooks his thumbs under the sides of my panties, I'm speechless. And when he pulls up on the fabric so that a sweet pressure nestles against my pussy, I bite back a moan.

He releases the pressure, then pulls at my panties again, teasing me, moving them back and forth so that he's teasing my most sensitive spot. Instinctively, I grip his

hands, both urging him on and bracing myself. My legs lose strength, and I fall back against his hard chest, moving every time he wickedly plays with me.

“Maybe,” he says in a ragged voice that rumbles through him and into me, “I like virgins more than I thought.”

As he gives a stronger pull on my panties, I begin to cry out, but before there’s any sound, he reaches around and buries one hand in my hair, bringing my mouth to his in a ravishing crush.

My world ignites—sparks of every color, my skin sizzling, my body torched by a desire I never thought I’d feel. But I do.

God, I feel.

With something like a ravenous growl, he deepens the kiss, tightening his fingers in my hair, going at me with an intense greed that makes me feel as if he’s never tasted anything like me before, as if I’m an instant addiction. I grapple at him, out of control, slippery between my legs and aching for him to play with me some more.

My passion seems to push him to his raw limits as he lets out a feral sound, scoops me up, and lifts me, taking me somewhere until I feel something cool and smooth underneath my bottom.

I hear something crash to the floor, and it’s only when I think it might be my phone that I realize I’m on a table, slouched against the wall and panting for him.

Hungrily he nips at my bottom lip, and I wince, but not because of pain—purely from pleasure and need. And he seems to know that because he sucks off of me, leaving me breathing even harder.

I feel like I'm strung together by a chain of heartbeats, and most of them are palpitating between my legs, begging, pleading.

As he watches me, his blue eyes seem to see everything inside of me—how much I want him, how much I want this—and I have to look away from him before he sees too much.

Secrets and all.

“Look at me,” he commands in a whisper.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:04 am

I can't.

But then he slides his hand down my face, between my breasts, and over my stomach and belly, leaving more shivers behind. When he dips his fingers into the front of my panties, I groan. My legs part for him, my hips arch as he separates my folds, then slowly strokes my pussy.

So good...oh, god...

I hear how wet I am, how excited, and I find myself doing what he wanted me to do in the first place. I look into his eyes from beneath my heavy lids.

He seems to like what he sees, because he smiles, just a lift of one sensual corner of his mouth, but it's enough to send a shock through me.

"Shit," he says. "You were born to be fucked, baby..."

He bites off his words, keeps stroking me, and my temperature keeps rising. I'm still looking into his eyes, unable to tear myself away.

"How close have you been to having a cock inside of you?" he asks.

I can only let out a soft sound of delight with every drenched caress, but when he slips a finger up and into me, I cry out.

"Have you ever been this close?" he asks.

Still slumped against the wall, I shake my head. I want him to start working me again, so I gyrate once, feeling his finger buried inside me.

More, please.

His smile is ravenous now. “Good. That’s good, Karini. And this will be even better.”

He adjusts my hips, lifting them so that I can see the sheer red panties I bought just for this night, the slight patch of my light brown hair under them, his fingers between my legs. The hot sight makes something brutal fan out inside of me, its edges sharp and insistent, pushing to be released.

Then he eases another finger into me, and this time when I cry out, the sound is tighter.

But the discomfort slips away as he begins to massage my clit with his other thumb, swirling his fingers, pushing in, out, sending me into an oncoming tizzy.

I grip the edge of the table with my hands, and I still can’t tear my gaze away from his as he pumps into me, out of me, so slowly and expertly that I want to scream. He circles me with his thumb, priming me until my cream is so wet and thick that it bathes my thighs.

“Fuck,” he says. “My little gift...”

Everything inside of me begins to swell, the whirring fan blades swishing faster and faster, beating, keeping up with the increasing pace of his arousing fingers. As I look into his eyes, the blue of them darkens, pulsing with my own heartbeat. Then they start to go black, the color seeping into me, pounding at me unbearably, swallowing me up little by little until, with one big rush, everything pulses and I—

Something tears me apart like blades flying off in a million directions, and I let out a sound that's somewhere between a yes! and a more! Then...

Then my head and body start to piece themselves back together again, and I'm gasping for air, slumped on the table as Cage removes his fingers from me, then pulls up my panties and pulls down my dress.

Even in my glowingly buzzed state, his gesture surprises me, because a man who can talk that dirty to me isn't the kind of man who cares about making anyone comfortable.

He only proves that as he steps away from me, rubbing his fingers together as if enjoying the slick feel of my wetness on his skin. Or maybe he's only reveling in the taste he got of the gift he's about to toss back outside.

Just when I think he's about to turn away from me and leave me hanging, he looks back with a dark, cocky grin.

"Fuck the drive to the airport," he says. "I'm going to take you up on that gift after all."

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:04 am

Chapter 3

My pussy is still humming, my body still afterburning, so it takes me a few seconds to absorb what he just said.

Cage Bryant just asked me to stay—at least in his own arrogant way. I get the feeling this man doesn't actually ask anyone to do anything as much as he just says something and expects to be obeyed.

I sit up on the table and press my damp thighs together, suddenly the queen of demure. "You're...keeping me?"

"Under certain conditions."

I slowly slide off the table, making sure my dress covers everything. I don't know why since he just got a nice, long look at my goods, but there's something about the way he's devouring me with his gaze that unsettles me.

Excites me but also terrifies me.

He rests his hands on his hips, casual, strong, utterly in charge. "Don't look so afraid."

"I'm not."

"You are." He gives me yet another thorough look that has me trembling again. "I'm not going to take your virginity tonight. I've got to go back to New York for

business.”

Huh?

“Are you asking me to fly back to my home and wait for you to...summon me?”

And there’s that bemused smirk again. “No. I want you to come with me for a few days to the city.”

The city. As in New York. As in a few days there with him?

Mind blown.

He chuckles at how dopey I must look just standing there in my sweet dress, trying to figure out the logistics—and the whys. He’s so out of my league in so many ways, and once again, I feel like an awkward teen. Why would he want me if he doesn’t have to have me?

But for some reason, he doesn’t seem to notice my awkwardness. Or maybe it just feeds his massive ego.

“I mentioned conditions,” he says, his mood changing, his expression deadly serious. “And here’s the first: I’m going to pay you a fee on top of what you’re already getting from the Highest Bidder.”

I manage to keep my jaw from hitting the floor. More excitement rushes me, but I tamp it down.

This wasn’t what I was expecting by “conditions.” And all that money... Boy, it could really save my butt.

“Why did you change your mind?” I ask.

“Maybe I judged this whole thing too quickly because this gift took me by surprise.” His cool reserve intensifies. “However, I won’t have another man paying my bills. My client will be paid back for what he spent on you, and I’m going to cancel your contract through the Highest Bidder site. I’ll be paying you directly.” He pauses. “And it’ll be double your initial fee.”

His expression intensifies as his eyes heat up, reminding me that his fingers were just inside of me, turning me on and pumping me up.

Dear god, like I’m going to say no to this offer? And I’m not only ecstatic about the money. Don’t get me wrong.

It’s about him. I already can’t get enough of Cage Bryant.

He lifts one of his dark eyebrows. “Are you taking the offer or leaving it?”

How do I say yes without seeming totally desperate?

“To be clear,” he continues, “this deal is only good if you come back with me to New York immediately and agree to do anything I ask of you.”

His words rattle me. Anything? “Is this what you really meant by ‘conditions’?”

Now his demeanor is absolutely impenetrable. “I’m never going to ask you to do anything that will cause you harm.”

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:04 am

Okay. But I don't really know this man. Yes, he was already more intimate with me than I've ever experienced before, but part of me feels afraid because this is really happening—this impulsive, out-of-the-ordinary offer from a billionaire. But even more significantly, he seems like the type of guy who could steal my heart if I'm not careful.

I can be careful though—way more careful than I've been in the past.

“I accept your offer,” I say, my blood already singing for what I've just signed on for.

Cage doesn't say anything, but I see something that confuses me in his blue eyes—something that grips my heart—before his gaze cools and he nods in satisfaction, sealing the deal.

* * *

All business now, he directs me to a lounge where there's a gigantic plasma TV plus every media option available on it. After he gives me a phone charger, he tells me that since I'll be hanging around, I'll need some dinner.

I watch him leave the room, and I wonder if he always runs the gamut from hot to warm to cold and back again.

Probably. But I'll be with him only a few days, so I can take his changing moods. My patience will hopefully be rewarded in many ways...

I plug my device into an outlet. Then I settle onto a stuffed leather sofa in the dark-

wooded room that has a view of the waterside pool with white-draped awnings, which gives it a decadent Roman flavor. There's also a curtained iron gazebo, and as I access a movie on the TV, I see Cage going out there with a tray of ingredients.

Is he going to cook me dinner?

It seems there's a small kitchen in that gazebo, and I find myself watching him cook more than I watch the movie.

He's still in his board shorts, shirtless, and that means I get to see his muscles work with every move he makes. Even though he's not dressed in an elegant business suit and chased by paparazzi at this very minute, he's still the authoritative billionaire who just bought me.

And he plans on fucking me.

Oh, god, but when? How? Where?

I curl onto the sofa, pressing my thighs together so the ache between my legs won't drive me insane. I think the only thing that'll make the delicious pain go away is him, his fingers, his mouth, and...

I blow out a breath. His penis. Or, now that I'm about to become very familiar with it, maybe I should start being a big girl and calling it what the big girls call it.

His cock.

By the time he finally summons me outside, I've blushingly fantasized about him having me in about a thousand different ways.

He's put on a dark T-shirt, as if he took that extra courteous step for our waterside

dinner, and he pulls out my chair for me.

A flutter of appreciation wings around the inside of my belly, and I smile at him as I sit and place my phone on a chair next to me. The white curtains stir in the mild breeze as the sun turns a simmering orange, coating the water with its warmth.

But it's him I can't take my eyes off of. Tall, dark, gorgeous him.

As he slides a plate in front of me, I realize that something smells delicious, and I close my eyes and inhale.

"Yum," I murmur.

When I open my eyes again, Cage is standing there and watching me as if my slight, delighted sound has turned him on. I see it in his eyes. But he's also guarded, absolutely in control.

This is a man who does things the way he does them. He's a mystery I'm not going to solve in a few days, and I'm going to enjoy myself for what this is worth.

I glance at my plate, which is full of yellow rice with olives and something like grilled bananas. "What is this?"

Cage smoothly pours a golden wine into my waiting glass. "Cuban plantains. It's supposed to be a family recipe from generations ago."

I glance up at him to see the breeze toying with his thick brown hair. As he looks back at me, his eyes pierce me, and the color is all the more intense because of his tanned skin and dark eyebrows.

This has got to be a dream, I think as he pours wine for himself and then sits across

from me. Every move he makes sends a quaver through me. It's almost as if he's stroking my pussy again, getting me wet and ready for what he'll eventually be doing to me...

Tearing myself away from yet another fantasy, I take a sip of my wine. It's buttery and fruity.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:04 am

When I look at Cage again, he's not eating. I think he's getting his fill from watching how I drink, how I enjoy.

"You've got good taste," I say, putting down the glass.

"Yes, I do. In everything."

Does he mean me?

I blush yet again while I start eating, and damn, but he can cook. Is there anything he isn't good at?

The mere question sends a ripple of desire over my skin. He was sure good at what he did to me earlier.

As I realize that I'm wolfing down my food, I slow my pace, offering him a whoops kind of grin. At first he wrinkles his brow, but then a smile ghosts over his lips. I don't think he's used to girls like me—ones who actually eat real food instead of brown rice and vegetables. Ones who don't think chewing gum will put them over their calorie count for the day.

I drink more wine. It's starting to give me a happy buzz, probably because I'm not a big drinker in the first place. "Where did you learn to cook like this?"

This one simple question must be the wrong one, because something shutters closed in his eyes. His voice is cool. "Cooking was a skill that was necessary for me to learn."

Okay. The man of mystery strikes again. I have to say though that every time he goes dark and glacial like this, I like it. There's got to be something wrong with me, but there it is—I'm drawn to his inaccessibility.

Then again, what is there about him that I'm not drawn to?

As the sound of seagulls travel through the air in the near distance, I sneak another peek at Cage. His gaze is fixed on the ocean, as if there's something faraway that's consumed him. It's because of my question, isn't it? God, I'm not going to ask anything else. Not if it makes him unhappy. Even as inexperienced as I am, I know my job is to do the opposite.

I study his strong profile and shift restlessly in my chair.

Speaking of jobs... When will he fuck me?

How?

Where?

Out of the corner of my eye, I see a message flash onto the screen of my silenced phone in the seat next to me, and I glance down at it. When I read the text, my entire body freezes.

Liam:

Got the package as expected.

I feel the color drain from my face, and the food and wine I've been eating and drinking go sour in my stomach. I want to throw up, but instead, I only put down my fork and lift my napkin to my lips.

Even though my gaze is fixed on my plate, I sense that Cage has picked up on my reaction.

“What’s wrong?” he asks.

“Nothing. I’m fine.”

Look at him, Karini. Play this off like it’s nothing.

I do my best to put on a brave face and act like everything is okay, but my pulse is racing and I can’t breathe very well.

Shit.

I’ve got to get through this meal, because I don’t want Cage to change his mind about taking me to New York. He doesn’t need a basket case—he wants the girl he already got a small taste of. A virgin who melts at his touch and who’ll turn him on.

I pick up my fork and make myself eat, but nothing has a taste anymore—not after that text.

When I lift my gaze, Cage is still watching me as if he knows something is wrong, but even though I’m battling a panic attack I smile again. All the same, my sudden paranoia doesn’t disappear.

And neither does that text.

Chapter 4

After dinner, Cage shows me to my room.

That's right—my room. Not his.

Not ours.

It overlooks the big Jacuzzi that's situated near the pool, and it has a large, red, four-poster bed and dark, opulent furniture such as a chandelier draped with strings of pearls, an ottoman, and a mahogany vanity table. A bathroom is attached, and from what I can see of it, there's a lot of marble and fanciness there, too.

It's a bedroom fit for a princess, but there's one thing it doesn't have.

Him.

I thank Cage for his hospitality, but he must sense that I'm not entirely happy, because he gives me a long, questioning look.

"I'm just wondering..." I start. But my courage runs out.

"What, Karini?"

It's the sound of my name spoken by that rich, luscious voice that gets me, and I try again.

“I’m just wondering why we won’t be sharing a room. You know, since you bought me and everything.”

“I already told you that I’m not going to take your virginity tonight.”

“Yes, but...”

“But I don’t ever share my bed for a night. Not with anyone.”

He bars his thick arms over his chest, and even though he’s still wearing those board shorts and a T-shirt, he dominates everything in that room, including me.

“Not with any woman?” I ask.

“I need my space.”

There. It’s as simple as that for him, but he still makes no sense to me. Why would he buy me for some intimacy if he’s going to spend the night away from me? Unless...

Oh.

I think of how he always closes himself off, just as he’s doing now. He’s not only a private person, there’s something else going on with Cage Bryant, something he doesn’t want anyone to see. Maybe that darkness I sense in him means he doesn’t want commitments, even if it’s for one night in the same room.

He assesses my response then relents, but only slightly, letting his arms fall away as if he’s no longer on an emotional red alert. Something flashes through his gaze, but his expression remains enigmatic.

“We’ll be leaving early tomorrow morning for the flight to New York,” he says.

I lift up my single bag. “It’s not like I’ve got a lot to pack. What time should I be ready?”

“A car is picking us up at six A.M.”

“Got it. I’m an early riser anyway.” And since he won’t be keeping me up late tonight, I should have no problem rising and shining.

Then again, I have the feeling he’s going to keep me up real late with all these bewildering thoughts about him running through my mind. There’ll be a lot of tossing and turning as I fixate on those three big questions: When will he have me? How? Where?

With an unreadable look, Cage leaves me standing in the middle of the room, and I can only hope I get some sleep.

I also hope I won’t get another text that sends me into a panic.

* * *

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:04 am

Early the next morning, there's already a contract that's been slipped under my door. It's a simple agreement between Cage and me, and I note that he's had access to the Highest Bidder files that verify I have no diseases and that I've agreed to "relations" with a partner who's just as physically clean. I'm on birth control, as well, so it seems everything is set.

I sign and leave the papers for Cage to find and, over an hour later, a limo is driving us to the airport. I stifle a yawn. If Cage notices, he doesn't let on. He's too busy barking orders into the phone, clearly keeping the employees of his business on their toes even before regular work hours start.

I can't stop looking at him, because he's wearing a dark suit today, just like he does in all those paparazzi pictures. He's polished, with his hair tamed, with his burgundy tie knotted, with his golden cuff links gleaming.

I enjoy looking at this version of Cage, too.

Really like. Enough to conjure naughty thoughts of his hands in my panties again, his fingers strumming my clit...

I make a small sound in my throat as my pussy buzzes in anticipation of the things to come. Of the me to come. But then, just as I start to get juiced for him, I remember the text I got last night, and my mind goes dark.

I barely notice Cage disconnecting from this latest call and tapping something into his phone. Probably another call.

“Long night?” he asks, the blue glow of the phone mixing with the dimness of the sunrise through the tinted windows.

For a moment, the vivid color of his eyes captures me, and my heart flips in my chest. Then I realize that he isn’t talking on his phone to someone else. He asked me a question, and I shake myself out of my haze.

“Oh. I slept great.”

“You’re yawning. Generally, that’s a sign of a restless night.”

There’s a hint of a wicked grin on his mouth. Is he teasing me? Well, at least as well as someone as cool as Cage Bryant can tease when he’s not trying to make me come during foreplay.

I think he’s even seeing if I’ll admit to wanting him so badly that I couldn’t sleep at all.

But I don’t want to admit that. “You know how it is with a bed that’s not your own. Sleeping in a foreign place feels...odd. No matter how beautiful it is or how soft the sheets are.”

“We’ll have to make sure you’re much more comfortable tonight.”

His suggestive tone sends a thrill through me, and he goes back to work, shutting me out.

What a surprise.

Soon we pass the general airport and drive to a smaller section where it seems that private aircrafts operate.

Oh my god—are we going on his own plane?

Of course we are and, once again, I try not to make a fool out of myself, showing just how inexperienced I am as the limo drops us off at the small terminal and we're escorted to his private jet by a suited man on Cage's security detail.

After we climb the steps and enter the aircraft, I look around at the lobby or sitting room or lounge or...whatever I'm standing in. All I know is that it's plush, with creamy white leather seats, serene colors, smooth wood, and gold trim. There's even a big TV and a dining table attached to the wall. I don't know what being rich smells like, but there's a scent in the air that makes me think of palaces.

"Wow," I whisper.

He surveys his own jet as if he's never seen it before. "This belongs to Bryant Industries."

"In other words it's your jet."

His laugh rumbles. "Yes, it is."

"I mean. Wow. When I flew out here for the Highest Bidder job, I'd hardly even ridden in coach before, much less first class. And this is..." I shake my head. "Heavenclass."

He's still got that hint of a smile as he shows me to a massive armchair and I sink into it. It even feels like smooth, silky cream.

"Make yourself at home," he says. "If you're tired, there's a bedroom in back. There's also a conference room that you can relax in if you don't want to hear me on business calls, and the galley is fully stocked if you want food."

He'd left breakfast for me this morning—Eggs Benedict and delicious fresh berries—and although he hadn't joined me, I'd enjoyed his cooking once again. "I'm not even close to hungry, but thank you."

I see his own hunger start to burn in his gaze, and just as my heartbeat picks up, the crew appears. A chic flight attendant relieves me of my bag and hands me a Bellini. Cage waves off a drink as he takes a seat next to me. He still has his phone in hand, and I'm sure he's ready to use it once we're settled.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:04 am

I sigh, place my drink into a nearby holder, then lean back into the cushiony seat.

“It’s good to see you relax,” he says.

“How can I not? Bellini? A private jet? A trip to New York?”

A gorgeous billionaire who’s indulging me?

He doesn’t say anything for a moment, and I turn my head to face him. He’s looking deeply into me with those heart-stopping eyes, and my pulse stutters.

“What is it?” I ask.

“I was referring to last evening at dinner. Something upset you.”

The text from Liam. Got the package as expected.

All I want to do is shut that out of my mind, and there’s only one way that’s going to happen—with Cage. He’s enough to make any woman forget anything, so why think about what’s waiting for me back in the real world?

I have heaven right here.

“Really, it was nothing.” I lean to the side, bracing my elbow on the armrest and my head against the cushion backrest.

My hair curls over my shoulder, and Cage reaches over to touch it. He rubs the

strands between his fingers, just as he did yesterday when he tested the juices from my aroused pussy. The memory sends a strike of lust through me, and I bite my lip.

“It didn’t look like ‘nothing,’” he says in a low tone.

I really don’t want to think about this, and I reach up to wrap my fingers around his wrist. It’s the first time I’ve initiated anything with him, and his eyes flare with desire. Electricity seems to burn from my skin to his own.

My breathing quickens as his fingers trail from my hair to my neck. He strokes my tender skin there with his thumb, and when I swallow, his lips part. His gaze goes hazy as it runs from my neck to my mouth...

A female voice interrupts us. “Mr. Bryant? The captain is ready.”

Cage’s eyes focus again, and he removes his hand from me. When he glances at the flight attendant, he’s fully in charge of himself. Of everything around him.

I sit up in the seat and stare straight ahead, furiously blushing again. I’d almost forgotten that Cage and I aren’t alone.

“Thank you, Janelle,” he says. “Let everyone know that we won’t require service during the flight.”

“Yes, sir.”

His words hang in the air between us as we prepare for take off. Even as the jet flies into the brightening sky those words don’t go anywhere.

Why would he refuse service unless he’s going to...?

My god, is this the when, how, and where I've been fantasizing about ever since he gave me a taste of what he's going to do to me?

I don't know how long I sit there avoiding his gaze with the sound of the jet growling around us, the passage of blue sky rolling past the windows.

No crew. Just us.

And I'm pretty sure Cage hasn't taken his eyes off me this entire time.

I throb under his intense scrutiny. I take a sip of the peach Bellini, just for something to do.

"You're rather shy, aren't you?" he murmurs.

I put my glass back in the holder. "Me?"

"You."

He begins to loosen his tie with such casual assurance that my pussy starts creaming.

"I'm not...shy," I whisper. "Not exactly." The secrets I carry would blow that idea right out of the water.

"Whatever you are, Karini, I want you to bring it to me." His command echoes through the lounge. "Come over here. Now."

His urgency startles me, but in a good way, a way that gives my pulse a twist. I heat up as I see the same fire in his eyes that I saw yesterday.

It's happening. He's going to make me come again, and I already know the when and

the where of that fact.

It's just a matter of how...and how hard.

Chapter 5

Cage tosses his tie to a nearby sofa, his blue gaze drilling into me until I quiver. I want to go to him as he instructed me to, but I'm holding myself back.

Is anxiety racing through me because I'm afraid we'll get caught by the crew? Is my excitement and fear also about what he intends to do to me?

Or maybe I'm hesitant because I tried to be a bad girl once before, and it didn't turn out so well.

I knew what I was getting into with the Highest Bidder, but now that the moment has come when I'm expected to be naughty again, I'm hesitating. Can I do this after all?

As his gaze pulls at me, I don't think I have a choice. No matter how hard I try to stay back from Cage, the more useless it is.

I slide off my chair and come to my unsteady feet. I tug down the hem of my short summer dress as the floor of the jet hums beneath me.

"Closer," he says. "Let me unwrap you like a sweet little gift."

Oh.

"And what about your employees?" I ask on a whisper. "What if they walk in?"

"They won't, because they always listen to my directions. So should you."

I believe him, and it's such a relief that I won't get exposed during this intimate moment...

Even so, I'm frightened and exhilarated enough so that it feels as if a bullet is ricocheting through my chest. Everywhere it pings it leaves a shock of stimulating pain that melts downward, coating my belly, then easing between my thighs with erotic warmth.

I inch even closer to him until the front of my legs press against his. The contact primes me, soaking my pussy, my clit hammering.

Cage gestures at one of my sandaled feet, then brings his sexy blue gaze back up to mine. When he crooks his finger, I know he means for me to lift my leg so that my foot rests on the chair.

As I do, I'm afraid that the Bellini has affected my balance and I'm going to fall, but he grasps my leg, guiding my foot to the top of his thigh with practiced confidence. I watch as he unstraps my sandal.

"Now the other one," he says after he finishes.

I stand on my two feet again, then lift my other foot until he wraps his fingers around that ankle. After he has this sandal off, he cuffs me with his fingers, keeping my foot where it is. My knee is bent, giving him a flash of my panties, and his skin warms mine, sending burning rays up and up to tickle my clit.

A small sound of need escapes me, and Cage's animal gaze fires up. I can't look away from him as he runs his fingertips up the side of my calf then down again. Then he whisks his knuckles over to the inside of my leg, urging me to spread for him.

My breathing tightens, my heartbeat wavering.

“I’m going to need you to do something for me,” he says, taking his time petting the inside of my calf. “I want you to help me unwrap my gift.”

I’m still too frightened and stimulated to speak.

“Start with the top of your dress, baby,” he says. “Peel it down and show me what’s underneath. Slowly.”

Baby. I like being called that. It makes me feel taken care of, cherished, even if this is only temporary.

My chest rises and falls with my uneven breaths as I bashfully reach up to the buttons on my dress’s bodice. My hands shake as I undo one clasp, then another. With every button I unfasten, Cage’s gaze grows more famished, a wolf in billionaire’s clothing, a greedy predator who can’t wait to see what I’ve been hiding.

After I finish, my dress slumps so that the short cotton sleeves are at my elbows, exposing the tops of my breasts as the lacy bra pushes them up. I bought the lingerie for this job, thinking I would need it to please my client so he wouldn’t send me back and ask for a refund. But from what I see in Cage, he could care less about the frills.

He wants more skin.

“Show me those tits.” There’s dangerous grit in his voice. “Give it to me.”

My pulse deafens me as I fumble with the front clasp, so nervous now that I can’t make my hands work like they should. Impatient, Cage pulls at my skirt and brings me down to him.

My legs give out. I fall all the way forward to straddle him with my knees, bringing my sex to press against the hardness of his cock through his trousers, and I gasp,

easing slightly away.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:04 am

He only clenches his jaw then slips his hands into the sides of my dress where the fabric gapes away from my body. The feel of his palms on my ribs electrifies me, and I grab his arms.

“Easy,” he says. “Just relax.”

“I guess this is why you don’t usually have anything to do with virgins,” I babble. “Because we have no idea what to do.”

“I’m not going to fuck you yet. I’m only going to make you cream for me, just like yesterday.”

It’s as if he hasn’t been able to stop thinking about our first encounter either, and I let go of some of my tension. For some reason he wants me. I can see just how much in his fiery gaze, even though he isn’t saying it out loud.

“Now that’s more like it.” He slips his hands up my ribs until he comes to the bottom edge of my bra. “Yesterday, I liked watching your face, seeing how good I can make you feel. Show me that again, baby.”

As he easily undoes the front of my bra, I close my eyes, fully giving in. When my breasts pop free of the cups, I bite my bottom lip, not knowing if my boobs will measure up to the tits on his more experienced women. I suspect I have nice ones—full but not big, firm with pink tips—but when I open my eyes and see the way Cage is looking at them, I feel as if they’re the only breasts that’ll ever matter.

His eyes are filled with desire as he cups them, gently squeezes them, and I arch back

my neck, moaning.

“Do you make those sounds for other men when they touch you like this?” There’s an edge to his question.

“No.”

He keeps fondling me, exploring and making me move with his every caress.

“How much of a virgin are you?” he asks.

“What do you mean?”

He rubs my nipples with his thumbs, bringing them to hard peaks. I bite my lip so hard that it stings.

“I mean,” he says, “how far have you put out for other men?”

Boys, I want to say. Because no one compares to Cage and the way he touches me. The one guy who ever got anywhere near this point with me doesn’t deserve to be called a man. Not after the nightmare he’s putting me through.

“I’ve never given other guys very much,” I finally say. “No one has ever…”

I can’t go on, because Cage is lightly playing with the very tips of my nipples now, and I’m overtaken by waves of heat.

He pulls me toward him, positioning me so that he can suck one nipple into his mouth. I haul in a sharp breath, bracing my hands on the top of the chair and digging my nails into the leather. My pussy nestles against his cock, and I feel his tip nudging me every time he sucks on my breast, every time he lightly pushes my hips forward

with his hand so that I'm barely humping him.

I'm so wet that my pussy is sliding against my panties and his trousers, and every time his head hits my clit, I mewl a little.

"Fuck," he whispers against my breast. "You feel so damned good, taste so damned good."

Then he flicks my nipple with his tongue, and I press my sex against him harder, gripping his thick hair with one hand. A low growl seems to be vibrating inside of him, as if he's getting just as turned on as I am. Every time my pussy hits his cock, he seems to lose that much more control.

When he comes up for air and looks up at me, there's a hellish need in his eyes. Even though I don't know what I'm doing, I think I know what he'd love for me to do now.

Still unsure, I ease off of his lap. My heart is thundering inside me as I look at his groin, where I can see the length of his cock under his trousers.

"Do you want me to...?"

I can't believe I'm asking him this...or almost asking him. I'm too much of a novice to know how to ask, but I want so badly to make him happy.

He only smirks in answer, and it's a dark, greedy expression of lust. A hungry yes.

As the blood pounds in my ears, in my chest, in my clit, I drop to my knees in front of him. This time I don't fumble—I want to see what's underneath his zipper too much—and when I pull him out of his trousers, I blow out a taut breath.

He's thick and long, and my mouth waters just looking at him.

“Now touch me,” he says.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:04 am

Eagerly I stroke my hand under his shaft, and he pulls in a breath between his teeth. His intense gaze encourages me, more darkness whirling there, joined by a yearning so powerful that all I can do is respond to it.

I run my palm under him, his cock getting stiffer by the moment. I'm so fascinated by his dick that when I lean forward to lick his tip, it seems the most natural thing in the world to do.

He groans his approval, then mutters, "Now do more of that, baby."

I do as he says, experimentally running my tongue around him and tasting a slight saltiness. I love the firm feel of him, the unfamiliar sensation of doing something that I've only fantasized about, and before I know it, I'm swirling my tongue up and down his cock, slowly at first, then with increasing gusto.

His hand is in my hair, and when I look up to take a breath, his gaze is utterly lost.

For a moment, the power I have over him swamps me, but I'm too dizzy to think much about that. I'm all body and no brains, and I start lavng him again, sucking and giving him head as if I actually know what I'm doing.

He makes a guttural sound as he fists his hand in my hair. It's primal, tortured, and it keeps me going, taking him in my mouth and sucking him faster and faster—

When he comes, I swallow up the juices until I can't take any more. Then after he's spent, I back away, feeling his cum slip down my throat as I wipe him from my lips, his gaze going entirely wild.

“Now it’s your turn,” he growls. “I want to taste your sweet pussy.”

He surges out of his chair and scoops me up, bringing me back to my own chair with raw ferocity.

Now he’s really out of control, that darkness in his gaze getting me so hot that I can barely stand it. He kneels and pushes up the skirt of my dress, then rips off my panties, tossing them aside. Before I can take in another breath, he hooks my legs over his shoulders and pulls my hips to him.

When he kisses my pussy—a kiss that’s fevered and so, so dirty—I gasp. He keeps going, sucking, ravishing, using his tongue to lap up the cream from every bit of me. I grip the sides of the chair, stifling a scream. He devours me mercilessly, circling my clit with his tongue until my hips are churning. I spread my legs wider for him, hanging them off the sides of the chair, asking for more, always more...

A tense pressure starts pushing at me from the inside out. It starts to roll around in my belly like a heavy stone creating waves that grow and grow as he uses his fingers to part my pussy lips. When he delves into me with his tongue, I can’t hold back. I moan loudly, just as I did yesterday, but with more desperation now.

There’s a part of me that’s still afraid the plane’s crew will walk in on us. But there’s a bigger part of me that doesn’t give a shit as he tongue-fucks me, adding his fingers to the naughty play, massaging my clit at the same time, driving me crazy, crazier...

Something big and wet and wonderful explodes inside of me, and it feels as if I’m splashing everywhere—inside and outside. I cry out some more, loud and nasty, no matter who might hear it.

But that’s not all—Cage is intent on completely breaking me down, sucking on my clit now, and helplessly I come again for him again, jerking, gushing with heat,

pulling at his hair.

It's as if the power goes out in me, my mind going black for a flash. Absolute darkness. An eternal second of blankness.

Slowly, I gain my senses again, but then my mind scrambles until, with yet another wet burst, I suck in a deep breath, everything in me rattling, destroying me, then dying.

I open my eyes, and my surroundings solidify, coming together. I exhale, long and hard.

While my breathing and heartbeat slow down from the wild ride I was just on, I realize that Cage has been watching my free fall as if he can't get enough of what just happened either.

As if there's a deep feeling there—one that stuns me.

It's only when I start to blush furiously at the fact that he's still between my cream-wet thighs and that I'm still entirely spread out for him that reality sets in.

He owns me, and not only because he paid for me.

By now his expression is different. There's something...off...about it. Where he should be warm and intimate, he's distant, cool, hard-edged.

It makes me think I never did see what I saw in him.

Without a word, he adjusts my body until I'm sitting, and he tugs down my dress so that it covers me. Then he stands. He turns his back as he silently puts himself back in his trousers. The sound of his zipper cuts through the tense air.

What's with him? It's as if he can't handle the closeness that just passed between us.

He goes back to his seat and picks up the phone from the table next to him. He doesn't look at me.

"I'll be making a few calls," he says tightly. "Then I need to get some sleep for the rest of the flight."

His words slam into me. I think I'm being dismissed.

After a numb moment, I uneasily stand, feeling the slickness that still moistens my pussy. I bend down to pick up my panties and clutch them.

Then, without a word, I walk the path of rejection to the back of the plane toward the bedroom, knowing I won't see Cage for the rest of the flight.

I might as well try to make up for the sleep I didn't get last night. Might as well hide back there and try to figure out what just happened.

In the end, I get about as much sleep there as I did back in Miami.

Chapter 6

After a driver picksus up in a limo and drives us into Manhattan, I don't push myself on Cage as he makes more calls. I know enough to realize he doesn't owe me anything personal. The deal we made was only one of many daily transactions he deals in, and it isn't as if I entered into this arrangement expecting to come out of it with a soul mate.

All I need is the money, and then I can take care of the past that keeps coming back to haunt me.

Get rid of my stubborn problem once and for all...

Even though hurt keeps nudging me, I keep repeating this, even as we're dropped off in front of Cage's skyscraper. There, a doorman tips his hat to him and professionally smiles at me as we enter the extravagant lobby with its sleek black floor and a light fixture whose round bulbs shower down from the ceiling in a sparkling show.

After we ride up in the black-tiled and gold-trimmed elevator, Cage brings me to his duplex, which is probably about 10,000 square feet and costs millions of dollars. Even if he is distracted, he efficiently shows me around, and I'm blown away with the Swarovski crystal chandelier in the main room, as well as the floor-to-ceiling glass windows that feature views into the heart of Manhattan. Everything is high-tech: the security system, the entertainment offerings, and even the kitchen where a private chef is on call.

Once again, I'm like a princess in a fairy tale, although based on what happened in

the jet, I'm sure my Prince Charming is going to ride off into the sunset all by himself after he gets his ultimate way with me.

But, hey—why should I complain when I'm with a hot billionaire who's giving me money, amazing orgasms, and the finest luxury amenities that a woman can have? Not too shabby, and I'm going to enjoy it the best I can and not worry so darn much.

And it gets much easier to enjoy once Cage shows me to “my” bedroom.

There's an oversized cushioned gold headboard for my king-sized bed, which rests on a raised, thickly carpeted platform. Sculpted golden lamp fixtures and tasteful modern paintings decorate the room.

When I peek inside the walk-in closet, I laugh in glee. “Clothes?” I ask.

“They're all your size,” he says. “My assistant asked the Highest Bidder to provide that information so she could supply you with what you'll need. I thought you should have something to wear besides what you have in your bag.”

The website did ask for my size, probably just in case their billionaires want to pamper their girls like this. “Thank you for thinking of that.”

I run my fingertips over a gorgeous silk shift that one of his dates in those paparazzi photos might've worn. Little, black, and elegant.

I feel Cage standing behind me, and I drop my hand to my side.

“I'd like to choose what you'll be wearing for the rest of the day, Karini.”

His voice is sandpaper rough, and it scrapes over me, burning my skin. It seems he's back to paying attention to me now, and I can't stop myself from imagining him

taking the simple dress that I'm currently wearing off of me like more gift wrap.

"Which dress are you thinking of?" I ask softly.

When he walks into the closet, he brushes by me, and I shiver. Did he do that on purpose?

His expression tells me nothing as he peruses the selection on the racks in front of him—nightwear, daywear, an array of shoes. He finally pulls something down on its hanger.

It's a lovely yet unremarkable filmy shift the color of sea foam. It's sweet yet elegant.

He moves toward me then rests it against my body, as if to see how I'll look in it. But I'm only thinking of the slight pressure of the dress as the fabric whispers over me. I never thought having Cage cover me up would make my stomach flip like it's doing right now.

When he slips a hand around so that his palm rests against my shoulder blade, I hold my breath. And when he guides me toward a full-length mirror, it feels as if I've been ignited through and through.

There I am in the reflection, everyday average me, my light brown hair resting on my shoulders, my eyes wide as Cage holds the dress over the front of me. When I meet his gaze in the mirror, my belly joins my stomach in its circus of somersaults.

"This brings out the color of your beautiful eyes," he murmurs.

I look again, and he's right—my eyes aren't just a boring gray anymore; they've picked up the blue-green hue of the dress.

Cage's hand slips down my shoulder blade, and in the mirror I see that he's lost focus. He's watching his fingers trail down me as if he's entranced.

Just as my heart begins to piston in my chest, he stops touching me and hands me the dress, already on his way out the door. "Be ready in ten minutes."

Ten? Does he think I can put myself through a car wash or something?

But I won't argue. "We're going somewhere?"

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:04 am

“We’ve been cooped up in a jet, then a car. I need some fresh air.”

Suddenly he sounds irritated. Did I do something wrong?

What now?

I think about his whiplash change in temperament on the jet after he gave me oral—from intense to removed. What’s with him?

But he’s gone, and I don’t waste time messing around. I strip, choose a cute pair of Valentino slide sandals to go with the dress, then jump into the bathroom to wash up.

I do get a little sidetracked there by all the sumptuous soaps, gels, and fragrances he ordered someone to stock for me—at least I think they were purchased for me and not someone else. But I manage to meet him in the foyer in ten minutes flat.

He’s still in his business suit as I sweep past him to the door with a you-didn’t-think-I-could-do-it-didja smile. He lifts a dark brow.

I lean back against the door. “You probably thought I was going to pamper myself too much and keep you stewing out here. I think those toiletries in my bathroom were actually a Venus Fly trap you set for me, but I was up to your ten-minute challenge.”

Now he’s back to looking amused. “I guess you’re onto me.”

If only.

He leads me into the elevator, and as we descend, he leans against the black-tiled wall. I catch him giving me an approving, lustful look, and I warm right up again.

“You wear that well, Karini,” he says.

“Not too much wrapping?”

“Oh, I like the wrapping. It only means I get to unwrap you again.”

Hoo-boy. I try not to flush under his compliment, to take it with grace, even though it’s always been hard for me to do that with anyone.

“Thank you, Cage,” I make myself say.

His raises both eyebrows now. “‘Cage,’ is it?”

“Should I call you ‘Mr. Bryant’? Especially in public?” I’m not actually bantering. I mean it.

He seems to turn that over in his mind.

“Did you plan on taking me out in public?” I ask. “Or is this a whim?”

After all, he did hire me on impulse.

He stands away from the wall, his hands in his pockets. “I didn’t plan anything about this...except for that closet full of clothing.”

Huh. I think I threw him a curveball with my questions, and it makes me happy that I can play in his league—at least in this way. He probably doesn’t get many curveballs from people. In fact, I get the feeling it’s even refreshing for him.

He gives me a sidelong look, then graces me with a naughty smile. “You really do look gorgeous.”

My body is just beginning the familiar process of steaming up when the elevator dings and the doors slide open. Needing to cool it, I head out. I still don’t know how to react to all his compliments. I wish I’d learned how to do that even before today though. If I had, I might not be in such trouble back in the real world...

His long, slow strides allow him to catch him up to me as we emerge onto the city sidewalk. “If I didn’t know any better, I would say you can’t take flattery, Karini. Surely I’m wrong.”

I don’t want to talk about the awkwardness I thought I’d grown out of before realizing I’d never left it behind. I’d rather trade light jokes with him, tease him a little so that he isn’t always so serious. Have him tease me.

Traffic rolls past us, the thin squeal of brakes echoing off the high buildings, the slight humidity surrounding me. Storefronts beckon with windows showcasing trendy clothing and high-end restaurants.

“So,” I say, changing the subject at breakneck speed. “Where’re we going?”

I know he knows that I’ve shifted gears, and he drops the topic. And why not? We’re hardly working on a relationship here.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:04 am

“What’s your stance on ice cream?” He’s still got his hands tucked into his pockets while controlling the pace of our walk. I don’t know how he looks so cool, even during summer.

“Hmm, ice cream,” I say. “My stance is that I like it.”

He laughs, more relaxed than usual. Some of his thick brown hair even waves in the breeze coming from the passing cars. “How would you like to get some right now?”

“Ice cream is good any time. Any time is ice cream time.” Giddy because this day is going so well, I grin at him, but then frown. “I’m not sure you’re the ice cream type though.”

“What does that mean?”

“You don’t seem like the kind of person who’s in to pastel flavors, jimmies, and foofy sauce.”

“Everybody’s got a bit of a kid in them.”

“You?” I laugh. “You were a kid once upon a time? I get the impression that you were born such a serious man.”

Once again, I think I’ve said the wrong thing, because his gaze goes dark, and he fixes his gaze straight ahead of us.

“You never know about a person,” he says.

That's when I clam up, because he's right. If he knew everything about me, he might not want to take me anywhere. I can guarantee my family and friends would feel that way if they ever found out about the secret I'm trying so hard to keep by earning this money.

When we enter the ice cream parlor, blushing pink lights, stained glass lamps, and quirky decorations greet us. Cage orders for me, of course—a banana split. He gets a frozen hot chocolate for him.

Meanwhile, the customers stare at him. He's that magnetic, towering over everyone else, a strong, designer-suited giant among mortals.

A few men also look at me, but I think it's the dress. At any rate, Cage glares at them and they stop.

He leads me to a table while carrying our treats, but before we get there, a male voice calls out to him.

“Cage Bryant!”

There's the trace of an accent—Russian?—and an older man dressed in an impeccable suit comes over to shake Cage's hand.

“Mr. Vasiliev.” Cage seems genuinely glad to see him. “I had no idea you're in town.”

“We only just arrived.” The man is all kinds of wealthy, from his striped silk tie to his diamond cuff links to his steel and gold watch. His silver hair is styled in what I'd guess is a \$500 haircut, and he also holds himself with a sort of old-school, refined air, almost as if he walked out of another century. “My grandchildren—they insisted we have frozen hot chocolate during our visit. I see you had the same idea.”

Cage lifts his dessert to the man, then says, “Indeed. Are you here on business or pleasure?”

“It is business that brings me here most unexpectedly.”

Mr. Vasiliev’s attention turns to me. He’s curious about who I am, and my adrenaline kicks in, making my mind race.

Is this man an important business associate? More importantly, is he savvy enough to know an escort when he sees one? I mean, I’m sure not dressed like a colleague, so he won’t mistake me for that. I’m dressed as if Cage and I might be on a date...

Mr. Vasiliev bows to me, and I extend my hand, still trying to think fast. He cordially kisses the back of it.

“And who might you be?” he asks.

The words are out of my mouth before I can take them back.

“I’m Karini,” I say. “Cage’s girlfriend.”

Chapter 7

Cage is fuming. It's in his eyes as he drills me with his gaze. It's in the clench of his jaw, the tense set of his shoulders. It's in the way he looms in my peripheral vision as I offer a lame smile to Mr. Vasiliev, whose eyes have begun to sparkle at the news of the most eligible bachelor in New York's "girlfriend."

Oh, boy, I've blown it, and I really didn't mean to. I should've just told Mr. Vasiliev my name and that's it, but my nerves took over and I became Motor Mouth.

"A girlfriend," the delighted man says, squeezing my hand between both of his. "I have not seen news of this in the society pages, Cage. Why have there been no pictures of this lovely woman with you?"

"I've kept her under wraps," Cage says.

His double entendre isn't lost on me. It's a reminder that I'm his gift, and I've stepped way out of my job description.

Why didn't I just smile and shut up?

Mr. Vasiliev is still holding my hand, patting it. "You must tell me your secret, dear girl. After all, no woman has been able to pin down my friend here thus far." His eyes light up even more. "We shall meet for dinner together before I leave town next week, yes?"

If Cage wasn't furious before, he sure is now. But I wonder if I'm the only one who

can see it since Mr. Vasiliev doesn't seem to notice.

"Yes," Cage says. "I'll arrange a time and place with you, Igor."

"Splendid. But now I see that my grandchildren are already out the door. I promised them a visit to the Central Park Carousel, and they mean to hold me to it."

As Mr. Vasiliev gives another gentlemanly bow to me, I smile again, keeping my mouth closed so I don't do any more damage. Meanwhile, I pray for a hole to open up in the black-and-white tiled floor and swallow me so I won't have to deal with the hell that's about to rain down.

After all the goodbyes are said and Mr. Vasiliev has left, I brace for Cage to lay into me. But he shocks me by staying silent, sliding our ice cream treats onto a table, and pulling out my chair.

I sit, gauging his mood as he takes a seat across from me. My gut tells me that I'm still in hot water.

"Eat," he says.

He doesn't bark out a command. It's more like a firm suggestion, and that worries me. In fact, he's so cool that it's even worse than being yelled at.

My stomach is so curdled that I can't eat a thing. I only use my long spoon to play with my sundae, and every time I look at Cage I try to let him know how sorry I am for my dumb mistake.

As everyone else in the shop laughs and has a grand old time under the sound of vintage music, his silence gnaws away at me. Then the dreaded moment finally arrives.

He leans forward only slightly, fixing his raging gaze on me. “You told Igor Vasiliev that we’re seeing each other.”

I only nod.

“Why?”

His tone rubs me the wrong way, instinctively getting my defenses up, just like yesterday when he was such a prick to me about my dead phone.

I calmly put down my spoon and fold my hands in my lap. Then I lean toward him so I can whisper back. “Would you have preferred that I said I was a paid escort?”

Oh, he doesn’t like that. If there’s such a thing as beyond-pissed, he’s it. But he’s still controlled, even now. The burning rage in his gaze is like a cold fire that seethes inside of him.

“Listen,” I say. “I was nervous and put on the spot. If I could take it back, I would.”

“There are no do-overs in this scenario.”

Bummer, because I could sure use one.

“Karini,” he says evenly. “Igor Vasiliev is very important to Bryant Industries. He’s considering partnering with us for many, many millions of dollars with my recruiting business in Russia.”

“Okay. But he seemed happy with you when he left. Wasn’t he?”

My naiveté does not charm Cage.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:04 am

He ignores my optimistic comment. “This is a deal that needs to go through, or my business will take an enormous hit. My investors and board of directors will lose faith in me if things go south with Igor.” He’s still leaning toward me, and I can even see shards of silver in his blue eyes. “I’ve promised everyone this deal on a silver platter, and now it’s at risk.”

“How?”

He leans back in his chair and bars his arms over his wide chest. One of his fingers taps as if he’s counting to himself, bringing down his temper number by number.

“Is there anything you noticed about him?” he finally asks. “Anything that stood out to an observant person such as you?”

It’s a cut disguised as a compliment, and I fist my hands in my lap. “He seems...nice. And very understanding.”

He only gives me a look like I’m gum on the bottom of his expensive designer shoe, and it’s as condescending as hell.

My own temper bucks up again. “He was courteous, gentlemanly, and kind of...old fashioned.”

“Very good, Karini. You’re right—Igor is extremely traditional, and that includes his views. He’s been a bit reluctant in his dealings with Bryant Industries, in large part because I’m not married and I don’t have children. He considers such men to be unstable, and it’s taken a great deal of wooing to even get Igor to the point where he’s

considering a partnership.”

“I still don’t—”

“Understand? You saw how approving he was at the mere thought that I had settled on one woman.”

“Yes.”

“So what do you think will happen if Igor never sees you again?”

Oh.

Oh.

Now I’m starting to get it.

I nudge the sundae away from me. It’s getting runny, and I can’t even think about how yummy it might’ve been if I hadn’t freaked out and thrown out the word girlfriend to Mr. Vasiliev.

Cage is still tapping his finger. “Let me paint that picture for you. If you don’t show up to our dinner, Igor will believe that I’ve dumped you—just like he thinks I do to all the women I go out on the town with. He’s going to see me as untrustworthy. He’ll rethink the deal. That’s how his mind works. To him, a family man is the only man he wants to have a business relationship with.”

“So you’re saying that I’ve undone all of your hard work, is that it?”

His silence once again speaks volumes.

One stupid word—girlfriend—is causing so much trouble. And it's all my fault. I own this, but there has to be something I can do to improve matters.

"I'm going to make this right somehow," I say softly.

Cage lets out a long, rough breath. His tapping finger goes still, and he uncrosses his arms. Then he leans forward again and lowers his voice to a harsh whisper so no one around us will hear.

"I've already decided that we're going to continue the ruse of being a couple. We're going to make a dinner date as Igor expects us to."

Guilt presses down on my chest. Some gift I am. "I'm so sorry. I really didn't mean for this to happen."

"But it did. You were thoughtless."

His rudeness makes me flinch. If he was a prick yesterday, he's double the fun now.

I stand out of my chair, my back stiff. "You don't have to be such a pill about it."

"A pill. Like aspirin? Because I'll need some of that with the headache you've given me."

"Aw, poor baby." I'm starting to see red. He just brings it out in me—from zero to sixty in a hot moment. "It's beyond me how you manage a billion-dollar industry if something like this makes your delicate head hurt. Surely you've dealt with worse."

He slowly brings his gaze back to me, searing me with it. Now he's really good and pissed, because my backtalk has obviously rubbed him the wrong way. I'm not sure people generally talk to Cage Bryant like this, and something makes me a little proud

that I'm the one who's dared to do it.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:04 am

Then something changes in his eyes. He's not just angry at me. It's like a switch has been flipped on in him, and he...

Good god, it's almost as if he's thinking that I need a good spanking.

And he's the one who'd dearly love to do it.

My instincts have me rushing away from the table, heading toward the restrooms where I can shut myself in until he gets a hold of the urge I saw in him—a dark, powerful sexual attraction that doesn't make sense to me.

But my body sure understands it. That's why I'm making such good time weaving through the tables of chattering people, my adrenaline screaming and pulsing with a desire of my own that scares me just as much.

I hurry into the hallway, then nearly breathe a sigh of relief as I open the door to one of a few unisex single restrooms and—

Cage's hand reaches over me and pushes open the door. Before I know it, he's pulling me inside by my dress, then locking the door behind him.

The crazy heat in his gaze is still burning, sizzling into the very center of me and making me go liquid inside...and outside. In my belly...in my pussy. Temptation bubbles until my clit hums with the heat.

As I back away from him, my breathing cuts through me, and when I hit the tiled wall, I feel trapped.

An insane laugh wells up in my chest, and I realize something about myself.

I like this.

Cage takes his time approaching me, and the closer he comes, the more my heartbeat rages.

“You want to get a rise out of me?” he asks grittily. “Then keep giving me more attitude.”

“I don’t think that’s such a good idea,” I say breathlessly.

“Oh, yes you do.”

He pauses a few tense feet away from me, and a naughty buzz begins to saw through all of me.

“Give me that sass again, Karini,” he murmurs with that darkness in his eyes. “And let’s see what happens.”

Chapter 8

It seems as if time stands still while Cage watches me from a few feet away, bare hunger in his piercing blue eyes.

Even though my muscles feel frozen, pinned by his gaze against the bathroom wall, everything inside of me is brewing, simmering. There's something chemical going on between us, and it's going to end up exploding.

Something in his eyes flickers, going even darker, and I gasp. Then, with a restrained growl, he pounces, grabbing me and hauling me against him until the length of his hard body presses against mine.

"You've been a bad girl today," he whispers.

He doesn't give me time to argue because he picks me up in his arms then tosses me onto his shoulder with effortless strength until I'm looking down at the floor with my hair covering half my face. My ass is in the air, his large hand on the curve of my cheek.

I grasp at his designer jacket, my head spinning. Every move he makes is primal, and it's getting me so hot.

"What do bad girls get?" he asks.

"I don't know."

As I feel his other hand slip beneath my dress, I clutch at his jacket harder. He tugs down my panties and pushes up my dress. My vision begins to pound along with the rest of the blood that's surging through me.

Things are moving so fast that everything reels, and it's only when he's got my panties off that my thoughts catch up.

Air hushes over my naked bottom, and the naughty sensation makes my pussy throb even harder with wet need.

"You know what bad girls get," he says, arrogantly caressing one of my ass cheeks. "Tell me what it is."

"Punishment." It comes out choked, blocking my breathing as I fight for oxygen.

"That's right," he says. "You get a spanking for fucking around with me back there."

Now that he's planted the thought, he waits for it to take hold of me. I shiver in fright, but I'm anticipating it, eagerly holding what breath I have. But when he doesn't do anything, hopeful in such a warped way.

His grip tightens on me, and I hear a thwarted growl rumble from his chest as he fondles my ass some more, as if it's all his and he wants me to know it.

Just as I'm about to beg for him to punish me already, he suddenly smacks my exposed bottom.

The sting makes my pussy gush, and I bite my lip, holding back an aroused groan. But I'm not going to make a sound. I'm not giving in to him.

My clit is pounding again, waiting for what comes next.

Cage only rubs away the stinging heat on my skin. It's as if he's testing me to see how much I'll take.

But I want to feel my clit jerk with lust again. I want to get wetter.

What's wrong with me?

"Did you learn your lesson yet?" he finally asks, his voice brittle.

"No." I wiggle, asking for more. "Fuck you, Cage."

"Fuck me for what?"

I don't know what else to say, and he smacks me again.

Something rapturous blasts through me, and I come with such soaked brutality that everything disappears for a fierce moment. Then, as my head starts spinning again, I'm back, fisting his jacket in my hands, hauling in tight breaths. I want this so bad that I think I'm going to die, and my sight starts to clear, my body trembling as if it's barely tied together by vibrating wires that are set to break yet again.

Juices make me slick between my legs, and I involuntarily mewl, wanting him to give me another.

Instead he slides his fingers between the folds of my beating pussy, as if wants to see how affected I am. He wants to see what a little monster he's making me.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:04 am

“You’re drenched,” he says, taking his hand away. “You’re enjoying this.”

“Yes.” I can’t lie.

When he slowly reaches between my legs again and parts my lips, I cry out a little. He dips his finger into me, and I gasp and move my hips against him so he goes even deeper. I’m silently begging now, and when he pushes even farther inside, I squirm. I pull at his jacket as he pumps me, finger fucking me faster, faster, deeper, until he hits a spot inside of me that makes a violent shower of sparks light the darkness of my mind yet again.

Spinning—my sight, my consciousness—I feel him moving me off his shoulder until he brings me down to my feet, my back against the wall. He has to hold me up with one arm because I can’t stand on my own. With his other hand, he deftly undoes his fly. All the while he looks down at me with those intense blue eyes, his dark brows making him seem so cruel, and I wonder if he sees the part of me that’s asking for more and more—the crazy want, the surprising need, this new addiction that I’ve just discovered with him.

“You’re not getting off that easily,” he says.

God, but I am.

I know that’s not what he means, and fear mixes with stimulation, getting me higher pulse by pulse.

Is he going to really fuck me now? Is this finally the when, how, and where...?

Things are going so fast, and I want them to go faster. I reach down for his cock, but he's ahead of me, cuffing my wrist with his fingers then pushing my arm over my head so that it's plastered to the wall. He guides my other arm upward, too, and he binds both of my wrists with that one large, damnably experienced hand.

"Should I give you my cock?" He reaches down behind me with his free hand, urging my hips forward, but not enough so that I'm against his dick. "Should I fuck you right here?"

Before I can plead for him to take me, he coaxes his fingers down from my back and over my ass, then down under my dress and between my thighs. Like a born slut, I part my legs for him as he eases up to tease my drenched slit.

As he strokes me, I moan. The sound of my juices...the erratic rhythm of our breathing... Oh, it's all too much. But when he pushes his fingers up and into my pussy from the back, I sharply gasp, rising to my toes and arching toward him. At the same time, he lets go of my wrists above my head and reaches down to his cock.

With excruciating laziness, he takes hold of himself and slips his bare tip through my folds, back and forth, teasing me some more. But he doesn't enter me. His fingers are already inside my pussy, pumping in time to those slow strokes of his cock, getting me going harder, higher... God, he's torturing me more and more, especially when he rubs his smooth, hard head against my clit.

The electric contact intensifies the feverish buzz I already had going. My blood starts to bubble again as he slips and slides over me, circling the tiny button of pleasure that's never felt anything like this. That, combined with the way he's swirling his fingers inside of me from the back, brings me into the darkness again. It's as if I'm in the middle of a growing eclipse as passion rolls over me and I gyrate, hungry for more. Always more...

I approach a place that threatens to tear me apart...

Pressure rising...

Steam from our chemical attraction brewing...

He pushes his fingers so far up into me that I buck forward, and I feel his cock hit the hand he's using to bang me.

So close. So fucking close...

"Please..." I whisper.

"Please what?"

His gaze is fully dark now as he lets go of his rock-hard shaft, bracing that hand on my hip, picking up speed and guiding me in a relentless rhythm as he pumps his hips and slides his cock through my folds and finger fucks me at the same time. His tip keeps hitting far enough back so that I can still feel it nudging his fingers as they push in and out of me with increasingly wet, vigorous urgency. I'm sopping, ready for him, gripping his shoulders and desperately urging him on.

"Please," I whisper. "Fuck me!"

"Do you deserve to be fucked?"

I want to answer yes!, but his fingers are so far in me that they're prodding my g-spot again. At the same time, his shaft is sliding against my clit, and the combination is pushing me and pushing me...

An orgasm butts against me, threatening, not quite getting there, and I groan in

frustrated delight. Then Cage hits both sweet spots again—clit and g-spot—and a flash of destructive light suddenly rips me apart.

One flash...two...like fast lightning...

I feel him come with hot spurts on my pussy and thighs as I finish my own intense orgasm. I cling to his suit jacket once again, my face pressed against his hard chest, his strong, tensed arms holding me up.

Right away I realize that he didn't climax into me. He held back, and it's only when I look up to see the veins standing out on his neck that I know how forcefully he fought himself.

He didn't fuck me for some reason. Punishment?

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:04 am

Or something else...?

“You didn’t...” I start to say, barely getting out the words. I don’t have the strength. All I can do is keep holding onto him.

But I can feel the coldness stealing up on him, just like always. He lightly props me against the wall, waits until I can prove that my legs can hold me up, then turns toward the dispenser to pull out some paper towels.

I know he’s already left me.

Without looking at me, he hands me the towels. He takes some for himself.

As my body keeps whirring, I clean myself up as he does the same. He zips himself back up, getting himself together before I do, and tosses the towels away.

I go to the sink and run my towels under the water, then reach under my dress to bathe off the juices he left on my thighs and pussy. I’m steeped with them.

I catch him watching me, and the darkness is still there in his eyes, as if he’s holding himself back again from ravishing me. But there’s that something else in his gaze, too.

I see pieces of him there, shards, as if his eyes are shattered mirrors that haven’t been fit back together yet.

He doesn’t have to say it—he was very, very close to losing control completely with

me, and he hates that. Maybe he even hates himself.

There are demons in his gaze that I can't even begin to guess at, and as much as I enjoyed this dark sexual dance, I can't stand his obvious remorse.

"What's wrong?" I ask, holding the towels, the water still running.

He doesn't answer.

I step back from the sink as he comes over. He washes his hands, then dries them off. He doesn't look at me the entire time, which is odd for a man who can't seem to stop watching me.

Feeling vulnerable, I finish cleaning myself off, throw away my towels, and then tug at my dress, making sure I'm all the way covered. I see my red panties on the floor, the same color as the flush that's still warming my skin. I pick them up and throw them away, making sure the discarded towels hide them.

When I turn to Cage, he's running his fingers through his hair. He straightens his suit. Then he finally turns to me.

"This can't continue," he says coolly.

As numbness steals over me, he opens the restroom door and walks out.

Chapter 9

I can hear the 50s music from the ice cream shop playing outside the door that just closed on me. I can still feel Cage's hands on me from the intense, heart-stopping sexual encounter we just had.

At the same time, I keep hearing what he told me in such a distant voice.

This can't continue.

Without thinking, I open the door to the hallway. I see him entering the main section of the ice cream shop, his tall, intimidating body like a dark spot against the light of the bigger room.

I go after him, but his strides are so long that I don't catch up until we're outside on the sidewalk.

A mild, humid breeze blows, and I push down the hem of my dress. I don't want my skirt blowing up to reveal that I don't have my panties on underneath. Even worse, I'm about to blow up.

"What do you mean, 'this can't continue'?" I shout.

He comes to a tense halt near the street corner where the crosswalk signal is green. From the way he's standing, I can tell he's got a bitter set to his mouth, as if he knew I'd catch up to him and I wouldn't let this go.

Is the damned playboy so good at leaving women behind that he thought he could do it with me, too?

I thread through the people on the sidewalk, forging a path toward Cage. “Why did you say that to me?”

He turns around, and the mere sight of him hits me like I’ve collided head-on with my lust. That thick, devilish hair. The dark brows over a panty-dropping gaze. That massive hard body under the immaculate suit.

This man was so, so close to screwing me, and I still ache for it to happen, no matter how he’s treating me.

“Calm down, Karini,” he says, his voice carrying.

A few people glance at him, their gazes lingering before they go about their New-York business. But I couldn’t care less if we’re putting on a show as I approach him and he casually moves toward the drug store on the corner then stands by the brick wall. He looks down at me with a condescending air, but I know there’s something else there. Heat that can’t quite be covered by the layer of ice he’s trying to put on.

“You want me to calm down?” I ask.

“Yes. I’ll pay you all the money I promised, but if you know what’s best for you, you’ll leave and get as far away from me as possible.”

Is he serious?

The sassy part of me wants to laugh. But the other part is hurt. I mean, what we just did... How intensely we did it...

It didn't mean a damned thing to him?

Maybe I'm more emotional than I thought after our fierce encounter, because my need swarms me, my throat tight, tears blurring my vision.

It has to be my post-orgasm hormones.

As a rush of tears trickles down my cheek, I angrily swipe them away. Then I start to run. I don't know where, but I don't want him to see me this way.

"Karini!" I hear him yell.

But I don't stop, not even when I hear footsteps behind me on the sidewalk and feel a hand on my shoulder. Suddenly I'm being whipped around, his fingers pressing into me as he looms over me. All I can see through my tears are his eyes. They're clear right now, and as I realize that he feels like shit for talking to me like that, I stop trying to get away.

I do, however, shrug his damned hands off of me.

"Don't do this," he says.

"Do what?"

He clenches his jaw until a muscle ticks in his cheek. He seems to search for words.

Cage Bryant, speechless.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:05 am

Then he finally runs his fingers through his hair again and mutters, “I don’t like to see you like this, so stop crying.”

“Oh, yes, just as you command, sir. Right away, sir...”

“Stop.”

I glare at him, but my eyes are still glassy. Another tear wiggles down my face.

“Jesus,” he says from between his teeth.

He’s still not leaving, and that gives me some courage. “You said you don’t like to see me this way. What did you mean?”

“In pain. That’s what I meant.”

His blunt admission stuns me, and it’s not just because of what he said. It’s how he said it—as if he’s tormented in some way. But then he just stands there as if he still might tell me to get lost, and I back away from him, then start to take off again.

He catches up in an instant, and when he pulls me to him this time, he envelopes me in a furious embrace, nearly lifting me from the ground in his passion.

My face presses against his, cutting off my breath, and everything stops for me—time, the air around us, the traffic in the street.

Even my heartbeat.

For this blissful moment, with his fingers buried in my hair, with his other arm crushing me to him as he tries to control himself, I see a different Cage than ever before and...

My mind fizzles out as he suddenly scoops me into an unrestrained kiss. No thoughts about him telling me to go away, no worries about how I'm falling for him too hard and too fast...there's only a blank euphoria closing in on me. His kiss isn't as commanding as it was yesterday when he first seduced me. It isn't tender, either. It's somewhere between desperate and demanding, and as I lose my balance, he catches me again, pressing tinier kisses to the corner of my lips, my cheek, my temple.

Confused and dizzy, I only grasp at his jacket, because I don't think I can stand up anymore.

He holds me, then presses his lips against my head. "I want you to stay."

"But—"

"You're killing me, Karini. I don't know what the hell to do with you. All I know is that you're already in my blood, goddammit, and I don't want you to be."

I hear that darkness in his voice, and I can imagine that it's in his eyes. But the truth is that he's already my addiction, too, and as he cradles me, I bury my face in the crook of his shoulder and neck. He smells so good, like skin and soap, and little by little, I become aware that we're standing outside where cars are clogging the city street and people are walking by. They're staring. Someone whistles from a passing bike.

Reality filters in as I whisper, "You're going to be recognized." But I don't want this moment to end. I don't want anything to take this away from me.

At my comment, the muscles of his back tense under my hands, and I know what he must be thinking—that New York expects him to be their gossip-column Romeo, and that’s the reason he could lose a business deal with Igor Vasiliev. Or maybe he’s thinking about how he constantly mows through all his women, and I’m just the next one in line.

In the end, I have no idea what he’s thinking, and maybe I never will.

But as he pulls away from me, I realize that, somehow, I’m the only woman he sees right now. For some reason, I’ve got him in the palm of my hand, and I have no idea how that even happened. It’s almost as if he’s falling for me as quickly as I’m falling for him.

Hah. Me, a Jane. A plain girl no one would have any reason to notice in a crowd, nothing special. I’ve got to be delusional.

Even so, at his possessive look, a sense of power steals over me, and I speak before I think. “I’m sick of you jerking me around, you know.”

I expect a flash of anger, but he only keeps looking down at me. Then he strokes my cheek. “I meant what I said. I want you to stay.”

“Then why did you tell me this isn’t working out?”

He drops his hand from my face but still keeps a hold of my shoulders. “I’m just under a great deal of stress, Karini. Do you understand?”

I tilt my head, trying to read him, and I finally see why he could be so stressed out. “The possible deal with Igor Vasiliev,” I say.

He smiles slightly, and even though the smile is barely there, it warms my heart that

at least I understand this much about him.

Maybe, after he takes me back to his home, I'll get to understand so much more.

* * *

He needs to go to work in his downtown office for the rest of the day, but after we return to his lavish duplex, he asks me what I'd like the personal chef to make for dinner. He can't be here to eat it, he says, but he's going to be back tonight, and I should expect him.

"And when I get back," he says at the door on his way out, "I want you to meet me in my room."

His meaning doesn't register right away, but that's only because he's already swept me into his arms to kiss me again—soft, promising, and, yes, demanding. I'm not sure if he'll be running hot or cold when he returns, but as he gives me a long, hot look then walks out the door, I realize that something big just happened between us.

He said to meet him in his room.

We're going to be in his room.

He'd told me before that he needs his space, but he's actually letting me in tonight. Is it because I almost left him today and he's the kind of man who refuses to get left?

That has to be it, because surely he can't be that attached to me in such a short time...

But the very idea that he might be sends an innocent flutter through me. Could it be that I'm not the only one who's starting to fall hard and fast here?

Oh my god, is that really what I'm doing?

I spend the rest of the day fantasizing about him, lingering over the steamed mussels with tomato and chorizo broth his personal chef serves to me on the balcony overlooking Central Park. I attempt to watch some TV, then read one of the many leather-covered novels in the massive library with streamlined bookshelves that reach the ceiling. Then, when Cage sends me a text saying that he's going to be home in an hour, I finally step into my marble bathroom to prepare myself for the biggest night I've ever had.

I think this is the night I'm going to lose my virginity, and it's to someone who's beginning to matter way too much to me.

As I stand under the large, square rain shower head in the center of the roomy marble stall, I let the water wash over me, pelting my skin. I slather myself with apricot gel and shampoo, my breath coming faster as I run my palms down my stomach, imagining Cage's hands on me. I think about the when, how, and where that have been haunting me since yesterday, and nerves scratch through every part of me.

When? Tonight.

How? With all the passion I saw in him this afternoon.

Where? In the bedroom he normally keeps to himself.

It's finally happening, and my heart nearly gives out as the clock ticks closer and closer to his arrival.

I'm primping at my vanity table when I receive the text I've been waiting for.

I'm here.

Lust twists inside of me, and I stand from my chair, looking at myself in the vanity mirror. I see the same Karini that I always do, except that the fancy hair products Cage left for me have made my light brown hair sleek and smooth as it falls to my shoulders. My gray eyes are bright with a rising sexual fever.

I'm wearing something I chose from the walk-in closet from the selection of nightwear he bought for me, and the filmy lavender baby doll negligee doesn't hide my curves as much as it shows them off. I can see my pink-tipped breasts through the gauzy fabric, the swerve of my waist, the shadow of hair between my legs just before the hem skims my thighs.

I'm here, he said in his text.

I'm here, too, and I'm ready.

When I finally enter his room down the long hall, I softly close the door behind me. The faint light from the floor-to-ceiling window filters over a huge white bed on a black lacquered platform. None of the high-tech entertainment equipment surrounding it grabs my attention. None of the art on the wall attracts my eye like that bed does.

It's only when I hear Cage's voice from the side of the room that anything else matters.

"I haven't been able to think about anything else but you all day," he whispers. "And, goddamn, but the wait was worth it."

I turn around, my heart stopping.

Every bit of me melting at the sight of him.

Chapter 10

Cage is leaning against the doorframe of his bathroom with a towel riding on his hips. The moonlight from the floor-to-ceiling window shows me every carved inch of him: his long, strong legs, his hard abs and broad chest, his chiseled arms and wide shoulders. His tanned skin is beaded with water, his hair wet, and the clean, damp air tells me that he just got out of the shower.

My mouth starts watering as I imagine how his skin will smell, how it'll feel slipping against mine.

Tonight's going to happen.

Oh my god...

It's actually happening.

He moves away from the wall then toward me so slowly, methodically, that it's as if he's already thought long and hard about what he's going to do to me and how he's going to do it. "Just look at you, Karini. Fuck, look at you."

He makes me feel as if I'm the only woman who's ever caught his eye. I never really realized that I could be attractive before this, but now I quiver with the knowledge that he wants me badly, and it's not only because he bought me.

I pulse with heat, with desperation as he comes even closer.

“How about a kiss hello,” he says.

I nod, almost in a sensual trance, then I draw in a tight breath as he stops in front of me. A thousand seconds seem to pass as I look up at him, my knees weak.

This is happening...

Before I can steady myself Cage surges toward me.

With breathtaking strength, he hauls me up to him, lifting me high and bringing my back to the wall as my knees balance on his shoulders. I hold my breath and clutch his hair while he grips my hips, his mouth near my bare pussy.

A kiss hello... Oh god.

My heart flounders, not knowing what to expect next, only knowing that my thighs are parted and his harsh breathing is stirring the hem of my negligee. I can feel the heat of his mouth so close to me, and I wince in anticipation. I'm so swollen down there, beating and yearning.

As he nudges under my nightie with his nose, he lets out a rapacious growl then presses his mouth to my sex, laving me with his tongue as I press back against the wall, gasping. But his hands are strong, his arms like iron bands that hold me up as he wickedly tastes me through and through.

Oh god...

I'm unstable, feeling as if I'm about to fall when he deftly gets a hold of me and lazily lets me slide downward, my pussy dragging over his chin, then his chest and belly. My clit is singing with the friction.

As I hit the ground and try to keep upright on my feet, he hungrily smiles down at me, and I see the darkness in his gaze that excites me so much.

“That was just hello,” he says in a deep, gravelly voice.

He starts walking me back toward the bed, dominating my every step. Our gazes stay linked, and it’s as if he’s the one pulling every string, guiding me, commanding me.

“Tell me,” he says. “What’s going to get you off?”

He’s got a good head start, but I don’t even know what to say.

He eases me onto the bed, arranging my arms above my head, looming over me as I lay in this vulnerable position.

“Do you even know what you want?” he asks.

Timidly, I shake my head. Then I whisper, “Show me.”

Show me what I want, what I need...

As he bends one of his knees onto the bed, his towel opens enough to show me his powerful, streamlined thigh. The outline of his cock against the fabric makes my pussy cream, because tonight’s going to be the night.

And I don’t know whether to run or tear that towel off.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:05 am

He rests a hand on my neck, and my pulse kicks against his fingers. After if he feels how keyed up I am, he skims down over my collarbone, between my breasts, over the center of my stomach, then my tightening belly. Just as I think he's about to stroke me between my legs, he moves to my thigh. He slides off the bed, sinking to his knees on the floor.

The desire in his eyes is imprinted on my mind, even though he's out of sight, and the deep blue color glows inside of me, burning until I shift my hips in agitation. He cuffs his fingers around my ankles.

I stare at the ceiling, my heart scuttling.

"Easy," he says in that low, persuasive voice. "Just lie back and let me make you feel good, baby."

"Okay."

I relax a little, and he rubs his thumbs at the sensitive spot just above my ankles.

"When I fuck you," he murmurs, "you're going to forget all about being nervous. You're going to moan and gush until my cock is dripping with your cream."

I never imagined a man would talk to me like this and that it would get me going so hard that I want to sob for him to continue.

"What're you going to do to me?" I ask, my voice wavering.

His thumbs are still petting the inside of my ankles, and I rock my hips on the bed.

“I think we should start right here,” he says. “Does this feel alright?”

I only moan.

“And if I were to do this...” He runs his palms up the inside of my calves, then walks his fingers slowly between my knees, parting them a little farther. “What would you think?”

“I think...” God, I’m starting to pant, and it’s the only sound in the room besides my overwhelming pulse. “I can’t think, Cage.”

“Good. Because this isn’t about thinking.”

His fingers dance their way up between my thighs, and the blood thumps between my legs. My labia feel plumped, drenched, and he hasn’t even gotten there yet.

He pauses in his journey, caressing the inside of my thighs with gentle strokes, up, down. Each time his fingers inch under my negligee, my hips shift, responding to his every movement.

I feel as if I’ve had a glass of wine and the alcohol has infiltrated my body, giving me a sexy buzz. But I haven’t had anything. Only him.

“Good?” he asks me.

“Yes.”

As he gets to his feet again, he runs his hands over the tops of my thighs. He continues upward, his thumbs skimming my pussy, giving me a little shock. He lifts

my negligee as his light fingertips come to my belly, making tiny muscles jump there. He roams up my stomach, and when he cups my breasts, I squirm.

His large body blocks out everything else in my sight, his heat encompassing me.

“Damn,” he says, fondling me. “Your tits...”

I rest my hands over the backs of his as he squeezes my breasts, his thumbs dragging over my nipples to tease them to hardness. My feet are braced on the mattress now, giving me the leverage to move with his caresses. I’m one long line of slow flowing lava.

The moonlight shows me what’s in his eyes—demons that are chasing him, even in this bedroom. I wish I knew what they were, but I can’t think right now. All I can do is make impatient, delighted sounds that seem to drive him on until something snaps in him and he suddenly flips me over on the bed.

I heave in a startled yet turned-on breath as the mattress dips with his weight and he works the negligee up and then over my body and arms. With one practiced move, he wraps the nightie around my wrists over my head, and my clit gives a violet jerk. A spurt of wetness coats my pussy.

I can feel the bare tip of his cock brush my bottom. The towel has obviously fallen away from him, just as surely as so many other things have fallen away.

His composure.

His cool.

“Tell me to stop if you want me to,” he says darkly.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:05 am

Stop what? The heat that's building inside of me? The fever I'm running?

"More," I whisper harshly.

He pauses, almost as if my answer has surprised him, but then he tightens the nightie around my wrists, pulling them up slightly as he dips his cock between the backs of my thighs.

Scared of what comes next, I keep my legs closed, but as I feel another velvet nudge from his head, I open slightly.

"Shit," he mutters, but he pulls back. I don't know why. This is all going so fast, just like everything else with Cage does. I want this to happen, but then again I don't. I'm juiced and I'm frightened, needful, desperate.

I hear him breathing as he straddles my body with his knees on the mattress, feel him keeping a tight grip on the nightie around my wrists. But he doesn't do anything else.

An eon seems to pass by. Car horns float up from the city street beneath us and compete with my sharp breaths. The air conditioning kicks on, humming and imitating the flow of my blood as we both wait.

And wait.

I can't stand this. "Cage...?"

I might as well be pleading—I think I am—and he hears it, too, because he gently

loosens his grip on the nightie, letting my hands fall all the way back to the bed. Then, with a tenderness that mystifies me, he slips his hand back between my legs, urging them open.

Give it to me, I think, excitement warring with my anxiety. Keep going...

He strokes into my pussy from the back, skimming over my entrance on his way to my clit, his touch slick with my cream. I press the side of my face into the mattress, biting my lip.

“Good,” he whispers as he continues to rub me. “So ready for me...”

Everything inside me is beginning to unravel and untie. At the same time, it’s as if ribbons are tightening within me, my clit knotting up along with my belly, creating a pressure so unbearable that I don’t think I can stand it. And when Cage lets go of the nightie around my wrists altogether to slip that hand under my stomach, I begin to urge him to go faster as he strokes my pussy.

“Yes...yes...yes—”

He cuts me off by bending and crushing his lips to mine. The unexpected kiss suspends all the tightness in me, almost like the ribbons are being taken up by the wind, hovering before they swirl down to the ground again, curling back into their knots.

Now he’s kissing me ferociously, ravaging me, devouring me, and I return every erotic beat, reaching up to grasp his hair, my negligee dangling from my wrist and covering us like a veil.

He breaks the kiss, stops stroking me, and waits. My approaching orgasm pauses. Damn him, he’s teasing me, priming me, and when he suddenly flips me to my back

again, I'm high with the need to come already.

“Cage!”

At the sound of my frustration, he bends my legs then urges them apart as he stands up from the bed, so tall, so everything. Now I can see the fire in his eyes, hellish and driven by whatever it is that I can't explain. I can see his hard cock bobbing with his excitement, and the thrill of knowing that he's going to be inside me soon terrifies me in a brutally hot way.

As he slides his fingers into the folds of my pussy again, I wiggle my hips.

“Now?” I ask.

“Not yet.”

“When?”

“Soon...”

He pushes a finger up and into me, and an animalistic yowl fills the air. It's mine.

He adds another finger, slower this time. I make more little sounds as he swirls inside of me, opening me up.

I grip the duvet. When. When. When...?

It's only as I open my eyes and look at him again that I see past the demons in him, straight to something I've seen before.

Does he feel something for me?

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:05 am

Does he?

My thoughts blinker off as he curls his fingers inside me and presses on my g-spot. Sparks go off inside me, almost lighting a flame.

But not quite yet.

“Are you ready for my cock?” he asks.

I don’t answer, because now he’s using his other thumb to circle around my clit. It’s even more maddening than having him touch the sweet spot itself, and I let him know that by crying out my rising pleasure.

With a ragged sound, he withdraws his fingers from me and pulls my legs to his hips. I feel his tip at my entrance, but he’s controlled enough to wait.

Barely.

“Tell me how much you want this,” he whispers.

“A lot.”

“This much?”

He dips his head into my opening, just enough so that I suck in a breath at the discomfort of taking him in. As he releases me, I hear the wet sound of him slipping out.

Desire beats inside me like tiny fists as he lowers me so that I'm flat on the bed again. Then he braces himself on the mattress and slants his body so that the length of his cock slides against me, but not into me.

"Please," I say.

He slips his hand up my body to caress my breast, and I see the battle in his gaze—light versus darkness, the present versus some kind of past that's marked him so badly.

Then he slips his fingers down from my breast and plants his hand on the bed so that he's caging me. The next time he prods me with his cock, it goes in farther, enough so that I inhale stiffly.

Oh, I wish he would just—

As he slides deeper inside me, I lock my legs around him and grip his arms, gasping. My walls tighten around his big cock, and when he slips out of me, there's a stinging burn along with the discomfort.

But there's also a craving that I have to feed, and I do it by digging my fingernails into his skin.

It's a yes, please, more, and he enters me again, hard and thick, and with every stroke afterward, the burning subsides, and I begin to move with him.

"God, baby," he says, working me, driving me crazy as everything whirls inside of me, gathering speed and force.

He fucks me and fucks me, my brain blinking in and out, the sound of my mewling the only thing I hear. As the friction of his cock against my walls creates heat, more

sparks, a fire, everything that was suspended in me starts rolling, heading toward something big...something great...

When that something finally bursts through me with savage speed, I scream.

It's as if my orgasm lights him up, too, because he gets all the way on the bed, bringing me onto his lap to face him. He grips my hips and impales me with his cock, and I gasp loudly again. He uses his hands to show me how to churn on him, letting his cock ease in and out of me as I hold on, groaning with every thrust as he starts to lose control.

His eyes...dark...light...I don't even know which one anymore...

Another orgasm is building and building, and he leans me back and fucks me with his tip hitting my ultimate spot, nudging it, pushing me, urging me—

It happens again—release, wreckage, rapture as I'm torn open with a shattering wet splash. He comes, too, blasting into me, and we both fall to the bed, rolling over it with the force of our passion. I feel us both falling, and as we tumble off the mattress, I land on top of him, panting, grasping for breath as he holds me on his lap, digging his fingers into my hair.

He holds me close, my face buried against the damp skin of his neck so I can't see his expression. But from the way he can't seem to let go of me, I think we just crossed yet another line.

And I can't wait for even more.

Chapter 11

After, he cradles me in his arms and eases me back onto the bed. I keep my hands on his chest as he slips under the sheets with me. With care, he pulls them up and over me, as if making sure I'm tucked and resting.

As my palms press against him, I can't get enough of the sweaty, manly feel of those muscles and that warm skin. I swear I'm floating on a cloud, high from what he just did to me.

I don't even stop to think of the tenderness between my thighs or wonder why I liked being dominated by him so much. It just is.

Under the sheet, he walks his fingers down my bare hip, exploring my skin, and I snuggle my face into the crook of his neck and shoulder, my favorite place. Or at least one of them.

"You're spoiling me," I say softly, almost drunkenly.

"For what?"

"Any other man in the future."

I don't know why I said that. Maybe it's because of the way he's holding me, so intimately, as if I matter beyond what our arrangement says. Honesty seems so natural with him right now in this raw afterglow, but I have no idea what happens after having sex. Do I keep on talking about how incredible he is and no one will ever

compare?

Or is this where we start to talk about exes and all the other things I don't want to reveal?

God, I can't think about those secrets. Not while I'm here with Cage.

He hasn't said anything else, but his fingers are still busy, slowly trailing down the front of my thigh. Goose bumps make me shiver.

"If you just want me to be quiet," I say, "I can do that."

He laughs a little, seemingly relaxed. "Generally, this is the point where I get asked about my crazy dating life and my casual affairs and why I'm not the serious type."

"Because your other women want to know if they're different from everyone else? They want to see if you'll let them, out of everyone else, stick around?"

"I think that's what some of them are up to. That's why I'm not much for pillow talk."

"Don't worry. I won't grill you." And I hope he won't do the same to me, asking about my past, because I'm not about to tell him. It's enough for him to know that he took my virginity. Nothing else is relevant.

His fingers go still until he smooths his hand up and over my thigh, cupping the back of it so casually that I almost believe we're a couple who's done this before.

"I won't bore you with the details of my social life anyway," he murmurs. "I don't want you to think I'm a complete bastard."

“You’re not?”

He presses his lips against the top of my head then talks against me. “I grew up on my own, and I’ve never had anyone who was...close. My mother died and my father is no longer in the picture. I’ve never exactly been a...warm...individual.”

I wait for him to continue, to tell me how his mother passed away or why his father isn’t around, but he never does. I only imagine that he’s got that darkness in his gaze again as he continues to hold me.

As I keep pressing my hand to his chest, feeling the thudding of his heart, I realize that Cage and I have crossed yet another line. I’m pretty sure he doesn’t reveal anything to anyone about himself, doesn’t like to feel vulnerable at all, and the fact that he just let me in a little bit more...

I sigh again, running my hand from his muscled chest to his cut waist. I pull myself closer to him until my breasts are crushed against him and my leg nestles between the two of his.

Heaven.

“I understand what you’re saying,” I whisper against him. “Sometimes it’s not easy to get close to people. It’s always been hard for me, too.”

“You?”

He laughs, and that makes me smile against him.

“What’s so funny?” I ask.

“You don’t come off as someone who has a problem with getting close to people.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:05 am

For a terrible second, I remember what's waiting for me back home, and I tense up. Cage must feel it, because he rises to his elbow so he's propped up, looking down at me. He's frowning, trying to read me in the dimness of the room.

I pull the sheet up to my shoulders, almost as if that will hide every secret I've been keeping.

Cage tucks a strand of my hair behind my ear. "Do you have any idea how you really come off to others, Karini?"

Great. Is he about to tell me in his cutting way that I'm average, but I have a great personality. Or maybe I'm just a good girl who's a challenge until you break her in.

"You don't have to say anything," I tell him. "I know I'm not like those other women you see. The elegant, stunning, exciting ones you run around town with."

His eyebrows draw together even tighter. "Jesus. You really don't know."

"Know what?"

His gaze runs hot again as he brushes it over my face. Then he lazily begins to pull the sheet away from my body.

I tug it back over me, but he wins, yanking the sheet off, leaving me exposed.

He already had his way with me tonight, so there's no reason I should be shy as his eyes take a long stroll over my body. But I am bashful, and I bring an arm over my

breasts and cover my sex with my other hand.

“Don’t,” he says quietly.

The desire in his voice changes everything, and I take my hands from myself, curling further onto my side like a kitten, watching him, waiting for what he’ll say next. As he keeps devouring my body with his gaze, a flush eases over me, and just like that, I’m ready for him again.

Ready for anything.

“What I see,” he says as he touches my hair, “is a woman with big gray eyes and a smile that turns me on every time I see it. Don’t you know that? You’re fucking gorgeous, Karini.”

Maybe, during college, I did see some changes both physically and mentally whenever I looked at myself in the mirror, but I never quite believed I would be anything other than what I’d always been.

I think Cage sees someone totally different than I usually do.

I look into his eyes to determine if he’s really putting me on, trying to get me to screw him again without him having to work very hard for it. But all I find in his gaze is truth, and it sends a rush of warmth through me.

Then real life returns, because, once again, if I’d seen myself as Cage sees me before now, I wouldn’t be in such trouble.

There wouldn’t have ever been a Liam who’s way overdue to send another text...

But it’s as if there’s a new connection between Cage and me, something pulling us

toward each other as he draws me back to him, holding me tighter than ever as he embraces me, our bodies intertwined.

He doesn't have to say anything else as he strokes my back. Soon his breathing evens out, and in his arms, feeling more loved and safe than I've ever felt, I fall asleep, too.

* * *

The next morning is cold as I wake up in bed alone, the soreness between my thighs the only reminder that he was even there.

He's gone into work without letting me know. Sure, he's made arrangements for Daphne, the personal chef and grand dame of his kitchen, to treat me to a delicious breakfast and lunch. He's also texted me that I should make myself at home until he returns. But I sense that his distance has returned, and I suspect the reason.

He regrets letting me into his room.

He hates that he told me even a little bit about his past.

I know instinctively that Cage Bryant just doesn't make himself this available to anyone, so I tell myself to be patient as I take a swim in his small, private pool, then summon the on-call massage therapist and manicurist who come over to pamper me with a spa day. I chat on the phone with my family and friends, lying to them about this "end-of-the-summer wingding with some college buddies."

I wait for the next text from Liam, and thank god there isn't one.

By the time Cage returns, he's all business, appearing in the library where I'm kicking back on a stuffed sofa, reading some Jane Austen.

At the sight of him in his pressed suit with his brown hair slicked and tamed, I go full horny for him—so powerful, so intimidating. I've been daydreaming about him, walking an emotional tightrope as I wonder what mood he'll be in this time.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:05 am

“I’ve made a decision,” he says, sliding behind his desk like an inaccessible boss and taking his seat.

Okay, we’ve got a read on the mood, and it’s Arctic.

I don’t let that bother me. After all, I’m here to serve. I sit up and put the book down on the glass table in front of me.

He continues. “We’ll be dining with Igor Vasiliev the night after tomorrow.”

So we’re definitely going there. But there must be something else he’s leading up to.

“Great,” I say. “Just let me know how you want me to dress and what I should and shouldn’t discuss during the meal. I already learned my lesson about saying too much.”

He seems pleased by my answer, but he’s still cool. “Since I can’t put anything to chance with Igor, we’ll be having rehearsals, so to speak.”

Ah. This was what he was building up to.

Sudden thoughts of an old musical I saw with my parents, *My Fair Lady*, clutter the front of my mind. “Am I going to be schooled in the art of being a lady?”

“A girlfriend. My girlfriend. But, more to the point, we need to seem as if we’re a real couple. If we can carry that off, I’m certain I can cement the deal with Igor to do business with him in Russia.”

My heart falls a little. Cementing the deal means having my “relationship” with Cage come to an end. But it’s not all bad, right? That means I’ll have my money—plus some extra—and I’ll get Liam off my back for good. No more texts, no more worries about keeping my secret.

“I’m game,” I say. “What does ‘rehearsing’ entail?”

“Not much more than it did when Igor saw us going out for ice cream.” Cage is so confident, as if he’s thought all of this through. “For the next couple of nights, we appear in town, dine together, smile in each other’s company, then have that dinner with him. It’s just a matter of sticking to an act.”

“Basically, we pretend to be significant others for the next couple of days and I don’t say anything to mess it up.”

“Precisely.”

I should be ecstatic at the thought of being wined and dined by an incredibly handsome billionaire who’ll pull out all the stops for me, but it seems so...empty.

Even so, I smile at him. “I’m all in. Just tell me which lesson comes first, Professor Higgins.”

From the slight, professional smile on Cage’s face, I know he gets my vintage reference to *My Fair Lady*.

But the darkness I see in his eyes is as ruthless as I’ve ever seen.

Chapter 12

We're only pretending to be a couple, but when Cage tells me he's taking me out that night to dinner and then the opening of an art gallery, it all seems too real.

For this dress rehearsal for the dinner with Igor Vasiliev, I show Cage a black-lace, tea-length cocktail dress and high-heeled sandals from my closet. He approves. He tells me that he'd like to see what I select for the actual dinner and that I'll be having a hair and makeup specialist come here to shine me up that evening.

But tonight I'm on my own, so I get dressed with great care, styling my hair so it trails over one shoulder, doing my best with my makeup.

It's as if I'm going on a first date with a guy, breathless and eager, even though this is only business.

I stuff a little handbag with my necessities and wait for Cage in the ornate entry. When he emerges from the hallway, he slows his steps.

We look at each other—I, taking in every detail of him in his dark suit; he, lavishing me with a gaze so approving and famished that my pulse trembles.

“Did I ace lesson one?” I ask.

“Straight As.”

“So I look like I could actually be your girlfriend.”

“You look...”

As he trails off with that sensual fire in his gaze, I remember what he said last night about how gorgeous I am. The fact that he doesn't say it now feels even more powerful, as if there's no word for me.

Maybe he is right, and I need to start looking at myself in a different way.

He opens the door and escorts me into the elevator. We're joined by other people on the way down, and every time one of them glances at me and smiles, I feel Cage's approval as well as a possessive hum that never stops filling the space between us.

After a ride in his limo, where he has champagne waiting for us, we're dropped off at what Cage calls a neo-bistro on the Lower East Side. The moment we enter the restaurant, the exclusivity of the blushing lights and high-backed booths strikes me as being very intimate. I see a pair of big box-office movie stars in one corner, and they acknowledge Cage. Everyone else merely stares—and not only at him.

I already had a glass of champagne to settle my nerves, so I'm rather giddy at this new feeling of empowerment. I feel people staring at me...at us, and I have to keep telling myself that this is just an act.

The maître d' leaves us with menus, and as soon as our waiter reports to us, Cage orders a fine wine. As he interacts with the waiter, I inspect everything around us, wanting to be observant. It's just that I'm so happy to be here, so stoked about the possibility of getting Cage this huge deal with Igor Vasiliev. I'm going to do everything I can to see that it happens.

I'm in the process of picking up the cool salt- and peppershakers that look like fancy wooden chess pieces when the waiter leaves.

Cage is staring at me.

“What?” I ask, showing him the shakers. “Aren’t these great?”

“Lesson two,” he says evenly, “is not to act as if you’ve never been out to dinner before when we dine with Mr. Vasiliev.”

I put the shakers down. It was a tiny faux pas, but I understand. Mr. Vasiliev might think I just found my way out of a barn if I don’t act more sophisticated.

“I’ve got it,” I say.

With a stoic expression, Cage studies the menu. I know how much this upcoming dinner means to him, how stressed he is about it, so I let his mood slide. I’ll just have to pay more attention to what I’m doing.

I am sophisticated, classy, and experienced, I tell myself as I look over the small plates on the menu—gourmet oysters, exotic cheeses, succulent clams, different versions of beef tartare, then tarts and custards for dessert...

I concentrate on lesson three: Cage’s girlfriend would let him do the ordering.

When the waiter returns with our wine, I lay down my menu. Our server pours a splash of red in Cage’s glass, then at his signal, mine, too. I focus on swirling the liquid in my glass to assess the quality—it’s something I learned online before I got dressed for tonight—and Cage smiles slightly at me.

Nailed that lesson, thank you.

I sip the wine and swirl it in my mouth, then give Cage a brief nod. He allows the waiter to fill our glasses, and then the server takes our order from Cage and

disappears again.

“I passed,” I say.

“Absolutely.”

He leans back in his chair and plays with the stem of his glass. “I was hard on you about the shakers.”

I don’t think Cage does apologies, so I take this for what it’s worth. “I’ll learn. It’s just that I’ve never been to a place where movie stars eat and billionaires order bottles of wine that...” I glance at the Cabernet Sauvignon. “I’ll bet this costs more than an entire month of what I earn shelving books at my school’s library for extra dough.”

“Then enjoy it, Karini. But not too much of it, if you know what I mean.”

“Aye, captain.”

For the next two hours, Cage coaches me on what to talk about and not talk about with Mr. Vasiliev. What it boils down to is this: If the man asks about how we met and other personal details, I’ll let Cage handle it.

By that point, I’ve got a wonderful buzz going from the second glass of wine the waiter poured for me while Cage took a quick phone call outside—the Cabernet Sauvignon is doing wonders to relax me during this trial run, and I won’t blow it for Cage. I want so badly to do well that I need to be relaxed. He’ll never know I’ve nipped a little more. And he’ll be extra happy that I’m in such a good mood when we finally get home.

And when we get there, will we be going to Cage’s room again?

What carnal adventures does he have in mind for me tonight?

After we finish dinner and Cage takes me back into the limo, I lean my head against his shoulder in the backseat. Soft, mellow music—something more suited to Florida than New York—plays over the speakers.

“You should limit your drinking at the Vasiliev dinner,” he says. “No champagne on the limo ride there either.”

“Okay.” I just won’t tell him how much I’ve had tonight and things will be cool.

“How much wine did you have?”

I hold up my hand and indicate a smidge with my fingers.

He tenses up next to me. I believe he senses a wee fib from the “girlfriend.”

“We still have the art gallery to go to,” he says tightly. “A friend of a friend is opening it with a photography showing.”

I slip my hand into his. “Can’t we end the lessons here tonight and just go home? I crushed it in the restaurant. After the shaker incident, I mean.”

I don’t know if it’s the handholding or the word home that spooks him, but he tenses up even more. I realize too late that I misspoke—his home isn’t my home, and I shouldn’t get too comfortable in it. Also, I suspect that to Cage, holding hands is far too intimate.

How weird is that after we’ve done way more personal things with each other?

He takes his hand out of mine, and as I flush, I sit up straight.

“Indulge me,” he says. “You need more practice as my ‘girlfriend,’ and this is one more opportunity to hone your act.”

Boy. Demanding much?

But I don’t argue. He’s paying me for my time, so I tell myself to suck it up, and when we arrive at the small, trendy little gallery in Chinatown, I put on my girlfriend game face.

After we leave the limo, Cage slips my arm through his. There’re actually a few photographers outside to snap our pictures, and I relax and smile for the cameras. Not too big, not too small, but just right.

Cage doesn’t correct my behavior, so I’m going to take that as a win. It’s our first photo together. Mr. Vasiliev will probably be seeing it in the society columns.

I’m just buzzed enough to not care about that fact either. If my family and friends see me with Cage Bryant in the media, I’ll just tell them my end-of-summer adventure was really an adventure, and it was sadly short-lived. Hey, if the royals in England can hang with commoners, why can’t I hang with a playboy billionaire?

Also, I’ve had worse things happen in life than a society picture. Just ask Liam.

We enter the art gallery with all its white walls and black-and-white photographs: portraits, landscapes, shadows and angles. There’re lots of people wearing severe black outfits—totally out of my element, and I suddenly feel alienated. Servers wander around with trays of champagne, and I eye them.

Right away, a svelte woman with square-framed glasses swans up to Cage. “He made it!” She talks to a short man with a white goatee and porkpie hat who’s come up behind her. “Cage made it!”

My “boyfriend” takes her by the hand and kisses it, then he shakes the hand of Trendy Man.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:05 am

“Jennifer, Phineas, meet Karini,” he says.

“Karini,” Phineas says with glee. “What a beautiful name. Pleasure to meet you, darling.”

Ah—I sense a lesson presenting itself. This is a test to see how smooth and polished I can be whenever I meet Cage’s friends...or acquaintances...or whoever these people might be.

Jennifer only gauges me with suspicion, but since she’s standing way too close to Cage, I’m thinking she’s into him. That’s why she’s being judgy about me.

But I pull out all the stops from the book of Miss Manners, allowing Phineas to kiss my hand. Then I shake Jennifer’s.

She does hate me. I can tell.

“Cage,” she says, taking him by the arm. “You must see the Brooklyn collection.”

“Yes,” Phineas echoes. “You simply must.”

Cage grins down at me as if he has no idea about her interest, or maybe he doesn’t care. “Jennifer owns the gallery,” he says. “Phineas is the artist whose work is on display.”

I politely nod and seem interested while keeping my mouth shut. Better to come off as mysterious rather than embarrass Cage.

The couple leads us over to a teeny room with color pictures of the Brooklyn Bridge at different times of the day; they're all lined up as if recording how the light moves over the structure hour after hour. Jennifer thinks it's fascinating. Phineas preens.

I see a server approaching with the champagne, and I think about going for it before I see Cage catching me.

Okay, okay, I've had enough booze. But doesn't he understand that I'm still a little nervous around these people and that I really want to do well for him?

As Jennifer oozes more compliments about the photos, someone comes in the room and tells Phineas that there's an interested buyer. He's off in a flash, but that leaves Jennifer, who keeps touching Cage's other arm.

Excuse me? Myboyfriend.

Maybe I'm making things too real now, because I'm the one who gets possessive. I snuggle up to him closer, just to show Jennifer that he's off limits.

Cage's arm stiffens, and I realize that I've failed this particular test, stepping over a line when I wasn't supposed to, being too intimate.

But where is that line with Cage, and why does it always feel as if it's moving?

After Phineas returns to fetch Jennifer, leaving Cage and me alone in the small room, my pseudo boyfriend looks down at me, his gaze darker than ever, his mood absolutely black.

Without him saying a word, I know rehearsal is done for the night.

Chapter 13

With my girlfriend lessons over, Cage sits in silence next to me on the limo ride home. I know exactly what I did wrong in the art gallery, and I think he knows that I didn't just make a mistake when I cuddled up to him in front of Jennifer, his associate or whatever.

I did it on purpose because the lines got blurred. I'm getting in too deep.

The moment we get back into his apartment, he icily closes the door behind us. I face him in the entry. Neither of us says a word.

I can hear my heartbeat echoing everywhere inside of me as things get more intense. Finally, I'm the one who talks first. "Thank you for wining and dining and romancing me, Cage, but I need my beauty sleep."

I take off down the hallway. He follows me, unhurried, although his tone is rough.

"What did you think you were doing back there?"

"Being your girlfriend. Wasn't that what I was supposed to be doing?"

"You know damned well what the expectations were. Igor Vasiliev won't appreciate public displays of affection or classless behavior like that."

I turn the corner into my room. "Then exchange me for a more perfect model! Girlfriend 2.0!"

On my way across the thick carpet, I take off one heel, then the other. Then I go to the walk-in closet and flick on the light to illuminate the rows of hanging clothes, shoe racks, and wide drawers.

Just as I'm about to return the shoes to their place, Cage fills the entrance.

I turn to look at him, and his gaze burns into me. My pulse quavers.

His tie, collar, and jacket are undone. He's hot and cold, both temperatures dominating me already.

"Never walk away from me," he says with controlled heat.

"God, Cage." I sound so brave. "One second you're pushing me away, the next you're hauling me back in. Which is it?"

The darkness returns in him with a dangerous flash in his eyes, and I suck in a breath. Fright and excitement—I don't know which I'm feeling. But as he takes a step forward, my nerves get the better of me, and I throw a shoe at him.

The heel thuds off of his hard chest, and he merely looks down at where it lands on the floor, then back at me.

The darkness is seething in him now. My blood is boiling and dancing.

He takes another step toward me, and I let the other shoe fly.

This time he easily lifts his arm to dodge it.

"If you're going to be a baby and throw things, you better improve your aim, Karini."

“You’re such a prick.”

“Don’t you think,” he says tightly, “that you’re the one who should be punished for tonight, not me?”

Based on what happened between us last night, I think I know what kind of punishment he means, and my pussy clenches. Yes, please show me a lesson just like that...

He must see the permission in my eyes and in the eager way I can hardly breathe, because he pounces, using one hand to tear at the front of my dress, ripping it and making me stumble and gasp. A shot of heat juices my pussy.

I look down at the shreds of black lace on me, then suck in another breath as he tears at more of the dress.

I stand there with my strapless bra and matching black panties exposed, fighting for air while my clit pounds.

Cage is devouring me with his gaze. The sheer size of him arouses me beyond all reason, and I thoughtlessly reach for him, grasping his shirt and yanking it out of his trousers. I do it so hard that buttons pop off.

Punish me for that! I think as he keeps eating me up with his gaze. Do it!

Page 40

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:05 am

It's as if the darkness in him explodes, and he yanks down my bra, my breasts popping out. He turns me around, toward all the hanging clothing, and I grope at the dresses and nighties on their hangers. I latch onto them as he strips the rest of the torn dress off me, then the bra, then my panties.

They all lie in shreds on the floor as I wait, panting, so wet and throbbing that I think I might die.

Naked, stripped away of everything that used to cover me, I know without a doubt that he's gotten to the real me underneath.

He drags his large hands down my bare back, then cups my ass, bringing me to my toes as I pull at the clothing to keep from falling.

Falling hard.

I moan as he kneads my cheeks and presses his mouth down against my ear.

"You need to be a better student, baby," he says, his moist, hot words tickling me.

I manage to speak. "Just keep teaching me."

He laughs cruelly and urges his long fingers back between my legs, feeling my wet pussy, skimming my entrance on his naughty way.

"Oh!"

“There,” he whispers against me. “You’re already learning to obey my every move.”

He’s turned on, and that turns me on even more as he plays with me, dipping his fingers into me, making silent, wicked promises and getting me drenched and desperate. The muscles in my belly spasm, working their way up to something bigger.

When Cage stops finger-teasing me for a moment, I nearly cry out in protest. But he’s only let go so he can strip something off of him. He brings his hand around to the front of my pussy, and before my next flailing heartbeat, I feel him thread a length of something silky between my legs.

His tie...

He grasps it from the back, then begins to move it back and forth, stroking through my slick folds. The smooth-rough texture grazes my clit, and I start to slip down to the ground, leaving the hangers and the clothes knocking against each other on the way.

He’s with me as I drop to my knees, my legs spread wide. I’m pressed back against him now, and I grope behind me, pulling at his clothes as he keeps working me with the tie, building that fire in me, crazy flames that lick and burn.

Just as the heat is rising, threatening, pounding its way through me, he stops again.

I give another frustrated cry, yanking at his jacket.

He laughs, throws the tie away, then shucks off his jacket. I feel the hardness of his wide chest against my back. I pray that he’s going to take off his shirt, too, giving me access to all those smooth muscles, every primal inch of him...

He firmly takes hold of me and brings me to my back on the carpet. As I try to catch

my breath, I restlessly shift my hips, running my gaze over his naked, rippling torso. He never stops watching me as he reaches for a closet drawer, then tugs it open.

“What’re you doing?” I ask.

“Quiet,” he commands.

He’s not playing. Those demons are driving him again, and a nasty thrill overtakes me. I know now more than ever before that I have demons, too.

I lift my arms over my head, and Cage stops reaching into the drawer for a second. His eyes are on my breasts—my full tits with their stimulated pink tips.

A sense of power rushes me at the knowledge that I can dominate him in this one small way—by showing him how excited he makes me. By making his eyes go hazy with lust.

But then I spread my legs so he can see how wet I get down there from submitting in every other way.

A growl rumbles from his throat, the darkness rising in him, and when he pulls a fistful of white silk stockings out of the drawer, I know I’m in for it.

Finally.

“You obviously need to be controlled.” He drops most of the stockings, hanging onto just one pair. “You should be tied up like the gift you are.”

My pulse accelerates, pounding through every part of me. My pussy is getting the brunt of my excitement, throbbing, creaming.

Page 41

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:05 am

My gaze travels to where some of my clothes hang. There are decorative poles on each side of the racks.

Something to tie me to...

Another gush soaks my pussy as Cage expertly pulls my ankles over to where I was just looking. My bottom lightly scrapes over the carpet, burning my skin and lighting fire to my nerve endings. He positions me so that one foot is by one pole and the other foot is by another, spreading me so that I'm fully exposed.

I'm beside myself with fear and ecstasy as he ties one of my ankles to the post, then the other to the second one. I mewl and shift as my legs straddle him. I raise my arms over my head again, inviting him to bind me there, too, just as he did last night with my negligee.

He leans back on his haunches, the veins in his neck livid and pumping as he hungrily looks at my pussy. Then he drags his gaze back to my face.

"Are you still willing to learn?" he asks.

"Yes," I whisper harshly. "Please!"

Another nerve-screaming moment passes as I see a tug-of-war in him. But when I wiggle my hips in agitation, it's over.

He growls again, rougher this time, and I sob in relief and rapture. With the devil in his gaze, he wraps my wrists with another stocking, then ties it off, leaving me

willingly vulnerable and beating for him.

As he undoes his belt, then his fly, I encourage him by making soft, needy noises, biting my lip to keep myself from completely begging him.

He takes out his big, stiff cock, and before I can shriek in anticipation, he slides his hands under me and hauls my entire body up toward him. I gasp as I land on his lap, my pussy against his belly, his shaft nestled between my folds and the crevice of my bottom. His hands hold me up.

Instinctively I squirm again, and the forbidden sensation of his dick in a place where I never thought one would be drives me insane.

“Baby,” he whispers, and I can hear all the demons scratching his voice.

Then, out of nowhere, he kisses me, deeply, desperately, and my lust melts just enough to expose the yearning inside of myself—the need to have him kiss me like this for the rest of my life...

But then his mouth grows more demanding on mine. He nips at me, almost as if he knows that he’s revealed a part of himself that never should’ve come to light, and he’s punishing me for that, too.

I want to dig my hands in his hair, run my palms over his firm body, but I can’t because of my bound hands. And when he cuts off the kiss and loops my arms over his head so that they’re dangling together behind his shoulders, I’m helpless to touch him anywhere.

I start to protest, but he shuts me up with another ruthless kiss—a hungry one that’s all lips and teeth and urgency. Then he clutches my hair and brings me away from his mouth so that my chin is up in the air.

In that hot moment, the sting of carpet burn on my ass combines with the feel of his cock between my crevice and my ultra-parted legs, and I whisper, “Please do it. Please.”

He tortures me a little more by stroking his hand from my back up my waist, then cupping my breast. He plays with my nipple, slowing everything down, sending jolts of need through me.

Dammit, I want to touch him back, but I can’t...

A tiny, thwarted cry wells up in me as he lightly runs his fingertips down the center of my stomach, my belly. He comes perilously close to my pubic hair but stops short of it, brushing back and forth against my tender skin. Thanks to the bindings on my ankles, my folds are so spread open that my clit feels raw as it palpitates.

I’m burning everywhere for him.

“I want...” I start to say.

“What?”

As he reaches down to tickle my clit, I sob. He only growls again then grips me by the hips, lifting me onto his cock. I groan loudly as he fills me, then I try to bring my legs in to wrap around him, but I can’t. I only strain at my ankle bindings as I lean backward, arching. He lets me slump back onto the carpet, and the momentum brings my tied hands over my head again.

He braces his hands on the floor on either side of me, hovering over me as he drives his cock into me again, bringing my hips up in a suspended, erotic moment. My prone, helpless position gets me hotter, hotter, as he slips out of me, then thrusts into me again.

My brain fogs up as he fucks me, fucks me smoothly and mercilessly, the stockings pulling at my ankles every time he pushes into me. My bared clit is screaming now, and I'm about to snap, everything taut inside me, bands stretching then relaxing with every thrust.

I start to tremble inside with the rising heat, and the tremble turns into an uncontrollable shiver.

"Baby," he says with every increasing stroke. "Shit, you're hotter than I ever... Fuck."

His words die off as he loses himself, his thrusts becoming more insistent as he watches me, his breathing chopped, his skin slick against mine.

I can't hold myself back anymore. It's too much. I...

A quaking trill within me sputters, then busts into sparks, then spirals through me, up and up until it screams, then bursts apart. I come loudly, calling his name, but it doesn't stop there. Just as I'm winding down, another spiral pops up and out of me, and, god, I don't think this is going to stop as another one attacks, exploding and tearing me apart.

Then everything goes dark until Cage blasts wet heat into me as well, bathing me, completing me as he collapses on top of me.

I want to hold him tightly against me, but I'm still bound.

Restricted in so many ways from showing him how much I need him...

Chapter 14

Time passes, seconds...minutes. You can hear a pin drop as Cage finally pulls away from me, his breathing ragged.

I feel as if those pins are prickling over the skin of my bottom, which is tender, still stinging from the burn of the carpet from when he fucked me. I'm also aching between my legs with the intimate, raw sensation of having him inside me again tonight, stretching me to my limits, making my pussy's muscles tremor in the aftermath.

Cage remains silent as he unbinds my wrists, then my ankles, then reaches up to tug one of my nightdresses down from its place on a rack. The sound of disturbed hangers clatters through the closet as he hands the fabric to me.

As I sit up and hold the nightie in disbelief, I'm burning with what I think is embarrassment...or maybe it's desperation to have him do to me again what he just did.

He stands, still ignoring me as he zips himself into his trousers. All I can do is gape at him. It's not because of his tanned, muscled, beautiful torso either. It's because he's more withdrawn than ever before, and I don't get it.

"That was..." I start to say.

"I didn't intend it to go that far."

His words are so unfiltered that I flinch. But then I shake my head. “You didn’t go too far. I...I liked it. In case you couldn’t tell.”

“Okay,” he mumbles.

He’s still acting strange, and when he begins to walk away, I stop him by asking, “What’s going on, Cage?”

There’s a hopeful second when I think he might want to tell me, that he’s merely restraining himself and all it’ll take for him to break is one more touch from me.

But then he says, “You’ll want to get some sleep. I’ll be going in to work early tomorrow, and I’ll be texting you with links about conversational topics that Igor Vasiliev might enjoy during dinner. You’ll want to be prepared to talk about them during our next rehearsal.”

And with that he walks out, our odd afterglow thudding to an end.

I sit on the floor, baffled, my body still wishing he were here with every lonely heartbeat. One of the stockings he used to bind me is draped over my wrist, and I pull it tight, as if testing it. The pressure makes me close my eyes as I remember the heights Cage took me to.

But right here, right now? This is a low.

Did he basically just toss me aside because he’s still angry with me about being too much of a girlfriend in the art gallery?

Talk about intimacy issues. What exactly is this man’s deal?

It has to have something to do with those shadows I always see in him, the past he

never talks about. But who am I to fault him for that when I won't even talk about my own awful past?

When I finally clean up and go to bed, it's another sleepless night. I have to wonder how many of those I'm going to have before I finish this job, pay my debts, wipe away all my secrets, and finally get back to the Karini I used to know.

If she even exists anymore.

* * *

I'm rubbing my eyes with one hand and holding my phone with the other as I come out of my room in the morning. My hair is a rat's nest, and I've pulled a flowing robe over the nightie I put on after the fierce sexual bout with Cage last night. There's a pleasant ache between my legs, but I look like I've been ridden hard and put away wet—which I almost was except for my crashing orgasm.

But why do I care what I look like? Cage said he was going in to work early again, so I don't give a turd about appearances. Truthfully, I don't know how much he'd even care as long as I continue to put out the goods for him and show up at that dinner with Mr. Vasiliev tomorrow night, ready to rock that business deal.

As I walk down the long hallway to the kitchen, there's a delicious bacon-and-egg aroma in the air. Cage probably called in his personal chef to cook me breakfast—no doubt he'll be regimenting every calorie, my every move until tomorrow night's big event.

I almost dread tonight's dress rehearsal, because I wonder what I'll inadvertently do to screw that up. Then again, if a screw up gets me the kind of earth-shattering sex last night did...

Sick, Karini, I think as I round the corner into the state-of-the-art kitchen. You're one warped kitty, and you'd better be careful. Think about what happened the last time you were a wild girl...

As a shiver wracks me, I get ready to greet Daphne. Then I stop short, because the chef isn't in the kitchen.

Cage is there, sliding a plate of food in front of an empty seat at the sun-dappled table by the window. He doesn't have on his suit jacket or tie, but he looks like a boss, wearing his perfect white button down that's tucked into his belted, creased gray trousers. His Italian leather shoes are shined, his cufflinks gleaming, his brown hair combed back.

As he looks up to find me, those shadows darken his penetrating eyes, but then he steps back from the table, his gaze clearing as if everything is cool and he never left me hanging last night.

Page 43

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:05 am

“Karini,” he says, greeting me.

Formal. Distant.

Folks, meet Cage Bryant.

And guess what? I look like a tornado picked me up and spit me out right here in front of him. Great!

But he doesn’t seem to mind that I haven’t put myself together yet, so I stop minding so much myself.

“Good morning.” I nod toward the plate, which has three loaded pieces of toast on it. Nearby there’s a porcelain pot and what I take to be a steaming cup of tea, plus a smaller plate of pineapple and grapes. “Did you cook for me?”

“I had some extra time this morning.”

That means yes, and it’s as if a burner has been turned on in my chest, suffusing me with warmth.

“Avocado toast, three ways,” he says. “One with a poached egg, one with bacon, one with an heirloom tomato.”

I’m confused all over again. Is this the same Cage who acted as if I didn’t exist after he owned my body last night? Is this the one who was supremely uncomfortable when I showed him affection at the art gallery?

Tentatively, I go to take a seat at the marble table and set my phone on my lap, never removing my gaze from him. He stays standing, almost as if he can't bring himself to give in to this moment entirely.

I realize this just might be his version of an apology. Wow, he sure works in mysterious ways.

“Aren't you going to stay a while?” I ask. “Eat with me?”

“I'm due at the office.”

I smile a little, unable to resist a bit of teasing. “What were you going to do if I was still asleep when you left? Surely you weren't just going to leave this masterpiece here to get cold.”

He reaches into his trouser pocket and pulls out his phone.

“You were going to text me?” I ask.

When he bites back a smile, I'm not sure whether he's teasing me right back. Who knows with this enigmatic man?

Just when I think things have gone back to normal between us—whatever normal is—the clouds return to his blue gaze. He slides the phone back into his pocket.

“In addition to the links I'll be texting you today,” he says, “I'd like you to think about some things Igor will inevitably ask you during dinner tomorrow night.”

He's not demanding it. Interesting.

“I'll keep my eye out for your text.” Then I take a bite of the bacon and avocado toast

and... Oh my god, this man knows what I like, and not just with sex. This toast is sex.

He continues. "In addition to his asking about how the two of us met—"

"Which you'll handle," I say with a full mouth.

"You should be prepared to answer him when he asks you what you want out of life. When I first met him, he was curious about that, and he grilled me about my ambitions and plans for an hour."

"It'll be easy to answer. I know exactly what I want." I grin. "More toast."

He's lifting his eyebrow at me, and okay, so I've gone too far with the kidding. He's hiding his stress pretty well, but I don't want to push him by being too flip.

After I swallow the food, I say, "I'm really not that complicated with my ambitions. First, I want to graduate from college with a 3.8 GPA after my next semester. I also want a steady, stable job as an accountant for a place that—here's the irony—treats its employees like more than a number. And I want..."

Cage is watching me closely. "Go on."

A blush takes me over. "I want to find a man who'll love me and have a family with me."

Page 44

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:05 am

As silence descends once again, I push a piece of toast to another spot on my plate.

“Well,” Cage says, “Igor will be happy to hear all of that.”

But how about you? I want to ask. What do you want besides this business deal with Igor and a life screwing one woman after the other?

I look up at Cage to see if I can read an answer in his expression, but he’s already turned his back on me, moving toward the kitchen’s island, clearing a pan and spatula from the counter and taking them to the sink.

“Someday,” he says without emotion, “you’re going to find that man, Karini, and he’s going to be a lucky bastard.”

Then he’s gone, leaving me with that as well as everything he didn’t say.

That man sure as hell won’t be Cage Bryant.

I shouldn’t be surprised, and I force myself to go back to eating. There’s no use paying attention to the way my heart is cracking, because there wasn’t ever supposed to be anything between Cage and me anyway.

I just wish it didn’t feel as if there is something growing and taking root, at least with me.

I’m drinking my tea and staring out the window at the view of Central Park when I hear my phone ding with a text.

Is it Cage? Is there something else he wanted to say to me that he couldn't say before?

My pulse bounces, and I put down my cup. Then I realize that maybe he's only texting me those links so I can start studying for the Vasiliev dinner. Whatever the case, I have to see now.

When I access the text, my stomach roils.

When the fuck is the next payment coming?

I drop the phone and fold my arms over my stomach, feeling my world turn upside down, spinning in a sickening, inevitable direction.

Chapter 15

After I send a rushed text to Liam telling him to hold on, that I'll have the rest of the money soon, I pray that he'll cool down.

All I can do is hope...

The rest of the day, I try my hardest to concentrate on the homework Cage sends me—links about Russian liquor and food, culture, and Brighton Beach, where Igor Vasiliev mostly hangs out when he's in New York. There's a huge Russian presence there, and that's where Cage and I will be going tomorrow night for dinner at a restaurant run by one of Vasiliev's friends.

Cage also sends a link to a picture of us in front of the art gallery last night. It made the gossip columns, and I can't quite bring myself to wonder how my family and friends will handle the news if they should see it.

Truthfully, nothing can shut out that last text from Liam. The more I think about it, the more I can't hide from the fact that he wants his money now, and I don't know how much longer he's going to keep my secret. The best thing I can do is kick ass at girlfriend practice tonight so I'll do well at tomorrow's dinner. Then Cage will let me go, I'll send the money, and this will be over.

My heart constricts at never seeing Cage again, but I know it's for the best.

Isn't it?

I calm my nerves by sneaking into his study and pouring myself some brandy from the crystal decanter. The liquor is strong, but I swallow it down. The burn relaxes me, and by the time he gets home, I'm on steadier ground.

I'm already in my cocktail dress for tonight's dry run. The Carolina Herrera color-blocked sleeveless creation has a full A-line skirt and a sweet, innocent high, frilled collar. I've put on enough cosmetics to look good, but not enough to draw negative attention. We'll see what the makeup artist does with me tomorrow.

When Cage walks into my bedroom, he's ready to go, dressed in an immaculate charcoal suit with his hair combed back. The moment he sees me at the vanity table, his gaze lights up, and it's not in the usual lustful way.

"Hi," I say, smiling at him. Somehow, he's enough to take my mind off Liam. He always is.

A small smile overtakes his mouth, tilting it. "Hi."

This greeting is different from most of the ones we've had before. Usually he's demanding, reminding me that I'm the escort and he's the boss, but there's something more intimate about this hello.

I think he realizes it, too, because his gaze shutters.

"Almost ready?" he asks.

"I just have to tidy my hair."

I have a bamboo brush that I'm about to run through my straight, shiny locks. I used the high-end grapefruit-scented shampoo, conditioner, and mousse in my bathroom, and my hair is thick and smooth. Cage saunters over to me before I start, and he takes

the brush from my hand.

He touches my light brown strands, and I close my eyes, dizzy. I open them again at the feel of the brush running over my scalp and through my hair.

It's as if thick cream is flowing through my veins, sweet and warm. In the mirror, my eyes are bright, my cheeks flushed.

"How was work?" I ask.

He gives me another stroke with the brush. God help me, but I'm purring between my legs.

"Everyone's preparing the paperwork for the Vasiliev deal," he says. "I want it ready to go."

"You'll close the deal."

"We'll close the deal."

He sounds so assured that he almost fools me, because his shoulders have gone tense. He doesn't quite believe that I can pull this girlfriend thing off, does he?

"I've been studying all day, Cage," I say. "I'm going to nail this."

He resumes brushing my hair, and I move with every stroke. It's almost a sexual thing, but not quite. I feel closer to him now than most times, especially last night, after he banged me and left me without a word.

"Out of curiosity," I say, "what are you going to tell Mr. Vasiliev after you close the deal and I'm not around anymore?"

Cage's tone is businesslike as he tucks a lock of hair behind my ear. "As luck would have it, your mother will soon need you to go home to take care of her during an illness. Igor will respect that we have to spend some time apart, but the distance between us will prove too much. Half a country away, you'll rethink our relationship, thus breaking my heart and keeping me away from women for a long time."

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:05 am

My stomach curdles. “You’ve thought of everything.”

“That’s why they pay me the big bucks.”

He sets the brush on the surface of the table, and I try not to feel badly that he seems not to care about us “breaking up,” even if it’s a fake breakup.

I meet his gaze in the mirror. “From now on, you’re going to have to keep your wild dating life real low-profile in order to keep his business. Can you manage that?”

Cage doesn’t say anything. He only keeps looking at me in the mirror until overwhelming heat consumes me.

Then he steps away from me, completely out of the reflection.

“Let’s go, Karini. Just enjoy tonight’s wining and dining and romancing.”

I guess I’m not going to get an answer about his future with other women. Still, it’s as if he’s making last night’s strange behavior up to me, just as he did this morning when he cooked me breakfast.

I’ll take what I can get.

He leaves the room, and I stand from the vanity table seat. He has no idea he’s taking my heart with him.

So what will I do when this arrangement is over? Cry? Wallow in what could’ve been

with a billionaire who has no idea how to connect with me except sexually? Yes, I'll have the money I need, but just thinking about being away from him hurts...

My phone dings where I left it on the bed, and I freeze, dreading who might be texting me.

I inch over to it to see that my worst fear has come true.

Time is running out.

Panicked, I shut my phone off and take it with me as I run out of the room to catch up to Cage.

* * *

Cage takes me to Columbus Circle where there's a small, red-shaded tasting room that specializes in Russian vodkas. He's bought the place out for the night, and we sit at the dark-wooded bar by ourselves, the sole customers.

The air is cool in here, contrasting with the summer night outside. Cage orders and then I listen raptly as our server explains in a thick accent about how vodka is distilled and the different ingredients it's distilled from, and then we taste the smooth liquor.

It goes down like silk.

We have plates of foie gras and caviar as appetizers, then Chicken Kiev for an entree. Oddly, no matter how much I drink tonight, nothing gets me even buzzed. It might be because the latest text from Liam has upset my system, and I'm so desperate to do well with this "girlfriend" thing that nothing is going to stop me—not even with Liam hanging over me.

Even so, when my nerves fail me and I spill some of the vodka I'm having with dinner on the bar, Cage frowns at tonight's first faux pas.

I quickly use my napkin to clean it. "Sorry. I swear, the alcohol isn't a factor in my clumsiness."

Our server, who has left us to dine alone, comes by and cleans the mess without a fuss.

When he leaves, Cage looks as if he's wondering if there's time to contact a charm school so I can take some emergency classes there.

I touch his arm. "Mr. Vasiliev isn't going to disapprove if I spill a little vodka."

"It's not that. You seem extra...jumpy tonight. I want to make sure that doesn't happen with—"

"Our dinner tomorrow. I know, Cage. I know how much this means to you."

It seems that he has to pull himself out of this dark place that my one little mistake has put him in. The stress is weighing on him so heavily that it almost has him in a vise.

I try to distract him. "So we can guess what Mr. Vasiliev is going to ask me during dinner. What do you think he's going to question you about, besides how we met and all that?"

"I told you that he already grilled me about my ambitions and plans early on."

Page 47

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:05 am

I trace my finger down my vodka tumbler. “Okay. But anybody who reads a business article about you can get those answers. How about, you know, your hopes and dreams? Those are different from ambitions and plans.”

He stays silent.

I try again. “If Mr. Vasiliev were to engage me in conversation about those topics, I’d need to know what you’ve told him. A girlfriend would be up on those kinds of things, don’t you think?”

I’m balancing on a wire here. On one side is the Cage I’m dying to know more about—the one who seems so close to revealing more about himself to me sometimes. On the other is the Cage who might shut down immediately if I push too much.

He finally answers. “You want to know about my hopes and dreams? All right. I hope to always have enough money to buy my security. And I dream of never having to answer questions like these ever again.”

All right. That last part wasn’t the answer I was hoping for, but at least he gave me something.

“You’re happy with your status quo in life then?” I ask.

“Very.”

“Then...” Oh my god, I’m about to say something I’ll regret, but I can’t stop now. “If

you were so happy with how you ran your dating life with all those temporary women, why did you decide to keep me around?"

Mistake. Big mistake. He freezes right before my eyes, black ice, impossible to get a grip on, as hard as stone.

"Well then," he says, gesturing to someone near the exit. "That should do it for the night."

Something tells me that my huge mistake during this rehearsal wasn't in drinking too much booze or inspecting some cool salt- and peppershakers on a dinner table. I challenged Cage's boundaries of intimacy again, just not in a physical way this time.

I obviously got to him.

Our limo driver comes over, and Cage stands and nods to him.

"Take her home," he says.

What?

"You're not coming with me?"

"I'm staying here for a while." He sits back down and orders something else from the server.

I feel as if I'm drifting on a wind that's blowing me away from him, and I barely hear the driver as he says, "Miss Lively?"

I numbly turn to him to see him sweeping his arm toward the door.

I don't make a scene. I just go with him, my steps heavy. Cage could've had more drinks in his home if he wanted to, but I've obviously upset his balance and he doesn't want to be around me.

Tonight I think I robbed him of that control he so sorely needs, and all he can do is get it back by distancing himself.

The ride to his place seems to take forever, and when I'm finally inside, I slink to my bedroom, shutting my door behind me. I really messed up tonight. Why couldn't I keep my mouth shut? Haven't I learned to do that yet?

After I go into my walk-in closet to put my shoes on their rack, I try not to linger there, to think about how he got me off in here last night, how I thought that maybe we'd found a twisted yet deep connection...

I rush out of there, moving into the bathroom and turning on the light. I stand in front of the marble sink for a moment, then begin to take off my mask of makeup, one layer after the other. What's left in the end is a woman, not a girl, I'm only starting to recognize—sadder and wiser, but she's definitely changed from even a couple of days ago.

I finally see what Cage sees, and I want to cry.

But then I hear a slamming sound, like a door. I don't move. About twenty frightened heartbeats later, I hear my own door open, and I hold my breath, still staring in the mirror.

There's only one person who can get into Cage's place and slam the doors that way.

He walks into the bathroom and stands behind me in the mirror, his tie gone, his jacket off, his collar undone. His hair is messy, as if he's run his fingers through it

while fighting himself about something, and I see the same dark look in his eyes that he had last night, right before he dominated me and I so willingly submitted.

“I thought you were staying at the bar for a drink,” I whisper.

But then I see Cage lifting a red blindfold in the mirror. It dangles like a new, exciting escapade.

“You need another lesson, Karini,” he whispers, right before he ties the silk around my head, making everything go black.

Chapter 16

As the blindfold turns my world dark, all my other senses explode.

I hear Cage's harsh breathing behind me, almost as if he chased me back here to his apartment by taking an impulsive cab ride and he never stopped pursuing me until this very second. I smell his shirt, clean and starched, and his skin...god, his skin. I can taste the memory of him in my mouth from the last time we kissed, and I can feel the air caress my bare arms, making the hairs on them stand on end, thanks to all the goose bumps running up and down my flesh.

Cage has come here to control me in every way, and I think it's the only way he knows how to do it.

"Did you think there'd be no consequences for your behavior tonight?" His voice is my everything right now—rough with frustration and obvious need, almost a physical thing because I've been deprived of seeing him.

"No," I whisper as my hands fumble in front of me, finally resting on the smooth, cool marble counter. There—now I'm steady enough to say something back that I know will enflame him. "I was hoping there'd be another lesson after I pushed you to tell me things you obviously don't want to talk about."

"But I'm the one who's going to do the talking now," he commands. "Don't say another word."

I bite my lip, obeying, happy to do it. Much too happy.

His voice is still echoing inside of me. This blindfold has taken away so much of him from me, and this is the only part of him I have right now. My breathing speeds up, but it can't compete with my heartbeat, which taps through me like a building rainstorm, making my pussy moist.

I feel a slight pressure on my back.

He's got a hold of my zipper.

Oh, I wish I could see myself in the mirror that I'm still facing, but just imagining the roaring blush that must be covering my face gets me hot.

As he slowly pulls the zipper down and down, the sound fills the room. He's undoing me second by agonizing second, and when my dress gapes open in back and he unclasps my bra, freeing my tits, I hold my breath.

I wait for him to touch my sensitive skin back there. I'm ready to beg for it.

He's trying to control his breathing, but it's uneven. The realization that I have a hold on him makes my nipples tighten.

I'm still waiting for him to touch me, but he isn't doing it. What the hell is he doing?

When I feel my skirt being lifted, I swallow back a moan and brace my hands tighter on the counter. I imagine his hands getting busy with me as he slips them under my dress to pull down my panties. I hear the rustle of silk from the dress, the whispering caress of lace against my skin as he lowers my underwear. He's being careful not to touch me with those long, naughty fingers of his, and his cruelty is driving me crazy, my clit wetly pulsating.

After my panties are off, nothing happens, and I clutch the counter, my heartbeat

chipping away at me as I stand there in my own darkness.

“Cage...” I start to say.

“Quiet,” he demands.

His voice comes from behind me, low to the ground, as if he’s crouched with my panties in his hand. My pussy craves his touch, but he isn’t giving it to me, damn him.

He finally speaks, frustration edging his voice. “How can I be sure you’re going to be a sweet, obedient girl tomorrow night at that dinner if you keep disobeying my rules?”

I begin to answer, then stop myself. He’s testing me. I can’t see his face to be sure, but I sense it.

“All you have to do is act like my girlfriend,” he says. “That doesn’t mean you have to know about shit like my hopes and dreams. And it sure as hell doesn’t mean you have to dig deep into my business.”

I hear and feel him stand up, and my body quakes.

“There,” he says quietly. “You’re finally listening, not talking. You’re not saying a word unless I ask you to. Is it because you know you’re in for it if you say anything to me?”

My breath catches as I feel my skirt being lifted again. My bottom is exposed, and I prepare myself for him to spank me, even though I’ve been a pretty good girl so far.

“Or are you staying silent because you know you’ve been testing me tonight—and

you know testing me is a bad, bad idea...?”

I jump when I feel his fingers on one of my ass cheeks. He strokes lower to explore underneath the curve of it, getting close to my pussy. I jolt with wet heat, anticipating, dying for whatever’s coming.

“How long before you test me again?” he asks. “How far are things going to go, baby?”

Page 49

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:05 am

As I feel his other hand slide up my back to press me over the counter, I gasp. I cushion my head with my arms, my face turned to the side. My clit has a heartbeat of its own as he keeps caressing my ass.

What is he going to do? When will he do it?

He lifts his hand from my bottom, and I suck in a breath to prepare myself for the sting of a spank.

One pulse...two...

When nothing happens, I let out a thwarted little groan. Cage only laughs.

“Before you get what you so clearly want,” he says, “spread your legs. Show me your pretty pussy.”

At the nasty command, a flush rages through me, but I do as he says. As I part my legs, I hear how wet I am, sopping, needy.

He lets out one of those low growls, and I don't have to see him to know that he's getting hot, too. Behind my blindfold, I imagine what he sees—the pink flesh of my most secret parts, the creamy folds, an invitation for him to do what he wants...

I expect him to slip his fingers into me now, just as he's done before, but he surprises me when I feel him spread the cheeks of my bottom.

Now my clit is going wild, sending electric pulses into my belly. Each beat sizzles

inside of me, louder, harder, building me up until I'm digging my nails into my own arms.

He uses his thumb to circle a forbidden spot in my crevice, and I move with him, whimpering at the foreign thrill that's getting my sex even slicker.

"So many places no one has ever been with you," he says. "How does this feel, baby?"

I don't know if he's gauging me, seeing if I'll say something and break his rules or not, and as he presses his thumb against a super sensitive spot, I only make a shocked, delighted sound. He presses it again, and I gush even more between my legs. The next time, he dips his thumb into me a little, and my sight goes even darker under my blindfold.

"God!" I say, realizing too late that I disobeyed him by saying something, even this one tiny word.

"She just can't help herself," he says, as if disappointed.

But I can tell that he isn't. He's just as excited as I am.

I wish I could see it in his eyes, know everything he's feeling. Has he let down his guard like I've seen him do before? Is that darkness in his gaze yet?

He smacks my bottom so suddenly that an explosive surge comes between my legs, and not only on the outside—it's as if liquid has hit a live wire inside of me, charging me up and making me burst. With my ass stinging, he spansks me again, and this time I come with a ferocious gush, crying out loudly.

My skin burns, cream bathing my inner thighs, and in my blindfolded blackness, I

can hear Cage's breathing pick up even more.

He slips his fingers through my folds, smearing the cream around, circling my clit until I'm absolutely humming inside. But I think I'm actually making a sound like that, too—humming like a swarm of bees about to sting back.

“Does my baby like that?” he asks.

He damned well knows the answer, and I want more of it, so I break his rules.

“Yes,” I say forcefully. I might as well have said fuck you, give me some more, because that's what I meant.

I don't give a shit about being punished now—give it to me!—and I push my hands up the counter, spreading my legs farther, silently asking for him to give it to me, now, more, please...

When he only teases me by taking his fingers away from my pussy, I whimper again.

I can't see for sure, but it's as if he can't keep his hands off of me now, and he skims both of them into the gaping back of my dress, coasting to the front of me and cupping my breasts. I arch off the counter with a pleased “ah,” and he slips his fingers over my nipples, playing with me. His fingers are slick with my juices, making every caress slippery. Then he presses his cock against the back of my sex, his hard tip nudging my entrance. He's still in his trousers, and the rough sensation of his fabric against me drives me wild.

“More,” I groan.

“What's that, baby?”

“More!”

“Do you want my cock? Is that what you’re trying to tell me?”

Page 50

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:05 am

As he dips into me with his head, I make a yes sound. He does it again and...

Yes...yes...yes...

“You’re not supposed to be telling me anything,” he growls as he keeps dry fucking me, but just barely, just enough to make the pressure expand inside me again, building up for another wave of ecstasy.

I slowly realize that there was a strained note in his voice that I recognize—need for me, and only me.

My temperature rises even higher. Heat pushes out against my belly, steaming and pushing me to a place that’s going to blow my mind.

I can’t wait.

Suddenly, Cage hauls me back from the counter, and I blindly gasp, not knowing what to hold onto, not knowing what the hell is next. But I want it. Want it badly. The anticipation adds another layer to my desperation for him, and the beating pressure inside me turns into a fierce banging.

Cage swings me around, and I feel my back against the wall right before he tears off the rest of my clothing, leaving me bared to him. He lifts me higher against the wall, and I hook my legs around his waist as he latches his mouth onto my breast, desperately sucking, tonguing me and swirling around my tip until I’m pulling at his hair because of the sensations and the messy, erotic sounds we’re making.

Can't see, but I can hear...can feel...and that feeling is pushing me and pushing me.

The blindfold is still firmly in place, and I want to pull it off so I can see him working my breasts with his mouth. Hearing him is bad enough, so is feeling him, but I want to see the madness in his gaze, the darkness. I want to see him dominating me as I let him do anything he wants.

I can feel his hand undoing his trousers now, and I know the minute his cock springs free, because he steadies me against the wall, then rams into me, stiff and hard. I yowl with aching rapture as I immediately explode for him, wet and wonderful and clawing at him so he doesn't stop...never want him to stop...

He fucks me, grunting in primal passion with every thrust, lording it over me as I hang on and ask for more and more, yes and yes and please and please...

I'm reeling head-on toward another blind, brutal orgasm when Cage growls even louder than before, then stiffens, coming into me first, saturating me with hot cum during every blast. I pull at his hair, right on the edge of my own climax.

Just as I feel like I'm about to bust open, he jerks the blindfold off of me, and the slam of light combines with the crash of passion that completely takes me over—light, heat, wet. I give full voice to my release, my eyes finally focusing as I look at Cage watching me with his own naked gaze. I come and come, cry and cry until I'm so weak that I start slipping down the wall, satiated, a bad girl who did good.

Real good.

As he keeps his gaze on mine, I see that he does feel something for me, and I cling to him, never wanting to let go. This is it—the moment when he's going to drop all his defenses and tell me how he really feels about me. I've seen it in him. I know it's

there.

No more hiding.

But, gradually, I feel his muscles tense, and as he lets me slide all the way down the wall, everything in me sinks—my stomach, my heart, my soul. It's all falling.

After he makes sure I'm not going to crumble, he does what he always does—puts himself back in his pants then pushes back his hair from his face. But he doesn't go anywhere.

There's a moment of hope. I think he's about to say something.

Will he?

Please?

But then he only withdraws once again, turning away from me and leaving the bathroom.

Once again acting as if I don't exist.

Chapter 17

The next morning, I lie in bed alone. Sunlight pours through the curtains in my room, and I haven't called on Daphne to make me a fancy breakfast because I'm not hungry. And I know the maid is probably chomping at the bit to do her daily cleaning in here.

But none of it matters.

Cage has given me many lessons about "being his girlfriend," but it seems I haven't learned the most important one of all—don't fall for a man who never made you promises in the first place.

The only upside I can see is that, after tonight's dinner, I'll be free. Maybe once I'm back home and I'm not in Cage's presence any more, I'll be out from under this strange, sensual spell he has me under.

Everything will be okay tomorrow, I think. But I'm not so certain of that.

I'm afraid I'm in way too deep now...

When my phone rings, I startle to a sitting position in bed, clutching the duvet to my chest. Is it Cage? Then just as quickly I wonder if it's Liam, upping his game, going from texts to phone calls to harass me about the money.

I calm down just as soon as I realize that the ringtone is my mother's.

Just before I answer, I wonder if my family has seen the society column photo of Cage and me from the other night at the art gallery. Actually, I really don't care. That's the least of my concerns.

I pick up the call.

"Good morning, sweetheart!" My mom sure sounds like she's had her eggs sunny-side up today. "Or maybe I should say good afternoon since you're still on your summer adventure back east with your friends. I always forget about the time change."

Yeah. Summer adventure. If only she knew how adventurous I've gotten.

I smile as much as I'm able to, because it really is good to hear her familiar, loving voice. "Morning, Mom."

"I just thought I'd check in before you fly home tomorrow evening."

"I'll still be there."

"Oh, good. Dad and I will have your room all ready for you. I know you'll be off to college again before we know it though. You never seem to stay in one place for long these days."

She hasn't said anything about seeing me on the arm of a billionaire in a society column picture, and I'm not about to bring up the subject.

As I move my legs to the side of the bed, I take in a breath at how sore I am between my legs. It reminds me that tonight is my last one with Cage, and that hurts even more.

God, I can't think about this.

So I listen to Mom chatter about New York and how wonderful it must be. She's never been here, so she wants to know about the restaurants and—e-hem—culture that I'm experiencing during this last hurrah before graduation. Then she mentions something that makes my hackles rise.

"This morning we got a lot of calls from an unknown number," she says. "At first your dad and I thought you'd gotten a new phone and didn't tell us, but I see that's not the case. It's probably only salesmen who don't leave messages."

I swallow, thinking of Liam. Is he doubling down on his harassment of me, aiming for my parents now? Is he about to tell them everything?

"There're ways to block those calls, Mom," I say, and somehow I sound calm.

"Okay, I'll look it up on YouTube. There's an answer there for everything."

"Yeah, I'd do it soon, too." I laugh unconvincingly, at least to my own ears. "Those calls are such a pain."

As she goes on to ask about what she should make me for dinner after I arrive, my blood chills me and my brain is in a fog. I pray for this call to end soon, and when it does, I access Liam's number right away then send him a text with my shaking fingers.

I promise, you'll have your money tomorrow.

I don't ask if he's been calling my parents just to put more pressure on me. If he isn't the one doing it, I don't want to give him ideas.

His answer comes at me with blinding speed.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:05 am

Promises promises, whore. You've taken too long.

I know that when Liam wants something, he'll do anything to get it, and all I can do is hope that he has enough patience for one more day.

Just one is all I need.

But I'll have to get through tonight's dinner with Igor Vasiliev first—and that means getting through one more night with Cage.

* * *

I start preparing myself for the big dinner early.

First on my list: eating something, anything, because I might pass right out if I don't. I put together a light salad, but I don't have the stomach for more than that.

Second on my list: A long bubble bath that's meant to relax and pamper me. It doesn't, but I'm squeaky clean and I smell like peaches, which Cage will like. I don't feel clean in so many other ways though, because if Liam carries through with the threats he's been making, no one will ever look at me the same way again.

As I get nauseated again from sheer nerves, I tamp them down. I'm not going to make it through the night if I'm this much of a mess. Besides, my makeup and hair artist has arrived.

She's nice, efficient, and has me looking elegant and classy in no time. She has a deft

touch with my hair, which she twists into a chignon that exposes the length of my neck in the wine-colored sleeveless Chanel cocktail dress I've chosen.

When Cage gets home, my pulse jitters. It thuds with every step he takes down the echoing hallway to the study where I'm waiting for him with my handbag in my lap and the TV on.

I switch the TV off as he comes into the room, but I can't switch off my emotions. They tremble at the sight of him in his perfect suit, which is gray, bringing out the tan of his skin and the blue of his eyes.

Anguish fills me up, because this is it. There'll be no tomorrows with him.

I stand, and he silently assesses me. The makeup artist walks into the room, waiting right along with me for his verdict.

"The dress," he says emotionlessly. "It's not good enough."

Not good enough for Igor Vasiliev or not good enough for him?

I doubt Cage is thinking about anything other than Igor as I go with my stylist to choose another, better dress.

He obviously doesn't want to be kept waiting, and he comes into my room just after I've put on a Dolce & Gabbana that clings to my curves and flares out slightly as it ends at my knees. The fabric is black-and-white striped with tasteful, innocent flowers winding through the austere design—cute yet tasteful, especially paired with my black pumps that have straps around the ankles.

Cage tensely nods his approval, then accompanies the stylist out. Meanwhile, I finally breathe, changing out my handbag to one that matches this dress. I take care to

include my lipstick, tissues, powder, and phone, which I pray won't receive any more texts from Liam tonight.

Just one more night and I'll be able to get rid of him...if I make it through with all these nerves attacking me.

When Cage returns, I'm just walking out of the closet, and I freeze in my steps.

He approaches me with his hands in his pockets, and the nearer he gets, the more my body responds, thumping, melting. He begins to circle me, never taking his intense gaze off of me. I gulp, feeling dominated in an entirely different way right now.

To him, I'm more of a mannequin than a girlfriend. I'm only an actress and not anyone who really matters. But that's why I was hired. I should've never thought anything else.

"Do I pass?" I ask, my voice cracking.

He walks to the front of me, and my heart takes a dangerous dip, because there's that look in his eyes again—the naked emotion that he quickly tucks away behind a curtain of darkness. Now I see the man who likes to tie me up and blindfold me. He's never far below the surface.

My pulse flutters at the thought, but now's not the time.

He finally speaks. "He's going to love you, Karini."

The way he says it... Is there something more to it?

Even though he's still as tense as hell, he offers his arm to me, and I slip my hand into the crook of his elbow.

There's no turning back for either of us now as he escorts me out of his apartment to the biggest dinner of our lives.

Chapter 18

Igor Vasiliev toastsus once again with what easily has to be his eighth vodka of the night.

“To Mr. Cage Bryant and his delightful Miss Lively! A good man who has finally found his match...after much seeking, of course!”

We laugh at the jibe as the three of us toast one another with our ice-cold tumblers. Then the men throw down their vodkas. I have to go slower, and I’m pretty sure Igor has made an exception for my delicate sensibilities, although the vodka is supposed to be taken in one shot.

The alcohol hasn’t affected Cage a bit, but it seems Igor is even happier and ruddier than usual, his skin flushed against the silver of his hair and the watery blue of his eyes. I’m still on only my second shot, nervous and mindful about getting drunk. Also, the alcohol isn’t sitting very well with the food Igor keeps ordering family-style like an indulgent king who’s entertaining diplomatic guests: herring, blini, caviar, borscht, chicken dumplings, shish-kebabs, sweet and sour cabbage... The list goes on, and I politely eat as much as I can as Igor watches approvingly. He wants us to “get a taste of Russia” in this Brighton Beach Boardwalk restaurant where he obviously holds court when he’s in town.

All the servers know him, chatting with him in their mother tongue. In our booth that’s set in the corner of a room with red walls and velvet drapery, other diners even come over to pay homage.

As for how Cage and I are getting along with him? So far, so good. He's having a fine time and I haven't made any mistakes that have earned a chiding glance from him yet. As a matter of fact, he keeps watching me with proud tenderness, and I only wish it were for real.

My stomach tumbles once again with disappointment, and I put down my vodka and eat a bite of some black bread, soaking up the alcohol in my system.

A server arrives with what looks to be a pastry dish, and Igor says something to him in Russian before he leaves. Then our host politely returns his attention to us.

"Miss Lively," he says while gesturing to the newest plate, "please try the coulibiac. It is filled with salmon, rice, onions, and hard-boiled eggs, a true Russian pleasure."

"Thank you," I say as he cuts into it and slips it onto another small plate. "And, please, call me Karini."

Igor nods at me, but I know he won't stray from his old-school manners. I've asked him to call me by my first name once before.

I smile at him. "It looks delicious. Everything is delicious."

"Nothing is too good for my guests." His eyes twinkle.

Cage is sitting back as if measuring every moment that goes by. He's still on edge, and believe me, I would give anything to have this dinner go perfectly. I would give anything if, after dinner, he would take me back to his place and tell me that everything tonight was no act—that every time Igor makes a toast to us, it's because all the words we're saying and the loving looks we're exchanging are real.

Igor hands me the small plate, then works on preparing one for Cage. "So. We have

talked our small talk, chatted about my adventures in New York with my grandchildren. What is next, my friends?"

He doesn't add that I've asked him many questions about Russian food and culture and his life up until now. I think that's what inspired Igor to bring on this food orgy, so I could experience part of his life for myself.

He gives Cage the plate, but his gaze is on me. "I have many burning questions for the two of you."

Here it comes.

The big stuff.

My stomach flips, but I cut into my coulbiac as if this is no biggie. Igor hasn't given any sign that he's about to come on board with Bryant Industries just yet, and we need to close this deal.

So let's do it. Please.

Cage lightheartedly says, "What can we enlighten you about, Igor?"

He doesn't hesitate. "How long have the two of you known each other?"

This is where I close my mouth except for shoveling more food into it.

Cage sends me an affectionate glance that almost makes me sigh.

"We met a month ago," he says. "Things have been happening pretty quickly between Karini and me, but I realized early on that she's different from the others."

“Different how?”

“Keeper different.” He smiles. “What I mean by that is...”

“She is a keeper,” Igor says, winking at me. “And that is the reason you have kept her ‘under wraps,’ as you told me before. Because you did not wish for anyone else to have the opportunity to keep her.”

Page 54

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:05 am

Cage laughs. “Exactly.”

The owner, Igor’s friend, brings another round of vodkas and chats with him in Russian for a moment. Cage joins them, and his command of the language isn’t surprising, just impressive. But I just can’t drink more. Yet I have the feeling that all I have to do from this point on is fade into the woodwork and let Cage do his thing anyway. I hope that’s all...

I feel something vibrate in the handbag that I’ve set next to me on the seat. A text?

Dear god, I think as my nerves screech. Please keep Liam away for the next couple of hours.

“If I might ask,” Igor says as his friend leaves, “how did the two of you meet?”

I’m probably the only one at the table who sees Cage’s defenses notch up slightly, but I’m still thinking about what that text might be about, so I’m not sure.

“I was in Colorado Springs on business when I was walking into a coffee shop,” Cage says. “There was a woman sitting alone at a table by the window, looking out of it with big gray eyes and a dreamy expression that made me stop in my tracks...”

Cage is looking into my eyes as he says it and, once again, I can almost believe it’s true. And when he reaches over to tuck a stray bit of hair back over my ear, my heart tilts.

“Those eyes,” Cage says. “They had me even before I went inside to say something

to her.”

My heart completes its rotation as I think about how his eyes had me on that day he opened the door of his vacation house in Miami. The memory is enough to shake Liam and whatever the new text might be out of my mind, because that was the day I started falling for Cage.

Igor breaks the moment with another question. “And Miss Lively’s family? What did they think when she introduced them to a man such as Cage Bryant?”

As Cage tears his gaze from mine, the muscles in the lining of my belly tremble. I press an arm against myself, wishing he didn’t affect me this strongly.

Cage grins. “‘A man such as Cage Bryant.’ Are you referring to the fact that I’m rich or that I used to be known for my interest in various women, to put it mildly?”

Used to be known, I think. My belly shivers even harder, and I put down my fork.

Igor’s laugh rings through the restaurant. “Both, my friend. I’m referring to both!”

“Well,” Cage says while lavishing another adoring gaze on me, “her family was resistant at first. They didn’t trust my intentions, thought I was toying with her and would break her heart. They had no idea that I was already in love.”

God. It’s so hard to just sit here while he says these things. It’s starting to tear my heart open because he’s saying the very things I want to hear.

“And your family, Cage?” Igor asks.

The only change in Cage is his gaze—from lightness to darkness and quickly back again.

“My mother passed away a while ago,” he says, “but my father can’t wait to meet Karini.”

Igor smiles at me, his fingers wrapped around his vodka glass as he responds. “I am certain your mother would have loved her.”

“I agree.”

I summon the brightest smile possible. I even take another sip of cold vodka, just so Igor sees I’m enjoying it, along with this conversation.

The twinkle returns to the man’s eyes as he lifts a brow to Cage. “And your plans for the future? When is the wedding?”

“I don’t want it to be very long but the time has to be right,” Cage says.

Igor raises his tumbler, and we all clink over the table, then drink more. I keep the smooth vodka in my mouth, not knowing if I can stand another swallow.

Then Igor says, “If you do not mind my saying this, the two of you will have beautiful children some day.”

“I’m banking on that,” Cage says.

And that’s when my heart finally rips in two. He’s trying to make this evening go well—his business depends on it—so that’s why he’s lying about getting married and having a family. But I can’t deny any more that I’m falling in love with a man who’s only using me for his own ends.

As I finally swallow the vodka, tears suddenly well in my eyes, and I try to swipe them away before Igor notices.

But he does.

“Is everything all right, Miss Lively?” he asks softly.

No, because every time I think about how much I want to get married some day and how I really do want children, my throat aches more. And I wish I could have both with a man who can make me feel like Cage does, even with as warped as our relationship sometimes seems.

I wave my hand in front of my face and smile brilliantly at Igor. “I’m fine, Mr. Vasiliev, thank you. The vodka is wonderful but—”

“It takes practice to ensure that it goes down easily. I understand.”

Before I burst into tears, I grab my handbag and leave the table, excusing myself in a wobbly voice.

I rush away, and I’m just entering the restroom hallway, fumbling in my handbag for a tissue, as Cage catches up to me.

We’re alone in the dimness as he tenderly cups my face in his hands. The fact that he’s still putting on a show makes me even sadder.

“What’s wrong?” he asks gently.

“Nothing.”

With my free hand, I wrap my fingers around his wrist and guide him away from my face. No use in pretending now.

He keeps a hold of my hand, and his skin burns into mine.

“Don’t tell me that,” he says. “Clearly something’s—”

“I can’t do this anymore!”

He pauses, looking at me as if I’m speaking another language. Then he laughs. “Nonsense. Do you know how close we are to success? You have Igor eating out of the palm of your hand!”

His cluelessness kills me.

“Maybe,” I say, “I don’t want everything you’re saying to be a lie, Cage.”

A slow freeze comes over him. He still holds my hand, but it’s as if he doesn’t feel a thing.

His voice is hard. “You knew the deal, Karini. Everything was always up front. I’ve been honest with you.”

Screw pretending about anything now. “Well then it’s too damned bad that my feelings have changed, isn’t it?”

Under his tanned skin, he goes pale. For the first time since I met him, I sense fear in him—is it fear that he might’ve badly wounded me? I think there’s guilt there, too, as if he knows that he can never give me the kind of life and love I truly want and deserve.

But why? Why the hell can't he?

When all those terrible emotions remain in his gaze, I know I'm right.

His silence shatters me, and I yank my hand away from him on a sob.

“Karini—”

“I need to go in the restroom to get myself together, and don't you dare follow me—”

In my rush to get away from him, I drop my handbag. It clatters to the floor, everything spilling out of the opening. My lipstick, powder, tissues, and phone are splayed out for anyone to see and...

Dear god, my phone has been jarred to life, and it's landed screen side up, exposing the last text that was sent to me.

YOU PROMISED ME MORE MONEY BITCH.

And there, right below it, is a picture of me, naked, touching myself and staring at the camera.

Chapter 19

It's as if the walls have closed in on me with wide, screaming mouths, and they're all coming at me with Liam's voice.

At the same time, that nude picture of me looms in my sight, and I finally let out a horrified sob, then lurch to the ground to pick up my phone and bag. I run down the hall away from Cage, and there's a door at the end of it...need to get to it...hope it leads to a place where I'll never see him again...

I crash through the door into a dim lot, but he's right there behind me.

"Karini! What the hell is going on?"

He catches up to me then whirls me around to face him. I don't want to look at his face to see the disgust there, and I keep my head down as I pull away.

But there is no getting away from this. No matter where I run, I'll always see that picture and I'll always know how stupid and weak I was before I met Cage.

"Karini," he says again.

This time there's something in his tone that forces me to look up at him, even as I cradle my arms over my stomach. I'm gripping my phone and my bag, feeling as if they're all I have anymore, because everything is about to disappear if Liam does what he's threatening to do with those photos.

Dox me. Make them go viral all over the Internet.

As Cage stands in front of me with his hands fisted at his sides, his expression stormy and confused, I fight back more sobs.

“That picture...” he starts to say. Then anger completely takes him over. “That message. Who is it from?”

No hiding anymore. Nowhere to go.

“I messed up so badly,” I say.

But it goes beyond that, because now that I think about it—now that Liam seems to have run out of patience and he’s really going to screw me over—this might even affect Cage’s deal with Igor. He’ll question Cage’s judgment in choosing a “girlfriend” if my naked body is plastered everywhere online.

“Oh my god,” I moan, “I really messed up.”

I start to cry, my body shuddering with every sob.

“Karini,” he says again, softer this time, with an emotion that sounds deeper than I’ve ever heard. But crap, I don’t know anything. And I’ve dragged him into my bullshit. I’m a disaster, and I wish he would just go.

Yet he doesn’t, and that makes me even more upset. Everything starts to spill out of me as I keep staring at the ground.

“There was only one guy who was ever serious about me.” My words rattle in the night air. “At least I thought he was serious. But... God, he was the worst thing that ever happened to me.”

“What do you mean?”

Cage’s anger is back, and I think it’s directed toward Liam. But how long will that last once Cage realizes exactly what I did?

When I don’t answer, he asks, “Karini, who is this asshole?”

I hold my arms over myself tighter. “His name is Liam Phillips. I met him before summer break at a music show in a club. He was...” I shake my head and stay hunched over. “He was older. Almost thirty. Way more experienced. That night, he was near the front of the stage, king of the club. Women were all over him. But then he looked at me, and for some reason, he smiled. Then he walked over, and I...”

I slowly look up at Cage. He’s so tightly wound that I have to take a step back. Is he jealous? Or is there something more happening with him?

“Keep going,” he says in a voice so deceptively calm that it makes me shiver.

“Liam bought me drinks,” I finally say. “I’d never had a guy do that for me before. I was so flattered, and when he came right out and said that he wanted me, I didn’t know what to do at all.”

Cage closes his eyes for an anguished moment, as if he’s picturing how pathetic I was. Or maybe he’s remembering the other night when he told me how gorgeous and desirable I am, and it pains him to know that I’ve never believed that.

And never believing got me into this trouble.

“What else?” he says in that low, dangerous tone. He opens his eyes, and his gaze burns with a terrible fire.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:05 am

“I’m sure you can guess the rest,” I say.

“Tell me.”

I hold back another sob, but Cage isn’t going to let me get away without telling him. And the thing is, I want to. I have to.

“Liam was obviously real bad news,” I say. “But I didn’t catch on at first. I was too busy marveling at how a hot guy like him could ever find me attractive. He dressed like a stockbroker, but underneath he was wild. I romanticized him, even when I found out that he was a drug addict.”

Cage’s gaze goes full dark.

I add, “I probably don’t have to tell you that he had little to no redeeming moral qualities.”

One of Cage’s hands unfists, but then he clenches it again. “I can’t name many drug addicts who do.”

Something about the way he says it makes him sound angry in a more personal way than I can fathom, but as he keeps drilling me with his gaze, I let the rest of my dumbass story out.

“I didn’t figure everything out all at once. It was gradual, because, at first, Liam was charming and nice. He took me on romantic little trips into the country for picnics. He brought me to a small carnival and won me a stuffed animal, for god’s sake. Then,

after a few weeks, he tried to..."

I nearly choke on the words.

"Did he hurt you?" Cage grits.

My pulse wobbles as I stare into his eyes. Sparks flare there, more anger. But is that fury at himself because he let me into his life?

Or does he actually care about memore?

"Liam didn't hurt me," I say.

Cage's shoulders relax, but not by much.

I lick my lips, because they've gone dry. "At least, he didn't hurt me in the way you're thinking. He did try to have sex with me, and even though I was infatuated with him, I said I wasn't ready. Because I wasn't. I think I instinctively knew that things between us weren't right."

"And what did he do when you refused?"

"He got really impatient." I rub my chilled, bare arms, even though the night is warm. "He called me 'boring' and a 'prude,' and I felt terrible about putting him off. I still hadn't caught on to what a shit he was. Then he suddenly became very 'patient' as he waited for me to come around, and I let him fool me into blaming myself for not sleeping with him. Then I did something really, really dumb."

I lower my head again, tears really running out of my eyes now. "One night, I allowed him to take some naked pictures of me on his cell phone."

“Shit, Karini.” Cage sounds disappointed.

“Even though I knew things weren’t right, I wanted to show him that I could be a ‘fun girl,’ and I felt like if I didn’t do something, I’d be just a boring old prudish tease.”

As silence descends, I realize how things have changed in the short time since I left Liam. With Cage, I never felt pressured. Instead of trying to prove something to him, I just...was. Cage brought something out in me. It never had to be forced.

And now all of that is about to come to an end. I can feel it.

I try to hold back those tears, but I can’t. “All in all, it took me a couple of months to finally see Liam’s darker side, and after I discovered his drug addiction, that’s when I broke things off. He was angry, bitter, but it wasn’t until he ran out of money for his drugs soon afterward that his truly evil side came out.”

“And his evil side is doing something with those pictures, isn’t it?” Cage asks.

I nod. “He told me that if I didn’t start giving him money, he was going to put my naked pictures online and send them to porn sites.”

More silence.

A crazy laugh cuts the air, and as it dies, I realize that it’s from me.

“He even has some short video clips of me touching myself,” I whisper.

Cage plows his hand through his hair and paces a few feet away.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:05 am

I raise my voice. “The only way I can keep Liam from putting that stuff online is by paying him off, but when he made his first threat, I didn’t have the kind of money he was demanding. He didn’t believe me though. He said I needed to go to my parents, who own a nice house, but I couldn’t do that. So I did my best, pulling everything out of my savings, but then he started pushing for even more. I finally got him to agree on the sum that I found out I could earn from selling my virginity to the Highest Bidder. The site had no idea about this situation. Liam doesn’t even know how I’m earning the cash, but I doubt he’d care.”

“Let me guess,” Cage says. “You already gave him your advance from the Highest Bidder.”

“Yes. And he’ll get the final payment after you pay me for the rest of this job. But I made him promise that he won’t ask for any more after that, and he agreed.”

“Did he? Well, you can bet a shit bag like him will keep his word on that.”

His slashing words make me cringe. “I know there are no guarantees that he’ll keep his word, but I have to believe what he said. I don’t have any other recourse.” I stuff the phone into my handbag so forcefully that I drop both items. The thumps on the concrete are deafening, but my devastation is even worse as I stand there and brace my hands over my stomach. “My god, if those pictures and videos end up online and on porn sites, my parents... They’ll be destroyed. I’ll be humiliated. And if they go viral and Igor Vasiliev learns about them...”

Cage turns his back on me. I can’t see his gaze, but I don’t have to because I can feel the demons swirling around him, as if they’ve caught up to him in some way I don’t

understand yet.

“Goddammit,” he rages. “You’ve been giving money to a drug addict, Karini. And this whole time, you kept it a secret.”

More tears run out of my eyes. Next he’ll probably say something about how I’ve messed up his life, because this deal with Igor is now in jeopardy. Some “family man” he’ll be with a flasher like me by his side.

“I’m so fucking sick of the lies,” he seethes.

As he slowly turns to face me, I wonder if he’s angrier about the pictures or being lied to. But it doesn’t matter. I’m already taking a step away from him, not because he’s disgusted—it’s because there’s something revealed in his gaze that I never expected to see.

Doubt.

It takes a moment for the realization to tear through me. He doesn’t believe what I’m saying.

But why? What did I do to him so that he doesn’t believe me?

As I keep trying to understand what’s going on, he speaks, his voice back to being so calm that it sends cold trickles down my spine.

“First,” he says, “I’m going to have the limo brought around. You will be going back to my place immediately and wait for me there until I return.”

He doesn’t have to say that there’ll be no “lessons” or escapades tonight. This goes beyond my bringing out the sexual animal in him.

“What about Mr. Vasiliev?” I ask.

Cage is still frigid. “I’ll make up an excuse, say you got sick and went home to rest. But you need to go out front and wait. Now.”

I flinch at that last word, wounded. All my fear and stress crash against me in a big wave, and I’m suddenly sobbing again, fumbling to pick up my phone and bag from the ground, then rushing away from him.

It doesn’t take the limo long to pick me up, and everything is a bruising whirl on the drive to the apartment.

Cage didn’t believe me. That, more than anything, is what I can’t stop thinking about. He isn’t on my side, and that’s what really hurts.

I hurry up the elevator and into his place and then, without thinking, I’m packing my bag.

I just can’t face him again. I don’t want him to call me a liar when I’m not. I just want to go, need to go.

I grab the very first flight I can find out of New York, huddling at the airport with my phone off until I’m finally in the air. I’m running away, hiding, but not from those pictures and videos.

I’m only trying to escape from what I saw in Cage’s eyes this time.

Chapter 20

On the flight home, I try to shut Cage out of my mind, but with every mile that passes, my agony grows and grows.

In a way, Cage hurt me worse than Liam ever could have. Liam never got under my skin and into my heart, so his betrayal never felt as personal.

I even think we might've had a future, because what would have happened if Liam hadn't texted me with that picture during Igor's dinner? In the end, would Cage have held on to me for longer than the term of our agreement?

The questions haunt me as I press my face into the papery airline pillow and listen to the whine of the engines in the otherwise silent plane. Somehow I fell in love with Cage during our brief time together, and now that we're over, it's as if I'm being sliced in two slowly yet thoroughly.

After the plane lands, I turn on my phone to see an avalanche of texts and voicemails. At first, I think they're from Liam, but that's not the case.

Cage has been trying to contact me.

As I sit in my seat numbly waiting for my turn to deplane, I stare at one of his texts on my screen.

Just tell me you're okay, Karini.

And that's only the most recent message. I want to talk to you. Call me. I only want to make sure everything is all right...

I put my phone away. He isn't ever going to get a call or text from me, because now that I spent hours in shock and sadness because the man I fell for didn't believe me or the terrible story I told him, I'm done. I just got through being treated like garbage by Liam, and it's not ever going to happen to me again.

Especially not with Cage Bryant.

Eventually I slump into the terminal with my one overnight bag, but I'm determined to get myself together. I have to before I arrive at the pick-up area where my parents will be waiting. They were overjoyed when I let them know about my change of flight plans; they were excited to see me even a few hours earlier than scheduled.

That's love, and I'm going to appreciate what I do have of it.

When they swing by the curb in their Mazda, I force myself to perk up, wave to them, then go to where they've pulled over. Both of them burst out of the car, arms open wide to me, and at the sight of their normal, hometown-America, beaming smiles, I drop my bag and run into their embraces.

As they lob questions to me about my "end-of-summer adventure," my heart breaks even more. I'll make myself tell them about how I went to hip restaurants and cool places with my "friends," but I'll be lying about these "happy times"—mostly to myself.

I miss Cage, even with all the anguish he's causing me. Dammit, I only want to be with him again.

Soon I'm sitting in the backseat of the car, speeding along to my parents' house. My

phone dings, and both of them glance back at me: my dad's gray eyes in the rearview mirror, my mom's blue ones as she turns around.

I try to laugh as I say, "I'm sure it's my friends seeing if I made it here okay."

"Well don't let us stop you." Mom looks so young with her light brown hair in a ponytail, so happy to see me. "Go ahead. Answer them."

I shouldn't look, because I know I'm just going to see Cage's name on the screen and it'll break me for good. I'll start crying, and they'll ask me what's wrong, and I won't be able to answer them. But as my mom turns back around, I give in to temptation and get my phone out.

It's not Cage who's sent a text.

When my phone sounds off with Liam's ringtone, my adrenaline freezes me. As I let the call go through, praying my parents won't comment about how someone is certainly bent on reaching me, I see Dad's brows furrow in the rearview mirror.

"Really, I'll just get it later," I say, but my voice shakes as I shut off my phone.

I'm acting weird, and they know it.

Later, after I go to the bedroom my parents have so lovingly kept clean and tidy for me, I finally listen to Liam's message.

"Wasn't last night enough to let you know how goddamn serious I am?" he yells. "Congratulations, you little twat—you just got yourself in deeper."

After he demands even more money, I start to choke on my panic.

I text him right away.

I'll give you the money when it comes in! I swear! Please don't do anything, Liam.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:05 am

But I don't know if Cage is even going to finalize my payment from our arrangement. After all, he's angry, and he's rich enough to simply refuse if he chooses to. I mean, I broke my contract by leaving before our time was even up...hours before. I hadn't even been thinking about the technicalities because my emotions were getting the best of me.

God, I'm really in the shit now.

When Liam doesn't respond to my text, my stomach ties up in rough knots and, for the rest of the day, I wait in terror to see if he'll carry through with his threats, outing my pictures to the online world.

I can't eat.

I can't sleep.

Not until I check my bank account first thing in the morning to find that all of the money Cage promised me is there.

* * *

Two weeks later, Cage still hasn't said anything about the money or my leaving him in such a rush. He's stopped asking if I'm okay. He hasn't followed up with a call or even a text, and his silence has only verified that whatever we had between us is really over. Of course, my heart still has an impossible time accepting that, even as my brain constantly reminds me that it's true and it's for the best.

How could I live with someone who doubted me like he did?

I can't, but I still think of him every day, sometimes every hour, and...god. It never gets better. I ache in the morning, ache during the day, and especially at night. The nights are definitely the worst, because that's when I remember how excited he made me and how, sometimes, I would see true emotion in his eyes.

But there are a couple of consolations I can take from everything, as I sit on a stone wall at school while watching some upperclassmen toss a Frisbee. First, I'm finally picking up the pieces of my life and moving on. And, best of all, Liam hasn't contacted me either. After I saw Cage's money in my bank account, I immediately transferred it to my blackmailer, then texted him saying that I never, ever wanted to see or hear from him again. As far as I was concerned, we had no more business to deal with ever again.

It seems that the money has been enough to keep Liam happy, because there are no pictures or videos of me naked online. No humiliation. No worries about how all of this could've affected Cage's business with Igor Vasiliev, who, by the way did agree to work with Bryant Industries shortly after I left.

I saw the business articles online...not that I'm wallowing in every piece of news about Cage or anything.

All I want to do now is graduate at the end of the semester. I'm going to move forward.

When my phone rings in my backpack, I take it out right away. It's my mom's ringtone, but whenever I get a call or text, I keep hoping it's Cage.

Before I answer, I inhale the fresh air and exhale. My lungs are tight, as if I'm going to cry again, but I shove my emotions aside.

“Hey, Mom,” I say.

Dammit, my voice sounds as if I have been crying. I can’t do anything right, not even shut off my emotions.

Of course, Mom knows best. “Karini, are you okay?”

“Sure. I’ve got my favorite class in fifteen minutes.” It’s a course in recreational mathematics. I saved the fun stuff for my final semester.

I just wish I were actually having more fun.

“All right,” Mom says. “Because lately, you’ve been...”

“I know, Mom.”

Mom, Dad, and my older sister Lacey who doesn’t even live at home, noticed the funk I’ve been in. Right up until I returned to college several days ago they kept wanting to know what’s going on with me, but I kept making excuses, continuing to lick my wounds and keeping matters to myself.

They’d never understand everything I’ve been through anyway.

Mom doesn’t bludgeon me with questions. She knows that won’t help, so she chats about the Thanksgiving plans she’s already making. It doesn’t matter that the holidays are months away—she’s an orchestrator, and both sets of my grandparents will be visiting. She’s calling to confirm that I won’t be taking off during the break to go skiing or snowboarding. It’s her way of saying I’d better be there.

As I assure her I will be, I grab my backpack and start walking to my class on a quieter side of campus. I’m relieved to have my mind taken off Cage with Mom’s

light chatter about trying to bake mincemeat pie this year, and after we hang up and I put my phone away, I'm in a slightly better mood. But as I get to the building where my class is held, I feel the skin on the back of my neck prickle. I feel someone following me.

I whip around, jumping back when I see a haggard, strung-out guy with greasy blond hair and reddened eyes. He's wearing a rumpled button down and trousers.

"Hey, Karini," Liam says.

I stumble backward into a dim hallway, and he follows me. Too late, I realize there's no one else around.

Page 61

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:05 am

My back hits a wall, and I start fumbling in my pack for my phone.

“Oh, come on,” he says. “If you call anyone you’ll be in even bigger fucking trouble than you already are. Just listen to me, you dumb twat.”

His tone of voice makes me freeze, ice-cold, terrified.

“But I gave you money,” I said.

“Yeah, and it wasn’t enough. And I knew that texting and calling you wasn’t gonna do any good. Last time you took for-fucking-ever.”

“It was a lot of money, Liam!”

“I know you can get more. I’ll bet your parents still live in that nice house.”

He smells as if he hasn’t showered in days, and I try not to gag on the stench. I can’t believe I ever saw anything in him, although this wasn’t the guy I first met. Not remotely.

I ask, “Did you already spend what I gave you?”

From the look on his face, I get my answer.

“How could you spend it so fast?” I whisper.

He lets out an exasperated sigh, as if I’m wasting his precious time. One of his hands

fidgets with his trousers, plucking at them. “Shut up. It’s not your business what I use the money for.”

But I can take an educated guess—all of the cash is gone, and his addiction is growing exponentially.

As I stare into his reddened eyes, a realization hits me hard: This harassment is never going to end. He’s always going to hold those pictures and videos over me. He’s never going to cut me loose...

Cornered, I feel anger rage through me. I’ve been way too easy on him, and I’m so damned sick of being afraid.

I hear voices outside the hallway. That, plus my rage, gives me the courage to push off of the wall.

No more cowering. No more trying to stop him from doing what he intends to do, because it’s useless.

“Listen closely, Liam,” I say as the voices outside come closer to the hallway. “I’m not paying you another dime, and I expect you to honor the agreement we already had. No doxing. No exploiting me.”

“Or what?”

There’s laughter outside the hallway now, and I should just run to whoever it is, report Liam to someone. But who? And is it possible that he would be able to release the pictures before he could be punished, even if it’s just to spite me?

But the look on his face pauses my panic: He’s stunned that I, the timid girl who couldn’t believe a guy like him would pay attention to her, is actually talking back to

him.

He clenches his teeth, speaking through them. “You’re not only a stupid fuck, but you’re a little prude. I never should have wasted my time on you.”

Then he leaves before I can tell him that Cage Bryant sure didn’t think so, but I leave it at that. He can’t bait me anymore.

But have I pushed him into releasing those pictures, just because he can?

I quickly run to where I hear the voices outside the hallway. A few students go into a classroom, leaving everything around me empty.

Liam is even gone, but as the seconds pass, I realize that he could be around any of these corners. He isn’t really gone at all.

What have I done?

Somehow I sit through recreational math class, but I don’t hear a thing my instructor says. I go back to the apartment that I’m sharing with my two roomies, Victoria and Corrine, only to remember that they said something about going to a barbecue for a service club they want to join. This leaves me all alone with my horrific thoughts as I sit in front of my computer, scared to death to turn it on to see if Liam has carried through with his threats.

But I’m going to face this. I don’t have any other choice.

I surf the web, knowing it’s probably too early to find anything, but I don’t stop. I skip dinner in my anxiety, watch a movie online while checking the rest of the net in a small screen window, and I pray that the doxing won’t actually happen.

The sun sets through my room's window, turning the mountain-studded horizon darker hour by hour, and finally, a text appears on my computer with a sharp ding.

Payback is a bitch...bitch.

Right below that are some links, and with my stomach churning, I access them.

Horror clouds my mind when I see where they lead, and when I find my pictures and videos spread all over the place, my stomach lurches.

I'm now the star on a porn site visited by millions and millions of people.

Chapter 21

I run to the bathroom and vomit, and when I'm done, I cling to the toilet, crying uncontrollably.

With those pictures and videos out there, my life is over. My family, friends, and everyone else in the whole world are going to laugh at me and shun me.

Nowhere to hide now...

Then it hits me that Cage is also going to see everything.

A totally irrational emotion overwhelms me—bitterness. Will he believe that Liam was blackmailing me now? Will he feel like a jackass because he doubted me when I told him about it?

But the bitterness makes me choke, both because it's wrong and because I'm literally tasting my bile as I drag myself from the toilet to my sink. I'm still sobbing, but it's not only because of the porn site now. At some point, Igor Vasiliev will become aware that I, the budding porn star, am the same woman in the society column pictures with Cage.

I was a part of the lie that got Cage the deal with him.

Will he stop doing business with Bryant Industries because of me?

I run the water in the sink, rinsing out my mouth, slumped over the counter while my

weeping intensifies.

What the hell do I do now that the damage is done? I can't call Cage to apologize. And I sure can't call my friends who have no idea what I was doing over the summer.

The only person I can think to contact is my sister Lacey, who isn't so perfect herself. Once upon a time, she went through a rough relationship with a man who turned out to be married, and even through her grief and mortification, I was there for her, never judging, only comforting.

But this isn't even on the level of what she went through. This is a worldwide freak show compared to her private, honest mistake.

I stay in that bathroom for a long time. An hour? More? I'm not sure, but with every minute that passes, I know that I need to do something, and maybe I can trust Lacey to not only confide in but to give me some advice.

Boy, do I need some advice...

I don't know if I can calm myself down enough to make a phone call, so I text her on my computer instead.

Lacey, I need to show you something. I am SCREWED.

She answers right away.

What's wrong, Kar? Whatever it is, we can work it out.

See? I've made the right choice with her, and I gulp away the thick saliva in my throat and type faster.

Promise you won't tell?

Promise.

I exhale then take the harrowing dive.

A guy posted pics of me to a porn site.

I include the links and hold my breath, waiting for her to freak out.

She doesn't for a few minutes, and every ticking second knocks away at the strength I thought I had.

When my phone rings with Lacey's delicate music box ringtone, I startle. It sounds like a warped horror movie soundtrack to me, and I'm dreading what will happen if I answer.

But I have to.

"Lacey?" I sob.

"Hah hah, Karini," she says. "This is really funny. What kind of sick joke are you playing?"

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:05 am

“I don’t understand. It’s not funny.”

She continues. “My mind is never going to recover from those pictures of all the panting people going at it with each other on that site. Voyeurism so isn’t my scene.”

Is she joking?

I’m too stunned to cry now. “I said those things because they’re true, Lacey. Did you actually click on the links I gave you?”

“Of course. At first. Then I couldn’t help looking around at the rest until I wanted to gag.”

“Try those links again.”

There’s silence, and I’m pretty sure Lacey is doing what I asked.

“Nope,” she says. “The links themselves don’t work. Don’t you think the joke’s getting old, Kar?”

“Wait. Tell me what you mean by ‘they don’t work.’”

“All they do is lead to pages that say ‘content unavailable.’”

What?

My pulse patters as I review my texts then click on the first link I sent to Lacey.

And my sister isn't kidding. The links aren't functioning.

My head spins. Maybe this is only temporary and life is playing its own sick joke on me by extending this nightmare. Or can it be that Liam sent me fake links to screw with me?

So why did they work when I first tried them?

"Karini?" Lacey asks.

I don't know what to do, so I start to laugh.

"Karini!" she scolds. "This is so lame!" But she's starting to laugh anyway, as if I've really pulled one over on her.

I go with it...at least for now.

"Gotcha," I say.

"Wow, you had me going. Are you drinking or something? Because there is some warped stuff on there."

As I wipe the last of the tears and snot from my face with a tissue, I try clicking on those links again and again, but each time, they don't work.

Then I get angry, because Liam obviously did do something to mess with me. But if he thinks it's going to get me to pay him more money, he's sadly mistaken.

I collapse on my bed and sleep the sleep of the damned for the rest of the night. I wake up only a few times after having the same nightmare featuring my naked pictures flashing on the infamously massive Times Square marquee while Cage

stands below it.

And, every time, his face is blank and emotionless until he turns his back on me.

* * *

I rise early and go straight to the computer, testing the links again.

Huh. They're still not working, and Liam hasn't texted or called me. Should I fall into his trap and text him to see what the hell he was trying to do?

I know that I'm not going to be able to get anything done with my class work or attend school itself unless I know.

What's going on? The links don't work.

Page 64

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:05 am

I get a response right away—just not the one I expect.

Undelivered.

I check my reception, and it's fine. This is beyond weird, so I suck it up and call Liam. But his number isn't working either.

Puzzled, I emerge from my room to find my roommates in the kitchen. It looks like this is the last stop on the walk of shame for Victoria and Corrine, because they're wearing clothes that look rumpled and they have bedheads. And they confirm everything by telling me about the hot guys they met at the barbecue and stayed with last night. It was a boinkapalooza.

Victoria offers me a fresh glazed donut and, hungry as hell, I take it.

Both of my roomies watch me wolf it down: Victoria with her big brown eyes, Corrine with her green ones.

“When's the last time you had a meal?” Corrine asks.

It sure wasn't last night, but I'm famished now, and I merely shrug at the question before thanking them. I want to tell them about Liam and how he just seems to have disappeared, but they go to their rooms to crash and get some sleep before their noon classes. Besides, I still can't tell anyone else about my problems.

Besides Cage. Not that he matters now.

I get ready to go to a beginning ballet class I'm taking for kicks and credits. On the way, I look out for Liam on campus, just in case he lost his phone in a drug-induced stupor and decided to show up here to demand more money. But there's no sight of him.

Could it be that somehow, some way he's gone?

I make it through the rest of the day without any Liam sightings, and the night is just as safe. I indulge myself with sweet dreams of Cage, thinking of the best of times with him, and for once, I sleep soundly.

The next morning, I get a call from a friend I haven't seen since I started dating Liam.

Theresa went her own way while I ran around with him because he just rubbed her the wrong way. I should've listened to her.

She barely says hi to me before she rushes into the reason she called.

"See, Karini, I knew Liam sucked!"

"What're you talking about?"

"Girl, haven't you heard the news? Good god, go online and check your local feed to see what's up with that fool!"

I'm on it, and when I find a story about Liam, I read through it quickly, then sit back in my chair, going through the comments below the article, too. Some of them are very blunt pieces of information from Liam's neighbors, and it seems they're just as sick of his crap as I am.

The scoop is that, yesterday evening, police responded to a noise complaint at Liam's

apartment. They found him inside with a broken arm and it was clear he'd been beaten badly. His place was in ruins. The cops even found drugs everywhere.

"Surprised?" Theresa asks.

She has no idea what he put me through. No one but Cage knows, but I can't help shaking my head and saying, "No. No surprise."

"After I found out about this, I asked around and heard you two had broken up, so I had to call about this. Are you all right?"

"Yeah," I say, still bewildered. "I'm...great."

I smile. God help me, but I am. I have no idea what's happening, yet it's poetic.

Theresa sighs with what seems like relief. "That's good to hear, Karini. I knew he'd turn out to be bad news, and obviously someone thought as little of him as I did. He sure got his ass kicked."

"The article says that he refused to give the name of the person who assaulted him."

"Yeah, I'm sure the police couldn't care less. They found all that heroin, so they arrested him for intent to distribute. Did you know—?"

"That he was a drug dealer? No." A user? Yes. An absolute piece of shit? For sure. But not a dealer.

As Theresa and I catch up, my mind untangles so many things, and my mood improves. Liam will be going away for a very long time because it seems he has a long record and prior convictions.

Page 65

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:05 am

In spite of my blindness where he was concerned, this is such an awesome day.

I wish I could actually thank whoever beat him up and turned the authorities on to his drugs. I even think...

No. It couldn't be Cage. I mean, he didn't believe my story about Liam in the first place. In the second place, he obviously doesn't care about me or the guy who was almost my downfall.

But the suspicion won't go away.

Throughout the rest of the day and into the night, my suspicion persists. Maybe my need to involve Cage in this is just wishful thinking though, and as I roll to my side in bed, I try to close my eyes and put him out of my mind.

No fantasies about him tonight. I'm back to that nightmare about him turning his back on me and...

My phone dings, and I groggily reach for it. When I look at the message, my heart stops, because unless my eyes deceive me, it's from the one person I want to hear from, the one I can't stop thinking about.

Cage.

And there's only one word below his name in the text.

Outside.

Chapter 22

My pulse poundsthrough me so hard that I can't catch my breath.

Outside, his text said.

Does that mean he's really here?

I crash out of my bed and stumble to my window, swooshing aside the curtain, and...yes. There he is standing under a streetlight—Cage Bryant, his brown hair combed back, and he's wearing a suit, and...

And he's holding a large bouquet of flowers.

Am I dreaming again? But it must be a good dream this time, not a Times Square marquee nightmare in which Cage is turning his back on me as he did every time I thought we'd gotten intimate.

I press my fingertips against the windowpane, just to make sure everything is real.

Cage lowers the flowers as he sees me.

As a rush of warmth swamps me, I give a little cry of pure joy, and I stop thinking and wallowing. I stop telling myself that it's actually a good thing Cage and I broke up, and then I'm running, running out of my room and bursting out the front door and taking the outside staircase, grasping at the rail, almost falling in my haste.

I speed to the front of my apartment building then to that streetlight, and even as my bare feet hit the pavement and the cool night air chills my skin because I'm only wearing an oversized T-shirt, I don't care.

I only see Cage lowering the flowers to his side, his eyes shining with emotion as I launch myself at him.

He catches me, and I throw my arms around him, smelling his skin, his everything. Him.

He holds me so tightly that I can't breathe. Then he murmurs into my ear.

"Karini... God, Karini..."

With my chest crushed to his, I feel our hearts beating together, as if they're entangled, and even when I let go and drop to the ground, pulling back from him, he doesn't release me.

He strokes my cheek tenderly, and I can't stop looking at him, taking him in, feeling our pulses slap the air because they're pounding so hard.

"I haven't stopped thinking about you for one second since you left," he whispers roughly. "Karini, I was so wrong to send you away that night."

"You didn't send me away—"

"Yes, I did." He's still touching my face, and there's no trace of darkness in his gaze, not like there was before. His blue eyes are clear, intense against the tan of his skin under the light of the streetlamp. "I basically sent you away after you opened up and told me everything about those pictures and videos from Liam. I shut you out completely."

I'm crying again. Jeez, I'm a leaking mess with tears running down my face, but they're happy, cleansing tears, because Cage is here. He's come to me with flowers and clear eyes and a heart that seems to be bared to me.

And he's touching me as if I'm the most precious thing imaginable to him.

I shake my head at his confessions. "Cage, I know why you pushed me away."

"No, you don't. But I want to tell you. That's why I came here, Karini, so you could hear me out. I need you to do that."

He pushes my hair back from my face, and now there's something different in his eyes. Raw fear.

I slip my hands down his strong arms, bracing myself to finally hear why Cage can get so dark. Whatever it is though, I'm never going anywhere.

No more running...no more hiding.

The light of the full moon shows me everything in his gaze as he looks deeply into me. His low voice echoes off the lonely streets, almost as if we're the only two people left in this world.

"Remember the night I mentioned my parents to you?" he asks quietly.

"Yes, and you never mentioned them again." It was the first night we were together, but he shut himself down after that.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:05 am

“I never brought them up again because I don’t talk about my parents to anyone.” Now his gaze does go dark. “It’s because they were both drug addicts.”

Realization sweeps over me as I remember the last time Cage and I saw each other—in a dim lot behind the Russian restaurant where Igor Vasiliev took us; my phone screen exposing my nude photo and Liam’s threatening text; the story I told Cage about Liam’s drug addiction and the way Cage reacted and then how he said he was sick of all the lies.

But I hadn’t been lying to him. There was something way darker than my past that made him push me away.

He goes on, and it’s almost as if he’s exposing his entire soul to me. “I lived with my parents’ bullshit for seventeen long years, lying to our neighbors about why my mother and father would never come to the door when people knocked, why they always looked so sick during their infrequent appearances outside our disgusting apartment, why I never seemed to have enough to eat. I was good at hiding what was really going on behind those doors, so not even my teachers knew what was going on at home.” He pauses, and his darkness only grows. “My mother overdosed when I was fifteen, and it wasn’t until I was nearly out of high school that I found out that it was my dad who introduced her to heroin.”

I press my hand against his chest. His heart, my heart. My throat swells with emotion, making my voice thick. “I’m so sorry, Cage.”

“It is what it is...or was what it was.” He’s stroking my face again. “After my mother died, I grew so angry with my father. The bastard wouldn’t stop using, even after

what happened to her.” He swallows. “But I was sick of the lies and the ugliness, so I moved out and began taking care of myself when I was seventeen. It wasn’t much different than what I’d been doing before, scrapping for meals and money, running a household long before I should’ve been. It’s just that I didn’t have to deal with them anymore. I put my energies toward succeeding in everything I tried, but it turned out that this wasn’t enough.”

Now I see the wounded boy in him—the one who grew up way too soon and hardened himself to the point where he turned that granite soul toward business, eventually becoming a billionaire who never took no for an answer. I see the makings of this cold-blooded titan of industry who never had a real home or family, and I understand why he seemed to doubt my story on the night of Igor’s dinner.

Liam only reminded Cage of his parents, didn’t he? And Cage was so very sick of addicts affecting his life, sick of the people close to him telling him lies, stealing money for drugs, even though that’s not what I was doing. But, in his eyes, I was enabling Liam.

Cage’s eyes weren’t clear that night, not like they are now.

“Your father,” I say. “What happened to him?”

“I have no idea. He could be dead for all I care.”

I can feel that emotional hardness as his arm tightens around me, but he came to me for a reason tonight. I know that he doesn’t want to live the rest of his life as he’s been doing, and I reach up to bring him down for a kiss. A long, I’ve-got-you, I’m-here-for-you kiss that has me swooning until he hauls me against his chest, my cheek against him.

I’m what he needed...he’s what I need, and I close my eyes, listening to the tenor of

his voice as it flows into me.

“Can you see why I’ve never allowed myself to truly open up to a woman?” he asks.
“To trust, to care for anyone. Not until you came along. Now I can’t stop caring.”

Love explodes in my chest. He’s really saying these things to me.

“I care, too,” I whisper, “and I understand everything.” I rub my face against him and slip my arms around him as I add, “Everything.”

His past, and his most secret, dark desires.

From the way he keeps holding me, I know that we don’t have to say what those dark desires are out loud.

But he speaks anyway. “God, I’ve never understood what it’s like to want a woman so badly that I lose control, but I did with you. Over and over again.”

The thought of being with him again—tied up, blindfolded, trusting him to do what he wants to do with me—makes me tremble. He’s so attuned to me that his breathing gnarls, catching once again as I feel how his body is responding to being so close to me. His cock is getting hard, and my pussy is getting wet.

“My god, Karini,” he says. “If you only knew how you frustrated me, even while I was so damned taken with you. All you had to do was walk through my door, and every second afterward, I was dying to touch you more, taste you, claim you. I wasn’t used to feeling that way, so I fought it off.”

“And I egged those desires on.” But now I have a good idea why he would lose control like that with me: This is about his mother, who was pushed into a dark way of life by his father, a way of life that eventually killed her. His past is as black as sin,

and he never outran it until now.

But I think there's something more that he still has to tell me.

"Every time I was with you," he says, "all my dark impulses came out, and the last thing I wanted was to be like my old man. I was afraid those urges would engulf anyone I cared about. I thought it was better not to be close to anyone at all than to risk hurting the women I was with, but after you left, I knew better. I knew I couldn't live without you."

My heart jars to a stop. "Truly?"

"Truly." He pulls back from me so that he can cup my face in his big hand.

As he bends to kiss me again, I feel as if I'm floating, but there's something niggling at me, a question.

"Cage," I whisper, ending the kiss against his mouth. "Have you heard about what happened to Liam?"

"Yes."

He kisses the corner of my lips, my jaw, and I press my forehead against his.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:05 am

“Did you somehow find him and beat him up?” I ask.

Cage exhales then looks fully into my eyes. “I had to make sure you were safe.”

I should be stunned, but I knew it all along, didn’t I? And I wanted it to be true. My savior. My Cage.

My man who’d never see me harmed.

He goes on. “I had a security team monitoring the web, and when they alerted me about the videos and pictures hitting that site, I saw red. I had my team get it taken down immediately, and they scrubbed any trace of those images clean. There’s no record of them, and the originals are destroyed now.”

“I thought that maybe you’d taken care of those pictures and videos because they might hurt your deal with Igor Vasiliev, but...”

“No, Karini. This was about you. All you.”

“And how did Liam end up injured?” I ask.

“He got a personal visit from me that night. Just me. I wanted to have a man-to-man chat with him about how he treated the woman I love.”

“Love,” I say on the edge of ecstatic laughter. He loves me.

“I love you, more than anyone or anything on this earth.”

My head is spinning. “Me, too, Cage. Oh, me, too!”

I gasp as he drops to a knee, offering me those flowers, which I cradle against my chest. New tears run down my face as he pulls a velvet box from the lining of his suit jacket. He opens the box, and a diamond ring sparkles in the moonlight.

“Make me an honest man,” he says in a voice tight with emotion. “Marry me.”

I nod, unable to find my voice, but at the light in his eyes, I get to my knees and fall against him, hugging him, crying more as I whisper yes over and over.

As we kiss again, I think I hear cheers in the background. It’s only when we finally come up for air that I realize there are people whooping it up from the windows of their apartments, fellow students applauding, then telling us to get a room.

I laugh as Cage dips me in his arms, looking down at me with a true, bright smile.

“I’ve already got the room,” he says.

I smile back, my pulse hopping. “And I’ve got all the time in the world for whatever you have waiting there for me.”

Chapter 23

From this point on, I know my life will never be the same. It already feels like a dream in motion, too good to be true, but it is.

As true as anything I've ever experienced.

Cage carries me to his rented black Jaguar, and even though I'm still only wearing my long T-shirt for a nightie, he whisks me off to a nearby ritzy resort at the foot of the mountains. I've only heard about this place and have never been there, but I know it's been a playground for the rich since the early twentieth century, and he's rented out an estate house near the golf course and spa.

After he parks and carries me inside, I don't have time to count all the rooms or wander the elegant, turn-of-the-century halls. He takes me directly to a bedroom—our bedroom, not just his any more—and all I can see at first are the moonlit view of a golf course and a shimmering lake outside the window.

He tosses me in the air, and I hold my breath, then land with a bounce on a massive emperor-sized bed. I laugh, totally free, totally on Cloud 9, then lift my arms to him.

His eyes are filled with something I've seen only a few times before tonight, but now I know exactly what it is. Love. This man has loved me since day one, but he's never allowed himself to admit it.

“Karini,” he says with a sexy smile as he stands by the bed looking down at me with moonlight coating his powerful form. It's as if every time he says my name, he's

telling me how much he feels for me.

I'm not in a fancy negligee or one of the cocktail dresses he bought me in New York City, but I feel just as gorgeous in my long T-shirt as he strips off his suit jacket, tears off his tie, then crawls onto the bed toward me.

He comes to hover above me, bracing his hands on either side of me. "I spent every day hoping that this would happen again. And here we are."

"A dream." Not just a fantasy. I have a flesh-and-blood god who's staring down at me with such passion.

I run my palms up his thick arms, loving the feel of his expensive silk shirt over all that muscle. And when I think of how he used all this strength to defend me from Liam, my body thuds with a secret fever, because I'll never tell anyone what Cage did for me.

It'll bind us forever.

Cage sinks down to his forearms, predator-like, his mouth inches away from mine. As my breathing chops through me, time stretches out until it's ready to snap.

Him...me.

Us.

Just as I think I can't wait a second more, he swoops down, kissing me softly yet hungrily. I feel every emotion he ever held back. I smell his clean, manly skin. I hear him moan low in his throat as he tastes me with his lips, his tongue, thoroughly loving me as I helplessly raise my hands and lose myself in him.

He explores me with his tongue, taking his time, and I arch my hips up to him, wrapping one leg around his hips and inviting him to get it on with me already. I just can't wait. I've been waiting much too damned long as it is.

He pushes his hips down to me, pressing his groin against my sex, and I pull away from the kiss, sucking in an agitated breath.

"Did you miss that, my little gift?" he asks.

"Every night."

"I did, too. Fuck, I missed your beautiful pussy, your tight little body."

He churns his cock against me again, and I groan, turning my head to the side.

His voice is rough and desperate. "I missed everything about you because I knew I'd never find anyone like you again."

All these beautiful words—his gift to me.

I gather enough breath to speak. "When did you first know that you wanted to keep me? Was it when I gave you the Highest Bidder envelope..." My words fail me as he grinds against me again, but I do my best to finish. "Or did you know I was your one in a million when I came back with my dead phone?"

He lazily circles his hips some more, teasing me with the tip of his cock. "When you handed me that envelope, I was highly interested." He pushes against me again, making my pussy cream all the more. "Then when you came back, I was hooked."

He pauses in his sexual torture of me, the look in his eyes intense, stoking a bigger fire in me. Flames rage, and with a flash of need, I attack him, bringing him down for

another hot, long kiss that burns me inside, sending wisps of smoke through me like signals.

He's the one. The only one.

I eagerly talk against his mouth. "Come on, Cage." I yank his button down out of his trousers. "Do it to me."

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:05 am

“Do what?” he asks, seeming amused as I ravish him.

“What have you been thinking about doing?”

He helps me strip off his shirt, leaving me with a pulse-pounding view of his rocked torso. He’s so cut everywhere, mesmerizing.

I want to show him how much I love him, how I would do anything for him just as he’s done for me. I work at his belt, the button of his waistband, and soon he’s bared from head to toe.

My god, he’s so gorgeous—tanned, smooth, chiseled, tall. And that cock—it’s already primed for me, bobbing and hard.

“Not yet, baby,” he says as he deliberately begins to ease my T-shirt over my head. “You’ll get it soon.”

After he tosses my shirt off the side of the bed, I bite my lip, reading the furious desire in his gaze. Lightness and darkness are fighting for dominance, and he must know that I want both sides of him.

Want it all so damned badly.

I wiggle out of my simple cotton panties as he devours me with his gaze, and when I’m naked, as nervous as the virgin I used to be, I feel more strength than I ever have. I lie back on the bed and lift my arms over my head, reveling in my sensuality, my stimulated breasts. I spread my legs so he can see how my pussy is pumping with

heat and wetness, just for him.

Then I languidly roll over, keeping my legs parted.

“Give it to me now,” I whisper.

He knows what I want, and when he caresses my bottom, adoring every one of my curves, I bite my lip, anticipating.

He smacks me, and my clit knots up.

“Oh,” I breathe. “That’s it, Cage. Please...more...”

He taps me harder, and the sting makes my nerve endings flare in a way that gets my sex even hotter and wetter.

“More,” I beg. “More!”

Spank...another spank...and with every playful smack my clit pops, splatters, gets me drenched until I spread my legs even wider, inviting him in.

Time seems to speed up as I hear his breathing quicken. I feel as if things are going to happen at light speed now, and I’ve missed him so damned much that all I want is for him to be inside me. We’ll have days and weeks, months and years to slow it down, but for right now, I want it hard and fast.

As if he senses that, he lies on the bed and expertly brings me on my side so that he’s spooning me, his hard cock nestled against my bottom. Then he lifts up my leg and rests it back on his own and, in the next sharp breath, he enters my pussy with one smooth, groaning thrust.

I gasp, the sensation of his cock impaling me so intimate that my skin flushes mightily. I cling to the arm he has wrapped over me and bury my face into the damp crook of the one he has resting underneath my head. He slowly begins to pump into me, moving my entire body with his as if we're one.

Every stroke goes faster until he's hitting that special spot inside me that infuses my thumping blood with excitement. Sensual pressure expands in my belly until I'm mewling, getting louder with every hit, my body pounding and knocking.

Then, with a jarring, cataclysmic blast, I come, calling his name, hearing it ricochet off the walls until it bounces back to me, blasting into me yet again. He keeps hammering me with his cock, pulse after pulse, and when he climaxes it's with a force that rocks me harder than ever.

Fire, flames, sun falling out of the sky to crash and burn and flow all over me with liquid heat until I'm sated.

I'm his.

He's mine.

His skin sticks to my own sweaty flesh as he keeps holding me, his arm still draped over me and bringing me back against him, his face against my neck. We're bound together like this now, and not just emotionally.

Our bodies, our souls.

He's still inside me, and he whispers harshly in my ear.

"Squeeze your pussy for me, baby."

I do as he asks, tightening my vaginal muscles, and he comes once again with a primal growl, then relaxes.

Page 71

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:05 am

I wait, because there's one little part of me that fears he'll go back to being the Cage I knew in New York—the guy who would fuck me, clean up, turn his back on me, then leave.

Slowly, I roll over, knowing in my heart that it will be different this time as I look at him. When I see that he's watching me with such emotion in his eyes that it suffuses me with sublime warmth, I smile, my chest tight.

He uses his fingers to stroke the hair back from my face, deep adoration still in his gaze, and I sigh.

“And that,” he says, “was only the beginning, my love.”

He glances at something behind me, and I lazily turn to look over my shoulder. What I find on the table by the bed arouses me. It makes me laugh with nervous ecstasy.

Because spread out on that table are all kinds of toys—delicate whips, satin blindfolds, silken bindings, and other things I can't even guess at.

Anticipation thunders through me as I turn back to Cage.

“You got a gift when I showed up at your door in Miami,” I say. “Now are you giving me gifts of my own?”

“If you want them.”

I give him a confident, turned-on smile.

“Fuck yes,” I say, giddy that the night has only just begun.

And so has the rest of our lives together.

Epilogue

I want everything to be perfect today.

Silver and gold balloons decorate Cage's Manhattan duplex where I moved in with him after I graduated from college last winter. Birthday banners are hung in the long marble hallway, and the aroma of a Russian feast fills the air. We've strung bright white lights here in the living room, and they wink over the pile of gifts we've gathered for Igor Vasiliev, whose birthday we're commemorating in our home, even though Cage's associate turned sixty-eight a few days ago.

It's been a crazy ten months for us. Not only did Cage come to Colorado Springs to sweep me off my feet by proposing to me, but then he met my parents and my older sister. Then we had a grand engagement party in my home town with my friends and relatives in attendance. A few months after that my college graduation rolled around. Cage actually booked the resort estate house, using it as a home base as he did business until my commencement ceremony, which he attended with my family.

He was really proud of me—just as proud as I was of him while he continued to come to terms with his past. I was with him all the way, and now we've made it.

I adjust a strand of white lights that decorates one of the many potted ficus trees in the sunny living room. My sister Lacey crosses her arms and surveys the results of our birthday decorating. Then she says, "Mr. Vasiliev better be worth all this fuss."

"You'll like him when you meet him," I say. "He's the last of a dying breed—an old-school gentleman."

She quirks a smile at me, and I take in her light brown hair and blue eyes. She's the spitting image of Mom, who wanders over from the neat piles of gifts she's been arranging so they'll appear just so. Mom and Lacey are wearing chic summer sheathes that Cage bought for them during their latest New York shopping spree—Mom's dress white, Lacey's pink.

Dad even comes over from across the room where he's been staring out a floor-to-ceiling window at Central Park. He still can't get over the view, even after so many visits. "Are you sure about these Russian birthday traditions, Karini? I'm not comfortable with the thought of some of the ones you told us about."

Lacey laughs. "Like pulling Mr. Vasiliev's ears according to the number of years he's got behind him? I can't say I'm looking forward to that either. It's weirder than any American traditions we have."

I hold back a laugh. If only they knew how, on my twenty-third birthday, Cage resurrected some kind of birthday spanking tradition we used to do in America. I checked online. It really used to be a thing.

It's totally our thing now.

I shrug at the looming birthday ear-pulling question. "We might be able to skip that tradition, guys. After all, we'd like to steer clear of any international incidents."

When my skin awakens with heat, I know that Cage has walked into the room behind me. He doesn't say anything as he eases his hand to my slightly pooched belly.

Possessive. Loving. He's already thinking of names for the little baby boy and girl who are on their ways into our lives. Roman and Tatiana (or Alec and Anya?) will be along for the ride when Cage and I get married at the end of the month as soon as the dream house Cage has been overseeing is finished. I didn't want to be married

anywhere else except in the new home that'll hold and comfort our family for the rest of our lives.

"Hey, Cage," Lacey says, perfectly at home with her uber-rich future brother-in-law. "Should we pull on Igor's ears today or what? Evidently, that's what Russians do to each other on their birthdays."

Cage laughs. "We can leave that up to Igor. He's big on traditions. That's why he wanted to meet my family while he's in town this time."

He couldn't have made my mom any happier by calling them "family." I can tell that Dad and Lacey are totally on board, too. They accepted him pretty quickly, except for that first meeting when they put him through the wringer by asking him a million questions about the loads of women he used to date and how he got so rich.

Gauche but protective, but hey, he's the first real boyfriend I'd ever brought home. The only boyfriend who'll ever matter.

Right now they obviously sense that Cage would like some alone time with me before Igor arrives, and they mention something about checking out what Daphne the personal chef has cooking in the kitchen, then depart. Lacey, the joker, winks at me on her way out, but Cage doesn't notice.

He keeps rubbing my belly, and I lean back into him, feeling the security of his hard body, resting my cheek against his strong arm.

"Good job with the decorations," he says. "Igor's going to be pleased."

"You know I always do my best for you, baby."

As he kisses the top of my head, my blood warms. I want him right now just as much

as I always do, passionately, insanely. But when he reaches his other hand in front of me to show me a wrapped box, I have to put my need for him on hold.

“What’s this?” I ask.

“Open it and see.”

I hate to break away from him to take the gift in my hand, but I’m curious, so I do. And after I turn around to find him grinning down at me with his blue eyes shining, I tear into the ribbon, then the wrapping, stripping everything down to a medium-sized black velvet box.

I slowly open it to find a diamond tiara nestled in velvet cloth, sparkling in the summer light from the windows.

“Cage,” I say breathlessly.

“It’s for our wedding day,” he says. “I know you already have your veil picked out to go with your dress, but I saw this, and it was begging for you.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:05 am

Just like I playfully beg for him during our nights together?

He takes the small crown out of its box, then slips it onto my head. I don't have to see myself in a mirror to know that I'm beautiful, because I see that in Cage's eyes. I always have.

"My gift," he murmurs. "My queen."

When he bends down to scoop me into his arms for a kiss, I melt. I cling to him during this lazy, loving assault of emotions. I feel as if we're in the eye of our own storm, everything whirling around us as the chaos echoes inside of me, too, and when he deepens the kiss by stroking my tongue with his, I'm his erotic slave.

I'm his everything, even after he pulls away to look down into my eyes.

Fire...storms...us. He belongs to me and I belong to him, forever.

He runs his fingers down my neck, over my aching and swollen breast, then to my baby bump. With a naughty glance, he goes lower, skimming under my summer dress to my pussy.

I moan and bite my lip as he teases me there, awakening my clit and the pounding of my blood.

"There's no time," I whisper.

"There's always time for me to take you into our bedroom for—"

The doorbell chimes, and the hot moment between us suspends in the air. We laugh at the timing, but it's not as if there won't be other opportunities.

I smack his hand away from me, and he chuckles. Then I slide the tiara off my head, not caring that's it leaving my hair a mess. I'll live.

I tuck the headdress into its box, saving it for our wedding day.

Igor is in high spirits, and he's brought his wife, two children, and grandchildren with him. The kids immediately go for his pile of presents in the living room, inspecting them, politely guessing what could be inside.

As Igor's family surrounds my own, laughing together, Cage, Igor, and I stand back and watch.

"Ah, family," Igor says. "I cannot wait until you have your own children to join in festivities such as this."

He smiles and looks at my baby bump, and Cage can't help but to touch me there again. I look up at him to see the glowing affection in his eyes, and I almost lose track of where we are and who we're with until the kids laugh gleefully at the sight of Daphne wheeling the massive birthday cake into the room on a linen-covered cart.

But Igor isn't watching them. He's watching us with a satisfied smile.

"I always knew the two of you would work things out," he says.

He has no true idea. Cage never did lie to Igor about how I had to "take care of my sick mother" and how that resulted in our breakup. Instead, Cage told him something closer to the truth—that he had blown it with me and wanted me back.

And he sure got what he wanted.

“You know, Cage,” Igor continues as the kids surround the cake now, “meeting Karini was actually what convinced me that you could be trusted. She, as they say, was your ace in the hole.”

The air in the room seems to go still as something passes through Cage’s eyes. A memory of how dark things used to be for him, perhaps. But then he looks at me and his eyes are shining.

He slips his hand to the back of my head and gives me a kiss so tender that my knees go weak. Then he smiles down at me.

“Meeting Karini is what convinced me that I could be trusted, too,” he says so softly that I’m not even sure Igor hears it.

But I did, and that’s all that’s going to matter for the rest of our lives.

THE END