



Leo

Author: *Katie Dowe*

Category: Romance, Billionaire Romance

Description: Sherrian Watson has put love on the back burner, dedicating herself to building her dream pastry shop, all while nursing the wounds from her last heartbreak.

Things are going great until her well-off aunt drops a bombshell—Sherrian stands to inherit a fortune, but there's a catch:

She must marry within two weeks!

Billionaire Leo Coleman has been secretly in love with Sherrian since their paths first crossed.

Seizing the moment, Leo proposes a temporary marriage, hoping it'll be his chance to finally win her over.

Thrown together for a faux honeymoon in Paris, their make-believe marriage starts feeling all too real.

Surprises unfold, and emotions deepen, challenging everything Sherrian thought she wanted...

Can Sherrian see the love Leo offers beyond their agreement?

Or will her past scars be too deep to let her grasp the happiness within reach?

Total Pages (Source): 76

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:51 am

Chapter 1

“Darling, you’re making me dizzy.”

“I do not know what in the hell I am supposed to do. She is insisting that I find a husband as if I can just pick one out of a hat.” Fisting her hands in her hair, Sherrian stopped short of just screaming.

The only thing that gave her pause was the fact that it would not solve anything. “You can always marry me!” Michael suggested helpfully as he watched her pace in a tight circle, the energy positively vibrating off her.

“Aunt Gloria already knows you are as gay as the day is long.” She flopped down on the silk sofa next him and rested her head on his shoulder.

She was exhausted. The pastry shop had been unusually busy today and she had been summoned to her aunt’s place. A phone call in the middle of the busy period with the woman telling her imperiously that her presence was needed.

“I expect you for supper, Sherrian and you know how I despise tardiness.”

So, she had to pass on everything to her partner, Ingrid, which included paperwork and some accounting and hightailed it an hour away to her aunt’s dusty old house. Just to be told in the middle of the unappetizing meal of barely cooked veal and raw vegetables that she had two weeks to find a husband.

“During that time, I will be going on a cruise. I am wrapping up my business and

meeting with the lawyers. The money is there for you to take possession of, but you have to find a husband.”

She had looked over her glasses and tutted in disapproval at her niece’s appearance. Sherrian had not bothered to mention that she was coming straight from work. It would not have made a hell of a difference. The woman was impossible.

“I have two weeks,” she murmured mournfully.

“And after what happened two years ago, the last thing you need is a husband,” Michael commiserated with her. He was her best friend and who better to know that she had suffered tragically and had decided to put the brake on relationships.

She had even stopped dating, which he privately thought was a damn shame. Sherrian was a beautiful woman who deserved to have a man catering to her.

“Ingrid is retiring in a month. She wants me to buy her out and frankly, I do not relish someone else coming in. I have plans for the place.”

“Big ones?”

“Yes. I was thinking it does not have to be a real marriage, just something to satisfy the old bat. All that money, just gathering dust in the bank. There is so much I could do with it.” Shoving off the sofa, she started pacing again. Michael leaned back and watched in fascination as she made the rounds, her slender body vibrating with tension and energy.

Her thick dark brown hair was piled on top of her head, with tendrils escaping down her face and the back of her neck. She was wearing faded jeans and her pastry shop t-shirt and managed to look elegant and classy in what should have been a casual outfit.

Her face was small, with pointed chin, eyes large and a dark chocolate brown, very expressive eyes indeed. Her lips were wide and at the mouth, without a stitch of enhancement. In fact, she was not wearing any makeup at all. Her skin was a flawless caramel, her nose small with flaring nostrils.

She was petite, barely topping five feet, but her energy level made up for it. Charles was definitely gay but could admire the very lovely and appealing package. He had no doubt that she could have any number of men dying to put a ring on that long and elegant finger of hers.

But because of what had happened in the past, Sherrian was understandably cautious.

“What about Greg?”

She stopped her pacing to consider and then shook her head. “It has to be someone who knows I am not interested in an actual relationship. This would be for show. No sex, no touching or sharing the same bedroom.”

He snorted and had her narrowing her eyes at him.

“What?”

“Then you’re looking for either a gay man or one who’s over ninety.”

“Why?”

He gave her an incredulous stare. “Sweetie, take a look in the mirror. You might not take the time and effort to doll yourself up, but you are a gorgeous woman.

Any man you choose will absolutely want to touch and more.” He plucked their wine glasses off his cherry wood table and checked for moisture. Satisfied that it was still

its glossy best, he headed towards his pristine kitchen.

“I am switching to tea, unless you plan on spending the night.”

“I am.” She followed him into the pristine black and white kitchen and sat around the counter. “It amazes me how you have all this beautiful space and barely use it.”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:51 am

“That’s because I do a lot of travelling and I am not enamored with cooking the way you are.” He glanced at her as he searched for his special Japanese tea. She needed calm and the tea he had decided on would contribute to that. Hopefully. “No one is. You live in the kitchen.”

“I do.” She was feeling restless again, a constant condition as far as she was concerned. She had someone in mind. He was a friend, and she could be brazen enough to ask him to go with her in this scheme she was planning.

He could say no, but she had a feeling it would be mutually beneficial to both of them. And she was desperate enough to try. If he said no, then- God! She had no idea what she would do if he did. She really, really needed the money.

“Thanks.” She took the cup he handed to her and inhaled the citrus scent.

“Let’s talk about something else, something not designed to drive me crazy.” She sipped tea and stared at him over the rim of her cup. Michael Charles Montgomery was a highly successful and prestigious actor who came from a wealthy family.

He was the only son of Ellie Montgomery; the famous actress who had taken Broadway by storm several decades ago and who was now retired and living in Italy with her latest lover. A lover who was twenty years her junior. “How’s mommy, dearest?”

A smile touched her lips as he grimaced and sat down across from her. “Her lover made a pass at me the last time I went for a visit.”

Her eyebrows lifted, “So, you did what?”

“Made a pass right back.” He grinned at her, green eyes twinkling. She was the only one in his large circle of friends, he ever felt comfortable with and considered her his best friend. She was unsophisticated and honest to the point of being rude and he adored her.

She did not pretend to be anything other than who she was, and he admired that. She did not give a flying fig about society and was not ruled by their ridiculous standards. “He is a gorgeous man who is only with mother because of what she can give him. The poor thing is completely under her thumb.”

“Greed makes strange bedfellows.”

“And you, my darling one are completely and utterly cynical.”

“They are both using each other, obviously, so there is no need for sympathy. How is Jason?” She asked casually.

“We’re on a break.”

“For how long, this time?”

“It might be for good.” He placed the cup carefully into the delicate saucer and folded manicured hands in front of him. “Aren’t you going to say, ‘I told you so’?”

“That’s not my style,” she gave him a blank stare as she sipped her tea, which was beginning to warm her stomach. “But I did tell you, he is only after you for what you can do for him. Dump his opportunistic ass and move on.”

“Easy for you to say,” his expression was mournful, “I fancied myself in love with

him.”

“He is an empty shell of a man and I saw that the minute you introduced him to me. All flash and no substance and very pretentious,” she shrugged. “You do not need that. If you wait patiently and stop picking up these losers, you are going to find someone worthy of you.”

“What if he’s exactly what I deserve?”

“That’s utter nonsense and you know it.”

“I don’t like living alone.” He looked around the luxurious place in which he had invested. He was wealthy and well set. But still, he was a thirty-year-old gay man with no one to call his own.

He traveled the world and could buy anything he wanted and did not hesitate to indulge himself. But he was lonely and was secretly happy that Sherrian had decided to spend the night.

“Living alone is fun and uncomplicated. I can walk around naked, cook with just an apron covering my nude body. I never have to pick up after anyone or put the damn toilet seat down. It is fricking liberating.”

He gave her a considering look.

“Why do I get the feeling you’re picturing me naked with just an apron on?”

He laughed softly and shook his head. “Precisely what I was imagining. Darling, you only came to this...,” he waved a hand vaguely. “This mind frame when that bastard did you wrong. We all need that special someone who is going to tune our pipes and settle in for the long haul. I want that and am not going to apologize for wanting it.”

She finished her tea and went to put her cup in the oversized sink. “I am over relationships. All I want to do is concentrate on building my pastry shop.”

“I could loan you the money, hell, I could give it to you.”

“No!” She shook her head firmly. “I already owe you quite a bit.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:51 am

“What’s a sum of money between friends?” He asked airily.

“The answer is still no.”

Dragging his fingers through his disheveled hair, he turned to look at the woman sprawled on the bed. A frown touched his brow as he realized not for the first time that things were cooling down between them.

He was going to cut loose, but did not relish the scene and the questions. He was putting on his boots when she stirred and turned around to face him.

“It’s late!” There was enough light from the moon seeping through the window for him to notice the pout on her rosy lips.

“Or early.” He nodded to the blinking light of the bedside clock which showed the time as being just 3.30 am. “I have a breakfast meeting and am flying to New York. I have to be prepared.”

“You always are. Darling, this is becoming tiresome. You never spend the entire night.”

“Again, it is morning.” He rose and slipped into his jacket. He did not have time for an argument. He had started seeing Janet two months ago and at first her beauty and vivid personality had intrigued him.

But that had quickly cooled. And he knew why. She was not a bad person, and he supposed if he were not hung up on someone else, he could really see them having a go at the relationship. But his passion had waned considerably.

“I am going to Mexico on a shoot for three days, We could make an outing of it and stay in the delightful villa of yours.”

He lifted thick coffee brown brows at her as he zipped up his pants. “No, we cannot. I have a company to run. But feel free to use the place. If you decide to, I will alert Manuel.”

She sat up, naked and flushed, her rose tinted nipples already hard. Her skin was white and pampered and the glorious red hair which was her trademark flowed over one breast and stopped at her tiny waist.

But other than a mild admiration for her beauty, he felt nothing else. “The fall fashion show will be right after I get back. Can I count on you being there?”

“We’ll see.” He patted his pockets to make sure he was not leaving anything behind. “Take care.”

He was at the door of the bedroom when she rushed over and launched herself into his arms. “Please stay.”

An impatient look crossed his attractive face and reflected in his blue-green eyes.

“I have to go.” Putting her away from him, he opened the door and left without a backward glance.

Outside in the parking lot, he got into his vehicle and just sat there. It was too early for the other tenants to be up and about. The concierge had rushed to open the

beveled glass doors for him. It was expected of course because he owned the building.

He was about to push the start button when his phone rang. He was going to ignore it when he decided to turn it over and looked at the LED. His brows lifted in shocked surprise and for a second, he could not move. Taking a deep breath, he pushed the green icon and hoped to God that he managed to sound normal.

“Hey.”

“Hey, yourself. You were the one who told me you are usually up at the crack of dawn. And shit, Leo, I need to talk to you. It is urgent or I would not be disturbing you at this time. Wait, are you with someone?”

He chuckled softly and knew why he had fallen for her in the first place. Sherrian Watson was in a league of her own.

“Not anymore.”

“That’s good.” There was a pause, and he waited. “I need to see you. I have this damn favor to ask, and it cannot be said over the fucking phone. Here I am up at this time of the morning and cannot settle. What is your day like?”

“I have a breakfast meeting at six and flying to New York right after. I should be back by tonight. Where can I find you?”

“I will be at the shop until around 9.00 pm. Bring your appetite and let me cook you something.”

“Sounds like a plan. You okay?”

“Kind of. I will fill you in when I see you. Later.” And just like that, she was gone. Leaning back, he closed his eyes and fought the shudders wracking his body. He had met her two years ago when she was engaged to another man.

She had been rushing in her usual fashion, from the pastry shop to go across the street to catch the bank and bumped into him. Instead of apologizing, the tiny bundle of electric energy had berated him for not watching where he was going.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:51 am

He had just stood there like a buffoon watching in fascination at the sparks shooting from the chocolate brown eyes and did not say a word. Afterwards, she had marched off across the street and entered the bank.

But he had seen the logo on her shirt and knew she worked at the pastry place only a few feet away.

The next morning, he had presented himself there and sat in a corner booth, enjoying coffee and her delicious raspberry and cream pie.

He had then sat there and watched as she moved from one table to the other and then back around the kitchen. Her energy left him breathless, and he had fallen then and there. When she came over to his table, he had seen the ring on her finger and felt his heart sinking.

He had persevered and became her friend instead and hired her shop for when they had meetings at the corporate headquarters or even when they were having functions at the office, he would use her. He had thrown her so much business that she confessed that he had singlehandedly boosted the business.

When her fiancé was killed and he found out that the bastard was also cheating on her, he offered his shoulder as a friend, all the while wishing that he could be something more. When she made it plain that she was not in the running for a relationship, he had reluctantly backed down and waited for his opening.

Laughing shakily, he pushed the start button and hoped this was it.

“It was pretty rough today.” Ingrid sat next to her and gave her a sympathetic look as she slipped off her tennis shoes and wriggled her toes.

“Mondays always are. I am not going to complain.” Sherrian leaned back and closed her eyes wearily. The shop was empty at this time of night, with the last customer leaving with a box cream puffs, freshly baked.

“Honey, I hate to bring this up.”

Sherrian turned to face the older woman and knew what was coming. “You want to know what my plans are.”

Ingrid nodded, a sheepish expression on her lined face. “Ben is making noises about leaving without me.

You know we plan to take a two-month long cruise before we both officially retire.” Ingrid was nearing her sixty-fifth birthday and her husband, who was a seasoned fire fighter, was just days away from his own retirement. The couple wanted to go on a cruise and settle on a farm in Texas.

Sherrian was grateful to the woman who had hired her straight out of culinary school and taught her so much. Ingrid had taken her on as a partner three years ago and over the last year had offered her the opportunity of owning the shop outright.

“As you should be,” she slid her feet back into her tennis shoes. She should be hearing from Leo soon and wanted to get ready. “I will have an answer for you by the end of the week.”

Ingrid stared at the vivacious beauty quizzically.

“That aunt of yours still giving you a hard time?”

“Aunt Gloria is set in her ways.”

“We could always work out a payment plan.”

Sherrian shook her head. “No. You put everything into the business, and I don’t want to be the one to hold things up for you.” Reaching over, she patted the worn hand. “I will figure something out.”

“Honey, don’t let her rope you into doing something you don’t want to do.”

“I will do anything to take over the business. Go home and stop worrying about me. I am a survivor.”

“I just have one more thing to say.”

“Go on.”

“That asshole Greg was an idiot.”

“I completely agree with you.” Sherrian told her with a laugh. “It is funny. When it happened, I was so broken that I could not function.

But now, looking back, I should have seen the signs. I blamed myself for being so wrapped up in growing the business.” She shook her head. “When he took the broken dates and the latenights I would spend here so easily, I figured I was the luckiest woman in the world.”

“And all the while he was screwing around with your best friend,” Ingrid sniffed. “I never liked that Jasmine person. She was always smiling and too nice.”

“She was my best friend since high school. I never got the chance to ask her why she did it. That pissed me off. Losing Greg was one thing, but I also lost the person I considered to be my best friend.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:51 am

All those times they claimed they were working; they were actually screwing each other's brains out." Taking a breath, she rose. "Now, get out of here, before Ben starts blaming me for keeping his wife out at this time of night."

"Don't stay too late." Ingrid rose as well and glanced around the cheerful space with the chairs stacked on the tables after the girls had finished cleaning. She had been in business for the past thirty years after working at a restaurant and deciding that it was time for her to branch out on her own.

"I am going to miss this place." She reached out to clasp the girl's hand. "But I could not wish for a better person to pass it on to. You have turned this place into a showpiece, one that is immensely popular with the uptown crowd. I know you have great plans as soon as I draw my ancient ass out of here."

Sherrian hugged the woman and held on. "You're not that old!" She tightened the hold on the woman and closed her eyes in appreciation. She owed a lot to this woman and would never forget what she did for her. Letting go, she stepped back. "I am getting mushy, and you know how I hate that."

Ingrid patted her cheek fondly. "Our Chad would have made you a great husband."

Sherrian burst out laughing, eyes dancing merrily. "I think of him of more like a brother and he feels the same. How is Gayle?"

"My daughter-in-law is about to give us our first granddaughter. She is a rock star. Let me get the hell out of here."

Chapter 2

He felt the jolt straight through his heart as soon as she opened the door. There she was standing with the lights behind her, wearing just a simple pair of faded denims and peach colored t-shirt with the 'Tasty Pastry' logo stitched onto the left breast pocket.

Her thick dark brown hair was piled on top of her head and secured with a pencil, with untidy tendrils curling all around her face. And to him, she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

"You are baking." He had to force himself to appear casual.

"I'm always baking."

"You have flour on your cheek." He touched the spot lightly and just stopped himself from pulling her into his arms. She smelled of cinnamon and chocolate.

"Part of the package." She smiled at him, and he felt his world shifted. "Come in. I made linguini. You came straight from New York?"

He followed her as she wound her way through tables and chairs and past the cash register and into a cavernous kitchen strewn with tools and signs of her work.

"I did, yes. You did not have to go through the trouble..."

"Sit." She gestured towards the table lined up next to the cupboard.

Hiding a smile, he did just that and realized that this petite bundle of energy was the only one who spoke to him like that.

“Tell me what you think,” she passed him a plate with a tasty smelling pile of pasta and herbs. “I am experimenting with a new blend of seasoning.” She turned back to the stove and started wiping it down. “Did I tell you I am serving lunch now?”

“No!” He tasted the meal and lifted his brows. “This is excellent. Reminds me of a small café I went to in Venice.”

She blew out a breath and whirled to dig out a bowl. “Water or tea? I don’t have any of your fancy wines.”

“Water is good.” He dug into the meal with gusto. He had eaten on the plane, but this was the most delicious meal he had had in ages. She poured water and handed it to him and was about to go into the freezer when he stopped her.

“Eat with me.”

“I have to....”

“Sherrian.” His deep voice had her digging her hands into the wide pockets of her soiled apron.

Blowing out a breath, she dished out some of the pasta and sat across from him.

“How are you?” He asked quietly, sensing she was finding it difficult to broach the subject uppermost on her mind.

“Just fine and dandy.” She put down her fork and folded her elegant hands on the counter. “And that’s a damn lie.” Turning her head, she looked around the space. The counter where she had piled paraphernalia, the bags of flour, the food coloring she had been experimenting with, and the overall scent of baking that filled the air.

“I always knew I wanted to be a pastry chef.” She murmured, swinging her gaze back to him. “I used to pester my mother with questions and demanded tea and baking sets. She was a good cook herself, and I enjoyed watching her.” She was silent for a minute, reflecting on the past.

“They were killed in a vehicular crash when you were just fifteen.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:51 am

She nodded. “To her credit, Aunt Gloria stepped up and took me in. She was childless herself and married to her first husband.” A smile touched her lips. “Good old Uncle Hubert, he was a nice enough person but was never a match for her.”

Easing out a breath, she stared at the man seated across from her and wondered what insanity had possessed her to even think of embroiling him in her plans.

Leo Coleman was a self-made billionaire with looks to match. What she was planning to ask him was crazy, but she had no other choice.

“The favor I am going to ask of you, please feel free to say no. If you do, I promise that nothing will change between us. I will probably try and beg...”

“Sherrian.”

“Okay.” She took a deep breath. “Okay, so here is the thing. I love this place. It is kind of my life and I want to do so much with it. I would like you to agree to enter into a fake marriage with me.” She rushed to add.

To his credit, he did not react – well, not much, except the slight jolting of his hand holding the glass of water. But inside he was a mass of nerves and shock, interspersed with hope.

Could this be an answer to his prayers?”

“It is the only way I am going to get the money from my aunt. She wants everything done by two weeks’ time, after which she is going on her cruise.

The reason I asked is because you were saying to me the last time that you were tired of women chasing after you with the hope of becoming Mrs. Leo Coleman.”

She spread her hands wide. “it would be beneficial to both of us, and we would not have to live together. We could do this and in a month or after I receive the money from my aunt, we could part ways.”

Not live together? He was damn well going to make sure that happens!

“Leo?”

Leo carefully set his glass down, his mind racing with the implications of Sherrian's proposal. The idea was wild, completely out of the blue, and yet, it held a certain appeal.

His thoughts quickly turned to the years of dodging persistent suitors and the endless stream of women hoping to stake a claim on his fortune. A fake marriage could be a viable solution, but was he ready to take such a drastic step?

"What you're suggesting is..., unconventional, to say the least," he said slowly, capturing her gaze with an intensity that belied his calm words.

"I know." She nodded, her eyes pleading for him to understand the desperation that had driven her to this point. "But it's the only way I can save this place. My aunt has always been a stickler for tradition, and she will not release the funds unless she believes I'm settling down and building a future."

Leo leaned back in his chair, considering her words. The bakery was indeed Sherrian's heart and soul, and he had seen firsthand the passion she poured into every dish. The thought of her losing it all was unacceptable.

And if he could help her, while also gaining some respite from the constant romantic pursuits..., perhaps it wasn't such a crazy idea after all.

"Alright," he said finally, his voice steady. "I'll do it. But there will be conditions. We need to draw up a contract, lay out all the terms clearly. This must be a mutual agreement with no misunderstandings."

A look of profound relief washed over Sherrian's face, and she nodded eagerly. "Of course, whatever you need. Thank you, Leo. You have no idea how much this means to me."

Leo offered her a small smile, his mind already strategizing the next steps. "Let's meet tomorrow to discuss the details. For now, let us finish this meal and talk about happier things."

Sherrian's smile widened, and for the first time that evening, she looked genuinely hopeful. "Deal," she said, lifting her glass in a toast. "To new beginnings."

"To new beginnings," Leo echoed, clinking his glass against hers. As they resumed their meal, a new sense of camaraderie settled between them, binding them together in their shared resolve to face the challenges ahead.

His mind was on the fact that he was finally getting her to a place that offered him hope. The prospect of assisting Sherrian and witnessing her joy was a beacon amidst his otherwise tumultuous life.

It wasn't just about the convenience of a fake marriage or the reprieve from relentless suitors; it was about the subtle but profound connection he felt with Sherrian. He admired her tenacity, her unwavering dedication to her craft, and the warmth she exuded even in moments of uncertainty.

As they chatted and laughed, discussing their favorite recipes and childhood memories, Leo felt a strange sense of destiny. Perhaps this unorthodox arrangement would lead to something greater than either of them had anticipated. He looked at Sherrian, her face alight with excitement, and silently vowed to protect and cherish this newfound alliance.

“Wait!” She held up a hand suddenly, causing him to blink. “Are you seeing someone?”

His mind drifted to the woman he had left in bed just this morning.

“Not anymore.”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:51 am

She stared at him quizzically and opened her mouth to say something but thought better of it.

“That’s tidy, then!” She murmured, waving a hand in dismissal.

“Regarding the living arrangements,” he began casually, determined to settle this before he left. “Won’t your aunt want proof that this is not something you put together for her benefit? My townhouse is quite large with plenty of rooms.”

She stared at him with a frown.

“And I have a very large kitchen,” he prompted.

“I would not want to put you out,” she objected.

“You wouldn’t be. I am hardly there anyway, and this would convince your aunt that this is a genuine arrangement. Think about it?”

She nodded slowly, uncomfortable with the idea of living with him. “Are you certain you want to take this on? I mean, this will benefit me more than it will you. In fact, this is going to put a crimp in your style as a bachelor.”

Picking up his glass, he slowly sipped water and thought about his response. He was determined to take it slowly. It was obvious she was not ready for what he had in mind, but he was hoping that with them in the same space, it could come naturally.

“Perhaps I am tired of the whole dating scene and want to give it a break.” His blue-

green eyes twinkled. “It might be that you are doing me a favor.”

She snorted at that and rose to clear the dishes. He had cleaned his plate, but she had barely touched hers, showing him that she was still unsettled.

“Sherrian?”

“Hmm?” She looked up from the water she was running in the sink.

“I am not being pressured into anything, if that’s what’s bothering you.”

Turning off the tap, she turned to face him. “You know what happened with Greg two years ago.”

He nodded, careful to keep the tension he was feeling from showing. He did not want the ghost of her dead fiancé between them and wished she had not brought it up.

“After the devastation, I promised myself that I would concentrate on building my business. I wanted to concentrate on me. Ingrid gave me a chance and I am so completely grateful to her, but I want this place to reflect my style.”

She smiled slightly. “I take daring risks, do my research and combine ingredients that seems iffy, but I want this place to be the talk of the goddamned town. That is the only reason I am doing this, Leo. I need the money and would do almost anything to get it.”

She held up a soapy hand. “I am sorry, but I have to say this to make it clear. It is just an arrangement, a temporary one. Greg broke my heart and my trust and it is not going to be easy for me to trust another man, not right now. I just want you to know.”

He controlled his anger by sheer will and somehow managed to appear nonchalant.

“Got it.” He rose, indicating it was time to leave, and she wiped her hands in her apron.

“Are you leaving so soon. I just have a few things to do before that can happen for me.” She walked him to the door in silence. “Uhm, will you be open to meeting my aunt? I am planning to tell her tomorrow.”

“Of course. Just call and let me know when and I will rearrange my schedule.” He was about to open the door when she touched his arm.

“Thank you.” Her voice was soft with sincerity. “I really mean it. You have no idea what this means to me.”

“I believe I have some idea,” he offered her a small smile before turning away and leaving.

She locked the door behind him and leaned on the glass. He said ‘yes’! She would enter into this arrangement and receive the money in short order. Afterwards, she would be free to do whatever she pleased. And release Leo from his obligations. Because no matter what he said, a man like that would not remain single for long.

A frown touched her brow as she recalled that she had not asked him about the legal ramifications. Would his lawyers have to be involved? She knew a man like him had a fleet of them on his payroll. She was going to have to remember to ask him about it. But the main thing, the most important thing was that he had agreed.

“Yes!” Pumping her fist in the air, she looked around the dining area, anticipating the changes she would be making.

“Lights.” He ordered as soon as he stepped into the lofty foyer. Shrugging out of his jacket, he slung it carelessly over the elegant entrance table, next to the coat closet. His housekeeper would see to hanging it up when she arrived in the morning.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:51 am

He felt anger and let down. His joy at the proposition Sherrian had mentioned was dimming. She had told him some hard truths and he was finding it difficult to swallow.

It sounded like she was still in love with the bastard. She had told him in no uncertain terms that he should not be looking for anything else. She just wanted the money and that was it.

Striding along the hallway, his boots striking the glossy blue and green tiles, he went into the living room where a small fire was simmering. It was still too early for a fire, but his housekeeper knew he preferred the warm glow rather than the bright overhead lights.

Moving towards the recessed cabinet, he touched the button and grabbed a bottle of his favorite bourbon and a glass. Taking both with him, he went to sit on the chair in front of the fire. Toeing off his shoes, he stretched his feet out and poured a full glass.

His head was still spinning from his very hectic schedule, and he was tired. Bone weary actually and it was not so much from the activities of the day, so much as the emotions warring inside him. He had certainly not expected a proposal of marriage from her, albeit a fake one.

He would have preferred she had called him over to tell him that she wanted to start something up with him. He had been waiting two bloody years.

Tossing back the drink, he relished the glow in his throat and the burn in his gut and poured another. He should have said screw it and made his move before now. But he

had thought it would be better to give her time.

Time for what? He thought angrily. To become further mired down in her sense of betrayal and mistrust? What in the hell was he supposed to do?

Just offer her the use of his place and keep his distance? He was damn well not going to be doing that. With that resolve in mind, he finished the rest of the drink and settled back in the chair, a frown on his brow.

The crackling of the fire filled the quiet room, its sporadic pops and hisses a soothing backdrop to the tumult in his mind. He reached for the glass once more, but hesitated, his hand hovering over the polished surface of the table.

How had things come to this? The woman he had waited for, the woman he had silently cherished, now saw him as nothing more than a means to an end, a financial salvation in the form of a temporary charade.

His thoughts drifted back to the moment she had made her proposition. Her eyes had been earnest, her voice unwavering, yet there had been a flicker of something else - doubt, perhaps? Or was it fear? He could not be sure.

All he knew was that he would agree to any terms if it meant he could have her in his life, even if only for a brief, illusionary period.

Rising from the chair, he paced the room, his footsteps echoing softly against the tiled floor. He had to find a way to turn this situation around, to transform their sham engagement into something real, something lasting.

But how? She had made it clear that she did not want anything more from him than his financial assistance. Was it possible to change her mind?

A plan began to form in his thoughts, a bold and audacious scheme that could either win her heart or drive her further away. He would have to tread carefully, balancing his desire with a respect for her wishes.

But he was determined to try. He would show her, through his actions and his unwavering support, that he was more than just a temporary solution to her problems. He was her future.

With renewed resolve, he set the glass down and headed towards his study. There were preparations to be made, and he needed to ensure that everything was in order before he approached her again. He would not lose her to the shadows of her past. He would fight for her, for them, and he would not rest until he had secured her love.

As the night wore on, he worked tirelessly, the glow of the fire a distant reminder of the warmth and comfort he sought. He had waited two years; he could wait a little longer. But this time, he would not stand idly by. This time, he would act.

And with that, the first light of dawn began to creep through the windows, casting a gentle glow over his determined features. The battle for her heart had begun.

She was revved. A few minutes after he left, she had found herself unable to concentrate on the baking. And had started making notes in her little book. Ingrid often teased her about the jottings she put down, but they were important to her.

Plans for the shop. Plans for her future. She could already see the money in her bank account. She would put in more tables and chairs. There was certainly space for it.

A few privacy booths. Make the glass cases displaying what she liked to call her work of art much bigger. Have tasting parties. Advertise on the various channels,

perhaps hire someone to do the paperwork.

She shook her head. Definitely hire someone to do the damn paperwork, something she hated. But Ingrid was lousy at it, and it had been left up to her to take up the slack.

She resented spending even a minute crunching numbers when she could be creating a new and delicious pastry. She was an artist and a chef, not a damn accountant. Ingrid had been comfortable to allow things to stay just the way they are, she was not. She wanted to get bigger and better.

And as soon as she received the money, she was going to go for it. Thanks to Leo, it was soon to become a reality.

Turning in a slow circle, she made some more jottings. She might change the wallpapers. They had been there since she came to work here and looked a little dingy.

After her studies, she had taken a trip to Paris and Italy and noted the gaily decorated interiors of the small cafes. She wanted something like that. Cheerful colors, bold, but not brassy.

She liked to believe that people should have pleasant surroundings when they are having a meal, even if's just coffee and croissant.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:51 am

Putting the pencil into her mouth, she gnawed on the wood absently as she continued to look around. Leo was right. Aunt Gloria was not just going to cheerfully hand over the money on the announcement of their ‘marriage’. The woman was ornery enough to want to see where they were living. And might even want to attend the wedding.

She would suggest that they take a trip to Vegas or ask Leo if he knew of anyone willing to perform a fake ceremony. The person would have to be discreet of course. After all, Leo Coleman was a particularly important man, and it would not do for it to be leaked to the press that he was involved in something like this.

That was what was bothering her. She could do damage to his reputation. Why in the hell had she asked him? And why had he agreed? Yes, she knew they both had their reasons, but what if something leaked? “Oh Lord.” She whispered. “Am I doing the right thing?”

Chapter 3

Sherrian unconsciously curled her fingers in his palms as she waited for her aunt to say something. She felt a quick jolt to her system when Leo placed a reassuring hand over hers and somehow that steadied her.

“I know your mama,” Gloria’s eyes bored into his as if she was waiting for him to wilt.

“Do you?”

Sherrian had called and told her aunt about the upcoming nuptials. Her aunt had

demanded that they present themselves at her home for afternoon tea. She had proceeded to call Leo and caught him just as he was coming out of a meeting.

“I am sorry, but she wants it to be today.”

“I’ll pick you up.”

“I really appreciate this.”

They had made the trip with her regaling him with stories about some of her eccentric customers.

“Yes!” Gloria stared at him closely. “She’s living in the UK now, is that correct?”

“Yes, she is.”

“You keep in touch?”

“We do, yes.” He was amused by the questions and the woman’s relentless expression. They had been escorted into the shabby blue and white salon with the heavy antique furnishings and heavy gold colored drapery. Sherrian had warned him about the state of the place and her aunt’s eccentricity.

“And you met my niece, when?”

“Two years ago.” He felt Sherrian’s fingers digging into his palms and used his own to uncurl hers.

“You knew her when she was engaged to that worthless loser?”

He frankly did not know how to respond to that. “I,…”

“He did.” Sherrian firmed her lips and lifted her chin, making him want to rush to her rescue. He had spent an agonizing night wondering if he was doing the right thing. But this moment, this very moment, he knew he wanted to slay dragons for her.

Gloria waved away the housekeeper who had come in to see if they needed anything else. “And pray tell, why did you choose that - that person over him?” She jerked a head towards Leo.

“Auntie...”

“We met after she was engaged and became friends.” Leo intervened smoothly. He felt the tension in the woman seated next to him and wanted to end this uncomfortable discussion. “The good thing is that we are now, together!”

The woman stared at him for a beat and then nodded. “You’re right of course.” She looked at her niece. “You think I am being a nosy old woman, but the fact is – your father was my brother, and I lost him. He took care of me, when we were growing up with an abusive woman and a miserable drunken father.

That is who your grandfather was. He used his fists more often than he used his words and Milton shielded me as best as he could. I am obligated to take care of his only child.” She waved a hand again and picked up her tea. “The wedding will be held here.”

Leo felt when Sherrian tensed. “We thought we would just go on over to Las Vegas and have a quick ceremony.”

He received a frown for his effort. “You would deprive me from seeing my only relative taking her vows?”

“It was my idea.”

“Young people.” Sherrian was given a disapproving look. “The ceremony will be held here. I have a minister...”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:51 am

“Michael..,” sheer desperation had her almost leaping from the chair. If Leo had not held her back, she would have jumped to her feet. “You remember him? He was ordained as a minister on the internet and would love to do the ceremony.” She had not contacted Michael yet, but she was certain he would agree.

“I thought you said you wanted to go to Las Vegas?” The frown had deepened as Gloria stared at the them.

“Plan B!” Leo again interjected.

“I am not certain that I approve of some random ordination over the internet. And isn’t he gay?”

“What difference does that make?”

Gloria frowned at the girl’s defiance but conceded gracefully. “It is your wedding and times have changed. I would like the ceremony to be held before I leave. So, next Saturday should be fine. It is not yet too cold out. We will have it in the garden. A nice outdoor ceremony should be lovely.

I will make all the arrangements and call you with the details.” She gave her niece a critical glance. “Do something with your hair my dear and I am springing for the wedding dress. You are marrying a man of immense worth, you need to look the part.”

Dragging her hand away from his, Sherrian fisted it on the arm of the chair. “I am not wearing white.”

Gloria's eyes flashed with both amusement and disapproval. "I never said anything about white, Sherrian. But it is your wedding, and we must maintain some decorum," she said, her tone softening slightly. "Perhaps an ivory or a pastel shade, but definitely something elegant."

Sherrian drew a deep breath, unsure whether to be relieved or exasperated. Leo squeezed her hand gently, grounding her once again. "We'll consider it, Aunt Gloria," she managed to say, her voice steadier than she felt.

"Another thing. Your fiancé is quite adept at business." She turned her gaze towards Leo, an incisive look on her face. "I admire your business acumen. You have managed to make something of yourself, by accomplishing the American Dream."

She turned to her niece. "You will be getting a substantial part of my resources. I met with my lawyer just a day ago and my banker as well as my thieving accountant and I was told that it amounts to more than eight million dollars.

"This house..." She looked around the dingy and depressing room with a snort. "If one can call it that of course, it will be sold. It belonged to my third husband's family and there was a codicil that prevented me from selling before now. I am going to find myself a small cottage somewhere near here and live out the rest of my days peacefully."

She pierced her niece with her eyes. "I have heard the grandiose plans you have for the little shop and while I approve and admire ambition, I worked too hard to see my money thrown to the winds. Your husband will have control of most of it and will make certain that you are not pissing your inheritance away."

"Aunt Gloria!"

"Ms. Watson..."

“Quiet, both of you.” She ordered imperiously. “I might be a doddering woman going into her seventies, but I am not a fool. I would like to see this marriage flourish. I expect the two of you to be living in the same home. I will quickly visit when I get back to see how settled you are.”

She stared at her niece. “I know how broken you were over what that bastard did to you, and I realized that afterwards you stopped dating. This is a second chance, and I want you to take it. You get my money, but you also get my input. Now!”

She clapped her hands. “Next Saturday, at ten in the morning. Time for you to go on your honeymoon after.”

He allowed her the silence as they made the journey back to her place and knew she was fuming.

“I’m sorry,” she finally muttered. He glanced over briefly as he made the turn and saw that she was looking out the window. She looked so miserable and defeated, he wanted to stop the vehicle and take her into his arms. Inside he was gleeful. The old woman had unwittingly given him a gift. It was just up to him to do the rest.

“For?” He asked mildly. Night was descending and he was surprised to realize they had been at her aunt’s place for more than two hours.

“Involving you in all of it. This was supposed to be simple. We go off to Vegas to find some dingy and completely disreputable chapel and pretend to get married.”

“You should have realized that as her only living relative, your aunt would want to see you tying the knot.”

He stopped the car just inches away from her porch steps. The place was lovely, if a little neglected, and he had in the past, often wondered why she chose to live away from her aunt. Meeting the woman, he could understand why.

“She’s an interfering old bat.” Fury came just then, and he watched fascinated as she fisted her hands into her hair and tugged. “Planning the wedding and placing you in charge of the money.

Hard earned, my ass. All she did was marry three men with the resources and managed to outlive all of them, well, except Uncle Tony and he paid through his damn nose.” She turned to face him, dark eyes flashing. “I refuse to be handled.”

He gave her a mild look. “And I am not in the habit of handling women.”

She had the grace to look ashamed. “God! I am behaving like a world class bitch, when you are the one going out of your way in doing me this favor.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:51 am

“No comments there!” He smiled slightly at her flashing eyes.

She felt the anger and frustration draining away. She had brought him in, and it was not fair to take her anger out on him. “The honeymoon...”

“I was thinking Italy and Paris,” he interjected smoothly. “We could make it a working one. I have business interests in both places, and you could explore the various cafes and restaurant and get some ideas about their cuisine. Your aunt expects a honeymoon, so we do not want to disappoint her.”

She stared at him with a frown. “Why are you being so accommodating? If word gets out and it probably will, this will not bode well for you. As my aunt said, you are a man of immense means, and this could ruin your reputation.”

He smiled at that and turned to face her. If he told her now that he had fallen for her all those years ago, she would take off running. It was not time. He could wait or at least, hope he could. “I told you why I am doing this. I am sick and tired of women chasing me for what I can give them. With this, I get to be off the market, so to speak.”

She eyed him for another few minutes before shrugging. “Just promise me that if this gets too weird, you will let me know.”

“Done.”

She brooded for another minute as he watched her. “How many rooms in your townhouse?”

“Four suites in total.”

“Suites?”

“Yes.”

“Okay.” She blew out her breath. “We won’t get in each other’s way.”

They stepped out of the car and walked up the porch steps in silence. He could feel her hesitation, the weight of the situation pressing down on them both. As they reached the door, she paused and turned to him, her eyes searching his face for any sign of doubt or reluctance.

"Thank you," she said softly, her voice barely above a whisper. "For everything."

He nodded, offering her a reassuring smile. "We're in this together. We will make it work."

She unlocked the door, and they entered the dimly lit hallway. The house felt empty, a stark contrast to the whirlwind of emotions swirling around them. She led him to the living room, where they sat down on the worn-out sofa, the silence between them heavy with unspoken words.

"I never imagined it would come to this," she admitted, her voice trembling slightly. "Pretending to be married, planning a honeymoon... It is all so surreal."

He reached out and took her hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. "We're doing what we have to do. For your aunt, and for you. We will get through this."

She looked at him, her eyes filled with gratitude and something else - something deeper, more vulnerable. "I don't know what I would do without you," she confessed,

her voice breaking.

He felt a surge of protectiveness and affection for her, wanting nothing more than to ease her burden and make her smile again. "You don't have to worry about that," he said softly. "I'm not going anywhere."

For a moment, they sat there in the quiet, their hands clasped together, drawing strength from each other's presence. The future was uncertain, filled with potential pitfalls and challenges, but in that moment, they both knew they could face it together.

She took a deep breath and leaned back against the sofa, her tension slowly easing. "So, Italy and Paris, huh?" She said with a small smile. "I guess it could be worse."

He chuckled, relieved to see her mood lightening. "It could definitely be worse. And who knows? Maybe we will even enjoy ourselves."

She laughed softly, the sound like music to his ears. "Maybe we will."

During the drive home, Leo felt himself reflecting on the evening. He had left her place with the assurance that she would contact him.

As Leo drove through the quiet streets, he could not help but replay their conversation in his mind. The gravity of their situation was undeniable, but there was also a newfound sense of resolve between them. It was as if, amidst the uncertainties, they had found something solid to hold onto - each other.

He pulled into his driveway and turned off the engine, sitting in the car for a moment, allowing the evening's events to sink in. His thoughts drifted to the upcoming trip. Italy and Paris were more than just destinations; they were a chance to escape, to create memories that might help them navigate the complexities awaiting them back

home.

Leo stepped out of the car and entered his house, the familiar surroundings providing a semblance of comfort. He headed to the kitchen, poured himself a glass of water, and leaned against the counter. The quiet of the night enveloped him, contrasting sharply with the whirlwind of thoughts in his head.

His phone buzzed on the counter, breaking the silence. He picked it up and saw her name on the screen. A small smile tugged at his lips as he read her message: "Thank you for tonight. I feel like I can breathe a little easier now. See you tomorrow?"

Leo typed a quick response, his fingers moving with newfound ease. "Always here for you. Sleep well, and yes, see you tomorrow."

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:51 am

He set the phone down and made his way to the living room, sinking into his favorite armchair. The weight of the day slowly lifted, replaced by a quiet determination. They had a plan, uncertain as it might be, and they had each other. That, he knew, was more than enough to face whatever lay ahead.

As he closed his eyes, thoughts of Italy and Paris filled his mind, painting a picture of hope and possibility. Maybe, just maybe, this journey would be the start of something beautiful.

“You didn’t have to come over.” The exasperation was evident in her voice as she opened the door to admit him. She was not in the mood for Michael’s theatrics tonight.

“Of course, I did.” He swept in, bringing the frigid air with him and with his usual flourish shrugged out of his coat and hung it on the tree in the entryway. “I brought wine.”

“What the hell for?” She grumbled as she stomped into the living room where she had turned on the heat.

“To celebrate.” He eyed her as he placed the bottle on the center table. “There I was, languishing in my room and brooding about another date gone completely wrong, when you called.” His eyes brightened.

“You made my night. Now I need deets. On the way over, I looked up the gorgeous

Leo Coleman.” He draped himself over the arm of a comfortable sofa. “Man of the hour – or rather man of the year.

Self-made multi-billionaire who takes over smaller companies without prejudice of course and turn them into money making machines. He has been photographed with sheiks, royalties, and politicians, I would say he is not discriminatory there.

And he has been with some unbelievably beautiful women. Actresses for the most part. He has an interest, or his company has interests in some very rewarding and highly grossed films, hence the leaning towards actresses.”

He eyed her closely. “I recalled you saying that you met him or rather bumped into him outside your place of business, and he came in soon after and offered you some considerable business. My question is this and it has been bugging the living daylights out of me – why is he agreeing to this remarkable charade?”

His monologue had unwittingly sent her into deep despair.

“He wants off the marriage market.”

“Oh?” Michael simply stared at her with raised brows.

“Oh, do not look at me like that. I am as stumped as you are. We are both benefitting from all of it.”

“I get that you will be reaping the rewards, it just seems to me that the gorgeous money man is getting the short end of the stick.” He grinned at her glare.

“No reflection on you darling, but his willingness to do this, leaves me feeling ..., let us use the word, curious, shall we? The man can get any woman or man he wants, including me...,” he sighed dramatically.

“Pity he is a heterosexual male. All the good ones are taken. And you told me your aunt wants a semblance of a real wedding. A wedding at her drafty place, which – my God, that is a setting more for a funeral than a wedding. The Garden Home would have been more appropriate, all that wonderful space and beautiful flowers.”

“It’s not a real ceremony, remember?”

Michael grunted. “Isn’t it?”

“No!” She fisted her hands in her hair and tugged.

“Darling, you are going to pull all those gorgeous tresses out by the root and give yourself a migraine. The only thing that is not going to be real about it is the fact that I am not an ordained minister. Did she believe you?”

“After some convincing, yes.”

“And you are going on this ‘honeymoon’? Paris and Italy. Two of the most romantic cities in the world. I know your man has businesses in those places and everywhere else...”

“He’s not my man.”

He simply harrumphed. “And you are moving in with him. I have seen his townhouse in ‘Gorgeous living, and it makes my humble abode, looks – well, humble. Antique furnishings, lots of open spaces, lovely, treated wood floor, a kitchen that will send you into orgasmic heaven and pricey artworks.

He has an indoor pool and a kick you in the crotch gym.” He smiled at her lifted brows. “I always read up on gorgeous richmen in case they happen to sway my way. Unfortunately for me, he does not. The honeymoon...”

“Stop calling it that.” She snapped. “He suggested it because Aunt Gloria mentioned it. And he mentioned that I might be interested in scoping out some restaurants and cafes. He is calling it a business trip.”

“I see.” Michael pursed his lips and kept his thoughts to himself, realizing that she would not want to hear them. “So, the wedding dress.”

Sherrian rolled her eyes. “I told Aunt Gloria that I would not be wearing white.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:51 am

“White is so – yesterday.” He gave her a critical once-over with experienced eyes. “A stunning morning dress of lime green or pale peach. Snug, showing off those curves you like to hide. Your hair should be loose. I have just the man for it and the makeup of course....,” he shook his head as she opened her mouth.

“In order for it to look real, you have to act the part and dress for it. I will be responsible for the dress because you have no fashion sense, and it will be my gift to you!” He shook his head again. “I will not be taking ‘no’ for an answer.

Consider it my part in helping you out.” He gave her a sympathetic look. “Consider what you will be getting at the end of it. Your own shop to do with as you please. Your ideas have merit, and you demonstrated it so clearly that I can see it in my mind’s eye. It is going to look gorgeous when it’s finished.”

She got up and started pacing. “But the sacrifice, what the hell am I doing?”

He started to say something but thought better of it.

“He did not have to do it.”

She whirled to face him. “And that what is so troubling to me. He is doing all of this for me, and it feels like I am doing nothing in return. I hate being in someone’s debt.”

“Don’t I know it.” He muttered and rose. “Let’s get a lot of wine in us, shall we? I want to discuss the bouquet...”

“It’s not a real wedding!” She called after him and only got a wave of hand as he left

the room.

Chapter 4

As fate would have it, the day of the wedding turned out to be lovely. It was as if the wintry weather had taken a day off. The sun was shining – a beautiful golden globe in a spotless cerulean, blue sky.

She had been nervous since the decision and had not managed a full night's sleep since. Her things had been moved over to the elegant townhouse that was every bit as luxurious as Michael had mentioned. She had taken just her clothing, what there was of it.

She stood in the small closet and realized that her taste was woefully inadequate, and she was going to have to stock up on some clothing. It occurred to her that it could not be helped. It was going to come out that they were together.

Not the details of it, but they were going to have to attend functions together. It did not matter anyway, because her aunt had insisted on being involved. She wanted to make sure that the wedding was real. So, they could not very well lock themselves inside his townhouse and stay there.

Which meant she was going to have to shell out money and buy clothes she did not need. Michael had pointed it out to her and reminded her that as Leo's wife, albeit his fake one, she would be required to attend functions with him.

“Why?” She had almost stamped her foot at that.

“Because, darling, you would not expect the man to have another woman on his arm, do you?” He had asked patiently, making her feel like an idiot.

The dress he had chosen was a delicate lime green with a simple but subtle style and suited her perfectly. It was the softest cashmere, and she grudgingly admitted that it felt great against her skin. She had been forced to invite Ingrid and her husband Ben and felt a frisson of guilt, when she lied to the woman.

The wonderful woman who has been there for her for years - Ingrid had given her a puzzled look, one bordering on suspicion.

“I know he was giving us his business and you told me you were friends, but I had no idea you two had gotten close to the point of getting married and this quickly too.”

“Aunt Gloria wants the ceremony over and done with before she goes on her cruise.”

“And she will be signing over her resources to you. My dear, the offer to accept payments in increments still stands. You do not have to enter into something you are not ready for. I know how broken you were over what that – that man did to you.”

“I just decided that it’s time I moved on, and Leo is a very nice guy.”

“You’re not in love with him.”

She had lifted her hands helplessly. “We respect each other, and we are friends. That has to be it for now.”

Now, standing in front of the mirror in the room she had occupied when she was living with her aunt, she studied herself critically. Michael had gone to the trouble of paying for the services of a professional and he had done an exceptionally decent job.

She had warned him that she would be watching for any indication that he was enjoying his craft too much and going overboard.

“I would rather not look like a fricking doll or a clown if it is all the same to you. I do not usually wear makeup, and this is not something I indulge in. So, make it look like me as much as possible.”

The man had tsked and told her that with her skin tone, she did not need much help. “A lot of models and actresses would kill for such a flawless complexion. What do you use?”

“Soap and water.”

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:51 am

The man had stared at her in amazement. And she was satisfied. Her face glowed and he added something to make her eyes appear larger. Her brows were tapered and arched, giving her a kind of seductive look.

Her lips were coated in shimmering bronze and her hair shimmered with even the slightest movement from her. He had added subtle highlights, and she grudgingly realized she liked it that way.

Stepping back from the mirror, she turned in time to see her aunt coming into the room.

Something old, something borrowed and something blue.” She declared briskly as she came further in and stopped to stare at her niece critically.

“Oh, my dear.” One hand flew to her throat and her dark eyes filled with surprising tears.

Sherrian had never seen the woman display very much emotion over the years that she had lived with her and the fact that she was doing so now, sent her guilt up several notches.

“Please forgive me.” She walked over to pin the lovely sapphire brooch above her left breast. “I stood in this very room with your mother when she was getting ready to marry my brother.” Her eyes were damp. “They got married at this quaint little chapel a few miles from here and she spent the night, along with her attendants.

She was so happy and so beautiful.” Gloria patted her cheeks and blinked the tears

away. “She would have been so proud of you. You make an unbelievably beautiful bride and look so much like her.”

“I miss her. Miss both of them.” Sherrian murmured huskily, touching the brooch. “Thanks for this.”

“Of course. I just want to see you happy. Now.” She clapped her hands briskly. “Let us get this started. People are starting to arrive, and I do believe your fiancé’s mother is already here.”

“Is she?”

The nerves were threatening again. She had spoken to Celeste Coleman several times over the phone and the woman had sounded pleasant enough, if a little concerned that her son was rushing into marriage.

“My dear, it’s no reflection on you of course, but he’s my only child and my fervent hope is for him to be happy.”

Leo had taken the phone from her and reassured his mother that this was what he wanted.

Taking a deep breath, she left the room with her aunt.

He appreciated the fact that Gloria had gone to a lot of trouble. The setting was romantic. The woman’s house might bedrafty and slightly decrepit, but the garden was lovely and well maintained. A variety of flowers were bursting with color along the cobbled path.

The ceremony was being held outdoors with the graceful, latticed arbor a black and white backdrop with a thin trickle of water just a few feet away. Chairs had been placed on the grass for the few guests and the strain of classical music was coming from a live band set up a few feet to the left side

His mother, looking lovely in her chic lilac wool, sent him a slight smile, a look of uncertainty on her brow. Celeste Coleman had lost her husband ten years ago and never got over it. Leo admired the devotion between the two and vowed that he would not settle for anything less than that.

“Are you sure about this?” She had arrived just yesterday and insisted on staying at one of the company’s apartment.

“I am. You do not have to worry about me.”

“It is my job and you’re not too old for me to be concerned. She is not your usual type.”

“That should be of some comfort to you,” he teased.

“She is..., unusual.”

“Isn’t she?”

Celeste had chosen to migrate to the UK to live close to her sister who was not doing very well. As soon as he started making money, he had ensured that she was comfortably off and set her up in a lovely home in Birmingham.

Thoughts of his mother flew out of his head the minute he saw her coming towards him.

His breath caught in his throat as he stared at the vision coming towards him.

“Beautiful, isn’t she?” He had been so intent on looking at her that he had forgotten all about Michael.

“Yes, she is.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:51 am

“Your secret is safe with me, but for the life of me, I cannot fathom why Sherrian has not figured it out.”

Tearing his gaze from the woman approaching them, he pinned Michael with a look.

“And what is that?”

“You’re in love with her.” He murmured low enough, so that just the two of them could hear. “That’s why you agreed to do this.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Michael harrumphed. “I happen to be in your corner.”

Before Leo could respond, Sherrian was in front of them. Flashing her a charming smile, he took her hand and turned both of them to face Michael.

The entire thing felt eerily like the real thing, and she found herself reflecting back on the plans she had made with Greg and how excited she had been. He had wanted something lavish, and she had reluctantly agreed.

This was more her style, and she felt fleetingly that she was being cheated out of a wedding day again, because this was not real. Mentally shrugging the depressing thought away, she repeated the vows and within minutes, the ceremony was concluded.

She made the rounds and acknowledged the congratulations from the various guests,

some of whom she was only just meeting for the first time.

Leo told her he had to invite several members of his management team who were also friends and as she had suspected, she had been asked to sign a prenup, an incredibly detailed one drawn up by the lawyers.

She did not want anything from him. He had bought her an exquisite square cut diamond, which she planned on wearing on a necklace around her neck whenever she was at the pastry shop. She had also bought him a ring, a simple gold band with several diamonds etched into the design. And had balked at the price.

But it was too late now. They had to make it look as real as possible to satisfy her aunt.

The more it continued, the deeper she felt like she was being dragged in. Leo did not seem to mind, and she wondered why that was.

Something she was not willing to think about just now. They cut the cake, a delicious combination of caramel and chocolate delight that had been made by Ingrid as a gift to her and danced their first dance together as a couple.

“You’re not hungry?” Leo was playing the attentive groom to the hilt.

“Not really. My stomach is tied up in knots,” she admitted, “and these shoes are killing me.”

His glance swept down to the stilettos that were a match to the dress.

“Why don’t you take them off?” He suggested.

“Good idea, but I only have the tennis shoes I wore to my aunt’s house last night.”

“Which I believe are comfortable. Sit and I will go and get them.”

“Leo, you don’t have to,” she protested. He was behaving like a husband, and she did not know what to do about that.

“I know I don’t have to.” He glanced at his watch and noted the time. “The plane leaves in the next hour.”

“Oh.” She sat then and felt her heart plummeting. “I thought we were leaving tomorrow.”

He sat next to her, eyes searching her face. All around them, the guests were eddying and enjoying the meal that had been provided.

“What’s the matter?”

“Nothing.” She bit her lip. “It seems too real.”

“I thought that was the plan.”

“Your mother is going to hate me.”

“Why?”

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:51 am

“When she finds out that...,” she clasped her hands on her lap and heaved out a breath. “When she finds out that this is not real.”

“Will you be telling her?”

“No! Of course not. It is just...,” she looked around the setting and saw Michael chatting with one of the managers at Coleman’s Enterprise and fleetingly wondered if the man was gay. She had been introduced to all of them, including Leo’s assistant, a sharp looking woman with a thin face and piercing blue eyes.

“You’re right of course.” He had pecked her lightly on the lips when Michael declared he should kiss the bride. The shimmer of awareness had frightened her for a minute, but he had ended the kiss before she could make anything of it.

“I am being silly. I think I will have something to eat after all.”

With a nod and another glance at her, he went to get her a plate.

Michael came over to sit with her right after Leo had brought her the shoes and left.

“He is a keeper.”

“Cut it out.” Sherrian dug into the delicious serving of finger foods and forced herself to eat. Her stomach was still tied in knots, but she did not want to give any of the guests anything to talk about.

“I am just saying!” Michael eyed her curiously. “You look like you are at a wake.

Smile darling.”

“How is this?” She stretched her lips and had him grimacing.

“On second thoughts, don’t smile at all.” Plucking a fat grape from her plate, he munched.

“I see you’ve made a friend.”

He looked over to where Leo was conversing with the man he just finished talking to. “Mark Bainbridge. It so happens we have a mutual friend. I had no idea he was senior manager of operations at your husband’s company.”

“He’s not my husband,” she muttered.

“This entire thing looks real, and I have to say, your aunt outdid herself. It was a good call to have the ceremony outdoors and the weather cooperated. It is a dream wedding.”

“Will you stop saying that?” She hissed, feeling her appetite diminishing. “I am sorry Michael. I thought I had more time before the ‘honeymoon’, but Leo wants to leave today.”

“I see. Why wait though?”

“I need more time. I am panicking. We have not spent any time alone together since we decided to go ahead with this thing. But we are going away for a week and will be staying in the same place.”

“A hotel?”

She shook her head and handed him the plate. “He has a pied a terre in Paris which is our first stop.”

“Of course he does,” Michael nibbled on a delicate pastry that simply melted in his mouth, “he is going through an awful lot of trouble for you.”

“And it’s making me very uncomfortable.” She glanced over at where he was standing. He had the casual kind of grace that made him stand out among the other men.

His dark blue suit was impeccable, and his sable brown hair was well cut and catching the light of the afternoon sun. As if he sensed her stare, he looked up and sent her an easy smile before turning back to the group.

Michael saw the look and wondered not for the first time why she could not see what was so damn obvious.

“You’ll be fine!” He patted her hand reassuringly.

Noticing the fact that she was uncomfortable and trying valiantly to hide it, Leo put her at her ease by making sure he sat at one end of the limousine that had arrived at her aunt’s place to take them to the private airfield.

The driver retrieved their bags, which had been packed by his housekeeper and boarded the plane, handing them to the chic looking flight attendant in her spiffy navy and white uniform.

“Welcome aboard, Mr. Coleman, Mrs. Coleman.” She beamed, causing Sherrian to wonder if her blonde perfection was real.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:51 am

“Thanks. Will you tell Jonathan we will be taking off as soon as we are buckled in?”

“Of course, sir.”

Sherrian forgot her nerves and tried not to goggle as they made their way into the main cabin. “Is this a plane or a five-star hotel?” She breathed, making a wide circle to take in everything.

“I like to be comfortable, whenever I am traveling.” He gestured to the wide comfortable seats, and she sat. Stretching her feet out, she leaned back and closed her eyes in delight.

“It’s as soft as butter.”

“The cabin is to the rear; in case you want to take a nap or feel the need to freshen up.”

“Or I could curl up on the sofa and nod off.”

“If you wish.” He watched in amusement as she turned her head around to stare.

“We have plenty of time for a tour as soon as we take off.”

“I’ll think about it.”

The takeoff was smooth and very soon the seatbelt light went off. As soon as it did, the flight attendant glided in with a tray.

“Just place it on the table, please.”

“Yes, sir.”

Sherrian noticed the hopeful look she gave him and waited until the woman had left before asking the question.

“Is she more than an attendant?”

He looked up from the papers he was taking out of his briefcase and frowned incomprehensively for a moment before his brows cleared. “I don’t make it a habit of sleeping with my employees.”

She lifted her brows at his cool tones and wondered if he was offended.

“I only asked because of the way she was looking at you. Like she was hoping I would suddenly take a header off the plane.”

“I am sure you are mistaken. You did not eat very much at the reception, you should try and do so now.” He rose, with the briefcase and papers in hand. “I will take this into the office, so I won’t disturb you.” Without waiting for her to respond, he walked to the rear of the plane and disappeared into a room.

“Well.” Huffing out a breath, she pulled the tray towards her and lifted the cover. The enticing scent of roast beef hit her nostrils and reminded her that she was starving.

She had been eating for a few minutes when she realized he was not coming back. Not sure what she should do, she sipped the excellent champagne and put the glass away.

Pushing off the sofa, she made her towards the rear and stood there just outside the

door where she had seen him enter. Taking a deep breath, she knocked twice and pushed it open when he told her to come in.

He was seated behind a large desk and leaning back in the chair and wearing glasses.

He noticed her staring at the glasses and offered an explanation.

“Eye strain.”

“Oh.” She shoved her hands into the pockets of her dark blue dress pants and rocked back on her heels. “This is very nice. I take it that the blue and gold décor are the company’s colors?”

“They are, yes. Have you finished the meal?”

She nodded. “You were not hungry?”

“I ate my fill at your aunt’s.”

“I offended you with that question earlier.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:51 am

“The one where you wanted to know if I was sleeping with my flight attendant?”

“That one, yes,” She leaned against the doorjamb and looked so endearing, he was having a challenging time hiding his yearning. It was one of the reasons he had left her to come into the office. But his mind was not on work.

“I should not have taken it so personally.” He shrugged. “I don’t sleep with my employees.” He repeated. “It is a recipe for disaster and a lawsuit waiting to happen. Not to mention that if the love affair comes to an end, the strain and discomfort is not worth it.”

“You are right. I once had a college kid working the summer with us and he propositioned me.”

His thick brows lifted. “How old was this kid?”

“Nineteen.” She grinned at him and made him smile. “It happened just last year and as you know I am all of thirty.”

“What did you say to him?”

“I told him that I was flattered as hell, but he’s too young and Ingrid frowns on relationships between employees.”

“Aren’t you an employer?”

She nodded, her smile widening. “He mentioned that to me, and I told him that it was

even worse if the employer got involved with an employee.”

“And? Did he back off?”

“Nope.” She strolled further into the office and wandered around, touching the small bookcase, before going over to the refreshment table. “He followed me around like a lost puppy and we had to let him go.” She touched the coffee pot, realizing that it was hot. “Want some?”

“Thanks.” He swiveled the chair so that he could delight himself by watching her. She was a bundle of energy and life. She had changed into the blue dress pants and paired them with a cream-colored sweater. He had reminded her that they were going to Europe where the weather was decidedly colder than the States.

She brought the coffee over and placed it in front of him. her hair was still loose and flowed around her face and shoulders with her movements. Taking her cup with her, she went to sit on the wide chair in front of the desk.

Chapter 5

“Am I disturbing you?” She nodded to the pile of documents on his desk.

“You’re not, no!”

She sipped the excellent coffee and savored the taste and kick of it for a moment.

“How did you get started?”

He lifted a brow. “At what?”

“Business.”

Leaning back in the chair, he picked up his cup and took a sip, his expression thoughtful. “I do believe they have an entire section in Business Forum written about my meteoric rise to fame and fortune.” His derisive tone had her laughing.

“I prefer to hear it from you,” her dark brown eyes were twinkling, and he felt himself relaxing in her company.

“Very well.” He put the cup down and steeped his fingers. “It all started with a small loan from my father. I used that to buy my first piece of real estate - a rundown building in the heart of the city. Everyone thought I was mad, but I saw potential. After months of hard work and renovations, I sold it for more than double the purchase price.”

She leaned forward, fascinated. “And you just kept going from there?”

He nodded. “Exactly. Each success gave me the capital and the confidence to tackle bigger projects. But it was not all smooth sailing. There were plenty of setbacks and challenges along the way.”

“Like what?” She asked, genuinely curious.

He smiled wryly. “Oh, the usual - market crashes, bad investments, partnerships that went sour. But each failure taught me something valuable and made me more resilient.”

She tilted her head, considering his words. “So, you believe in learning from mistakes?”

“Absolutely. In fact, I would say that has been one of the keys to my success. That, and surrounding myself with people who are smarter than I am.”

She laughed. “You don’t strike me as the type to admit that readily.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:51 am

He chuckled. “Well, it is the truth. No one achieves greatness alone. It is about building a team of talented individuals who share your vision and complement your strengths.”

She sipped her coffee, feeling inspired. “That’s a very humble perspective.”

He shrugged. “I have been humbled plenty of times in this business. It keeps you grounded. What about you? What turned you onto pastries?”

She grinned. “I have an impossibly sweet tooth.”

His eyebrows lifted. “I am sure it’s much more than that.”

“It is.” She nodded. To his surprise, she toed off her boots and curled her feet under her. Her expression was intent and serious and reminded him of a scholar about to launch into her dissertation. “My mom loved to cook, and I became fascinated. One day I tried to bake a simple sponge cake and almost burned the place down.”

He stared at her in genuine amusement. “How old were you?”

“Seven.” She laughed at his expression. “I was that determined.”

“What happened?”

“Fortunately, it was a Saturday, and my parents were outside in the yard. They saw the smoke and came running. I was more concerned that I had ruined the sponge cake than almost burning the place down.”

“And?”

“And my mom decided to give me a crash course in baking safely.”

“And that started your meteoric journey to baking success.”

She laughed at that and settled back against the cushions.

“Something like that.” She eyed him for a minute. “I saw you going into the house with my aunt.”

He nodded. “She handed over the finances to me – the running of it. The lawyers tied up some loose ends and I have messengered the documents to my lawyers to take a look. I want to make sure you are covered all the way.”

“I don’t know if I should be thanking you or resenting you.”

His thick brows lifted. “Why would you resent me?”

“I know it’s unfair, but it looks like I am exchanging one warden for another.”

“Warden?” Irritation and amusement showed on his face.

“It might be the absolute wrong word, but I cannot think of another.”

“Try.”

She gave an irritated shrug. “I thought that after coming up with this convoluted plan where we are both put out, I would be home free. I make these jottings, things I want to do as soon as possible – expansions, employing more people, so that I am freed up to do what I love to do and that is baking.

Now I will have to run things by you and wait for your approval.” She gestured with her cup. “What if you think I am expanding too quickly, that my ideas are nonsensical.”

He set his cup down and leaned forward, his gaze steady. “I understand your concerns, truly. But I want you to remember that I am here to support you, not to restrain you. My goal is to see you succeed, and sometimes that means letting you take risks. I am not here to micromanage your every move.”

She took a deep breath, mulling over his words. “So, you’re saying you’ll trust me to make the right decisions?”

He nodded. “Exactly. I will offer guidance and advice when needed, but ultimately, I trust your instincts. You have built something amazing, and I believe in your vision.”

Her eyes softened with gratitude. “Thank you. That means a lot to me.”

“No problem...” He stopped when his phone pinged. Turning it over, he studied the screen. “I have to take this. It is a call I’ve been expecting from an associate in Paris.”

“Go ahead. I will just finish my coffee.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:51 am

Pushing back from the desk, he answered the phone in French! And it was fluent. The man constantly amazed her, she mused as she continued to sip her coffee and listen to his deep voice fading away as he left the room.

His absence gave her a chance to look around. Without leaving her comfortable position, she turned her head to take in the deep cushioned sofas, the glossy desk and leather chair, with the steel cabinets to the right. She had a peek at the cabin and was amazed to see that the bed was a king-sized one.

Leo Coleman certainly lived and traveled in style.

“I apologize for that. It took longer than...” His voice petered off as he stepped into the room.

Emotions stormed inside him with a force that shook him to the very core. She was curled up fast asleep, one hand hanging over the sleep chair.

Stepping quietly into the room, he stood there, staring at her.

She looked so peaceful, a stark contrast to the whirlwind of emotions he'd just experienced. He approached her slowly, careful not to wake her, and gently draped a cashmere blanket over her shoulders. He stood there for another moment, watching the rise and fall of her breath, feeling a strange sense of contentment settle over him.

Stepping back, he moved to his desk and began to sort through the papers scattered across its surface. Despite the luxury surrounding him, it was moments like these - quiet, intimate, and real - that he cherished most.

After a while, he settled into his leather chair, his mind wandering to the conversation they had just had. He knew she had the potential to achieve remarkable things, and he was determined to support her every step of the way.

He glanced over at her again, a soft smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. She stirred slightly, the blanket slipping off her shoulder, and he resisted the urge to tuck her in once more. Instead, he leaned back, allowing himself a rare moment of relaxation.

He could not concentrate on work anyway and he wanted to get her in bed where she would be more comfortable.

Carefully, he eased her into his arms, cradling her gently so as not to wake her. He marveled at how light she felt, despite the weight of the day's events that surely rested on her shoulders. Crossing the room in a few quiet strides, he laid her down on the king-sized bed, arranging the blanket over her once more.

She murmured something unintelligible, her brow furrowing slightly before smoothing out again. He watched her for a moment longer, ensuring she was comfortable before turning to leave the room. As he reached the doorway, he stopped and glanced back, feeling a pull at his heart.

In the dim light, she looked almost ethereal, her peaceful expression a balm to his stormy thoughts. He knew that whatever lay ahead, he was bound to her in ways he had not fully understood until now. A sense of purpose filled him, solidifying his resolve to be by her side through it all.

Returning to his desk, he made a silent vow to protect her, to support her ambitions, and to cherish these quiet moments together. He might have the world at his fingertips, but he realized now that she was his world, and he would do everything in his power to ensure her happiness and success.

With a final, lingering look at her sleeping form, he settled back into his chair and tried once again to get some work done.

“I slept for hours.”

He looked up from the email he was responding to, an amused smile touching his lips.

“You did, yes.”

She was rubbing her eyes and yawning. She was bare footed and looked like a recalcitrant child.

“And we are due to land in an hour. I was just coming to wake you.”

“Did you sleep?” She asked him curiously. He looked rested and fresh as if he had taken a shower. He was certainly wearing a different outfit from the one he had on earlier. What the hell time was it anyway?

“I took a nap, in the chair.”

“You put me to bed.”

He nodded. “I wanted to make sure you were comfortable.”

“Thanks.” She rubbed her eyes again. “Is that coffee I smell?”

“Want a cup?”

“I’ll pour it.”

“Breakfast is ready.”

“What time is it?”

“After midnight.”

She blinked at him. “And we’re having breakfast?”

“Not hungry?”

“I am starving. It must be the change in time and the setting. I am going to take this excellent coffee inside that kick ass bathroom or head or whatever the hell it is called and soak in that huge tub.”

An image of her naked and surrounded by bubbles, kicked him straight in the crotch and had his breath strangled.

Clearing his throat, he returned to his screen and tried to keep his mind off her naked body. “Take your time.”

Waiting until she had left his office, he pushed the laptop away and closed his eyes. He was going to have to find a bloody way to keep his control.

Paris at midnight was stunning as she well knew after spending more than two months taking a Cordon Bleu course and an extensive one in pastry making. But she would never tire of seeing the romantic city shrouded in lights.

It was cold and she was thankful that Leo had prepared for everything. The thick cashmere jacket enveloped her in warmth. A car had picked them up at the private airfield, the driver dressed in black and snapping to attention as soon as they deplaned.

She listened in fascination as Leo snapped out orders in fluent French and within minutes they were on their way.

“You speak French.”

“Yes, I do.”

She eyed him curiously. “What other language do you speak?”

“Italian, Spanish and a smattering of Chinese and Japanese.” His lips quirked at her raised brows. “It helps when you can communicate directly without using an intermediary. Words sometimes get lost in translation.”

“I suppose that makes sense,” she remarked, her eyes still wide with curiosity. “I’m impressed.”

“I’ve always believed in the power of language,” he replied with a modest shrug, “it opens doors that might otherwise remain closed.”

They drove through the quiet streets of Paris, the cityscape unfolding before them like a glittering tapestry. The Eiffel Tower stood tall and majestic in the distance, its lights twinkling like stars against the midnight sky. It was a sight that never failed to take her breath away.

The pied à terre was in the heart of the city, surrounded by towering structures, stores she recognized. Romano’s France was a stone’s throw away and she was

delighted to see several café's tucked away from the street.

As they continued their drive, she could not help but feel a sense of awe at Leo's effortless command of languages. It was one of the many facets of him that intrigued her. Despite his sometimes-alloof demeanor, there was a depth to him that she found endlessly fascinating.

"Leo," she began hesitantly, breaking the comfortable silence that had settled between them, "how did you learn so many languages?"

He glanced at her, a faint smile playing on his lips. "It was a necessity," he said simply. "My business requires me to travel extensively, and I found that learning the local language always made things easier. I also had a tutor when I was younger who instilled in me a love for languages."

"That's incredible," she murmured, her admiration for him growing. "I wish I had the same talent for languages."

"You could learn," he encouraged, "it's never too late to start."

She smiled at his encouragement, feeling a warm glow inside. "Maybe I will," she said softly.

The car came to a stop in front of an elegant building, and the driver quickly exited to open the door for them. Leo stepped out first, then turned to offer her his hand. She took it gratefully, stepping out of the car and onto the cobblestone street.

"This is it," Leo said, gesturing to the building before them. "Our home away from home."

She looked up at the building, its facade illuminated by soft lights. It was beautiful,

and she could not wait to see the inside.

“Come,” Leo said, guiding her towards the entrance. “Let’s get you settled in.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:51 am

The nerves started again as soon as they entered the small foyer. On the plane they had the pilot and flight attendant, but now they were alone with each other.

She felt an acute sense of anxiety and tried to will it away as he led the way along the narrow passageway and up the narrow staircase.

“No housekeeper?” She asked casually as they ascended the stairs.

“Maria will be here in the morning. I made the arrangements while we were on the plane. This is you.” Pushing the bright red door open, he stepped back and allowed her to step inside a beautifully decorated room with pastel curtains at the windows and a colorful quilt on the wrought iron bed.

“Are you going to bed?”

“My internal clock is still on US time. I have a meeting first thing in the morning and have to do some prepping. What do you need?”

She went in and sat on the edge of the bed.

“I intend to do some exploring first thing in the morning.”

“Need an interpreter?”

She rolled her eyes and made him want to snatch her into his arms. “I noticed a few cafes in the general vicinity.”

“There are, yes.” He leaned on the door jamb, his blue-green eyes watching her. He was careful to stay where he was for fear of adding to her anxiety. He had sensed it the minute they stepped inside.

“Which is good. Walking distance.”

“If you need to go anywhere else, the driver will be available to you and when I am done with my business, I could be of service.”

She shook her head. “You’re already doing too much.”

His mouth tightened fractionally. “You don’t hear me complaining.”

“I know. It is just that you are so damn accommodating, and I expect...” Her voice petered off as he straightened.

“Go on. What do you expect?”

“From that ominous look on your face, I am afraid to finish the sentence. Okay, fine. I expect you to ask for something in return.”

He had to tamp down the irritation and anger at her words. “Such as?”

“Oh please, don’t use that lofty tone with me,” she muttered, “it makes me sound like a complete bitch.”

“Your words. I will bid you goodnight.” His expression was formal, his voice icy.

“Leo, please!”

He turned to face her and waited.

“I am used to saying what I think, and this is an uncomfortable position for both of us. You have to agree on that.”

“Do I?”

“Isn’t there someone special here in this beautiful city you want to be with?”

“Why would you ask me that?”

She lifted her shoulders in a shrug. “Just being nosy, I guess. I am sorry.”

“We are both tired and jet lagged. Try and get some sleep. If you need to grab something from the kitchen, the place is stocked. I am going to take a shower and see to some work.

“Goodnight.”

He closed the door before she could say anything else.

She stood there, staring at the closed door, her mind racing with a torrent of conflicting emotions. She knew she had crossed a line, but why did he have to react so coldly?

Her chest tightened as she contemplated knocking on his door and apologizing, but pride held her back. Instead, she walked over to the window, parting the heavy curtains to gaze at the city lights that twinkled like distant stars.

The night air was cool and calming, a stark contrast to the heated exchange that had just transpired. She sighed, feeling the weight of their conversation settle on her shoulders. Perhaps she had misjudged him, misread his motives. But deep down, a nagging doubt remained, whispering that she was right to be cautious.

As she stood lost in thought, the sound of running water from the bathroom ceased. Moments later, she heard the door open and close, followed by the muffled sounds of him moving about. Her heart ached with a confusing mix of anger, regret, and a burgeoning feeling she dared not name.

She knew that sleep would be elusive tonight, her mind too restless to find peace. With a resigned sigh, she decided to explore the kitchen, hoping a cup of tea might soothe her frayed nerves. She walked down the hallway, the soft pads of her feet barely making a sound on the plush carpet.

In the kitchen, she busied herself with the tea, the repetitive motions of boiling water and steeping leaves offering a modicum of comfort. She wrapped her hands around

the warm cup, the steam rising in delicate curls. Taking a tentative sip, she leaned against the counter, her thoughts once again drifting to him.

What did he genuinely want from her? The question lingered, unanswered, as she took another sip of her tea, the night stretching ahead with all its uncertainties.

Okay, so she had managed to make him angry. Good job, Sherrian. The man had been nothing but kind to her and all she had done was to be suspicious of his motives. It did not help that she was starting to notice how attractive he was. His cologne, that subtle scent that was so much a part of him.

It was maddening how a simple scent could evoke such a strong reaction. She found herself remembering the way his eyes lit up when he talked about his passions, his easy smile that seemed to break through her defenses, no matter how fortified.

Her tea now lukewarm, she poured the rest down the sink and washed the cup, taking her time. As she placed the cup back in its place, she decided that come morning, she would try a different approach.

She was going to be casual and friendly and ignore any undercurrents she might be feeling. She was not going to drive herself crazy wondering if he had an ulterior motive.

She had been given the opportunity of a lifetime. A trip to Paris and a chance to gather some much-needed information in order to push her plans forward.

She had made him angry and was sorry for it. But Paris brought back a lot of memories and not good ones, something she could not tell him. This was the honeymoon destination she and Greg had planned on and spoken of it in length.

She had told him of her dream to come back and brush up on her French as well as

steal some ideas for her shop and he had agreed. He had even encouraged her to look for a place where they would have access to restaurants in the area. He had been so enthusiastic about it that she had felt puzzlement when she discovered his betrayal.

All the time she had been planning excitedly about their life, he had been screwing around with her best friend. It still stuck in her craw, but it was unfair for her to take it out on Leo. He did not deserve it.

Chapter 6

Leo sat around the conference table, half listening to the discussion going on. The bid for the Parisian hotel had reached a stalemate, part of the reason he had to make a personal appearance.

He had sent a team over to study the architecture and design and they had come back with a full report. The two brothers who owned the elegant and antique building were at war with each and could not bloody well make up their minds. His company had plans for the place, big ones and those plans need to get under way.

He was looking at undertaking a winter grand opening. The hotel was situated in a prime location and promised to make a quick turnover.

But his mind was not on the heated discussion. When he left the house, she was still sleeping. He had knocked first and then eased the door open to see her curled up on the bed.

The quilt had slid off at some point during the night to reveal her skimpy t-shirt. Her hair was steaming on the pillows, and he stood there with a yearning that was making him angry and frustrated.

He needed her, and yes, it had come to that. What she had said last night in that off-

handed way of hers had wounded him.

He knew that her honeymoon destination with that bastard had been Paris, because Michael had cornered him with that information. “You might want to change the destination.”

“What the hell for?” The man had cornered him just as he was coming out of the guest powder while they were at the reception.

“She didn’t tell you that was where she and that son of a bitch planned to spend their honeymoon?”

“No!” He bit out. “What the hell difference does it make? This is not a real wedding as you well know.”

The man had given him a knowing smirk. “Want to continue telling yourself that? Anyhow, it is bound to bring back some nasty memories.”

“Or she might be over him.”

The man had nodded. “Possibly. I hope for your sake that she has.” It had sound cryptic. He had forgotten about it until she had remarked about him having someone here. He had or did.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:51 am

Sophia would love if he called her up, but he was a one-woman man and no matter how frustrated and hopeless he felt, Sherrian was it for him. Why she could not see what the hell was in front of her was beyond him.

Stirring himself, when a question was thrown at him, he leaned forward and entered into the discussion.

The sensational aroma hit him as soon as he opened the door, and the feeling of warmth and coziness permeated the air.

Leo had been hoping Sherrian would be waiting up for him, a stubborn hope that had not faded despite his long day.

The meeting had dragged on longer than anticipated, with the brothers' bickering turning into a full-blown argument that needed his intervention. He had finally managed to broker a temporary truce, enough to keep negotiations alive and his hopes for the hotel's winter grand opening intact.

He shook off the tension as he stepped into the house, appreciating the welcoming atmosphere. The warmth was a stark contrast to the cold frustration that had clung to him during the meeting.

He hung up his coat and took a deep breath, savoring the delicious scent that filled the air. It was a blend of something sweet and spicy, something that spoke of home and comfort.

He found Sherrian in the kitchen, her back to him as she stirred a pot on the stove. She wore an apron over her t-shirt and jeans, her hair tied up in a messy bun.

The sight of her, so at ease and domestic, sent a pang of longing through him. He wanted to cross the room, to wrap his arms around her and bury his face in her hair. But he held back, unsure of his welcome.

She was so absorbed into the task that she did not realize he had arrived. Taking the opportunity to study her, he leaned against the frame and felt the worry and despair fading away.

He had whiled away the time by having lunch with some associates and taking in a few sights. At one point, he found himself wandering into several boutiques, tempted to pick up a few things for her.

He had stopped at a local Bistro and sat there brooding in his liquor before he decided to come home. To hell with it, if he was going to allow her to make him stay out in the bloody cold when he could be in the warmth and comfort of a place that he owned.

As if sensing his presence, she turned her head towards the doorway. The quick flash of what he wanted to think of as pleasure flashed across her expressive face and her smile was wide and welcoming.

“Hi.”

“Hi.” He remained where he was, blue-green eyes searching her face.

“So, I’m making Coq au Vin.” She turned back to the stove, giving him an enticing view of her taut butt outlined in the faded jeans. “In the spirit of our being in France, I decided to prepare the dish. Your maid, Maria, was getting on my nerves.” She

glanced over her shoulder to see him still leaning against the doorjamb and wondered if he was still mad.

Aside from a terse text message during the day, she had not heard from him. “She was chattering like a damn magpie and mostly in French, which as you know, it’s not half as good as yours.” She paused for breath, and he waited. “I spent the day exploring the various cafes.

My request to go back to the kitchen to watch how a meal was being prepared was not taken kindly.” She turned towards the table tucked into the corner of the room and turned over the plates. “Then I had two gorgeous French men hitting on me.” She flashed him a smile, unaware of the tensing of his shoulders.

“What did you do?”

“About what?” She sent him a vague smile as she bustled back to the stove to remove the pot.

“The flirting?” His face was a mask of irritation and impatience as he watched her flitting from stove to table.

“Oh, I told them I was married, and my husband would not take too kindly to me spending an unforgettable day making love. Their words, not mine.” The fact that she called him her husband, sent emotions washing through his body.

Remaining neutral was no longer possible. Pushing off the doorframe, he came towards her and took the wine. “Let me help.”

They spent the next few minutes putting the meal on the table in silence.

She sat across from him and stole glances as he took his first bite.

“Well?”

He took his time chewing and she had to resist the urge to reach across the table and shake the answer out of him. It annoyed her that she was on tenterhooks waiting for his approval. It also confused her that she had enjoyed cooking for him. When she looked up and saw him standing there, she had felt the acute sense of something akin to longing spearing through her body.

“Oh, come on!”

"Don't keep me in suspense," she urged, her voice tinged with a mix of amusement and exasperation.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:51 am

He swallowed deliberately, his eyes never leaving hers, and placed his fork down with a measured grace. "It's perfect," he finally declared, and a slow smile spread across his lips. The tension that had been coiled within her unwound, replaced by a flourish of relief.

"Are you usually this impatient?"

"When it comes to my cooking, yes." She took a bite and savored the meal, closing her eyes in delight. "I managed to muddle my way through a remarkably interesting time at the market when I stopped to pick up the ingredients. Oh," she pointed her fork at him. "I made dessert."

"I am looking forward to it." He dug into the meal and admitted that she was quite the cook. "You should think of opening a restaurant as well as expanding the pastry shop. You are very good." She looked pleased at his compliment and rewarded him with her dimpled smile.

"I prefer to stick to my strength."

He frowned at her. "Are you saying cooking is not one of them?" He pointed to the almost empty plate. "I have been around the world and have eaten at several excellent restaurants, and this is unequivocally the best Coq au Vin, I ever had."

She stared at him in wordless surprise and seem to be at a loss for words. It took a few minutes for her to gather her composure enough to respond.

"That means a lot coming from you."

“I meant it. This is sensational.” He reiterated gruffly. “But you do not have to cook. We did not come so that you slave over a stove. Let Maria do the cooking, or we could go out to dinner.”

“I wanted to apologize.” She told him softly. “For last night. I offended you again.” She sighed deeply. “I seem to be constantly putting my foot into my mouth. I did not mean anything by that statement. It is just that, this is all weird to me. Here we are in this beautiful and romantic city and there is nothing romantic going on.”

He wanted to ask her if she wanted it to happen and stopped himself just in time. He had a feeling she was not ready yet. As much as he wanted to feel her against him, wake up to her in the mornings, he had to bide his time.

“Apology accepted.” He inclined his head gracefully as he polished off the meal. “And this more than makes up for it.”

“Wait until you taste dessert.” She enthused, happy that they were in harmony again. His face was difficult to read and had her wondering if he really meant it. But she had never known him to lie or be dishonest. “I also made coffee.”

“Why don’t I take the tray into the living area. I noticed that a fire was lit.”

“Maria did that before she left. She really is not a bad person, but she talks nonstop. Like a fucking magpie.”

His chuckle warmed her heart and eased the tension between them.

While they sat at the table and ate the chocolate souffle she had spent hours making, she filled him in on what she had done the rest of the day.

“You bought supplies?” He asked her curiously, as he savored the delicate dessert.

She really was quite good.

“Yes, I did. I know it can be shipped, but there are several new pastries I would like to experiment with.” She waved her spoon, before dipping it into her dessert and scooping up vanilla ice cream along with the chocolate. He could not help but notice her lips and the shape of them. Forcing his gaze away, he took a fortifying sip of his brew.

The week was going to be a trial and test to his endurance, he thought grimly as he listened to her plans.

“I am tired of listening to myself talk. What about you? How was the meeting?”

“Frustrating.” He admitted with a rueful laugh. “At one point, I was tempted to walk out and say to hell with everything. Acquiring that particular hotel was certainly not worth the damn headache.”

She eyed him closely. “Only, you don’t think so.”

He gave her a surprised look at her intuitiveness. “No, I do not. The place is elegant, the structure old and graceful and has withstood a number of hardships. It is like an aged duchess holding onto her grace with both hands.” A smile flitted across his lips, making her even more aware of him as a man, not just someone who had come to her rescue.

“It had been a chateau back in the days and has been around for several hundred years. There has been some considerable restructuring but not enough to take away from its elegance and grace. It is ideally located and with some fair amount of work, would turn out to be a stunning work of art.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“The bloody Barreau brothers are feuding and are having a grim time agreeing to the terms. They are not in the position to hold onto the place but are still causing a lot of distress and time by being as ornery as possible.”

“I have a feeling you’re not going to let that stop you.”

The admiration and faith in his ability gave him pause and had him staring at her for a minute. “Absolutely not.” He murmured. For a minute, they sat there staring at each other, the tension mounting, the air thick with it.

To her surprise, she felt her hands trembling and had to put the cup down. Clearing her throat, she passed her hands over her thighs and avoided his eyes.

“Will you sell it?”

“What?” His throat was so tight, he wondered how the words managed to pass through his esophagus.

“The hotel. Will you sell it after you fix it up?”

He swallowed and took a sip of the coffee before responding. “Usually, that is what we do, but this time, I am thinking we keep it. You should see the place. It is a little broken down at the edges but, it still manages to maintain its dignity.”

“I would like to see it.”

“You would?”

“Yes.” She nodded, a smile curving her lips. “We should make a day of it. Sightseeing, including taking in your building and restaurant hopping.”

He sent her an amused look, completely enchanted by her. “Why do I get the feeling that the latter suggestion was what you were aiming for?”

“That’s because you know me so well.” Her laugh sent heat straight to the core of him. “But seriously, I would love to see the place. The way you described it had piqued my curiosity.”

“All right. I have another damn meeting in the morning. But right after, I will see to it that we meet up somewhere. How does that sound?”

“Great.” She finished the coffee and rose to clear the stuff away. He left his chair at the same time with the intention of helping her. Their hands touched just as she was picking up his cup and for a second, he let it remain.

His eyes left their hands to journey to her face and felt an electric jolt at her expression. She looked like she wanted to run but had no idea how to go about it. They were near enough for him to see the black mole near her left eye, one he had noticed before. Her breath became shaky and his thickened as his gaze drifted to her parted lips.

He was not certain what he would have done if she hadn’t dragged her hand away and stumbled back. Without saying a word, she gathered up the things and headed towards the kitchen.

He stood there and closed his eyes briefly, trying his best to quiet his rioting emotions. He had no idea if he should follow her into the kitchen and apologize. For what? For touching her and letting the touch linger.

He was not going to damn well apologize for that. He was a man, albeit one in excruciating agony of course, but a man, nonetheless. And he was yearning for her. It might be prudent for her to remember that.

She did not come back for the rest and coming to a decision, he took them up and brought them in. He found her at the sink with her hands in the sudsy water.

“I brought the rest,” he told her unnecessarily. He did not know whether to be annoyed or amused when she shifted away as he came up next to her.

“Need help?”

She shook her head and refused to look at him. “I’ll just finish this and head on up to

bed.”

“I was thinking of turning in, too.” He stayed where he was, enjoying the warmth from her body. And maybe staying longer, just to make her uncomfortable. “I had no idea it was quite so late.”

“It is.” She had stopped washing and just stood with her hands in the water.

“Well, goodnight then.” He touched her lightly on the arm and caused her to jump.

“Are you afraid of me?”

She turned to face him then, her eyes huge, face strained.

“No.” She swallowed. “Of course not.”

“I would like to think you knew me well enough to realize that I would never do anything without your clear approval.”

She tilted her head to look at him, exposing her long and graceful throat. One that he wanted to kiss.

“I know.”

“Good.” He said briskly, stepping back from her. “I will see you in the morning.” He turned on his heels and left.

She waited until his footsteps had faded away and let out a breath. To her consternation, she realized that she was shaking. Her knees were literally wobbling, and she could swear she still felt his touch on her arm. Her arm covered by the wool of her sweater.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:51 am

Which was crazy! The entire thing was out of control. Closing her eyes, she inhaled and exhaled. Her thoughts veered to what Michael would make of this.

“There is no way on earth you are going to be that close to a man like that and not want to jump his bones. Unless there is something absolutely wrong with you. Unless that son of a bitch you were engaged to took your feelings along with him when he succumbed to his damn injuries, and I know that is not possible.”

But she was not in the market for a relationship. This was just a charade, one that he had agreed to. She had made her position clear enough. No sex.

She had had enough of getting her heart broken. And besides, Leo Coleman was a fricking multi-billionaire and an extremely attractive one at that. He could have any woman he wanted and probably had.

“Enough!” She whispered harshly. “It’s not going happen and that’s that.”

Upstairs, in the bedroom he had always chosen, Leo was prowling the length of the blue and green room restlessly. A shower had not helped a damn bit. He wanted her. And want was too mild a word for what he was feeling. He had almost kissed her.

If she had not jumped back like a scared rabbit, he would have gone for it. Dragging his fingers through his hair, he realized that his hands were trembling.

How in the hell was he going to get through the next few days? They were going to be in Paris for three whole days and then were heading to Italy. He had a few minor businesses there of course but had planned both trips specifically for her.

And had hoped to extend it for much longer. Perhaps a week and a half or even two weeks.

Was he supposed to dance around her? Avoid touching her? To hell with that. Suddenly, he went from agonizing to furious. He was a man, and she knew that. She surely could not expect him to meekly stand by while she was in the room with her, did she?

And how naïve could she be to think that this was just going to be a neutral agreement. If that was the bloody case, she should have asked her gay friend for the favor. He had blood running through his veins, did he not?

And he had not had sex in several weeks. Granted that was his choice, but still. She was here, was she not? Right here in the room a few feet away.

He had spent last night even though he was battling anger, and pictured her curled up in bed, wearing something slinky or even a plain t-shirt. It did not matter what she used to cover herself with, he could still imagine what she looked like naked. All that soft and flawless caramel skin. Her breasts... He groaned and wheeled around to sit on the sofa.

Clasping his hands between his thighs, he cursed the flesh throbbing against the sweats he had donned after taking a shower.

He was bloody thirty-two and was not lacking in female companion. Right now, he could call one up and she would be happy to accommodate him. Sophia was still waiting to hear from him even though he told her he was married.

“If you change your mind, Cherie, I am here.” She had assured him in that throaty voice of hers.

He could call her and go on over to her flat. Leaning back, he closed his eyes wearily and realized that he just could not.

Chapter 7

They did not mention ‘the moment’. He had an early meeting and when he went downstairs, it was to discover that she was already up.

“I made coffee.”

“You did not have to. I could have grabbed something on the way.”

“It’s no trouble.” She avoided his gaze as she poured the coffee and set it on the counter.

“Where are you off to, today?”

“This delightful café that I passed as I was doing my exploring.” Taking her coffee with her, she sat at the counter and cradled the cup. “I went in for a minute and surprise! The woman, her name is Aimee speaks English – albeit with a heavy accent, but if I lean in - I could actually hear what she is saying.”

He grinned and sent her heart into overdrive. She did not need this, not now. Last night she had tossed and turned in bed, wondering if he slept in the nude and what his chest looked like. And the rest of him.

“I wish you luck.” He finished his coffee. He wanted a refill, but being so near to her, inhaling her scent and looking at her was making him decidedly edgy.

Um, have a good day. I have a feeling you are going to nail that hotel today.”

“Your lips to God’s ear. I will call you when I am leaving.” He hesitated a minute and she held her breath.

“See you later.” He turned at the doorway. “No cooking this evening.”

“Why?”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:51 am

“We are having dinner out. That will give you a chance to explore something different from the cafes.”

She looked down at her outfit of faded denims and a chunky orange sweater. “Should I change? You know how I hate dressing up.”

He grinned at her. “What you are wearing is fine. See you later.”

She sat at the counter and picked up her cup, cursing her trembling hands. For the first time since Greg had crushed her heart and stomped on it, she was feeling something. She had stayed away from all of that, and it had not been that difficult.

She had been approached by members of the opposite sex, including some of whom had been sent her way by Michael. She had gone out several times but had not been interested enough to get into anything serious. Her sex life was non-existent. And that had not bothered her.

Until now. Pushing the cup away, she dragged a hand through the thick strands of hair she had decided to leave loose.

She was attracted to him, that much she could admit to herself. She was acutely aware of him. And oh God! She wanted to sleep with him. Lifting a shaky hand, she rubbed the back of her neck wearily.

Which would complicate things. She was not the type to have casual sex, she wished she was that person. If that were the case, she would have followed her desire and gone straight to his room and just jumped him.

But she could not go to bed with a guy and simply tell him goodbye, it has been nice. And she had a distinct feeling that it would be much more than that with Leo. Michael was right. She had deluded herself into thinking that she could be with him, live with him, be in close proximity and not feel anything except mild feelings.

And they were just barely two days into the week. How the hell was she going to survive the next few days? She could enter into a sexual relationship and see where it went... No! The minute the idea took root; she shook it loose.

Leo was a very wealthy man and an extremely handsome one. She had never been able to keep Greg in her bed and he was not half as dynamic as Leo. She was not sophisticated enough to turn a blind eye on infidelity.

She did not believe in sharing her man.

She was also horribly inexperienced. Aside from Greg, the only other relationship had been with someone in college, and he had broken it off with her, because 'she was not doing it for him'...

It had been painful and a lesson she had taken with her over the years. With Greg, she had been awkward and apologetic, and he had told her he understood.

He had teased and called her his 'virgin fiancée', and she had thought it was cute. But he had been so dissatisfied, he had turned to her best friend to make up for her lack in the bedroom.

A man like Leo was highly experienced and would be disgusted with her lack of experience and would quickly get tired of her.

"I am not doing this." She muttered into her cup. "No matter how tempted and Lord, am I tempted." She finished the coffee and tried to settle her heart.

They made a day of it. She stopped in the little café, owned by Aimee and her husband William who just happened to be an American. She was greeted like a long-lost friend and invited back to the kitchen.

“I met my Aimee when I came here on vacation.” He was a thin looking man with a wide smile and an air of fatherly comfort about him. his light blue eyes sparkled when he talked and he had a habit of slapping his belly when he laughed, which was every five minutes.

“That was twenty years ago and I did not return home.” He nudged a nervous looking chef out of the way and took over. “We serve American and French meals and get a lot of tourists.” He smiled at her. “You are a chef?”

“Pastry.”

He nodded and reached behind him to pluck a covered plate from a glass case. “Patisserie. My Aimee makes the best. Taste, go ahead.”

She did and it just melted in her mouth, the taste of it floating through stomach. “My good Lord.”

He laughed at her amazed expression. “I took one bite of this when I stopped in and fell in love with the pastry and then with my Aimee.” He beamed at his wife who bustled in to pick up several plates and spoke to him in rapid French.

“English, my dove, or go slower. Twenty years and I am still trying to grasp the language.” Aimee shoved at him fondly as he wrapped his hand around her ample waist and stole a kiss.

“We have a crowd,” she gave Sherrian a wink before slipping out.

“I am going to need this recipe and please don’t tell me it’s a secret or I am going to have to kill you.”

His laughter boomed and he slapped a hand to his stomach, eyes twinkling. “You are a fellow American, so yes to the recipe.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:51 am

He picked her up in a spiffy red sports car at noon.

“This yours?” She asked as she slid in, the warmth of the leather enfolding her in comfort.

“No. Strap in.” He waited until she did before pulling away from the curb. “How was your morning?”

“Eventful.” She told him about William and Aimee.

“You got the recipe?”

“I did.” She leaned back and stretched her legs out. “it was cold as crap, and I forgot to check the weather. My jacket was inadequate.”

He glanced over at the tan leather.

Without warning, he made a turn that took them into the parking lot of Romano’s.

“Why are we here?”

“To buy you a coat.”

“Leo, I didn’t mean... No...”

He simply opened the door and came around to open hers. The building was even bigger than the one she had visited in New York and speared upwards with glistening

glass and chrome.

“Please don’t spoil this for me.” He murmured as she stood there with the wind blowing around them.

“Nothing over the top expensive.” She warned, then rolled her eyes at what she just said. “Who am I kidding? This is Romano’s.” She bit her lip. “Okay, fine. It is your money.”

He hid a smile as he touched her elbow lightly to guide her towards the revolving glass doors where a snappily dressed man was waiting to usher them into the brilliantly lit entrance. Women dressed in glitters – from dresses to jewelries rode the transparent elevator that seemed to zip upwards in seconds.

Leo knew where he was going, but a chicly dressed svelte blonde materialized out of nowhere and spoke to him in sultry French. Squelching the desire to rip the woman’s blonde hairs out by the roots, she did the next best thing.

Sliding her hand through his arm, she surprised both of them by the contact. She felt when he stiffened slightly. But instead of pulling away, he placed a hand over hers as they made their way towards the massive coat section.

The woman was waving poetic about the merits of cashmere and wool when they heard his name.

“Leo, what the hell are you doing here?”

He turned, a smile widening his lips. “David. I thought that was you.”

“You’re in France and did not contact us?” He stared at Sherrian curiously. He was gorgeous, breathtakingly so. She knew who he was of course. David Synder of

Snyder's fortune in sporting goods. She had read where he married a woman ten years his senior after running around as a playboy for most of his life.

"Where is Hailey?"

"She is – here she comes. We just stopped in to talk business. Darling." His quick intimate smile tugged at Sherrian's heart as the stunning woman draped in gold cashmere glided towards them.

"It's Leo."

"So, I see, darling." Gliding over, she kissed him on the cheek before turning towards Sherrian, who felt dowdy and unattractive in her denims and sweater. "And who is this?"

"My wife, Sherrian." Ignoring the clutching of her fingers into his arm, he smiled at the couple who stared at him in shock.

"You are married. Why the secrecy?" David demanded.

"it was low key."

"Dinner." Hailey's husky tone brooked no refusal. "Pierre's is a lovely little restaurant that I discovered since living here." She glanced at Sherrian, a smile glowing in her dark brown eyes.

"It is a casual place. A jacket over your jeans and that should do it." She held out a hand to Sherrian. "It's a pleasure to meet you, darling, and I am looking forward to hear you dish on this hunk right here."

She was quiet on the drive to the hotel. The couple had left them with the promise of a 9.00 pm meal at the restaurant and they had proceeded to pick out a gorgeous soft black cashmere jacket.

She had thanked him politely and refused the offer of something else.

“This is more than enough,” she told the eager sales associate firmly.

He waited until they reached the foyer of the hotel before he switched off the engine and turned towards her.

“Talk to me.”

She fiddled with her jacket and stared out at the looming building.

“You told them we were married.”

He knew that was her worry, but still it hurts that she had taken offence.

“Yes. What did you expect me to say? He took me by surprise.”

“They are going to want all sorts of details. How did we meet and all that? What do we say to that?”

“The truth. We met on the street, just in front of your place of business. I did not

know what else to say.”

She tilted her head to stare at him and considered. “She is very beautiful, almost like a model. They seem to love each other very much.”

The tension eased out of him and left him weak.

“They do. Very much. She was a professor at a university when they met. The love affair was unexpected and for a while they had no idea what to do about it, especially David.”

She nodded. “She’s incredibly beautiful and a doctor.”

He nodded. “She has a PH. D, yes.” He wanted to take her in his arms and cuddle. “She is also the most down to earth person I have ever met. Most of the ‘wives’ are, some of whom are from very humble beginnings. Look, if you are not comfortable, we could make our excuses...”

“No.” She shook her head. “I just have to figure out what to wear, that’s all.” She interpreted the expression on his face and lifted a brow.

“If you open that mouth of yours by saying you are going to buy me an outfit, I am going to slam it closed. I will figure it out.” She looked out the window. “Now let’s explore this palace of yours.” She turned to look at him. “I take it that it is yours?”

He grinned a little foolishly, relieved that they were over that hurdle. “The contract was signed this morning, after another long and heated discussion.”

“Congratulations!” She told him softly and really meant it.

“Thank you. Shall we?” He pushed the door open and came around to let her out.

Taking her hand as if it was the most natural thing in the world, he led the way towards the towering building.

“The Duchess.” She murmured.

“Pardon?”

“That is what it should be called. And there should be just suites, not individual rooms like other hotels. Just sumptuous suites and exclusive gift shops. Also, a theatre for shows, wonderful musicals. The best of the best. It should be so exclusive that it takes a year to get a booking.”

He turned her to face him. The crumbling graceful building loomed behind them, framed by a grayish blue sky. The property was located away from any vehicular or foot traffic and had the trees swaying in the stiff breeze.

“That’s a wonderful idea.” It was already forming inside his head. “You’ve painted a rather vivid picture.”

She shrugged, feeling the warmth of his skin seeping into her skin. Maybe it was this place, not just where they were at the moment, but the entire city of Paris. But she was feeling things she should not be feeling. She wanted his mouth on hers and her curiosity in wanting to know what his kisses were like was beginning to alarm her.

“Let’s get started.” She stepped away from him and turned towards the building, forcing him to do the same.

“What?”

“You’re wearing makeup.”

“So?” She bristled and had just managed to resist tugging at the seams of the brand-new emerald, green jacket she had chosen to wear over elegant khaki leggings. A tan cashmere sweater was under the jacket and her hair was loose and flowing past her shoulders, in healthy waves.

“You look lovely.”

Her heart slammed into her chest at the look on his face. He was wearing dark blue dress pants, a pale pink sweater and blue jacket with thin vertical stripes and he looked marvelous.

“I happen to be representing you, so I need to look my best. Besides, Hailey looks like a fricking movie star. The woman appears to be ageless. It has to be that with all that money, she has had work done.” She offered him a sheepish look as his brows lifted. “I am not usually this bitchy about another woman, but I am feeling insecure.”

He was surprised at her admission and knew it cost her a lot.

“No need.” He helped her into her jacket and brushed at her hair gently. “You’re killing it.”

She sent him an unconsciously provocative look over her shoulder that had him tightening with desire.

“Why, thank you.” Taking a deep breath and completely oblivious to the effect she had on him, she took his arm.

“Let’s do this.”

To her surprise, she found herself relaxing. The gorgeous couple made it their duty to put her at her ease. The restaurant was elegant, but not stuffy. The staff appeared to be on friendly terms with the Synder’s.

Both husband and wife spoke fluent French and the food and setting, gaslights, and purple décor, made for an intimate setting. Sherrian had not brought her notebook with her, but she was busy taking it all in to write her impressions when she returned to the flat.

And was unaware that Leo was watching her.

“Sherrian is wrapped up in her own thoughts.” His amused drawl had her coming back to the present.

“What?”

“Darling, we have been talking for a few minutes, and you have not contributed a word to the conversation.” Hailey, looking stunning in lime green the pantsuit molding to her slender curves, told her with a laugh. “We are trying not to take it personally.”

“I’m sorry.”

“She does this thing whenever we enter an eating establishment. She zones out and I

know she is marking things down in her mind.” Leo told them with an indulgent laugh which had Hailey and David giving each other a look.

“I cannot seem to help myself. This strawberry parfait is exquisite.”

“Leo told us you own a pastry store in the States.”

She nodded in response to David and only felt a smidgen of anxiety where he was concerned. She was trying to look past the gorgeous face and amazing body to the man himself. She knew he had been a playboy before meeting Hailey and could see why.

“Yes. I am looking to expanding it.”

“We would love to drop by on our next visit.” Hailey told her warmly. She clapped her elegant hands briskly. “Now, the boys are going to take a walk and go to the bar and leave us girls alone to get to know each other better.”

“You’re just trying to get rid of us.”

“One of the reasons why I love you is that you are so smart.”

“And the other?” David leaned over to take her chin in his hand.

“Cannot be disclosed in polite company.”

“We are all friends here.” He brushed his lips against hers. “I adore you.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:51 am

“You had better.” She touched his cheek intimately. “Now shoo.”

He kissed her again and let it linger this time. “Come on buddy, let’s go and buy ourselves some overpriced liquor, while our women gossip about us.”

“Your colossal ego is going to be the death of you.”

With a laugh, he followed Leo to the elegant bar.

Sherrian had to swallow the lump that had formed inside her throat as she watched the intimate foreplay between the couple. She wanted something like that, the thought slammed inside her with a force that had her sitting up.

She barely saw when Hailey nodded to the hovering waiter who came forward immediately.

“Two glasses of Dom,” she told him in French.

“Now darling, shall we get started?”

“There is really nothing much to tell,” Sherrian hedged slightly.

“Why don’t I go first.” Hailey gave her an appraising look. “When I met David, I was not looking for a relationship.” Merci.” She gave the man a dazzling smile that had him blinking as he brought the glasses of wine. “I was forty-five and he was ten years younger.”

She took a sip and nodded in approval. “I was a respected professor at a well-known university and worked my ass off to get where I was. I had a one-night encounter with him at a party and thought that was it. The sex was amazing of course, the best I ever had, but that was to be expected. He was David Synder.” She smiled whimsically.

“I thought that was it. But he found me and pursued me until I gave in. At first I just wanted it to be something physical, but who was I kidding? I was hooked from the very beginning.”

“Yet there had to be doubts on your side. The age factor, his reputation, and the fact that he was heir to a fricking fortune.”

Hailey laughed huskily, eyes dancing. “I really like you. Yes, all those were in play and I tried my best to make him go away. But he stuck. I even went as far as getting engaged to another man.” She laughed again at the look on the younger woman’s face.

“Yes, darling. I went to the extreme. The man was more of my age and solid. And I wanted to show David that it would not work between us. I ended up wounding a good man because of my utter selfishness. I had fallen head over heels in love with David and I was pregnant, at my age.” She shook her head.

“He came to my place; guns blazing and told me in no uncertain terms that he was not going anywhere.” Her expression became luminous as she gazed over at the bar where they were seated. “I had my doubts and told him in no uncertain terms that if he cheated on me even once, I was going to slice off his cock and feed it to him in increments.”

The two women’s laughter had heads turning, including the two men at the bar.

Chapter 8

What do you think has them so amused?" Leo murmured, staring at Sherrian.

"What else?" David's eyes danced. "The story about us – Hailey and me of course." He contemplated his friend over his glass. "Stuck on her, are you?"

"Big time." He admitted wryly. "Is it that obvious?"

"I am familiar with the look and feel of it. Having been there myself, am still there," his gaze flickered towards the woman who had turned his life upside down and put a spanner into his running around, just cruising through life.

She had brought him the miracle of purpose and a love that was so powerful, it made him giddy. Even now after years of marriage and children, he was still reeling. The emotions churning inside him made him sick to his stomach and sometimes he would wake up in fear and wondered if she was still next to him.

She was his life and without her, he was nothing at all.

"When are you going to tell her?"

He grinned at his friend's wry expression. "It is also clear that she does not know. You are so careful not to touch her even though you are dying to. My advice? Go for it. Seduce the hell out of her."

Leo took a fortified sip of his cherry bourbon. "You're the playboy with all the moves."

"Former and you are not too shabby yourself. I am assuming there is some sort of arrangement going on?"

Leo nodded. "I am not at liberty to disclose the details, but yes, there is."

"And you want it to be more than that. Man, you are in this city, the most romantic in the world. For how long?"

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:51 am

“A couple more days and then we are off to Italy. I had business here and a bit in Italy, but it is mostly for her. She wanted to explore the different pastries.”

“Take advantage of it and stop being such a bloody gentleman.”

Leo chuckled softly at that. “I would have, except the fact that her cheating bastard of a fiancé was doing it with her best friend. They were on the very verge of getting married. Plans were in place, church booked, invitations sent out and honeymoon destination – right here in this wonderful city.”

“Oh, good Christ.”

“Yeah.” Leo took another sip and glanced over at the two women. They were attracting quite a bit of attention. Hailey was so elegant and sophisticated with her short crop of hair and cool mannerisms and Sherrian – well she was magnetic, wasn’t she? Her hair bounced with every move and the energy just crackled around her.

“You don’t want to push and end up shoving her away.”

“No.”

“At the same time, you do not want to wait to cement her in that betrayal mode. I say, go the hell for it and damn the consequences.”

“It is not just physical for me. I am in love with her.”

“All the more reasons for you to get a move on. Don’t wait until you get back home

where it is familiar. Start working on it now.”

“You’re drunk.” He laughed as she stumbled on her way towards the door and he had to grab her arm, to help her along. All through the journey home, she had slept, her light snore amusing him.

“I am no..., not.” She spoiled that by giggling and leaning against him. “I am pleasantly buzzed and loose. Is that a term? Loose. And I think my head is spinning. That Hailey can sure handle her liquor.”

“I have never heard of anyone getting drunk on champagne before.” Supporting her frame with one hand, he pressed the code to open the door.

“I drank several glasses. Did I tell you that I have a very light head?”

“No,” he locked the door behind them and helped her out of her jacket. “I know now. Easy darling.” The endearment came naturally and none of them noticed it. “Here we go.” He wrapped a hand around her waist, and she leaned into him.

“I like her, and David is so gorgeous.”

He stiffened at that. “He’s happily married.”

She laughed and leaned in even more. “You are gorgeous too and so sexy. Did I tell you that?”

His heart did a song and dance, and his body shuddered.

“I don’t recall you saying anything,” he guided her up the steps carefully.

“Well, you are and there are times when I want to jump you and bite you on the lip. You have this smoldering sexiness going on.”

He was not sure how much more he could take. Her words were an aphrodisiac, which combined with her slender curves against him was making him crazy.

Taking a deep breath, he pushed her door open and led her towards the bed. Flopping down, she lifted her hands in the air. “I feel so good. Paris is wonderful, isn’t it?”

He knelt to take off her boots and socks.

“It is, yes.”

“And so romantic. A city for lovers. But we aren’t – are we?”

“Sadly, no.”

“We should change that.”

He went as still as a stone and lifted his head to stare at her.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:51 am

“What did you say?”

She raised up on her elbows and looked at him. “We should be lovers. We are in the right place. We should just get naked and do it. Make love to me Leo. I want to feel like a woman again. I am so tired of feeling like I am a social outcast.”

“You’re drunk and should sleep it off.” He rose unsteadily and could swear his heart was beating out of his chest.

“Let me get your clothes off... “

“Take it all off.” She helped him by tugging the sweater over her head.

He stood there like an idiot. A statue carved out of marble and stared at the enticing display of flesh. Her breasts were small and barely covered by the ridiculous scrap of blue lace. It would appear that Ms. Sherrian Watson did not care about outer layers of clothing but absolutely spent money and effort on the inner layers.

“Sherrian...” His voice was thick and his body rigid as she went further by unhooking the front clasp of the scrap of lace and taking it off.

Her nipples were puckered, causing the saliva to pool inside his mouth.

“I want to see your body. All night I have been thinking about what you look like without clothing. Let me see your body, Leo.”

He cursed himself for hesitating and without waiting any longer, he sat and took off

his boots and socks and rose to drag the sweater over his head.

She made a sound deep inside her throat that fired his blood even more.

“Take it all off,” she urged when he hesitated at the buckle of his belt.

He needed no further urging. Shedding his pants, he started to tug at his underwear when he hesitated.

“What?” Her eyes flew to his face as he stood there.

“You still have clothes on.” He whispered hoarsely.

“Oh.” She looked confused for a moment. Then she started to unhooked the clasp. Climbing in next to her, he dragged her up against the pillows and brushed her hands away.

“I think that’s my job.”

She laid back and watched his bent head as he took off the pants and hunkered there staring at her lower body.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” He cleared his throat. “You’re perfect.”

“I have a scar, right here.” She aimed her index finger at an area above the waistband of her lace panties. “I had my appendix taken out.”

“Still perfect.”

“Are you just going to stay there all night?”

He chuckled softly and eased the panties down, his fingers trembling. “Just savoring.”

She went still and felt her body heating as he ran his hands over her flat stomach and thighs. “Your complexion is flawless.”

She gazed at his broad chest with the scatterings of chest hairs.

“I would like to return the compliment. You have an amazing body.”

“Thank you.” He was impatient to have her but wanted to take it slowly.

He also did not want her regretting what they do here tonight. With that in mind, he stared at her. “Are you sure about this?”

“I am.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:51 am

He nodded and eased her panties down and over her hips. She kicked it away and watched as he continued to stare at her.

“You’re so beautiful.” Sliding to the left, he turned her to face him, fingers stroking her cheek and then her neck.

“Touch me, please.” He urged her.

She placed tentative hands on his chest, loving the combination of warm male skin and crinkly chest hairs. His breath caught when she became bolder and eased her fingers over his nipples.

“What? Should I stop?”

“No,” he laughed hoarsely. “Please continue.”

She did, using her fingernails to scratch the tight bud. He inhaled sharply and felt his sex stretching at an alarming length.

“I want to taste it.”

The breath literally left his body when she said that.

“Leo?”

“Yes?”

“May I?”

“Yes.” His hands tightened on her arms as she bent her head. She used the tip of her tongue to flick over the flesh and sent his blood heating beyond words. When she tugged at the nipple, he had to force himself not to cry out.

His body went rigid, and he cursed softly. She became so fascinated, whether it was from his reactions or the taste of him, but she started sucking and sending him into mindless agony.

“Baby.” His voice was harsh, his hands racing up and down her back. “I can’t. Sweet God. You have to stop.”

He had to pry her away and held her at arm’s length for a few minutes as he fought for control.

“Good God.” He lifted a hand to cup her cheek. His eyes were smoldering, his body shuddering. “I think it’s only fair that I returned the favor.”

Pushing her gently back, he straddled her and started feathering kisses on her face. He kissed her eyes and then went to her cheeks and the sides of her mouth, nibbling on the bottom lip. When she opened them, he shook his head.

“Not yet.” He went for the exposed area of her throat, brushing the hair back. He felt her slender curves trembling. He tongued the hollow of her throat and heard her gasp of pure pleasure.

Moving down slowly, he kissed the top of her breast and hesitated slightly before twirling his tongue around the rigid flesh.

The taste of her was more than he had imagined. Nothing in his dreams or even the

waking moments when he had pictured her naked and writhing under him had prepared him for the silky and sweet texture. He explored with his tongue before taking the nipple between his teeth.

Her startled cry had him shuddering and when she clutched at him, her moans echoing around the room, he went further. His hungry tugging of the flesh had them spinning in a mad vortex of passion that sent them flying off the edge. Her fingers went for his hair as her body arched.

Reaching between them, he palmed her sex, loving the feel of the downy hairs against his skin. It took just that, and she went flying. Her scream rent the air as her body convulsed. He hardly felt her fingers digging first into his back and then his shoulders as she exploded.

He waited for the storm to abate somewhat, before moving down her body. Her flesh was quivering, her body twitching.

When he kissed her stomach, she reached for him blindly.

“Wait.”

He went still - wondering if he had been too hasty or too slow.

“Please.”

He settled next to her and arranged his expression carefully. “What is it?”

Her eyes were bright and feverish, and her lips were parted.

“I have to tell you something.”

“Surely it can wait until...”

“No!” She reached for him and shook her head.

“You have to know.” He saw when she struggled and swallowed and wondered what on earth had her so agitated. “I know what you’re expecting.”

“You do?”

She nodded. “A man like you, would be expecting that I am responsive.” She swallowed again. “I am going to have to disappoint you.”

“You couldn’t...”

“Please! This is exceedingly difficult for me, just let me get it out.”

“All right.” He reined in his puzzlement and continued to watch her.

“You have been with thousands of women...”

“That’s an exaggeration...”

“Hundreds then.” She shook her head as he opened his mouth to contradict. “It has been only two for me. One when I was in college and Greg. They both...” Her gaze dropped to his chest, lashes framing her cheeks.

“And they both said the same thing. I was not passionate. Greg was nice about it, but I could tell he was impatient and trying not to show it.” Her fingers curled into his chest. “That’s why he went to Claire, my best friend, I could not give him what he wanted.”

“Sherrian...”

“I should not have started anything. You are only going to be severely disappointed and I...”

“Stop this nonsense!”

Her head flew up at his tone.

“What?”

“Whatever those two bastards told you was a reflection on their shoddy lovemaking technique. They were unable to draw the passion from you and typically in the behavior of how selfish and utterly despicable they were, they blamed it on you.” He took her chin between his fingers.

“I have only been with you for several minutes and I can unequivocally tell you that you are the most exciting woman I have ever been with. If you will allow me – let me show you what you do to me.” He stared deep into her eyes and waited for her assent.

“Yes.” She whispered.

“First...” Bending his head, he brushed his lips against hers and felt when they parted. But he was in no hurry to dive his tongue into her mouth as much as he wanted to taste and savor.

He was still shaken by the fact that she was so inexperienced and had not been with a man since that bastard died. He traced the outline of her quivering bottom lip and nipped at the flesh, making her jump.

With a throaty chuckle at her reaction, he used his tongue to explore the lip again before edging seductively and slowly into her mouth.

“Easy.” He whispered when she would have drawn him further in. “We have all the time in the world, and I just want to taste you. Let the taste of you linger on my tongue.”

Her fingers curled into his chest as her body arched towards his. He fisted a hand into her hair at the back of her neck and lifted her slightly. His tongue darted into her mouth, doing a slow mating dance.

His body was flying out of control, but he was determined to prove to this wonderfully exquisite woman that she was sexy and desirable. Her self-esteem had been knocked out of the court by men who were unsure of their masculinity, and he was determined to hand it back to her.

To show her that she was worth the effort. He deepened the kiss and the madness took her. He had wanted finesse, a slowing down to give them time to enjoy, but it was beyond him. He tightened his hold at the back of her head and bore her into the pillows, his body pressing against hers.

Emotions clamored inside his body, making him weak and hard as rock. It would have to be now, or he was not going to last. Shifting on top of her without breaking the kiss, he somehow managed to tug off his underwear.

He settled over her slowly, using one hand to guide himself until he was barely touching her swollen flesh. Her eyes flew open as she held his gaze. Ending the kiss,

he placed his forehead on hers and took several fortifying breaths.

“I don’t want to hurt you, baby.”

Her arms came around him.

“Now.”

A husky laugh was ripped from his chest at her fevered word.

“Absolutely now.” He glided in slowly, his body rigid, his blood pounding viciously as her tightness wrapped around him like a cloak.

“I am going to need a minute,” he gritted.

“Is something wrong?” She asked anxiously.

“It’s too much.” He rasped. “It’s - Christ!” He exploded as he sank in even further.

“How the hell could you even think you’re inadequate?”

“Thank you.”

“No. Sweet Christ!” He groaned. “Baby, what you do to me.” He moved then and she moved along at his pace. His eyes held hers as his body glided into her moist tightness. So long he had waited for this and now it was happening. He was not certain he could really take it in.

Her arms came around his neck and she lifted her face to his. He met her lips with his tongue sliding into her mouth in a sweet kiss that exploded between them.

He had to increase the pace. It was not left up to him. His body seem to have a mind of its own. With his lips sealed to hers and her slender curves melting into his, he felt as if he was rolling in the clouds.

When she came again, he swallowed her cries and gathered her close. He exploded along with her, his body shuddering as he spilled himself inside her. He was still kissing her even after the storm that had wracked them to pieces had settled somewhat.

Mindful that he was crushing her, he reluctantly shifted to lie next to her. Keeping her close to him, he cradled her against his chest and smiled dazedly.

“I guess you convinced me,” she murmured into his chest, making him chuckle.

“I hope I did.”

She did not respond, and he did not want to spoil it by saying anything else.

“I thought I was frigid.”

His fingers tightened on her back.

“You are most certainly not.”

“I think I want to call that son of a bitch from college and poke my tongue out at him.”

His laughter exploded and had her smiling.

“You should.”

“It would be childish.”

“Perhaps.”

“Would you back me up if I did?”

Tucking a hand under her chin, he lifted her face.

“Happily. What is his number?”

Her eyes twinkled with laughter. “The last time I checked, he was on his second marriage and not doing too well as a chef.”

“Good. Now if you would just tell me the eating establishment where he is currently employed, I could see to it that he no longer is.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:51 am

Her eyes went wide, and she started to laugh. “I really think you mean that.”

“I do.” He stroked her cheek. “how are you feeling?”

“Wonderful. No longer drunk because hello! Amazing sex and you managed to replace the euphoria of the champagne with something much more potent.”

“Happy to be of service,” he chuckled.

Her eyes dropped to his chest, and he held his breath.

“Um, I don’t know what this means.”

“What do you think it means?” He countered.

Her eyes lifted to his. “It complicates things.”

“It does, yes.”

She took in a deep breath. “We should talk about it.”

“I thought we were doing so.”

“In detail.”

“Or we go with the flow and enjoy ourselves. Look at me.” When she did, he continued. “I enjoyed you.” He wanted to say so much more, but he knew she was far

from ready. “We continue to enjoy each other and see where it goes.”

She gave him a steady look. “And if and when you decide that you want to leave?”

“If I don’t?” He asked it casually.

“You will.”

He tamped down the impatience. “I am going to consider that you have been hurt in the past by men who are not really men, but I would kindly ask you not to compare me with them. It is insulting and a bit of a bruising to my pride.”

She bit her lip to stop from laughing at his annoyed expression. The sex had blown her out the water and she was still shivering in the aftermath. More than that, she wanted to do it again.

“Fair enough.” She inclined her head. “There is no comparison anyway. You are – you were indescribable.”

His expression cleared.

“Thank you.”

She nodded. “I need to ask you something.”

“Ask away.”

She dropped her gaze to his chest and twirled her finger through the dense fark hairs.

“Sherrian?” He prodded.

“Um, give me a second.” She sucked in a breath. “What if I wanted an encore?”

He went still and could swear his heart stopped.

“Then I would be honor bound to oblige you.” He told her thickly.

Chapter 9

He considered that he deserved a bloody medal, certainly an award for endurance for allowing her to use his body as a testing ground.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:51 am

To avoid snatching her and placing her on top of his throbbing cock, he wrapped his fingers around the iron bed head and gritted his teeth to stop from exploding.

And he was a master in the art of restraint.

“How about this?” She used her finger to graze the rigidity of his nipple. She was like a child who has just been presented with her first toy by an indulgent parent. She had made the error of admitting that she had never felt free to touch and feel and he had erroneously suggested that he was open to her having a go at him.

She had nibbled at his neck and sent his blood pressure through the roof and then telling him that he tasted like whiskey and apple.

His breath literally left him when she used the tip of her tongue to trace the indentation in his chin.

Now she was further driving him crazy by sliding her fingers through the hairs on his chest.

“I never knew I loved chest hairs until now.” She stared at him beneath her lashes, giving him that seductive look designed to drive him more over the edge.

“Oh?” He asked thickly.

He wanted to ask how much longer, but he had promised to give her the time.

“Hmm.” Trailing her fingers down his flat stomach, she tortured him by circling the

indentation of his navel. “What if I did this?” Bending her head, she scraped her teeth over the taut skin.

“It...” He hissed out a breath. “That is effective. Sherrian...”

“And this?”

He cursed long and loud, his body arching as she closed her fingers around the throbbing length of him.

“Baby, wait. Just- Oh good God!” Unwrapping his fingers from the black iron, he reached for her blindly as she started to circle the reddened tip.

“I can’t.” With superhuman effort, he pulled her up and over him, hands clamping around her small waist. Closing his eyes, he tried to quiet his rioting emotions as she closed around him like a vice. There was so much he wanted to say to her. He wanted to spill his feelings, tell her that she was the most beautiful woman in the world to him.

When she leaned towards him and offered her breasts, he whimpered. Cupping them, he rubbed the tight nipples with his thumbs. Lifting his head, he suckled hungrily, his moving against hers, increasing the tempo until they were both spiraling out of control.

When it was all done, when the tempest had passed, she collapsed on top of him, his hands wrapped around her body, their breathing shattered.

It felt like a honeymoon, at least to him. They were no longer sleeping in separate rooms, not after that night. And he could not get enough of her. She had become

fascinated with the lovemaking and even on their way to Italy, had been the one to suggest they use the exceptionally large bed in the cabin.

They were not using anything in terms of protection, and he wondered if she was aware of it.

A sliver of hope began to stir inside him that she might even now be carrying his child. If that was the case, she would have no other choice but to marry him for real.

Florence was their destination with its lovely crumbling beauty and exceptional restaurants and wines.

They stayed in a hotel this time, one that had been bought by his company and restored to its former majestic beauty.

They were treated like royalty of course and it fascinated Sherrian to see him in action and hear his fluency in the Italian language, something that completely flew over her head.

They were spending two days in the country and would be packing in some business he had to take care of as well as their tour of the various restaurants and tiny cafes.

“I don’t want you going by yourself.” Their suite was on the very first floor – a breathtakingly luxurious shell pink wonder that took up the entire first floor. “you do not know the language and I would be worried about you getting lost or worse. I just have a few meetings and then I am free for the rest of the day.”

“You want me to wait for you.”

“Yes, I do.” They were sharing the same bedroom, and it did not even feel strange. He had done something for her that none of the two men she had been with in the past

had ever done. He had made her acutely aware of her sexuality.

And she had complicated feelings for him. His closeness made her dizzy and as soon as he look at her with those blue-green eyes, she felt like melting.

“Okay.”

He let out a breath as if he had expected her to argue.

“Good.” Walking over to her, he clasped her arms. “We have been travelling all night. There are restaurants open...”

“I want to go to bed!” She lifted her eyes, and he felt his heart slamming against his ribs.

“It is quite late.” He had to clear his throat in order to speak. “I don’t suppose you want to sleep.”

“No.” Stepping back, she tugged off her sweater and got rid of her bra. He had also given her confidence in herself as a woman. His reaction to her nakedness made her feel like the most beautiful woman in the world.

Greg had often teased her about being small on top and at one point, she had even contemplated getting implants. Now she realized how much he had beaten her down, subtly but surely. Leo was the exact opposite. He worshipped her body, spending time loving her breasts.

His expression as he looked at her now, made her feel like a queen.

“Take off your clothes.” She ordered and he obeyed with undignified haste.

He did not believe it was possible to fall more in love with her than he already was.

Her personality sparkled. He was proud to be seen with her. He introduced her to some business associates and clamped a possessive arm around her when they eyed her in that suggestive way they have about them as Europeans.

But she did not seem to notice she was being ogled, or if she did, obviously she did not care.

She was passionate in bed. Just the thought of what they would do when they were alone raised his blood pressure to impossible heights.

She had also become bold. Where once she had been hesitant and uncertain, she was now taking the initiative and mirroring his moves. In short, she was driving him crazy with his own methods. And she loved to explore his body, slowly.

Last night she had taken her time and made sure he could not interrupt, by tying his hands to the bedposts with silk scarves. It had been torture and he had almost rubbed his wrists raw trying to get out of the restraints.

He had cursed in both Italian and English and ended it with threats and then please. As soon as she freed him, he had jumped on her and almost swallowed her whole.

She turned him inside out and if it wasn't clear that they belonged to each other, he was going to have to point it out.

He glanced over at her as she twirled the pasta around her fork. They were having lunch at a tiny trattoria where the pasta was buttery and designed to melt on your tongue. And the view was spectacular.

It was their last night in Italy. Tomorrow first thing they were headed home, and he wished he could freeze the moment.

“Marry me for good this time.” He had intended to wait a week or two before he proposed, but he was anxious for her to be his wife. To bear his name. He was almost certain she was already carrying his child.

“Let’s not spoil the moment. We have been having such a wonderful time. I have enjoyed every bit of it.”

His eyes narrowed as he reached for his glass of wine.

“And asking you to marry me, is spoiling the moment?” His voice was dangerously soft, alerting her to the anger simmering behind the words.

“We don’t know enough about each other.” His harsh laughter had her bristling.

“Baby, we know each other in the Biblical sense. We are intimate, incredibly so, if you would recall.”

“I am not talking about sex.” She hissed.

“What we do when we’re alone could not be termed as having sex.” He pushed away his plate, his appetite gone. “We know every inch of each other’s bodies...”

“And marriage should be comprised of more than sex – oh excuse me – making love. I do not want us to jump into something and later down the road, we discover we are not compatible. Sometimes you think you know a person...”

“Don’t.” The single word was delivered with such precision that she felt it slicing into her heart.

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t compare me to him.” he finished the wine and pushed away from the table.
“Finish your meal, I’ll settle the bill.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:51 am

She watched in astonishment as he settled the bill and made his way out. Pushing away her plate, she collected her coat and went out into the parking lot where he was standing by the car and on his phone. Without a word, he opened her door and went around to the driver's side.

“Look...”

“No.” He told her tightly. “Anything you say to me now, is going to make things worse. I proposed and you told me to go to hell.”

“I did not say...” She sighed at the look he flashed at her. “I just think we should wait...”

“Until you are sure, I am not the bastard who let you down. How long do you think it will take you? A week? A month? A year? Several years?” He drove into the mad Italian traffic with an ease that had her admiring his driving skills.

“I know you don't understand,” she tried for calm as she sought to make him see her point. “I have been hurt. The humiliation and pain was so much that I wanted to die. I thought I had a good guy, and he fooled me. Right up to the point of his accident, he had me fooled and I blame myself for that.”

“Why the hell would you?”

“Because I was supposed to be smart and alert. I was so consumed with my baking, with proving to myself and others that I am the best, that I could meet any challenge, I neglected my relationship.”

She folded her hands in her lap. “I want to think things through this time. The stakes are much higher because of who you are and I...” Leaning her head back, she closed her eyes. “I need time.”

“Take all the time you need,” he told her coldly, unreasonably angry that she could not see what was in front of her.

“Leo...”

“I don’t want to talk about it anymore.” They arrived at the hotel just then. Handing the key fob to the valet who rushed forward, he started for the entrance.

They remained silent on the quick ascent to their suite. As soon as they were inside, he went into one of the other bedrooms and slammed the door shut behind him. Standing in the middle of the luxurious room, she stared at the closed door, her anger kindling.

If he wanted to be that way about it, then fine. To hell with him. To hell with all men. She did not need this in her life. Stomping away towards the bathroom, she slammed the door shut, but somehow there was no satisfaction in it. Not one bit.

He stayed away from her on the long journey home, burying himself in the briefcase of documents he had before him on the table. And in between he was on the phone, effortlessly switching from Italian to French.

Determined not to let him nettle her, she pretended to sleep for almost all of the plane ride.

A car picked them up from the airfield and even then, he continued to concentrate on

work, not easing up until they were gliding into the parking lot of his townhouse.

“Take the bags upstairs Jonathan.” He instructed the driver. “And you’re off duty for the rest of the night.”

They made their way into the building and were whizzed up by the super-fast elevator.

He headed straight to upstairs and to his office, barely giving her a glance. Sherrian sat on the sofa and heaved a sigh to try and get rid of the tightness inside her chest. A frown touched her brow as she stared at the number of suitcases the driver had placed just inside the large closet.

She was certain they had left with only three suitcases, now there were more than a dozen. She had been so miserable, she had not noticed that the driver had made several trips so that he could take the bags upstairs.

Pushing off the sofa, she went inside the closet and picked the first case to open. There were clothing, women’s clothing, in various colors and fabrics, expensive clothing with the tags removed.

Even though she was not an expert on fashion, she knew that they cost the earth and were from Romano’s, Cartier, Dolce & Gabbana, and several other high-end stores. She pawed through the rest of the luggage and discovered that most of the stuff was hers.

She had no idea he was shopping for her, or she would have objected. She sat on the carpeted floor and stared at the colors strewn around her.

“Oh crap.” She whispered, dragging her fingers through her hair. She had been with two men and none of them had ever been the least bit interested in her needs or

wants.

All Leo had ever done was to be there for her. He was an important man. She had heard snatches of conversations while he was on the phone and had seen him with business associates.

She knew he had a lot of responsibilities. But he had taken the time out to be her guide, to indulge her when she wanted to go to the various restaurants. He had given her so much and what had she given him? Nothing except to throw his proposal in his face.

Bending her head, she dragged her fingers through her hair and prepared to do some groveling.

He was not working of course. The anger had built until he was fairly bursting from it. He had been the fool who had thought she was leaning towards wanting a relationship.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:51 am

The times they had spent with each other, the intense passion had fooled into thinking he was near to his goal. He had humiliated himself and was damned if she was going to do that to him again.

He was going to end the arrangement and hand over her inheritance to his lawyers. He could not bear the idea of being with her and not having her full commitment. He was through! He stiffened at the knock on the door.

His fingers tightened on the folder he had been staring at since he came into the office and did not respond.

He struggled to appear nonchalant when she stood framed inside the doorway.

“I have work...”

“You bought me clothes.”

He shrugged carelessly and pretend to be studying something on his laptop.

“You can always return them.”

“I should.”

“Well, then. Please close the door on your way...”

“Stop being such an ass.”

His face tightened, his eyes smoldering.

“You bought me clothes. No one ever did that for me before.” She shoved her hands into the pockets of her jeans. “I told myself when I was with Greg that I was okay being an independent woman. I did not need anything fancy.

“She swallowed the lump inside her throat. “I am going to make a hell of a lot of mistakes, and I will piss you off frequently and I am scared.” She admitted. “You’re Leo and I am... ‘an unknown’ ...” She waved a hand.

“I do not know how to be with anyone. I thought I did. And for the damn record, I was not comparing you to Greg. And I still do not think we should get married just now.” She approached his desk. “I want to get to know you better. I think that is a fair proposal or whatever.”

He sat there staring at her expressionlessly until she wanted to scream.

“You can have anyone and I – God! Are you going to say something?” She demanded, eyes flashing. “First of all, I do not appreciate you freezing me out last night and today. I was miserable and- and I do not like it when you are upset with me. Dammit! Please say something.”

“You did not give me a chance. Come here.”

Taking a deep breath, she went to him, sighing softly when he tugged her into his lap.

“You were not the only one who was miserable.”

“Good.” She said it with such relief that it had him laughing.

“I missed you,” she admitted.

“I missed you too.”

“What should we do about it?” She asked, wrapping her hands around his neck.

“We should have makeup sex,” he was already nuzzling her neck.

“Sounds like a plan. Hmm.” She arched her neck, her eyes crossing as he nibbled at her skin. “It feels as if you are ready.” She rubbed her butt against his crotch.

“Am I? Are we staying here?”

“I have never done it on a desk before.”

His chuckle tickled her throat.

“We should do something about that.”

Page 43

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:51 am

He started to lift her up when she stopped him. “Wait!”

“What?”

“I have seen this several times and want to try it.”

“Try what?”

Hopping off his lap, she spread her hands and scattered his papers all over the floor.

“The laptop...” He was grinning as she carefully put the device on top of the filing cabinet. “I see you have it covered.” He added when she hopped onto the table.

She pulled the sweater over her head and unhooked her bra.

“Now you,” she said huskily.

“As you wish.” He made short work of taking off his clothes and moved between her open thighs. Unhooking the clasp of her jeans, he eased it off with her help. And then slowly peeled off her panties. Pushing her back on her elbows, he gazed at her slender curves hungrily.

“I spent last night dreaming about you,” she told him huskily.

“What was the dream?” He lifted one graceful leg and placed it on his chest.

“That you were making love to me all night.”

“I can make that dream a reality.”

“I would love that.” A moan escaped her when he lifted her foot and started at her toes.

“How does that feel?”

“Wonderful.”

“And this?” he glided his fingers up and down the sensitive area behind her knee and made her giggle.

“Funny.”

“This?” His fingers glided over her inner thigh, dangerously close to her sex.

“Not funny. It feels...,” she moaned softly. “Do not stop. Oh Leo.” The breathy sound of his name coming from her lips fired his blood.

“Tell me you want me.” He ordered gruffly.

“I do. I want you so damn much. If I don’t have you, I am going to die.”

With a groan, he trailed his finger further down, tangling with the downy hairs covering her sex. Her body shot upwards when he inserted a finger and then another one into her moist tightness.

“Leo.” Grabbing his wrist, she rode his fingers, her eyes holding hers. He saw when her eyes widened and increased the pace. She came explosively, her cries echoing around the room as the climax shattered her.

She collapsed on the desk weakly, her body convulsing.

Easing out of her, he lifted pushed her knees up and entered her swiftly. Gathering her against him, he gripped her hips.

It took one thrust for him to climax. His body shuddered as he poured himself into her as if he would never stop.

She wrapped her arms around him as he collapsed on top of her. As soon as he got his breath back, he lifted her and sat heavily on the chair, with her cradled in his arms. His heart was beating like a trip hammer, and his body was coated with sweat. The scent of her assailed him and he could stay like this forever.

She had not exactly made a commitment, at least, not the kind he was hoping for, but this was a start.

“Leo?”

“Hmm?”

“We had a big blow out argument.”

“We did?”

“Hmm. Which means we need to go another round.”

The laughter burst from him, and he could not help but wrap his arms around her possessively. “I think you’re spot on.”

Chapter 10

“I want to hear everything. Do not leave anything out.” Michael lifted an imperious hand that had the waiter approaching swiftly. “The Shrimp Alfredo is divine.” He scanned the menu without consulting her. “And the fruit basket.” He handed the menu back to the waiter dismissively before turning his attention to her.

“I really don’t have time for lunch.”

“You have to eat, and I wanted you away from your place of business. It is the only way to get your complete attention.” He studied her curiously. “You look relaxed, and your complexion is glowing. Which can only mean one thing...?” His smile widened. “You had sex.”

She thought about denying it but decided that it was too good to be kept to herself.

Last night had been hectic and rough at the same time. They had spent almost the entire night making up. Instead of feeling exhausted, she felt completely revved.

“We did.” Her smile was wide. “And I have to say, what they write in the books can in no way compared to the real thing.”

“Bitch.” He grumbled. “I am going to need details. Like how big his instrument is...”

“Nope.” Picking up her glass, she took a sip of water.

“And how good is his technique...”

“He has a lot of them, and it would take more than a day to get into it. Besides, we are not in high school.”

“I have to live vicariously through your love life.” He shook his head. “Imagine me saying that. You have a love life.” He gave her a contemplated look. “And knowing you, it’s going to be screwed up.”

“He wants to marry me.”

“Ah. And you said?”

“No.”

“Of course you did.” He sighed dramatically. “You are the only woman I know, who would turn down a proposal from one of the hottest and richest guy in this part of the world. What did he say to that?”

“He was mad. Did not talk to me for several hours. I basically had to grovel and hence the make up sex which went on for almost the entire night.” She grinned at the

pained look on his face.

“It seems as if things have progressed.”

She toyed with the mixture of fruits and nuts on the table. “It has. I am into him, big time. But I am deadly scared.”

“Because of what that bastard did to you.”

“I keep expecting Leo to tell me he has changed his mind and wants out.” She lifted her shoulders in a shrug. “I do not want to make a commitment and then he tells me he has changed his mind. Look at me.” She dug a finger into her chest. “I am not sophisticated and am never going to fit into his world.”

“You’ll do fine.” He waved a dismissive hand. “You are beautiful and witty. The man has good taste. He is also old enough to know his own mind.”

“I told him I need time.”

“To do what?”

She rolled her eyes at his impatient expression.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:51 am

“To make certain we are not making a gigantic mistake. He has been with so many sophisticated and well educate women...”

“You are a goddamned magician in the kitchen!”

“In the kitchen. I am not a judge or a clever lawyer or even an actress. I read somewhere that he was involved with a European princess at one time.”

“And none of them had the distinction of being proposed to.” He pointed out and waited until their meals were set before them.

“He bought me clothes.”

“I knew there was something unusual about the sweater.” He leaned forward and fingered the soft wool. “It is exquisite. Paris?”

She nodded. “I feel stupid wearing it to the shop, but I wanted to make up for the fact that I was a bitch about everything. You know I am not used to anything fancy, and I do not give a damn about couture.”

Michael winced as he dug into his meal.

“I wonder constantly why we are such good friends. I am a clothes horse.”

“So is he.” She admitted wryly. “His closet would swallow up my bedroom three times over.” She drank some more water absently. They had been back for the past two weeks, and the pace have been hectic. He had sat down with her to go over the

renovations that she wanted done and so far everything was going okay.

The pastry shop had been signed over to her and a contract drawn up by his lawyer in her name. She had employed two extra hands because of the upcoming winter season. And she wanted to free herself up to work mostly in the kitchen.

“Are you okay?”

“I think I am coming down with something. My throat is itchy and dry, and my stomach is acting crazy. One of the girls at the shop went home yesterday with a fever. She is still out, which means we are short-staffed.

“So how does it feel to own your own pastry shop?”

“Liberating!” She said with a quick laugh, pressing her hand against her stomach. “It also feels strange, not to be consulting Ingrid about everything. The decision is now on me. All on me and it is scary.”

“I take it that Leo has been giving you some business advice?”

She nodded and tried the water again. Her stomach was really acting up. “He’s really good at what he does.”

“Sounds to me like you’re smitten.” He said it casually, watching her reaction.

“I am definitely attracted to him, of course.”

“But?”

“Nothing.” She shook her head firmly and glanced at her watch. “I am not going to think about it anymore. We are doing fine and I am going to leave it at that.” Pushing

away from the table, she waited for him to stand before wrapping her hands around his neck. “It’s so good to see you.”

“Ditto. Sorry I had to rush away before you returned. We should get together soon.”

“You should come by and see what’s being done to the place.”

“I will, I promise.”

He watched her stride away and sat down to finish his meal. She looked so much better and whether she wanted to admit it or not, Leo Coleman was obviously doing wonders for her.

Lifting his hand, he ordered a glass of Chantilly Merlot to go with his meal.

She was exhausted and ready to drop. The contractor assigned to do the renovations had been recommended by Leo and was fastidious and somewhat of a perfectionist. The man was surly and uncommunicative.

He had a certain way of doing things and both of them had several personality clashes along the way, until she was tempted to tell him to go to hell. But he was the best and she wanted the best.

She wanted privacy booths, a larger waiting area, a place where baking competitions would be held. Another area where tea parties and discussions, whether it be about the latest movie or a bestselling novel, would be discussed over warm beverages or cold drinks combined with a savory and delicious pastry.

Page 46

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:51 am

She had specific ideas and had made several notations in her book. Daniel Cosgrove, the pain in the ass contractor had brought in an architect, which was going to cost an arm and a leg. When she had complained to Leo, he had sagely told her that if she wanted elegance, she was going to have to pay for it.

“If you want it done properly, it is going to cost. And I am making sure there is no cost overrun. I have your back. I am dealing with the financial side of it. You concentrate on the creative side.”

And she knew she was in good hands. Her aunt was back, and she had taken an afternoon off work, to go and visit her.

“I was hoping that husband of yours would make the trip as well.” She had sounded very disappointed that Leo was not with her.

“He has had some schedules overrun and had to take a quick trip to New York to sort out some details.”

“You look happy.”

“I am. The money...”

“I am not taking about the money. I would hope that is not what has the glow in your eyes and the soft look about you. Money is not the be all and end all of things.

You have a good man with you now and I hope you are at least making the effort to compromise and make the marriage work. I have seen the way he looks at you and

have to say that it is far different from the way that shifty eyed fiancé had about him.”

She shook her head in disgust. “I never approved of him, but of course, you were not prepared to listen to anything negative about him. Take care of what you have now, my dear and do not take it for granted.

As she went back to the construction site, her mind wandered to the evening ahead. She was looking forward to winding down and perhaps having a quiet dinner with Leo when he returned from his trip. The thought of him brought a small smile to her lips. She could not deny the way he made her feel - safe, cherished, and truly seen.

The noise of the renovation filled the air as she approached. Daniel was there, overseeing the workers with his usual stern expression.

She took a deep breath, reminding herself that all this chaos would soon transform into her dream space. The vision that she had nurtured was slowly taking shape, and despite the bumps along the way, she was confident it would be worth the effort.

Daniel looked up and gave her a curt nod as she entered. "Everything is on schedule," he said, without waiting for her to ask. She nodded in acknowledgment, appreciating his dedication even if his demeanor was less than friendly.

She walked through the emerging rooms, imagining the laughter and conversations that would soon fill them.

The contractor's precision was evident in every detail, and she was grateful for Leo's insistence on hiring the best. It was a partnership, not just in business but in life, and she felt fortunate to have someone who believed in her vision as much as she did.

As the day drew to a close, she made her way back home, eager to unwind and recharge. The renovation project was a monumental task, but she was starting to see the vision already unfolding.

The renovation was done during the time when the shop was not that crowded and even so, it was relegated to the back area to keep out of the way of the customers. She wanted everything finished before Christmas, but the safety and comfort of the people who supported her business came first.

As soon as she stepped into the kitchen, she donned her apron and started on the dough. Having lunch with Michael had taken up some of her precious time and she was running behind.

She was about to prove the dough when she looked up and saw Ingrid coming towards her.

Ingrid had always been a source of wisdom and strength, her presence both comforting and grounding. As she approached, there was a familiar warmth in her eyes, a silent support that spoke volumes.

"Ingrid," she greeted, her voice tinged with a mixture of surprise and relief, "what brings you here?"

"I thought you might need an extra pair of hands," Ingrid replied with a knowing smile. "And perhaps a bit of company."

They worked side by side in companionable silence, the rhythmic motions of kneading dough and the soothing scent of yeast filling the room. It was moments like these that reminded her of the simple pleasures in life, the ones that money could never buy.

“You should not be working. You are officially retired and just back from your cruise. I do not want Ben calling and biting my head off.”

Ingrid laughed softly, the sound like a gentle melody. "Oh, Ben knows better than to try and keep me away from this kitchen. Besides, I missed our little routines," she said, her hands deftly shaping the dough into perfect orbs.

Her heart swelled with gratitude. Moments like these, shared with friends who were like family, added depth to her life's tapestry.

As they worked, the kitchen was filled with stories of Ingrid's recent cruise, tales of exotic places and new acquaintances. The laughter that punctuated their conversation was as warm as the bread rising in the oven.

"You know," she said, pausing to wipe a flour-dusted hand across her brow, "sometimes I think we underestimate the power of simple, shared moments. They remind us of who we are and what really matters."

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:51 am

Ingrid nodded, her eyes twinkling with agreement. "Indeed, my dear. It is these moments that keep our spirits alive and our hearts full."

The evening continued in a symphony of shared labor and heartfelt conversation, each moment a testament to the bonds that held them together through the years.

"Let's talk about you." The scent of bread baking permeated the air and wrapped around them like a cloak. "I still cannot believe you're married, much more to a man like that."

"I made hot chocolate earlier."

"I would never say no to hot chocolate." Ingrid jumped into the familiar rhythm of things and started to box up the tarts and strawberry shortcake. "All done." She accepted the cup gratefully and sat around the counter. "Sit, please." She ordered the younger woman. "You're making me dizzy as usual."

"I feel like I have to keep moving." Sherrian, sat across from her and wrapped her hands around the cup, trying to absorb the warmth. She was definitely coming down with something. Dammit!

Ingrid studied Sherrian's face with a discerning eye. "You look a bit pale, dear. "Are you feeling alright?" She asked, concern evident in her voice.

Sherrian forced a smile, hoping to convince Ingrid - and perhaps herself - that she was fine. "I'm probably just tired. It has been a hectic week."

Ingrid reached across the counter, her hand a comforting presence on Sherrian's. "Sometimes we need to take a moment for ourselves. The world can wait."

The younger woman sighed, feeling the truth of Ingrid's words settle deep within her. The warmth of the hot chocolate seeped through the ceramic mug, offering a small measure of comfort. "You always know what to say," she murmured, grateful for the older woman's unwavering support.

"Tell me about your young man," Ingrid urged and she almost automatically denied that he was before she realized what she was about to say.

"He's..." She sipped hot chocolate and contemplated. "He's different."

Ingrid tilted her head, curiosity piqued. "Different how?"

Sherrian stared into her cup, as if the swirling chocolate held the answers she sought. "He's..., he's kind and thoughtful in ways I never expected. He listens, truly listens, and he makes me feel seen, like I matter."

A gentle smile spread across Ingrid's face. "That sounds wonderful, dear. Everyone deserves to feel that way."

Sherrian nodded, her eyes lifting to meet Ingrid's. "It is. But it is also terrifying. I am not used to this kind of attention, this level of care. It is almost as if I'm waiting for the other shoe to drop."

Ingrid's expression softened further, the lines of her face etched with understanding and compassion. "Love, real love, can be frightening because it asks us to be vulnerable, to trust. But it also has the power to heal, to bring out the best in us. Give it time, Sherrian. Allow yourself to be happy."

She considered that for a moment. “I spent a lot of time blaming myself for what happened with Greg.’ She flicked a glance at Ingrid. “You know how obsessed I become especially when I am creating something new.”

“Oh yes!” Ingrid laughed softly and then sobered. “He fooled you into thinking he understood and was behind you all the way.”

Sherrian nodded. “I do not want to make that mistake again. I become focused so much on work and it is going to get even more intense. I am doing all this renovations and expansions, and I have all these grandiose ideas. What if I am taking on too much?”

Ingrid reached across to squeeze her hand lightly. “I have always admired your zest and the way you have about you that makes any tasks seem possible.

From the very first day you walked through those doors, I knew you were someone special and that I would have to watch myself or you would be booting me out.” She laughed at the wry look on Sherrian’s face. “And I was right. You have visions my dear and I do not want you to ever apologize for it.”

“I just feel drained,” she admitted.

“You have just gotten back from spending a week in Europe and for the past two weeks you have been thrown into the fray.” Her eyes twinkled. “And I don’t suppose it’s easy to deal with that dour looking man I passed on the way in.”

“You mean, Daniel.” She muttered wryly. “He and I have a hate-hate relationship. If he wasn’t so fricking brilliant, I would be giving him his walking papers. But he is the best and I just have to put up with him for a few more weeks. He promised that the place would be finished before Christmas.”

“It’s already beginning to take shape.”

They both looked up when an employee came into the kitchen.

“I’m afraid the crowd is a little more than we can handle out front.”

“You stay where you are,” Ingrid ordered as Sherrian jumped to her feet, “I will go and handle the cash register.”

“Hey.”

“Hey.”

“What’s going on?” He approached the bed where she was curled under the covers and sat on the edge, his gaze flickering over her face.

“I feel like crap.”

“Okay.” He touched a hand to her forehead. “You’re running a slight temperature.” He glanced at the uneaten meal on the table. “Not hungry?”

“I’m not sick.” She tried to sound normal, but her voice came out sounding husky. “It is just a slight cold or a stomach virus. I do not get sick.”

“If you say so.” He tried to hide the glimmer of smile, but did not quite succeed.

“You think I am being silly.”

“Not at all.”

“I do not get sick. I do not have time to be sick. I have to work...”

“How about I get you some tea. This one has become cold.”

“Oh, dammit.”

“What?”

“I’m sick, aren’t I?”

“It would appear so.” He started to get up when she grabbed his hand.

“I feel as if I am dying.”

He just managed to tamp down the laughter.

“I thought you were not sick.”

“I am. My throat feels funny, and I am nauseous.”

“Nauseous?” Something leapt inside him, and he held his breath for a second. “You did not mention that.”

“I threw up twice at work and my tastebuds are shot. I was trying out a new dessert – a combination of strawberries and cherries and it tasted bland. I could not taste the cinnamon or the ginger. But the girls said it tasted fantastic.”

“Perhaps we should consult a physician in the morning.”

“Why? It is just a stupid bug. I am not going to make a big deal out of it. Some soup and herbal tea will do the trick.”

“What have you taken?” He looked around and saw remnants of some cold medicine.

“I hate taking pills, so I took some Nyquil.”

“How do you feel now?”

“I still feel lousy, and my appetite is non-existent.”

“What about the tea?”

“I don’t want you to leave.” She clung to his hand. “What if I have relapse while you’re gone?”

“Seriously?”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:51 am

“You don’t know how I am feeling.” She laced her fingers through his and sent a warm glow in his chest. “Anything can happen.”

“Nothing will.” He tugged his hand away and bent to kiss her forehead.

“You’re really leaving?” She asked with a pout.

“Stop being such a baby.” He said mildly, brushing back tendrils of hairs that were clinging to her moist forehead. “Mrs. Elliot was on her way out when I came in. I am just going to change and go downstairs and make you some tea and plain soup to settle your stomach. How does it feel now?”

“The same.” She rubbed her hand over it. “I think I am just tired. We came back from the trip and jumped straight into work. And the renovations are kind of stressful.”

His eyes narrowed at that. “Cosgrove giving you a hard time?”

She shook her head. “He is a man of few words and those words are curt and to the point, but I can deal with him. It is just everything is kind of overwhelming.”

“You wanted it done before the holidays,” he reminded her.

“I do. Okay, get the tea and soup and hopefully, I will still be alive when you get back.”

“I had no idea you were such a drama queen.”

Her glare had him laughing as he headed out the room.

Chapter 11

As he made his way downstairs, the cool air of the house seemed to clear his mind. He entered the kitchen, the warm light casting a comforting glow over the familiar space. He quickly gathered the ingredients for the tea and started boiling water, the soothing aroma of chamomile and mint rising in the air.

While waiting for the water to boil, he began preparing a simple soup. He chopped vegetables with practiced ease, his thoughts wandering back to her. The worry in her eyes, the fatigue in her voice – it all tugged at something deep within him. He found himself hurrying, eager to return to her side.

Once the soup was simmering on the stove, he carefully poured the hot water over the tea leaves, watching as the liquid turned a delicate golden color. He set the tray with the tea and soup and made his way back upstairs.

When he entered the room, she looked up, her eyes a little brighter despite the weariness etched on her face.

“You’re back,” she said, her voice soft with relief.

“Of course I am,” he replied, placing the tray on the bedside table, “I promised you tea and soup, didn’t I?”

She managed to smile a small smile as he handed her the cup of tea. She sipped it slowly, closing her eyes as the warmth spread through her.

“It’s perfect,” she murmured.

“Good,” he said, settling beside her on the bed, “now, try some soup. It will help.”

She took a few spoonful, her expression easing as she ate.

“Still dying?” He asked teasingly as he removed his clothing.

“You don’t know what I’m going through.”

“Oh, I’m sure.” He started to laugh and stopped abruptly at the look on her beautiful face. His heart quickened and he could swear his blood had turned syrupy. She was not looking sexy or at least, he was certain she had not put much effort into the way she dressed.

The worn t-shirt had seen better days, and her hair was all over the place, but she was the most potently sexy woman he had ever seen and the look she was giving him was making him weak as a damn kitten.

“You cannot possibly...” His voice trailed off as she slowly put the cup away and tugged the shirt over her head. She was completely naked, her nipples already puckered. And he was as hard as the proverbial rock. “You’re sick.” He had the fleeting thought that he was more trying to convince himself than her.

“I feel much better. The tea and soup combination was an excellent idea.” She glanced pointedly at his obvious arousal.

“Sherrian, I am not a goddamned monster.” He growled as he tried to fight the heat raging through his body.

“This is a sure-fire way to sweat out the sickness.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:51 am

“Is that your medical opinion?” He dragged off his underwear and knew when he was defeated.

“Of course.” Her eyes twinkled mischievously as he climbed in next to her.

He leaned down, capturing her lips with a fervent kiss. Her hands roamed over his back, igniting a trail of fire wherever they touched. The world outside ceased to exist; all that mattered was the two of them, wrapped in a fervent embrace.

Their movements were slow, almost reverent, as if each touch, each kiss, was a sacred act. He was careful, mindful of her recent illness, but the passion between them was undeniable, a force neither could resist.

He lifted his mouth from hers, reluctantly ending the kiss. She tasted of herbal tea and sexiness, of love and desire and heaven. And even though he was bursting at the seams, he still had to ask her once more.

“Are you sure?”

“Stop talking.”

His fingers trailed down her arms, sending shivers along her skin. Her breath hitched, a soft gasp escaping her lips as he explored her body with gentle curiosity. Each touch was a promise, a testament to the depth of their connection.

She arched into him, her own hands finding their way to the contours of his body, tracing the lines of muscle with a tender urgency. The room was filled with the sound

of their mingled breaths, the soft rustle of sheets, and the symphony of their hearts beating in unison.

Every movement, every caress, spoke of the unspoken words that lay between them. It was a dance of souls, a merging of two hearts that found solace and strength in each other. As they moved together, their bodies became the canvas upon which their love painted its masterpiece.

In that moment, nothing else mattered. The world outside was a distant memory, an echo of a life that seemed so far away.

Love for her overwhelmed him so much that he felt his throat thickening, his body surging towards hers.

His heart pounded in his chest, a tumultuous rhythm that echoed the intensity of his emotions. He cradled her face between his hands, his thumbs brushing away the stray strands of hair that clung to her damp forehead. Her eyes, half-lidded with passion, gazed up at him with a mixture of vulnerability and strength that took his breath away.

“Please,” she whispered, her voice a mere breath against his lips. “Don’t hold back.”

With a shuddering breath, he gave in to the storm within him. Their lips met again, this time with a fervor that spoke of longing and need. Their bodies moved together in perfect harmony, each kiss a promise of forever.

The night stretched on, a tapestry woven with moments of tenderness and passion. They lost themselves in each other, finding refuge and sanctuary in the warmth of their embrace.

He wanted to prolong the moment, draw it all out, savor every inch of her delectable

body.

He pressed a lingering kiss to her shoulder, his hands wandering with a languid grace as if committing each curve and hollow of her body to memory. Her skin was soft and warm beneath his touch, a testament to the life and love that pulsed through her veins.

As he moved lower, his lips trailing a path of fire along her collarbone, she tangled her fingers in his hair, a silent plea for more. He responded with a gentle murmur, a sound that resonated deep within her, stirring the embers of their shared passion into a blazing inferno.

They were lost to the world, two souls entwined in a dance as old as time itself. Each touch, each kiss, was a note in the symphony that played between them, a melody that spoke of unending devotion and boundless desire. The night was their canvas, and they painted it with the colors of their lovemaking, vibrant and enduring.

He wanted so much to express his devotion, declare his love for her, but he knew it would be too soon. He could feel her going in deeper, sinking under the silken splendor of his lovemaking. She had become the aggressor, reaching for him without his initiation and he felt hope.

He kissed her again, his hands roaming her curves. With gentle pressure, he pushed her back on the pillows, his body covering hers. He had contemplated a slow and lingering time spent exploring her body, but the need beating at him could not be stayed. He wanted her with a fervency that was making him ill.

His blood was thick, his body coated with a fine sheen of sweat. His heart was hammering against his ribs, his hands trembling.

He entered her swiftly, going in deep, his eyes meeting hers. He marveled at the

flaring of the dark brown depths, the parted lips as she closed around him like a tight wet fist. His body jerked in response to this wonderful sensation of her wrapped around him.

When her hands closed around his neck and she tugged him towards her, he brushed his lips against hers slowly. He might not be able to use words just yet, but dammit, if he was not going to let his body speak in volumes.

He moved inside her, his tongue entering her mouth, savoring her taste. Sensations rocketed through his body, and he had no other choice but to allow it to take over. He increased the pace, swallowing her moans. Her pert nipples were branding his chest, creating a friction that was about to drive him mad.

Her body arched, fingers digging into the supple sweat slickness of his shoulders and back, biting into skin. He did not feel anything except the desire and passion roaring through his body like quicksilver. He swallowed her cries as the violent climax engulfed her and she exploded.

They became one, moving together in a rhythm born of instinct and desire. His fingers intertwined with hers, a physical manifestation of the emotional connection that bound them.

He wanted to imprint this moment into his memory, to recall the way her body felt beneath his, the intoxicating scent of her skin, the sounds of their breaths mingling in the stillness of the night.

Every movement, every touch, every kiss was a declaration of his unspoken feelings. He felt her responding to him, her body arching to meet his, her hands clutching him closer as if to never let go. The intensity of their connection grew each thrust a testament to the depth of their passion.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:51 am

He came and it was not easy or smooth. The depths of his feelings for her combined with the swell of intense passion had his control disintegrating. Ending the kiss, he buried his face against her neck, his teeth sinking into the soft flesh of her skin as he fought to control the madness racing through his body.

He unwittingly broke the skin and even when he tasted blood, he could not let go. Waves after waves of emotions swept him along with a ferocity that had his body shuddering. He poured himself into her, watering the mouth of her womb, his body weak and satiated, his heart shattering.

The moonlight filtered through the curtains, casting a soft glow over their entangled forms. He marveled at the sight of her, illuminated by the silvery light, a vision of beauty and grace that left him breathless. Her chest rose and fell with each ragged breath, her eyes closed as she savored the lingering sensations of their intimacy.

This was the beginning of something profound, something that would shape the course of their lives in ways they could not yet fathom. He could see it in the way she looked at him, in the way her body responded to his touch, in the unspoken bond that had formed between them.

It took more than a few minutes to roll off her and even then, he could not function. Could not think and he could not look at her.

Stirring himself, he was about to get off the bed when she grabbed his arm.

“What’s wrong?”

He finally looked at her, wincing at the raised bruise on her flesh.

“I need to get something to put on the bite mark. I am sorry as hell.”

“Why?”

His eyes flared as he stared at her.

“Why? What do you mean? I hurt you.”

Lifting her hand, she traced the reddened marks on his chest where she had dug into his skin as the climax took over.

“Then I guess we both have our own brands to contend with. Don’t be an idiot. I love what we do in bed together. No one had ever marked me before.”

He gave her a wry look and felt his chest easing. “You are a weird one.”

She grinned, and he felt the tension easing all the way. He had felt foolish and utterly vulnerable at his inability to control his reaction. Something that had never happened to him before. But now she was turning it around and making fun of what had happened.

He lay back down beside her, their fingers still entwined and stared up at the ceiling. The intensity of their connection lingered, a tangible presence in the room. He could feel the warmth of her body next to his, the steady rhythm of her breath calming his own.

As they lay there, the silence between them became a comfortable blanket, wrapping them in its embrace. It was in these quiet moments that he felt the true depth of their bond, an understanding that transcended words. He turned his head to look at her,

captivated by the serene expression on her face.

Turning his head to look at her, he felt the smile curving his lips at her disheveled hair and swollen lips. “Still feeling sick?”

She shook her head and moved closer, draping a thigh over his. “You have healed me completely. I told you that is what I needed.”

“You sure did.” He used a finger to trace the bruise. “I should put something on, before it gets infected.”

“Not yet.” She snuggled against him, fingers tangling with the hairs on his chest. “This feels good.”

“Hmm.” He closed his eyes and inhaled her scent.

“I need to ask you something.”

“What?”

She trailed a finger through the hairs.

“Sherrian?” He prompted.

“You were seeing someone.”

“I was, yes.”

“What happened?”

He shifted so that he could see her face.

“I ended things.”

“Why?”

He considered how much he should tell her without giving anything away. “It was just physical.”

She stared at him curiously as if trying to ascertain whether he was telling her the truth.

“How did she feel about it?”

He hesitated briefly. “She knew initially that it was nothing permanent.”

She arched a brow at him. That is an amazingly effective way of not answering the question.”

His gaze remained steady on hers. “I just think that is not an appropriate discussion at this time. It is in the past.”

“Is it that easy for you?”

A frown touched his brow. “Yes, if only my body was involved, then it is that easy. We had a mutual agreement, not a relationship.”

“It’s different for men.”

“I suppose it is.” He answered carefully.

“For women, it much more than physical.”

“I suppose it is.” He repeated.

“The sex...”

“No.” He put a finger against her lips. “I do not feel comfortable discussing my past relationships with you. Just like I would not want to hear what you did in bed with that - that bastard who deceived you. Is that clear?” He jolted when she bit his finger.

“What was that for?”

“I like the taste of you and love when you get all formal and uppity.” And just like that, her mood had changed. He had to admit that she had him spinning in circles. For the first time in his life, he had no idea whether he was coming or going.

“You witch.” He whispered, pushing her back on the pillows and covering her body with his. “For that, you deserve to pay.”

“Looking forward to it.”

It was not long before their playful banter gave way to a more serious conversation. She drew a deep breath, her eyes searching his. "Do you think it's ever possible to really move on from someone?"

He paused, considering her question carefully. "I think it depends on the person and the circumstances. Some people leave a mark that never truly fades, while others..., they become just a distant memory."

She nodded slowly, processing his words. "And what about us? Do you think we will be able to move on if things don't work out?"

His gaze softened as he brushed a strand of hair from her face. "I don't even want to consider that possibility."

Her lips curved into a small smile.

They lay in silence for a moment, the weight of their conversation hanging in the air. Finally, he broke the stillness with a soft chuckle. "You know, for someone who claims to like the taste of me, you sure have a funny way of showing it."

She laughed, the tension dissipating. "Well, I can't help it if you taste so good."

He grinned, pressing a kiss to her forehead. "Just promise me one thing."

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:51 am

"What's that?"

"Let's make the most of every moment we have together. No regrets."

She met his gaze, her expression earnest. "I promise."

And with that, they allowed themselves to get lost in each other once more, savoring every touch, every kiss, every whispered word. For now, the past was forgotten.

"You look like hell."

"I can always count on you to be honest." Pulling out a chair, she sat and stretched her legs. The place was quiet for a change, the lunch and early afternoon crowd had come and gone.

The contractor and his team had also left to go and tackle another project. She was not feeling well and had pretended she was doing great and recovered to avoid the nagging from Leo.

"I am not just being a bitch, darling, I am serious." Michael remarked, peering at her anxiously.

"It is this cold that seems to be lingering and my stomach is acting crazy. I sent someone home two days ago because of a stomach virus and it seems like I caught the bug. On top of that, I cannot taste a fricking thing. It is like my tastebuds have

gone for a walk. I am fatigued and listless, it is frustrating.”

“Perhaps you should go and get a checkup.” He offered carefully, taking up his cup of coffee.

“Does Leo know you’re not well?”

She lifted her brows. “We live together and yes - I told him I was not feeling too hot. After he made me tea and soup, I thought I was feeling better...,” she shook her head. “Enough to – youknow...” She waved a hand and managed an impish smile at his widened eyes.

“Even though you were at death’s doors, he still wanted to...,” he huffed out a breath. “The man is a monster.”

“I was not at death’s door, and I was the one who initiated it. I have become a sexual deviant.” Her satisfied tone had him laughing.

“It is about time. Good for you.” He sobered and gave her a thorough once-over.

“I am going to ask you a series of personal questions and don’t want you freaking out on me.”

She gave him a curious look. “Since when do you give advance warning? You are always poking in my business and never make an apology for it. Why the change?”

He took another sip of the coffee and eyed her over the rim of the cup.

"Because these questions might be a bit more invasive than usual," he replied, setting down his cup and leaning forward. "Are you experiencing any other symptoms? Fever, chills, shortness of breath?"

She shook her head, briefly closing her eyes as a wave of dizziness overcame her. "No, just what I mentioned before."

"And you have been careful?" He took another sip of coffee.

"Careful?" She frowned at him. "What the hell do you mean?"

Putting his cup down, he folded his hands in front of him and stared at her. "Protective sex, darling."

"Oh." For a second, she gave him a blank stare and then her eyes widened. "Oh. Crap. You think I might be pregnant. We..." She closed her eyes as she recalled that ever since they started in Europe, she and Leo had not contemplated or even talked about protection or the consequences if that was not exercised.

"I..." pressing a hand to her jittery stomach, she took a deep breath. It fits. All the symptoms were there. The lethargy, the nausea, the dizziness, and the fact that she had missed her period, something she had chalked down to all the stress and the change in her lifestyle. "Oh Lord."

"Have you two discussed the possibility of having a family?" Michael prodded.

She shook her head slowly, still processing the revelation. "No, we have not. It never came up because..., well, I guess we were just caught up in the moment and not thinking about the future." She ran a hand through her hair, feeling the weight of the potential reality crashing down on her.

"How ridiculously careless of me. I cannot be pregnant. We are not in a position! We are not even married, and I have so many things going on. God! To introduce a child into the mix is just insane. All of it is madness." She thumped her fists on the table and felt the zing of pain going up her arms, welcomed it in fact.

“What the hell am I going to do?”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:51 am

Michael reached over and placed a comforting hand over hers. “The first thing is you’re going to calm down and the second is go next door to the pharmacy and get yourself a pregnancy test.”

“And then?”

“Go on from there.”

Chapter 12

“I should take another one.”

“You already did three. A fourth is not going to change the result,” Michael pointed out patiently. She had heeded his advice and went straight to the pharmacy. After buying a bunch of pregnancy kits, she headed to her home with Michael in tow.

She had called Ingrid and asked her to come over and cover for her at the pastry shop. The woman had agreed readily, making Sherrian realize that her friend was not taking retirement in her stride.

She paced around her living room, feeling the tension radiate through her body. The three tests she had taken were lined up on the coffee table, all showing the same clear result. Positive. She glanced at Michael who sat calmly on the couch, his presence a steady anchor in the storm of her emotions.

“They all might be flukes.” She was trying to find a way out of this quagmire. She was pregnant. And she was not ready. Far from it.

“Sherrian.”

“You’re right.” She dropped down on the sofa next to him. “The fact that I do not want to be pregnant is beside the point. I am.”

“Yes.”

“And I don’t know what to do.”

He stared at her frowningly. “You are keeping it, right?”

Leaning her head back against the cushions, she closed her eyes. “Whenever I pictured me having a baby, it is always somewhere down in my late thirties. I would have realized my dream of having the spectacular bakery, everything in place.

And it would be established enough so that I could take some time off to be able to raise my child. Now I am unmarried, and my life is in complete chaos. I am just not ready.”

Turning to face her, he took her hands in his and forced her to meet his gaze. “Consider very carefully what you are doing. And whose seed you are carrying. Leo Coleman is a multi-billionaire and unless I miss my guess, the man is likely to need an heir to inherit his vast fortune.”

“No pressure!” She muttered.

“I am not trying to be a downer, darling, I thought you were really into this guy.”

“I am.” Dragging her hands free, she rose and stared at the offending test kits. “It is just that we don’t really know each other. The sex is fantastic, but what if that is the only thing keeping us together.” Her hand flew to her mouth as if something occurred

to her.

“What is it?”

“What if I turn him off with the news? I am going to be big and unattractive. My boobs are going to grow huge as well as my backside. My ankles are going to get swollen...” She sank down on the sofa and simply sat there staring across the room.

“I think I’m going to be sick.”

“The bathroom...”

“No. Not that sick.” She thumped a hand against her chest. “Sick with worry. God, what a damn mess.”

“Who says it has to be? The guy asked you to marry him, remember?”

“And I am not marrying him because I am knocked up.”

“Didn’t he ask you before...”

“I am just not ready,” she said stubbornly.

“Sherrian,” his firm tone had her looking at him. “If you mess this up because of that bastard who treated you like dirt, I will never forgive you.”

“It’s not that,” she insisted, praying that she was being truthful.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:51 am

“Then what the hell is it?”

“It’s everything.” She rose a little unsteadily. “Leo has a late meeting, and I need to be alone. I need to think.”

“I don’t want to leave you alone.”

“No.” She shook her head. “I have a bag packed with some essentials I did not take with me when I moved in with Leo. Could you secure them for me and leave them on the porch? I am going for a drive.”

He hesitated, searching her face for any sign of reassurance, but found none. Reluctantly, he nodded. "Alright, but I'll be checking up on you. If you need anything, you call me immediately, understand?"

She managed a weak smile, appreciating his concern. "I will. Thank you for being here."

Without another word, she went to get her jacket, feeling the weight of her world pressing down on her shoulders. The silence of the house enveloped her, and she felt a sudden urge to escape, to clear her mind.

Grabbing her keys, Sherrian headed out the door and into her car. She drove aimlessly for miles, the rhythmic hum of the engine providing a temporary solace. Her mind raced with thoughts of the future, of the life growing inside her, and of the uncertainty that lay ahead.

As she drove through the quiet streets, she found herself at the edge of the city, where the lights were dim, and the world seemed a little more still. She pulled over at a small park, the kind she had always found comforting in times of distress.

Stepping out of the car, she took a deep breath, the cool night air filling her lungs and momentarily easing her anxiety.

She sat on a bench, gazing up at the stars, searching for answers in the vast expanse of the sky. She knew she had to make a decision. one that would shape not only her future but that of her child. The gravity of it all weighed heavily on her, but in this quiet moment, she allowed herself to feel the full extent of her emotions.

Tears welled in her eyes, but she did not fight them. She let them flow, a release of the pent-up fears and doubts that had been consuming her. As the tears subsided, a sense of clarity began to emerge. She realized that no matter what, she had to face this head-on, with courage and conviction.

In the stillness of the night, Sherrian made a silent vow to herself and her unborn child. She would find a way through this, not just for herself, but for the life she now carried. She would take it one step at a time, trusting that she had the strength to navigate the challenges ahead.

She had no idea she had stayed out so late, or that her phone had lost its charge. She had sat there on the park bench until the bitter cold of the fall season drove her to seek warmth inside her car.

Leo was waiting for her at the door, a furious expression on his face. "Where in the hell have you been? I have been calling you for over an hour."

"Stop shouting. I have a damn headache." Sweeping past him, she shrugged off her jacket and slung it over the newel post and just sat on the third step.

“What’s going on?” He had followed her and was staring at her puzzled. “I called the bakery, and they told me you left in the early afternoon. It is almost eight at night. Where have you been?”

“I had some thinking to do.”

“Thinking that could not be done at the bakery or here at home?”

“Your home.”

Leo tamped down the anger and strove for patience. He had called her when he was leaving the meeting to find out if she wanted to go and have dinner. When he could not reach her, panic had flooded him as he wondered if she was in an accident somewhere.

“Okay, my home. What is going on?”

“I was not feeling well.”

His expression changed to one of concern and he sat on the step below her. “I thought you were getting better. We should consult a physician...”

“I know what’s wrong with me!” She snapped. Causing him to lift his brows at her tone.

“What’s wrong with you?”

“I’m pregnant.’ The tears she had been holding at bay came in a flood and she simply folded her hands on her knees and buried her face there and wept.

The joy he felt at her announcement shriveled and died. She was not crying tears of

happiness. He waited until the tears subsided and she lifted her head.

“You’re not happy about it.”

“Does this look like I am happy?” She shrilled, feeling the hysteria rising inside her.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:52 am

“Why didn’t you use something? I thought you would have been smart enough to do so. Or was it your intention to trap me so I would have no other choice but to accept your proposal.”

Anger churned inside him, and he had to take a moment to tamp it down.

“I will take into consideration that the news is overwhelming.” His tone was like steel, his face tight. “But I am not going to stand for your insults. I do not see why you are so out of sorts about.

Our passion has culminated in making a life, something to be joyful about. I want a child; I want children by you, and I have never said that to a woman before. You turned down my proposal and I told you I would give you time. I will not, however pretend that this is bad news for me.”

“No.” She shook her head, her mind tormented with guilt and anger, “because you are a man and nothing will change for you. I have a business to run, and this is going to set me back because of the changes. I already feel sick to my damn stomach and it is only going to get worse.

Nine months! Fricking nine months, I am going to have to endure the symptoms. I have renovations going on and plans to add some more delicacies to the menu. Which by the way, I cannot do as my taste buds are shot to hell. I do not want this. I do not.”

The silence after her explosive statement stretched between them like a tight rope. She knew she should not have said those things to him, but she had always said exactly what she was thinking. And he need to realize that this was not something she

was looking forward to.

“What do you plan on doing?” He asked, finally breaking the heavy silence.

“I don’t know.”

“I see.” He rose carefully, so carefully that he felt as if his joints had caramelized. Anything he said to her now would result in a big blowout and would drive them further apart and he could not risk it.

“I am going out. You should probably try and get some rest.”

“Where are you going?”

“I need to clear my head.”

“I did not say those things to hurt you...”

“And yet you have done just that.” Turning on his heels, he strode towards the entryway, leaving her sitting there.

She had been harsh; she admitted it to herself. But she was the one in this pickle. It was her damn body, wasn’t it? So, what if she had implied that she was not ready? She was not. Should she have pretended that she was all aglow over the news? Pretend that everything was all shiny and sunshine?

“Oh God! What a damn mess.”

She sat there for a long time after he left, the room growing darker around her as the evening crept in. The emotions swirled inside her, a chaotic mix of frustration, guilt, and fear. The silence of the empty room felt oppressive, and she wrapped her arms

around herself as if to ward off the encroaching shadows.

Her thoughts tumbled over each other, a relentless torrent that refused to be stilled. She thought of the business she had built from the ground up, the countless hours of arduous work, the dreams she had for its future.

A baby had never been part of that plan. She had always been clear about her priorities, and a child would change everything.

Yet, beneath the anger and the fear, there was a faint, almost imperceptible glimmer of something else. Could it be... hope? Or perhaps a longing she had never allowed herself to acknowledge? She shook her head, trying to dispel the confusing thoughts. No, she needed to stay focused, practical.

Taking a deep breath, she stood up, her legs feeling shaky beneath her. She needed to think clearly, to figure out her next steps. The renovations at the restaurant, the new dishes she wanted to introduce - these were the things that mattered now. She would need to find a way to manage it all, despite the nausea that already plagued her.

But even as she attempted to plan, she could not escape the image of his face, the hurt in his eyes as he had walked away. She had lashed out, but was it fair to blame him entirely? He had been right about one thing: this should have been a moment of joy, a celebration of their passion. Instead, it had become a battleground.

She sighed deeply, her heart heavy with the weight of the situation. "Oh God! What a damn mess." She repeated, feeling the words resonate within her. She knew she would have to face him again, and they would need to find a way through this - together or apart. For now, she needed to rest, to gather her strength for the challenges ahead.

He drove with no clear destination in mind. He just wanted to get away, to clear his head and figure out the next move. Twice she had rejected him. First by shoving his proposal back in his face and now, telling him clearly she did not want his baby.

The hurt was slicing through him, making it impossible to breathe.

He had thought that love would conquer all, that their shared dreams and passions would be enough to bridge any divide. But now, he felt the sting of her words, the coldness of her rejection like a knife twisting in his soul. How could something that had started with such promise have unraveled so completely?

As the miles slipped away beneath the wheels of his car, he replayed their arguments in his mind. He had always admired her determination, her fierce independence. It was one of the things that had drawn him to her in the first place.

But now, that same determination seemed to be driving them apart. She was so focused on her career, on making her pastry shop a success, that it left no room for anything else, not even for him.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:52 am

He wondered if he had misjudged everything. Had he pushed too hard? Expected too much? The image of her sitting alone in the darkened room haunted him, her eyes brimming with unshed tears.

Despite the anger and frustration that churned within him, he couldn't help but feel a pang of empathy. She was scared and he acknowledged that. Everything had spiraled so quickly.

One minute they were entering into a fake marriage for the sake of her aunt and receiving her inheritance and the next they were intimate.

She blamed him for not using anything, but that was so bloody unfair. The lovemaking had not been planned. Yes, he had fervently hoped things would progress between them, but she had been as much a part of it as he was.

He could not face her, not right now. He had been tempted to shake some sense into her, to lash out because of the hurt and pain. But he felt rage churning inside him, and he could not go back feeling this way. If he did, there would be no going forward. And maybe there was not at this point. He had some thinking to do.

He pulled over to the side of the road, the weight of his emotions pressing down on him. He needed to find a way to reach her, to make her see that they could face this together.

But how? The thought of losing her, of walking away and never looking back, was unbearable. And yet, he could not force her to want the same things he did. He needed to give her space, but he also needed to make her understand just how much

he cared.

With a heavy heart, he started the car again, the road ahead long and uncertain. He would give her time, but he would not give up. Not yet. There was too much at stake, too much to lose. He just hoped she would see that before it was too late.

She lay there in bed, stiff as a board as she listened for his footsteps coming into the bedroom. He had been gone for hours, and she was getting worried.

Her thoughts were churning, and she had been sick in his absence, wretchedly ill, compounding her argument about this being so damned inconvenient. She closed her eyes and pretended to sleep when she heard him coming to the room.

But she might have saved herself the effort. He did not approach the bed but went straight into the closet and took something out. Peeping through her lashes, she saw him selecting clothing for tomorrow. Without even glancing at the bed, he made his way through the dividing door and into what she knew was another suite.

The doors closed with a finality that sent a sharp twinge through her heart. She could go to him, ask for his forgiveness and risk him rejecting her. But somehow, she knew that an apology was not going to work this time. He needed time to himself, and she would give it to him. She needed time herself and was going to take it.

Sleep eluded her as she lay in the silent room, the darkness pressing in on her thoughts. She had always prided herself on being strong, on standing firm in the face of adversity. But now, she felt her resolve crumbling, the weight of her decisions bearing down on her like a heavy shroud.

The pastry shop, her dream, had become a fortress, shutting out everything that once

mattered. She did not mean for it to be this way, didn't foresee how much it would cost her. The ambition that once fueled her now seemed like a relentless tide, pulling her further from the shore of their shared life.

She thought of the moments they had laughed together, the tender exchanges that spoke of a future brimming with possibilities. It pained her to think those moments might be lost, drowned out by the cacophony of her relentless pursuit of success.

Her heart ached with the realization that she had let fear and ambition drive a wedge between them. The dream she had worked so hard to build felt hollow without him by her side.

Turning over, she gazed out the window, the moonlight casting an ethereal glow over the room. She knew she had to find a way back to him, to bridge the chasm that had formed between them.

In the other room just a few feet from where she lay, Leo linked his hands beneath his head and stared up at the intricate pattern of the ceiling. He had taken a gamble and had lost. The loss was so keen, he could feel it cutting into his very soul.

He felt an unbearable emptiness, a void that seemed to grow with each passing moment. The silence of the suite was deafening, amplifying the turmoil within his heart. Leo knew she was just a few feet away, but the emotional distance between them felt like an insurmountable chasm.

The memories of their happier times flooded his mind, taunting him with what they once had. The way she laughed, the sparkle in her eyes when she talked about her dreams, the warmth of her touch – all these moments felt like a distant dream now.

He had pushed her into a relationship. He thought of his damned arrogance. How he had jumped at the chance of being her fake husband, thinking that it would lead to the

real thing. Well, the bloody joke was on him, wasn't it. He inhaled sharply, feeling the pain of his heartbreak taking over.

He wanted to hate her. Oh, how he wished he could march right in that room and tell her to get the hell out of his life. But under the hurt and pain, love beat like a living thing, and it sickened him that he was so vulnerable to her.

Perhaps this was his damn punishment. He had avoided any sort of meaningful relationship all his life. Now for the first time he was in love and his feelings were not reciprocated. He had felt hope that she was coming to love him, even a tiny bit the way he loved her.

What if she was still hung up on that bastard? It pained him to think that she had been willing to marry the guy, while his own proposal had been shoved back at him.

"Well, no more." He whispered fiercely. "I am done."

Chapter 13

He was gone the next morning. The scent of coffee had her stomach churning. Moving lethargically through the kitchen, she made tea. The housekeeper would not be here for the next two hours, and she wanted to leave before the woman arrived.

Sitting at the malachite counter, she took a look around the immaculate kitchen that was the housekeeper's domain. She had invaded it quite a few times after hours, after the housekeeper left to try out some of the recipes she had picked up when they traveled to Europe. Thoughts of the trip sent memories flooding through her mind.

He had made it memorable for her. Going out of his way to put things in place. He had not realized of course that Paris had been the destination for her and Greg. Their honeymoon destination. Unlike that bastard who had broken her heart, Leo had bent

over backwards to make her happy.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:52 am

Her eyes widened at that. Yes, that was his main goal. He had gone to considerable expense, taken time out of his very busy schedule to make certain she accomplished something while on the trip. He had called it a working trip and in part, it had been exactly that.

She had accompanied him a lot. She had used some of the recipes she had gathered, and it had been a success. Paris was also the place where he had taught her the art of making love.

Not just having sex. He had taught her to be bold and that her body was a work of art. He had introduced her to so many things. She had shaken off her initial shyness, the awkwardness that always been there, brought about by her two previous relationships.

He had introduced a passion so intense, she had felt as if she was burning from the inside out. His magnificent body with its sinewy muscles had become a map for her to explore, something she had never done before.

Her body felt feverishly hot as her mind wandered over the night when she had fallen ill, and he brought her soup and tea. The lovemaking had gone on for almost the entire night. He had explored her body and left her weak and shaking with yearning.

Realizing that the tea had gotten cold, and time was passing, she rose and went to get ready to leave. She was going to have to find a way to fix things between them.

She looked up suddenly from the dough she was kneading to make her oatmeal and banana bread to see him walking towards her.

“They said I should come straight here.”

He looked so breathtaking handsome that she had to swallow the lump that had settled in her throat. His suit was a dark charcoal color, the inside shirt, of the palest pink. His overcoat was a darker shade of gray, the cashmere discreetly expensive.

His brown hair caught the overhead light and picked out strands of gold. He looked rich, powerful, and successful, except for the strained look on his face, indicating he had not slept last night as well.

“Hi.” His smile was wobbly and uncertain. She had spent the morning trying to come up with the words to say to him. “I was going to call...”

“I am leaving.”

“What?” Moving away from the counter, she wiped her hands in her apron and came towards him. “Where are you going?”

“Something came up. I am going to Europe.” He glanced at his expensive Romano’s original watch briefly. “I am on my way to the airfield now. I just thought I would swing by and let you know.” He glanced around. “This place is coming along.”

“Yes.” She absently lifted a hand to brush back tendrils of hairs that had escaped the net she had on and left a trail of flower on her cheek. The fact that made him want to wipe her cheek clean and kiss her senseless, sent a wave of nostalgic despair coursing through his body.

He had not slept last night and had given into the longing to take a look at her. He had

entered the bedroom quietly and stood there staring at her sleeping form huddled beneath the cover.

The yearning to slide in next to her had been so acute, it had left him shaking.

“This is sudden, This trip.”

“It is, yes.”

“How long will you be gone?”

“A few days, maybe a week. I would like you to give me your word that you will not do anything hasty.”

“What do you mean? Oh!” She placed a hand automatically on her stomach.

“I want your word, Sherrian.” His voice had become like a flint, his expression formidable. “I do not want to get my lawyers involved, but dammit I will. Wait until I get back so we can discuss the options. Agreed?”

She bristled at his tone and the words. “You think I would try and get rid of...?”

“I don’t know.” It appears I really do not know you after all. I have to go.” He turned and walked away and then stopping just inside the doorway, he turned to look at her, eyes roving over her face as if memorizing her features.

For a brief second, so brief, she thought she had imagined it, the harshness was stripped away to reveal the naked pain and despair. But it was gone so quickly and so was he.

She stood there staring at the empty doorway and felt the finality of his words

hammering at her. She had never seen that side of him before.

Michael handed her the box of tissues and sat across from her. The shop was empty of both customers and employees. She had survived the day, barely after he left and gone about her day baking and attending to her various duties. Then she had locked her office door and stretched out on her small sofa and cried until she fell asleep.

Now she was crying again.

“Hormones!” She sniffed. She had called Michael and asked him to come over.

“I know you are miserable right now and I hate to add to it...”

“Go right ahead.” She waved a sodden tissue at him.

“What possessed you to say those things to him?”

She looked down at her hands, the tissue crumpled and damp in her grip. "I didn't mean to. It just came out. I was scared, and I just... lashed out."

Michael sighed and leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest. "You know he didn't deserve that, right? You just dumped the news on him and did not give him time to process. And right on the tail of it, you made him know in no uncertain terms that the pregnancy was inconvenient."

"I know," she whispered, fresh tears pooling in her eyes. "I know I messed up. But what do I do now? How do I fix this?"

Michael leaned forward, his expression softening. "You talk to him. You tell him how you feel, and you apologize. It is not going to be easy, but it is the only way."

She nodded, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. "You're right. I need to make this right. He said he will not be back for a week. You should have seen the look on his face. Michael, it felt as if he was saying goodbye."

Michael frowned, contemplating her words. "Maybe he needs time to cool off, to come to terms with everything. But you cannot wait forever.

As soon as he gets back, you need to have that conversation. Be honest with him about your fears and your regrets. Show him that you are committed to working through this together. How do you feel about him?"

It was her time to frown. "It's complicated."

"Uncomplicate it, darling. The man clearly has feelings for you, and I saw it that day of the ceremony. Besides which, he would never have agreed to go such lengths for you if that were not the case."

He swept a hand around the widened space that was beginning to take shape. "He made it possible for you to get this, to realize your dream." He turned to look at her. "It seems to me that he has been the one giving and you were the one taking.

You told me that the bastard who brought you so low had nothing to do with the way you are acting, but I disagree. You are still allowing him to color your life. And what is worse, you are taking it out on a good man. One who cares about you. If you are not careful, that good man is going to leave without a backward look."

Leaning her head back, she closed her eyes, the tears she had thought over and done with, leaking through the closed lids. "It might be too late, and I suppose you're right." Opening her eyes, she stared at a point over his left shoulder.

"I went through a period of guilt after the anger and pain of his betrayal. I was always working, was obsessed to prove to Ingrid that I deserved to be a partner and not just an employee. I would research recipes, stay back after everyone had left to experiment and would forget the time or the fact that we had a date.

I resented the time spent away from my baking and it showed. He would teasingly say to me that he was going to have to become an ingredient for me to actually see him. He would be so nice about it, so patient and forgiving, that I took it for granted. Took him for granted.”

Michael waved a dismissive and impatient hand. “Greg was a tool. I don’t care if you spent forever in the kitchen without coming out to take a breath, what he did and with your best friend at that was despicable and showed he had no spine and little class.

Now you are with a man who is the complete opposite and you would do well to remember that.”

“I pushed him away because I was afraid of what loving someone again might mean. I was afraid of losing myself in a relationship like I had before. But now, I see how wrong I was. He deserves better than that. He deserves better than me.”

Michael shook his head. "He deserves the truth. He deserves to know that you are scared and that you are willing to work on it. He deserves a chance to decide for himself what he wants. Do not take that choice away from him."

She took a deep breath, trying to steady herself. "You're right. I need to be brave, not just for him, but for myself too. I cannot let my past dictate my future."

"Exactly," Michael agreed. "It's time to move forward, to let go of the past and embrace the possibilities of the future. You owe it to yourself to be happy."

She gave a small, determined nod. "I'll do it. I will talk to him as soon as he gets back."

Michael smiled, a reassuring warmth in his eyes. "That's the spirit. Just remember, no relationship is without its challenges. It is how you handle them that defines the

strength of your bond."

She managed a weak smile in return. "Thank you, Michael. I do not know what I'd do without you."

"You would figure it out," he said with a wink. "You're stronger than you think, and you deserve every bit of happiness coming your way."

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:52 am

Leo had not lied when he told her he had to leave because of an emergency. He had lied when he said he had to be the one to deal with it. He could have sent any number of his acquisition team. It was not something detrimental.

Just a few hiccups with the finalizing of the contract and the start date on the renovation. He could have handled it from home, but he wanted to get away. Had to. Staying near her was driving him insane. He had been tempted to beg and that would have been a damn mistake.

Leo had always prided himself on his composure, his ability to maintain control in every situation. But with her, that control seemed to slip through his fingers like sand. Her presence was intoxicating, and the walls he had built around his heart crumbled whenever she was near.

As he sat in the sterile hotel room, staring at the untouched papers spread across the desk, he could not help but replay their last conversation in his mind.

The way her eyes had shimmered with unshed tears, the way her voice had trembled with a mix of fear and determination. She was bravely confronting her demons, and it only made him want her more.

He knew he had to return, to face her and the feelings he had been running from. But the thought of confronting his own vulnerabilities terrified him. What if opening up meant exposing his deepest insecurities? What if she saw the parts of him that he had always kept hidden?

But then he thought of her, standing up to her fears, ready to embrace the future

despite the shadows of her past. A past shrouded in betrayal. Was she still in love with that bastard? Even the idea of it pained his heart.

But the fear of losing her forever was even greater. He could handle any business crisis with ease, but the thought of losing her, of never seeing her smile or hearing her laugh again, was unbearable.

Pushing to his feet, he wandered over to the window to look out. He had chosen to stay at a hotel instead of the flat where they had stayed on their 'honeymoon'. Was it only a few weeks ago?

He wondered bleakly. It felt like months, even years. So much had happened since then. He had allowed himself to hope that she was coming around to his way of thinking.

Had secretly hoped that their terrific union would produce a child which would force her to marry him for real. But he had miscalculated the depth of her ambitions. Could he fault her for wanting to be the best? He shook his head even as the thought emerged.

He should be lauding her. She saw something she wanted and fought for it. She had not forced him into the decision, he had gone ahead with his eyes wide open and if he was being honest, he had had his reasons as well.

He had taken a gamble, and it had not paid off. His heart was shattered. His mind in a turmoil. So, she did not want children with him, did not want to marry him. It hurt like the living hell, but he was going to have to live with it.

He had told her he would get his lawyers involved and he meant every word. If it comes to that, he would take legal actions. She was damn well not getting rid of his baby.

The townhouse felt empty, like an elegant shell that echoed with loneliness and neglect. The place was spotless as usual, the kitchen pristine. He had not called, and she was sure he had landed by now. Was he back inside the flat where they had stayed before? She knew it was owned by his company.

Or was he at some French bitch's home? Wrapped in her arms. The thought of that sent rage and jealousy swamping her. After what they had shared in his bed, the idea of him doing that to anyone else....

"I would kill him and her." She swore as she went about slamming down pots and pans with the intention of making some pastries. Something creative and complicated that would require her complete concentration. Digging inside the huge pantry, she gathered her ingredients to add to what she had picked up at the market.

Baking had been her anathema in the past, somewhere she had escaped to when her parents had died, and she felt as if she was going mad. She had baked, been swallowed up inside the intricacies and the art.

When Greg had destroyed her confidence in herself, she had buried herself in baking. Ingrid had allowed her to bake to her heart's content.

And during that time, she had come up with something stunning, things that had been a hit with the customers. Now she was facing multiple challenges, ones that she had no idea what to do. Michael had asked her if she had feelings for Leo and she could have told him a resounding yes.

But she was afraid to voice them. She had loved Greg, or thought she had. Wasn't she ready to have a life with him? Planning a wedding while trying to handle the shop? And she had been dead wrong.

While she had been going on about her business, planning a life, he had been sneaking around with her best friend. Someone she had been friends with since high school. She had never seen the signs.

When Serena had talked about Greg, telling her she deserved better and urging her to think about a lasting commitment, she had thought the girl was being supportive and having her back. Never dreaming that she had been marking her own territory and homing in on her fiancé.

She slapped flour inside the bowl and added creamy milk. She was making a celebratory cake with rich mango, cherries, and bananas. She had come up with the idea while watching a show based in the Caribbean.

It was complicated enough and even though her taste was more than a bit off, she was going to go on and follow her instinct. She had been baking most of her life and knew what to put where.

Afterwards, she was going to make vanilla/coconut/raspberry cream sponge and if time allows and she was not fainting on her feet, she would make a lychee and raspberry mousse. She was not looking forward to going upstairs to that impossibly big bedroom all by herself.

She should have stayed at her place, but it was too late for that now.

She poured the mixture into the cake tin, her mind a mix of emotions, thoughts clashing like the ingredients she so vigorously combined. Memories of Greg's betrayal mixed with the uncertainty of her feelings for Leo created a storm within her that she could hardly contain.

But as her hands worked the dough, the chaos in her mind slowly became manageable.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:52 am

The aroma of the baking cake began to fill the kitchen, a warm, comforting scent that seemed to wrap around her like a blanket. She felt a sense of accomplishment, a fleeting moment of peace amid the turmoil. She wiped her hands on her apron and glanced at the clock. Time seemed to stand still in the quiet house.

As the cake baked, she cleaned up the kitchen, her movements methodical and deliberate. With each wiped counter and washed dish, she felt a little more in control, a little more ready to face the challenges ahead.

The timer rang, and she took the cake out of the oven, the golden-brown crust a perfect testament to her skill. She set it on the counter to cool, a small smile playing on her lips. She had done it. She had created something beautiful amidst the chaos.

By this time, her stomach was heaving, and she was sweating. Sitting on the stool, she pressed her hand to her chest and took several deep breaths.

She had not allowed herself to think of the life growing inside her and because she had not done that, then she hadn't made an appointment to confirm her pregnancy. But she knew, without a doubt, she knew she was pregnant. The symptoms were all there. She had never missed a period – ever.

Tears pricked at the corners of her eyes, but she blinked them away. She had to be strong. She had to face this, just like she had faced everything else. There was a life inside her now, a precious life that depended on her. She could not afford to crumble.

She stood up, determined to keep going. She had decisions to make, preparations to consider. The uncertainty with Leo, the betrayal by Greg, all seemed so trivial in

comparison. A new focus took root in her heart, one that eclipsed all her previous worries.

She went back to the counter, slicing a piece of the cooled cake and taking a bite. The flavors burst in her mouth, a symphony of sweet and tangy notes. She smiled, a genuine smile, and felt a glimmer of hope. She could do this. She would do this. For herself, for the baby.

The kitchen, once a place of escape, now seemed to hum with new purpose. She cleaned up the rest of the mess, her movements lighter, her heart a bit steadier. Tomorrow, she would call and make an appointment and go on from there.

Chapter 14

Dr. Sanju Chiara was an Indian doctor, a petite ball of energy who had been recommended by Michael.

“She is a friend of a friend and is very personable and easygoing. She is also one of the best OB in the state.” He had also offered to accompany her, and she had said yes.

Last night had not been a restful one for her. Not even after the hours of baking that had taken her into the early hours of the morning had done its trick. She had not heard from Leo and spent a restless night twisting and turning in the bed.

She could understand that he was angry and hurt, but to completely ignore her was something she could not understand and had said as much to Michael.

“Give him time to cool off.”

“Or find someone else. Be with someone else.” She muttered.

“Darling, you did drive him away.”

The truth hurt, but Michael was right. She could always call him but was afraid that he was going to tell her that it was over. She had seen the look of finality on his face, and it was haunting her.

She got dressed and met the doctor in her office. The medical complex was a couple of miles away from the pastry shop and could be accessed easily from the highway. It made it easy for her if she had any sort of emergency.

The doctor smiled and gestured for her to take a seat. “I know Michael is not the father.”

“No, he’s not.”

She nodded. “Anything you say to me will remain confidential.”

“I know. How is my health?”

“Perfect.” The doctor made some notations on her pad. “You’re a little underweight which is surprising since you own that perfectly fantastic pastry shop on Holland Street. I have had some spectacular pastries from there over the years, especially since you have taken over fully.”

“I should have thought of bringing you something. I spent most of last night baking.” She twisted the strap of her tote absently. “How is the fetus? That is what it’s referred to, isn’t it?”

The woman nodded. “You are approximately four and a half weeks pregnant and should be delivering your baby the first week of June.”

“My birthday’s in June. June eight.”

“Wouldn’t it be wonderful if the baby arrives then?”

“No. I hate sharing my birthday with anyone.” She smiled slightly. “What now?”

“You said you have been having a difficult time with your stomach. I am prescribing some pills to try and combat the nausea and some iron tablets and folic acid. I am also making a list of things you should be eating. Not too many sweets.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:52 am

“I hardly eat what I bake and that is something I should not be telling a customer.”

“Probably not.” The doctor admitted with a laugh. “Your stress level is also high. I would recommend you stay away from anything that give you an inordinate amount of worries.”

“I am in a stressful business.” What she left unsaid was the fact that the man who had planted the seed inside her was on the verge of leaving and she had no idea what to do about it. “I have expansions going on and am introducing a lot of new recipes.”

“Try to stay as calm and as serene as possible. We do not want you ending up with high blood pressure.” She scribbled again. “I would like to see you back here by the ending of December. I know the Christmas season is your busiest but hire more people and try to stay off your feet as much as possible. Do your exercises, but do not overdo them.”

“Thanks.” Rising, she collected the prescription as well as the sheet of paper with the nutrition list and headed out to where Michael was waiting for her.

“Ready?”

She nodded.

He waited until they were out in the parking lot before he spoke.

“How did it go?”

“I am healthy and so is the fetus.” She got in and strapped in, stretching her legs out. She was tired and miserable, conditions not conducive to pregnancy. “I am four and a half weeks pregnant.” A smile touched her lips. “Which means it happened the first time we made love.” Leaning her head back, she closed her eyes.

“I am beginning to accept my condition.” She turned her head to look at him. “Somehow, since Leo left, I have this feeling of anticipation and wonder. I have a life growing inside me and that is a miracle. I bought several books online about pregnancy and what to expect.”

He navigated the noon traffic and stopped at the light. All around there was the excitement of the upcoming holiday season. Billboards touting Sale! Sale! Sale! And pretty lights in every store window.

“Are you going to call him?”

“No. I thought about it last night into this morning, but I do not know what to say to him, how to make it right. And I am afraid that he is going to tell me to leave.” She was fighting the tears. She was either crying or on the verge of sleeping and right now, she wanted to do both. She was so damned tired.

“You should go home and get some rest.”

She shook her head. “The place is too big and too lonely.”

He drove into the parking lot of her store and stopped. “Tell you what. Let’s get dressed up and go to a club tonight.”

“It’s the middle of the damn week and you know how I hate clubs.”

“Which makes me wonder about you. Come on darling, just for one night. Dress up

in one of those fancy pieces that Leo bought you, slap some makeup on that lovely face of yours and then let's go dancing. In a few months, you will be as big as a house and unattractive...,” he grinned at her dirty look.

“Perhaps not unattractive per se because you are a dream boat. But ungainly and heavy on your feet. Before that time comes, then let's go crazy.”

“Okay, fine. If it will get you off my case.”

Leaning over, he kissed her on the cheek. “It will work out, I promise you.”

Leo stayed longer and that was deliberate. His business in Paris was done within three days, but he lingered. And had dinner with Sophia.

She made him laugh and forget his troubles at home with her uncomplicated presence and flirtatious mannerisms. They had dinner at the hotel, and she tried to persuade him to invite her up to his suite. He declined gracefully of course and realized he was not even tempted.

Sophia Dubois was a classically beautiful French woman with thick waist length dark hair, almond eyes, and a rich caramel complexion. She was also passionate and easy to get along with. She had been an excellent lover, but like most Europeans, did not believe in monogamy.

He liked her but had never given a thought to anything permanent between them.

“She must be a looker, this woman who is standing between us.”

“She is.” He admitted, taking a sip of his wine.

“Then why is she not with you?”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:52 am

“I am here on business, and she could not leave her store.”

“She is, how do you say?” She waved a delicate hand in the air as she tried to find the word. “A pâtissier.”

“She is, yes.”

She eyed him over her glass. “She makes magic in the kitchen and the bedroom.”

He laughed softly. “Something like that.”

“I cannot compete with that kind of magic.” Her lips formed a red moue of regret. “I have missed your expertise in the bedroom. And have to say that is an extremely fortunate woman.”

He felt the pain of that statement and had to tamp it down. He had not called. It probably was petty, and he really should be checking on her, but he was too vulnerable right now and the pain was too raw.

“I am in love with her. Completely.”

She gave him an intuitive look. “And if she has not returned that love, she is a complete fool.”

“Leather pants, knee-high boots and a form fitting black cashmere sweater.” He

stared at her in delight. “I am going to be the envy of every man in the club. We are going to Timmy’s by the way.”

“I hate that place.” She complained as she slid into the passenger seat of the vehicle. “It’s a social club instead of a real one and everyone there wants to be seen.”

“It is where the ‘wanna be’s’ go to get noticed.”

“I thought you wanted us to dance. No one dances at that place. All they do is sit around and watch each other.”

Michael laughed in delight. “That is exactly what they do. But we will sit, have some non-alcoholic wine, eat pate and dish on the minor celebrities there. I happen to know who is screwing who.”

“Something I am not interested in.” She reminded him dryly. She would have preferred to stay home and try and get some sleep, but that had not happened over the last few days, and she doubt that it would be different tonight.

“Chin up, darling, I guarantee we will have fun.”

And she did. It surprised her that as soon as she stepped into the lofty interior of what was known as ‘the celebrity’s club’, she started to have fun. They were ushered into a room spinning giddily with a kaleidoscope of colorful lights.

People mingled prettily and the conversations were muted. A live band was playing, with several couples dancing unenthusiastically on the blue-green dance floor.

The bar was an oblong structure with several barkeeps serving up stylish looking drinks. The women vied with the men, and it was a toss up to who was more elegantly dressed.

Jewelries sparkled in the muted lights.

They were served a pink frothy concoction that tasted amazingly of strawberries and watermelon and was soothing to her stomach. Nuts were arranged attractively on a wide plate and wafer-thin breads were immediately sent to their table.

Michael knew everyone there of course and dished about them in a lazy speculative voice that had her laughing uncontrollable.

“I don’t believe you,” she gasped.

“Would I lie to you?” He asked drolly.

“Oh yes you would.”

He grinned at her astute knowledge of him. “Of course I would. But I am telling you that Stanley there is a cross dresser. And also, a closet homophobe. He lives with his mother in a horrible ranch type home that needs a lot of repairs.

Mommy dearest holds the purse strings and even though he has a minor success as a producer for some B rated movies, he does not get to call the shots.

The pitiful thing tried to get out from under her thumb twice by getting married, but they both ended in divorce.” He sipped his drink, eyes twinkling as he warmed to the story. “I think they’re doing it.”

She stared at him in disgust. “That is sick. And now you are just making it up.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:52 am

“I got it from an unimpeachable source,” he told her loftily.

“Your gay community?” She arched a brow at him as she sipped the drink. He was right. She had needed to get out and away from her troubles.

“I would have you know that we always know what’s going on around us.” He nodded to an elegantly dressed blonde. “Laura Pettigrew, star of the not so popular sitcom. She is married to the producer and sleeping with her costar.”

“What else is new?” She snorted.

“She is going on sixty and the poor boy is only twenty-two.”

“Eew.”

“Precisely.” He nodded. “Her husband is sleeping with her daughter.”

She frowned at him. “Incest?”

“No!” He laughed. “Laura’s daughter from her first marriage. She has been down the aisle five times already. Husband number five is in his forties. The daughter is in her twenties.”

“That is disgusting. How do you tolerate that revolving cesspool?”

“By having fun with it.” He grinned at her. “And staying pure.”

“Yeah right.”

She was asked to dance by a very attractive man with wavy dark hair and a thick mustache whom she recognized as an actor in a sitcom and was suitably flattered when he asked for her number.

“Sorry, married.”

She was on the dance floor three times with three different men. By the time she was back at the table, she was dizzy and out of breath.

“It seems like someone is having fun.”

“I am.’ She said glowingly. “Thanks for insisting that I come.”

“What are friends for?”

But the night and all of its magic ended when she received a terse text two nights later from Leo.

“I am staying the weekend at the club.”

That was it, nothing more. No ..., ”how are you feeling? We need to talk,” nothing like that. She read the text three times and felt anger consuming her. Yes, dammit, she had hurt him, but she had a right to hear from him.

And she missed him so much, it was like an ache inside her. She had told Ingrid she was pregnant, and the woman had been so happy for her. She had not told her the part where it was likely she was going to be a single mom. That her ‘fake’ marriage was on the verge of imploding.

Deciding not to worry herself about something she had no control over, she put aside the anger and fear and asked Mrs. Elliot about Christmas decorations. If the woman thought it strange that she was by herself as a newlywed, she did not mention it and volunteered to help with the decorations.

Mr. Leo usually hires a company to get it done. He entertains here sometimes, you know.”

“I would like to do it myself,” Sherrian told her.

“He prefers real trees to the plastic ones.”

“So, we will get a real tree.” She called up the tree lot and had one delivered. The owner hemmed and hawed at first, but when she mentioned Leo’s name, his attitude changed.

Not only did he send over his best, but the men carted it upstairs and set it up where she wanted it – right near the recessed cabinet and away from the huge hearth.

She spent evenings when she was alone, decorating the tree. She had plans to cook Christmas dinner and invite Michael, Ingrid and Ben and of course her aunt. That is of course, if she was still living here.

She would continue as if everything was normal, until she had to face the music.

“Mind if I join you?” The familiar sultry voice had him stiffening. He had stepped out onto the covered balcony to get away from the incessant chatter going on in the dining room.

“Maye, how are you?” He turned to face the woman draped from head to toes in rich mink. Diamonds studded her lobes and peeped from her throat and her fingers were adorned with the stones.

“Wonderful, darling.” She purred, gliding over to sit next to him. “I saw you stepped out and wanted to have a word.” She had brought her flute of champagne with her and eyed him over the rim, her catlike eyes like a shark. “Rumors are that you are married.”

“Not a rumor.” He resigned himself to enduring her company. Maye Davis was a legend in the theater and one who had been pursuing him relentlessly for the past year.

“She is not here with you?”

You know damn well, she isn’t. He thought sardonically. The woman would have done her research beforehand. “She had to work.”

Her light laughter drifted out. “Darling, but of course she does not. She is married to you, which means she can afford to sit at home and twiddle her thumbs.”

“She is not like that.”

“Next you’re going to tell me she does not care about the money.” Maye crossed long elegant legs that had her stockings whispering.

“She doesn’t.”

“How cute.” She took sip of champagne. “Rumor also has it that she is a baker...”

His mouth tightened marginally at the scathing tone.

“She is a magnificent pastry chef.”

“And you’re defending her.” Sharp eyes settled on his face. “Could it be that the oh so unattainable Leo Coleman has fallen in love?”

“It so happens that I am.”

“Oh dear. That means my plan of slipping into your room is all shot to pieces.”

“I’m afraid so.”

“Perhaps we can comfort each other just for tonight. We are both here alone, so there is no harm in being together.” She allowed her mink to shift slightly, revealing her impressive cleavage. “I won’t tell if you don’t.”

“I am flattered by the offer, but have to say no., finishing his drink, he rose and realized that he did not need to be here.

The minute he let himself into the apartment, the scent of baking curled around him like a welcome home banner. The scent was unbelievable and staggering, so much so that it took a moment for him to be able to move.

Shrugging out of his jacket, he carefully hung it inside the closet, his movements careful and precise. He slipped out of his boots and put them away, trying to tell himself that he was not prevaricating.

Then taking a deep breath, he headed towards the kitchen and stood in the arched doorway. She was not there, but the counter was filled with the evidence of her work. Pies of all descriptions, tarts, cakes and assortments of sweets he could not identify on the wide counter.

Turning away from it all and ignoring the strange comfort he felt in the pit of his stomach; he started towards the stairs when something told him to try the living room.

His heart did a flip as he stepped inside the room. A fire was burning inside the huge hearth, the light from the flames, flickering over the woman huddled beneath a thick throw on the wide sofa.

A Christmas tree tower in one corner, the decorations haphazardly applied with an obviously heavy hand. In spite of himself, he could not help the smile tugging at his lips as he stared at it.

There were also gifts piled under the tree. He did not particularly pay much attention to the season, except when he had to entertain at home and this year, he had decided not to.

His plan had been to spend the holiday just here. He had the idea of jetting them off to some exotic island to get out of the icy cold and just spend a week basking in the

sun and making love the entire time. But now that had changed.

His expression hardened as memories of their last time together came crashing back. He was about to turn and go upstairs when she opened her eyes as if sensing his presence.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:52 am

“Leo?” The sleep husky voice awakened such a turmoil inside him that he could not respond for a second. “You’re back.”

“Yes. Go back to sleep. I did not mean to wake you,” he said curtly.

“I am fine. I was baking and decorating the tree. I started three days ago, with Elly – Mrs. Elliot assisting me and I finally got it finished. What do you think?”

Tearing his eyes away from the enticing and fetching picture she made, he glanced at the tree and pretended to be studying it. “You should not have gone to any trouble.”

Sherrian felt her heart taking a dive.

“It’s no trouble.” She cleared her throat and pushed off the covers. “Are you hungry? I made pies and...”

“I ate at the club.” He stiffened when she came towards him and refused to show any reaction.

“How about something to drink?”

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” He lashed out. He could smell her lingering perfume or body wash and the gnawing inside him was getting worse. “Is that what we are doing now? Pretending that the argument a week ago did not happen?”

Well, it damn well did and you trying to force food down my throat and decorating a

damn tree, which by the way looks like it is about to topple from all the decorations, does not change the fact that you do not want my baby.

I am tired and not in the mood to be humored, so whatever the hell game you are playing, I am not buying it.” He turned on his heels and strode from the room, leaving her standing there.

She had expected that. Or something like it but hearing the bitterness and anger in his deep voice had staggered her.

She had felt a shift, felt something that had her opening her eyes and when she saw him standing there, words could not express her joy. She was going to fix this. He was here now, and she was going to have to find a way to get through to him before it was too late.

Chapter 15

He wasn't in their bedroom. She had expected that as well, but it hurt just the same to realize that he was avoiding her.

Taking a deep breath, she marched over to the adjoining door and shoved it open, just in time to see him walking out of the bathroom. A towel was slung low on his hips and the water was still glistening on the hairs of his chest. He lifted a hand to drag it through his damp hair, when he caught sight of her.

“Don't you know when to back the hell off. I am not in the mood.”

His voice was icy with displeasure, but she was not going to allow that to stop her.

“I want to apologize...”

“That is not going to work. I need to be alone...,” he stopped when she marched over and stood in front of him. “Don’t!”

He went rigid when she placed her hands on his chest, her head drifting back to gaze at him. The sight of those limpid pools of dark brown eyes combined with her touch was weakening him. “I know you do not like me very much right now and I admit that I hate what I said to you. But I want to show you that I have changed my mind.”

His muscles jerked.

“Why is that?”

“I made a knee-jerk comment about the pregnancy. I was blindsided and certainly was not looking forward to being a mother, at least not yet.” Her fingers curled into the hairs. “I am asking you to forgive me...” She jolted slightly when he gripped her wrists as if to push her away.

“I need time.” He told her harshly. “Just give me time to think...”

“No!” Dragging her hands away, she quickly gripped the edges of the towel and untied the knot.

“Stop!” He hissed out a breath as she curled her fingers around his hardening flesh. His hands landed on her shoulders, and he was still fighting the magnetic pull, when she zeroed in on his other weakness.

Bending her head, she caught a nipple between her teeth and started sucking on the flesh. If that was not enough to drive him to utter madness, she was using her thumb to massage the reddened tip, spreading the moisture over the flesh.

His control – thin at best, simply broke. His limbs felt like liquid and his blood was

boiling, he had spent a week away from her, determined to get her out of his head. Coming home to see her curled up on the sofa made him realize how futile his efforts had been. Now all he could feel was a need so intense, he was being swallowed by it.

Dragging off the thin silk robe, he fisted his fingers in her hair and dragged her head up. Seizing her lips, he devoured her mouth. She melted against him, her slender body molding itself to his. The feel of her, the potency of her nipples rubbing on his chest, shattered him even more.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:52 am

Lifting her into his arms, he carried her towards the bed and without breaking the kiss, eased her down, following her down. He savored the taste of her on his tongue, the feel of her slender curves against his starving body.

Ending the kiss, he trailed the curve of her cheek, the sides of her mouth and down to the sensitive spot at the side of her neck.

Her cry of triumph quickly turned to fevered moans as he blaze a fire to her breast, his tongue toyed with the nipple and had her grabbing his hair, clutching at the thick strands as he first used the tip of his tongue on the pebble like flesh before taking it between his teeth and suckled.

Her cries echoed around the room, her body arching frenziedly towards his. “Now! Now!” she demanded, lifting her body and trying to force him to enter her.

“Not yet.” His voice was a harsh whisper as he switched to the other nipple to give it the same thorough treatment.

“Please.” She dug her fingers into his shoulders as he went further down.

He was mad to have her, but was determined to have his fill, determined to taste and pleasure her until she was as mad as he was.

Lifting her legs, he draped them over his shoulders and lifted her hips. As soon as his tongue entered her musky moistness, she came. The climax had her jerking upwards, fingers curling into the sheets and her body convulsing. Tilting her head back, she screamed hoarsely, the climax pommeling her until she could hardly bear it.

He scooted up and covered her trembling body with his, driving into her with a force that shoved her towards the padded headboard.

He stayed still for a minute, his teeth gritted as he fought for control. Her familiar tightness wrapped around him like a cloak.

Her hands drifted up his chest slowly as she opened her eyes.

His hands framed her face gently, head lowered to take her lips. The kiss was gentle and sweet and had her leaking again.

Her hands came up around his shoulders as she kissed him back – pouring her heart and what she had been feeling for the past week into it. He moved then, slowly at first as if trying desperately to stay in control, but that was not to be.

As soon as she started moving, he was lost. His control broke into a million pieces and forgetting about finesse, he drove into her forcefully. She came again, her hands racing up and down his back, fingers biting into his shoulders. Emotions swept through him like a violent storm as he poured himself into her until he was completely empty.

It took minutes for the shuddering to stop and for him to gather enough composure to realize he was more than likely crushing her. When he started to slide off her, she clung, wrapping her arms tight around his neck and her legs around his waist.

“Just let me...”

“No.” She whispered against his throat. “Do not leave me. Please.”

His heart shuddered at the plaintive sound of her voice. “Baby, just...”

“I love you.” She blurted out. He went still as emotions stormed through his body. Lifting his head, he shifted so that he could see her face.

“What?”

Her cheeks were still damp with tears, her lips swollen. “I was such an idiot. It took you staying away for a week to make me realize what I have.” Her hand cupped his jaw. “I hurt you and I am sorry for that. But I was scared and selfish and determined not to be hurt again.

I want this baby, Leo; our baby and I am sorry I said otherwise. I spent the last week living in fear that you were going to call and tell me to leave.” She swallowed the lump in her throat. “I wanted to call you, but I was afraid of what you would say and scared that you were with someone else.”

“You love me?” His voice was thick, his eyes intense.

“Yes.” She laughed shakily. “And I know you probably hate me...”

“Never.” He placed a hand over hers and closed his eyes briefly. “Sweetheart, how could you not see that I have been in love with you for two years?”

She went still, her eyes widening. “Sorry?”

He chuckled at her stunned expression. “Ever since I bumped into you while I was crossing the street.”

“The first time we met?”

“Yes. Baby, let me...” He shifted so that he was lying next to her.

“But – but – I was with...”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:52 am

“Yes. You were engaged to another man, and I kept hoping that something would go wrong.” Lifting her hand, he kissed the knuckles.

She could hardly believe what she was hearing. “but even after Greg died and you were still coming around...”

“You made it plain that you were not on the market for a relationship, and I could see you were grieving. I did not want to stand in his shadow.”

“Leo.” She felt as if her heart was breaking, and the tears started again.

“Baby, no.” Using the pad of his thumbs, he wiped at the tears. “That’s supposed to be good news.” He added teasingly.

“I can’t.” Moving forward, she buried her face in the warmth of his throat and clung.

“Sweetheart...”

She shook her head, fingers digging into his chest. “I wasted so much time falling for the wrong guy and all the time...,” she lifted her head, her cheeks wet with tears, eyes dripping. “I can tell you it’s hormones, but it’s not only that.” Taking his hand, she laced her fingers through his. “How could you love me all this time and never say anything?”

She could not comprehend it and thinking of how he had stayed faithfully in love with her when she had never given him the slightest bit of encouragement, made her want to curl into him and never let go.

“It seems that when I fall in love, it’s for keeps.” He told her wryly.

“Leo.”

“Baby?”

“I want to be your wife and have children. Maybe three or four. And I want to marry you. I want a proper wedding with all the bells and whistles, even if that means telling my aunt that the first wedding was a sham.

I want the world to know that you belong to me. I am going to flout tradition and make my own wedding cake, one that is going to be spectacular, and I want to go away with you, just the two of us to some isolated location where I can make up for the time I lost.”

“Sweetheart, words failed him, and he felt as if he was melting inside. His hands cupped her face. “I have not asked you how you are feeling. I left you alone and never called to find out.” One hand drifted to her flat stomach. “How are you darling?”

She told him about the visit to the doctor and shook her head as a frown touched his brow.

“You were understandably mad at me. From now on, we will go to my appointments together.” She eased away the frown lines gently. “I thought the pastry shop was all I wanted, the most important thing to me.

Especially after I found out about Greg. I closed myself off from everything else and focused fiercely on that one aspect. Even when I got close to you, when we made love, I refused to see what was right in front of me.” Her finger traced his strong jawline.

“None of it matters anymore, except you and the baby I am carrying. I love you Leo. I think that I started to fall in love with you when we went to Paris.” She smiled whimsically. “Maybe it was the magic of the city, or it was you, but I love you so much, that I spent the last week pining for you.”

He kissed her gently, exploring her mouth with a tenderness that stole her breath. And then he gathered her against him, wrapping his arms around her possessively. Words failed him again.

He had come home thinking he was going to have to tell her goodbye and here he was, with her in his arms and a declaration of love he had been longing for in what seems like forever. She was his, finally. She belonged to him. His heart had always been hers, but now it was no longer one-sided.

“How about Christmas Day?” His deep voice rumbled against her cheek.

“I think it’s perfect.” She told him dreamily.

“Great.” He shifted so that he could look into her eyes. “Now, if you are not too exhausted, I would like to make up for lost time.”

“I was going to insist on it.”

Michael took in the sparkle in her eyes and the smile on her lips.

“I take it that everything is now coming up roses?”

She nodded. “What are you doing here?”

“I was just on my way to a meeting with my agent and decided to drop by and see how you were getting on.” He followed behind her as she zipped from stove to counter, preparing something that was making the saliva pool inside his mouth.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:52 am

“I am making raspberry and banana cream pie. An order for Leo’s Christmas party at his office. I promised him I would not overdo it, so I hired two more staff and – taste this,” She handed him a delicate pastry.

“I think I just died and went to heaven. This is amazing.”

“Something new, I am trying.”

“You succeeded. What is the chance of me getting a box of it?”

She looked over at him and laughed. The renovations were finally finished, and the men were out of her hair. She was trying to get everything in place before the wedding.

“Which reminds me, we are getting married. In a church this time and with me wearing a champagne-colored gown. Christmas Day, so whatever plans you have, cancel them. I want you to be my man of honor.”

He hurried to keep up with her as she went to box some things and handed them to the hovering staff member.

“That’s a week away.”

“I know. We want to get it done, so that we can go away for two weeks.” She grinned at him over her shoulder as she moved to the oven.

“Darling, such short notice. Who will you be inviting?”

“My aunt, Ingrid and Ben, Leo’s mom, and that’s it. Just an intimate ceremony.”

“How are you going to explain the second ceremony?”

“Leo is telling his mom the truth and I already confessed to Aunt Gloria.”

“You did? How did she take it?”

“Surprisingly well. She is so happy about the pregnancy, and she loves Leo. Told me that I finally landed myself a good man and it does not hurt that he is also loaded.”

“Where are you going for the honeymoon?”

“Some undisclosed location where there are no cell services. Now shoo. I have a million things to do, and I am meeting with Monique to discuss my wedding dress.”

“Darling, I am so happy for you.”

She stopped and took a breath. “I love him, Michael.” She pressed her hand to her stomach. Pulling him aside, she told him that Leo had loved her for the past two years. “Even when I was with Greg.”

“I suspected as much,” he mused.

“I still cannot believe it and I have no idea what to do with that kind of information.”

“Treasure it and him, darling. And you deserve to be happy.”

Their wedding day dawned cold and crisp, the sun barely flickering through the puffy

white clouds.

But to the couple, it was the most beautiful day ever and simply perfect. The chapel was tiny and lavishly decorated by members of her aunt's women's group. Whatever Leo had told his mother had obviously worked and the woman had flown over for the ceremony.

"You have made my son a very happy man and are carrying my first grandchild, something I have been looking forward to for years." Celeste told her in an emotional voice. "For that, I am eternally grateful." She had surprised Sherrian, by hugging her tightly. "I had my doubts about you at first, but no longer."

The ceremony was completely different from the one they had before, but that was to be expected. The marriage before had been a fake, something cooked up to get her what she wanted.

This time, she was marrying the man she loved, and it felt as if she was walking on air. She had insisted on doing it right and spent the night at her aunt's place, which was in the process of being sold. Aunt Gloria had accepted the offer of taking over Sherrian's house, since she would not be needing it anymore.

Their vows were repeated and before long, they were husband and wife.

The reception was being held at the townhouse, with caterers hired to take care of the meals. Sherrian had spent three days preparing her wedding cake and as she had told Leo, it was spectacular.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:52 am

The towering six tier, raspberry, chocolate, and cream ganache was too much for the small crowd, but it was so delicious, it had them coming back for several more slices.

The bride was ethereal and exquisite in a clinging champagne silk that highlighted her slender curls. Her hair had been styled by a professional and had pearls intertwined through the strands. She was wearing the same wedding rings he had given her before and firmly told him that they were perfect. “I don’t need anything else.”

Mrs. Elliot had already packed their bags, and they were almost ready to go.

“We have ten minutes to say our goodbyes.” Her groom came up behind her and wrapped his hands around her waist as she was talking to Michael. Leaning against him, she tilted her head to look at him. He was still wearing the tux that he had chosen for the ceremony, but had loosened the tie and it was hanging around his neck.

“And you have been on your feet for the entire time.” He glanced over at Michael who was staring at them in fascination. “I owe you a debt of gratitude. Sherrian told me you accompanied her to her doctor’s appointment.”

“She is my best friend.”

“While I am very grateful, that responsibility is now mine.”

Michael’s lips curled into a smile at the hidden warning.

“I would not have it any other way. Enjoy your honeymoon.”

“You really meant it when you say this place was off the grid.” She exclaimed as he brought the vehicle to a stop as soon as they cleared the winding stone driveway.

She had fallen asleep during the two-hour long journey and was just now waking up.

“You were not very good company,” he teased, “I had to hum to keep from falling asleep.”

She cast him a look. “I would have loved to hear that.” Pushing the door open, she stepped out and breathed in the clean, icy air. “It’s a cottage, with a chimney and there’s smoke coming from it.”

Hefting out their suitcases, he took her hand and led them to the front porch of the faded pink and white stone structure.

“Who owns it?”

“I do.” Fishing the keys from beneath a stone, he opened the door to a lovely living room where a fire was blazing cheerfully inside the hearth.

“Yours?”

“Hmm.” Putting the cases down, he helped her off with her jacket and hung it along with his on a peg just inside the doorway. “It was originally my dad’s. Hungry?”

She shook her head and went to stand in front of the fire. The room was plain, with wooden floors polished to perfection and a pair of corduroy-covered sofas arranged

around the fire.

Taking her hand, he led her to a rocker near the fireplace and sat with her on his lap.

“It’s a fishing cottage.” He inhaled her seductive scent and closed his eyes in contentment.

He had cleared his schedule for the next two weeks and intend to enjoy every minute of the time spent with her. In bed. It was too cold to go exploring anyway and all he wanted was to make love to her until they get tired of each other. Something he did not foresee happening.

Leaning against him, she felt the peace washing over her.

“Tell me about him.” She invited.

A whimsical smile touched his lips as he ran his hands up and down her arms. “He was strict. A man of exceedingly high moral standing. But he was a very good husband and father.” He bent to kiss her cheek absently.

“He and my mother were madly in love with each other. They did everything together and sometimes I would get the feeling that I was intruding.

They never said anything to make me feel that way and I knew without a doubt that they loved me, but they were a unit.” He tilted her chin up. “I was very young when I decided that I would not settle for anything less than what they had.”

His eyes wandered over her exquisite face. “I have a lot to give thanks for. I am with the woman I am utterly and completely in love with and wonders upon wonders, she is in love with me.”

“I am.” Wrapping her hands around his neck, she brought his head down. “I think we should get this honeymoon started.”

“I agree completely.” He whispered against her mouth.

Chapter 16

She closed her eyes and purred as he hit the spot on her feet. His clever fingers kneaded the tight muscles and sent satisfaction coursing through her body. As soon as she opened her eyes, she read the expression on his handsome face and knew what was coming.

“Okay, fine. Let’s hear it.”

“Hear what?” His tone was deceptively mild as he continued to massage the skin.

“I can hear you thinking.” She wriggled her toes and eased back on the pillows.

“Your extraordinary talents stretches to mind reading now? I am impressed.”

“Okay, knock off the sarcasm. I am overdoing it. Satisfied?”

“Are you overdoing it?” His tone was still mild as his hands slid up towards her calves and started on them. “Are you suggesting that being six months pregnant with a series of pregnancy related complications should at least have you slowing down.” He efficiently pressed his fingers against the tight flesh and almost had her singing.

“It was just nausea, dreadful episodes and yes, swollen ankles. I refuse to let anything like that slow me down. Besides, I am your wife and that means I have to be by your side.

Not to mention the fact that those amoral bitches have been coming left right and center. Apparently bearing your name and carrying your son means nothing to them. Who the hell was that bitch wearing the tight red dress?"

He ducked his head and concentrated fiercely on his task, biting back a smile. He did not think his wife would appreciate his humor at the moment.

"Her name is Gabrielle, and we met in France."

"You slept with her, didn't you?"

"Technically, we did not sleep...", he caught the fierce expression on her lovely face and decided some diplomacy and careful thinking was called for.

"It was a very long time ago."

"How long?"

"Too long for me to recall." Lifting her left foot, he tried to distract her by pulling her big toe into his mouth. But either she was not in the mood, or the subject was far too interesting for her to let it go.

"She was all over you."

With a sigh, he put her foot down and continued the massage. "She was just giving me a hug. European women tend to be ... handsy and very expressive." That got him a kick in the stomach and a dark frown.

"You kissed her."

"On the cheek. Darling, why are we having this discussion and why has it suddenly

changed from the fact that I am mad at you for insisting on coming everywhere with me?” He frowned at her.

“Bad enough, you insisted on being there for the opening of ‘The Duchesse’” – the hotel had finally had its grand opening and as predicted it had been spectacular.

They had spent a week in Paris seeing to the details and attending the grandiose opening. Her ideas had been incorporated in the design and had been wildly successful. “But you have been to several dinners which I could tell from the look on your very expressive face that you were bored out of your skull.”

“I want to be with you.”

He eyed her for a minute, before turning to pick up the bottle of cocoa butter cream he rubbed on her stomach every night.

“Sherrian.”

“What?”

“I would like to think that I do not have to prove myself to you. I have been in love with you for almost three years now and that love has grown even stronger. What is going on?”

“I am pregnant!” She muttered, placing a hand over her belly. After suffering from some acute nausea, she had gone past that and was now eating everything in sight. She often complained both to her husband and Michael that she felt like a very pregnant elephant.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:52 am

“That you are.” Slipping the dress off her shoulders, he unhooked her bra and felt his body stirring at the wide nipples.

“And fat.”

“Which comes with the pregnancy. I do not have to tell you that you are the most beautiful woman in the world.”

“You’re just saying that because you have to,” she pouted.

“I am saying that because it’s the truth.” He cupped her breasts and started to massage the flesh. “How can you doubt that I would ever desire anyone else?”

“Women chase after you and they are not very subtle. Last week when we were having dinner at Le Cirque, one came up to you and pretended I was not even there.”

“A business associate and I set her straight.”

She shrugged and looked away. “I am insecure, after...”

“No.” Lifting a hand, he got a tight grip on her chin, forcing her to face him. “We are not doing that again.” His eyes were dark, his expression ominous. “I am not him, goddammit! How many times do I have to prove that I am never going to cheat on you?”

I am irrevocably, head over heels, impossibly in love with you. Every breath I take, I taste you, feel you. Damn you, Sherrian.” Capping the bottle, he shoved to his feet.

“I’m sorry...”

“To hell with that!” His anger exploded. “We have been going through this very same damn dance for the past few months. You keep comparing me to that- that bastard. He is dead but still standing between us. Without trust, what the hell is the point of us being together?”

“You don’t know how I feel!” Her chest burned with fear and yes, jealousy and insecurity. He was a very attractive man in more ways than one. He was important and because of his status and money was treated like royalty.

Women stared at him everywhere they went and if she was being honest with herself, she attended these functions because she feared that he was going to take one of them up on their invitations, which at times were not subtle, and go home with them.

Their sex life had slowed down because of some health issues she was having. Their love life was tumultuous, and she knew before now, he could not keep his hands off her. Now, aside from rubbing cream on her belly and breasts, he was careful to avoid touching her.

“You think I am having sexual fantasies for other women. That I am going to leave my pregnant wife and go to someone else. It does not matter that I am here every goddamn night. And that I have showed you over and over how much you mean to me.”

He started to drag his fingers through his hair when he remembered he had cream on them. As he was about to turn away to go to the bathroom, she cried out.

“You don’t touch me. It has been a week now and you have not touched me.”

He turned to around and felt his heart shifting at the shattered look on her beautiful

face.

“I have not touched you because you have been in pain. I have spent the last seven days in torment, wanting you, craving you and unable to do anything about it. It is you.’

His voice turned weary. “It always has and always will be you. The fact that you have to question how I feel...”

“It’s me.” She whispered, closing her eyes briefly. “God! I hate that I am like this. I cannot believe that a man can love a woman like me. You can have anyone...”

“I want you.” He came and sat on the edge of the bed. “I only want you. I cannot look at another woman. I only see you.” She was still naked from the top down. Spanning her wide girth, he shuddered when he felt his son moving.

“I need you more than the air I breathe and not having you is...,” he took in a deep breath. “It is killing me, but I am trying to convince myself that I am not a monster.

“I need you.” She placed her hands over his. “I need to feel you deep inside me. The issues will always be there, and we can work around them. Right now, I need my husband.”

His eyes darkened and the emotions stormed through him like a tidal wave.

“Baby...”

“Please.” She clutched his hands. “I feel like I am about to die if you’re not deep inside me.”

That did it. His control, which was teetering at best, simply broke. Dragging his

hands from hers, he practically tore at his clothing. Sliding in next to her, he turned her around, so that he could spoon her. His hands were trembling, and it took several tries for him to guide himself into her wet tightness.

“Baby, my sweet.” He bent his head to nuzzle her neck. “My life,” his voice broke as she pushed her bottom up against him. He went deep and wanted to go deeper still, to touch her soul, to forge himself to her so that they would become one. It would never be enough.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:52 am

As soon as he thought he had reached the pinnacle of his love for her, there was more. He splayed his hands over the evidence of their shared love and absolute joy. They had a son they had created together.

“I adore you.” He whispered, one hand drifting down to cup her sex. “You’re my life.” He toyed with the swollen flesh and had her fragmenting.

“Leo!”

“Yes, darling.” He tongued the lobe of her ear, holding her close as the climax slammed and shook through her body. Twisting her head around, she sought his lips, and the kiss took on a potency that had her climaxing again.

He followed close behind her, his hips shooting upwards as he drove into her. He called out her name, his voice hoarse as the climax took over and carried him along in its violent wake.

They talked. With him still buried deep inside her, they had a frank conversation about the past.

She told him how she felt when she lost both her parents.

“I think the sense of abandonment started from there. I know they had no choice – that given the option, they would still be here for me. But losing both of them at the same time tore something inside me.”

He caressed her belly and felt a jolt at the slight movements there. “That is natural.

Darling, you suffered a tremendous loss.”

“Yes.” Her fingers linked with his and she felt the familiar wonderment that she had his love. That he was here with her and that he loved her. Really loved her.

“When I met Greg...,” she paused when he stiffened. “If you are not comfortable with me talking about him...”

“I am fine baby.” He reassured her. “It is just a kneejerk reaction. Go on.”

“Okay.” She blew out her breath. “When I met him, he said all the right things. He was sympathetic and pretended to be understanding.

He promised to be there for me, and I guess that I was lonely and needing to feel that there was someone there for me.” She leaned into him and sighed. “And I was absorbed with my baking and determined to make it.”

“Nothing is wrong with that.” He kissed the back of her neck. “I would never stifle your dreams; you know that don’t you?”

She nodded. “I have been thinking.”

“What?”

“I want to be here for you as your wife and the mother of Chad...”

“We have not decided that’s the name we’re using.” She had been writing down names and he had been edging to make a final decision. “And I do not know if I like the name Chad. It sounds like a cookie.”

Turning her head, she gave him a wry look. “Really?”

“How about Mark or Matthew or Leo Jnr...?”

“We already talked about that. No junior.”

“It’s a very good name.”

“Be that as it may, we are not naming our son after you.”

“Why the hell not?”

“He is going to have his own identity.”

“As Leo the second, he will.”

“Nope.” She lifted her head and kissed him on the lips.

“Okay fine. How about Matthew? It happens to be my middle name.”

“That can work. Your dad’s name was Levi and mine was William – okay, your dad wins. Matthew Levi it is.”

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:52 am

He thought about it some and nodded. “I like it. What were you saying before?”

“I want to cut back. I am thinking of having Ingrid come in and manage the place. She admitted to me that she is bored out of her skull and Ben is doing something part-time. She could come in four times a week.

I could do most of my baking here.” She turned her head to look at him. “I want to bring up my son, darling. I want to be here for his first steps and hear him say his first words, hopefully, it will be ‘mama’,” she smiled her impish smile and had him melting.

“I am not against hiring someone to help with the day-to-day duties, like changing diapers and being with him when I have to bake, but I want to be the main person in his life. What do you think?”

“I think I am the most fortunate man in the entire world.” He told her huskily. “And if that’s what you want, then I am behind you all the way.”

“Good, it is settled. I love you so much, Leo.”

“That’s handy, because I happen to love you too.”

“Honey, take the load off. You look like you’re about to pop any minute now.” Ingrid pulled out a chair and waited for her to sit. “What on earth are you doing here? I thought you were supposed to be resting.”

“I sneaked out. Elly was doing some laundry, and I was bored out of my skull.” She rubbed her swollen abdomen absently. “And I cannot settle. I am restless.”

The nursery is finally finished with, and Leo refuses to let me lift a pin.” She grimaced and shifted to ease her aching back. “I would like very much for this guy to make his way out and give me some ease.”

“You’re two weeks away?”

She nodded. “And I am under house arrest. My husband has not been out of town in a month, and I know it is because of me.”

“Honey, let me get you some tea.”

“I want coffee, preferably a latte.” She rolled her eyes at the look on her friend’s face. “Fine. Tea then.” She looked around the wide space and realized how much she missed being here. She had told her husband she was scaling things down, but that did not mean she did not miss it.

And she had been having twinges on and off since this morning, something she had not told her husband about. Leo tended to get paranoid when it came to her pregnancy and the closer she got to her due date, the more vigilant he became.

She just needed a breather. She had spent so much time in the lovely blue-green nursery, a mirror of her husband’s eyes, that she had folded and refolded the tiny clothing and rearranged the stuff toys until she was tired of the task. There really was nothing to do and nowhere to go.

Smiling at her friend, she accepted the lemon tea and took a sip. “Thanks.”

“Now, why don’t you tell me what’s really going on?”

“I am going to be a mother.”

“And an excellent one you will be. You also have a man who adores you and caters to you. Honey, you are blessed.”

She nodded and took another fortifying sip of tea. The place was a little bit quiet now, since it was late afternoon, and the heavy foot traffic was over. “I keep having this recurring nightmare.”

“What is it about?”

“It is silly and I know if I mention it to Leo, he is going to worry. I keep seeing myself in the maternity ward and the doctors saying that it is too late and I am losing my son. There is a lot of blood. Leo is there and he is crying. The fact that he is, tells me something is dreadfully wrong.”

“You have been to get your usual checkup, right?”

“Just last week and everything is fine.”

“It’s just the anxiety talking and manifesting itself in a dream.”

“Maybe.” She shrugged. “I never thought I wanted my baby and now, if anything were to happen...”

“Stop this at once.” Ingrid said firmly. “In two weeks or less, you will be delivering a healthy baby boy and from the looks of you and that handsome husband of yours, he’s going to be breaking hearts the rest of his life.”

Leaning forward, she touched Sherrian’s hand. “Take a deep breath, go home and watch something silly on TV, read a book or do a puzzle and just relax.”

“I might just do that. Thanks.”

Instinctively, Leo knew that something was horribly wrong. The meeting had been going on for several minutes and the urge to call his wife was getting worse.

When he looked up and saw his assistant hovering inside the doorway of the conference room, he shoved back his chair and without a word to the men seated around the table, rushed towards her.

“What is it?”

“Your wife.” She pursed her lips and clasped her hands. “She was involved in an accident.”

“What hospital?”

“St. Luke’s.” She called out as he rushed towards the door.

“Anything yet?”

“No.” His response was terse. “You should go on home. I will call...”

“I am not leaving.” Michael told him firmly. Ingrid and her aunt are still in the

waiting room.”

Shoving his hands into the pockets of his ash gray dress pants, Leo felt as if he was going to go mad if he did not hear something soon. The doctors had updated him as soon as he arrived.

Someone had cut her off at the intersection and the driver’s side had taken most of the hit. She was bleeding internally, and they were fighting to save both her and his son. He had told the man in no uncertain terms that his wife was the priority.

“You should tell them to go home.” He was practically jumping out of his skin.

“You know that is not going to happen. Why don’t I get you some coffee...?”

“Why don’t you just leave me the hell alone!”

“I understand...”

“Oh, I am absolutely certain you don’t. My entire life is inside that operating room. I specifically told her to stay the hell at home and she just had to go out, didn’t she? She just could not do as she was told.

Damn her! Damn her to hell! If she dies, Christ Jesus...,” he flopped down on the chair as if someone had pulled the cords. “If she dies, there is nothing left for me.”

Michael watched helplessly as the usually powerful and confident man crumpled, tears falling down his cheeks.

“Your son survived the trauma. We had to do a C-section in order to save his life.”

The man looked completely exhausted as he dragged the skull cap off his unruly white hair.

“My wife?” Leo asked tersely.

“Is still under the anesthesia but will make a full recovery.” Dr, Manning smiled slightly. “She is quite a fighter. For a minute there, we thought we lost her, but she bounced back. Most of the trauma was to her abdomen, but your son was adequately cushioned.” The operation had lasted five long and agonizing hours.

“I need to see her.”

“Of course. They are wheeling her into recovery right now.”

“Could you tell the others...”

“Of course. Go on in.”

She had a bandage on her forehead and her right arm was in a sling and she was so still that he was afraid the doctor had lied to him, and she was in fact dead.

Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:52 am

Rushing over, he carefully sat on the chair and took her hand in his to feel her pulse which was steady.

Breathing a sigh of relief, he put her hand against his jaw and breathed out slowly.

“You’re going to be the death of me,” he whispered. “I am so mad at you right now; I would strangle you. I told you to stay put, didn’t I? But you had to have your own way and looked what nearly happened. If I had lost you...?”

He swallowed the lump in his throat. “I would have...” he kissed her palm gently. “I cannot even think about it. Not now. Not ever. You promised me a lifetime and I am holding you to it.”

Three weeks later...

“He’s getting so big.” She whispered as she stared down at her son who was sleeping soundly in his cot.

“How long have you been standing there?” Her husband asked in an indulgent tone.

“Five minutes.” She grinned at his raised brows. “Okay, ten or fifteen.”

“Make that twenty.” Scooping her carefully into his arms, he marched out of the nursery and into their bedroom. He had taken a month away from the office to tend to her and to see that she was fully recovering from the accident that had almost cost her

life and his sanity.

“I was thinking.” He sat with her on his lap on the sleep chair they had acquired for when she was feeding Matthew.

“That we should start on our daughter?” She asked teasingly.

He gave her a wry look. “That we should take mother up on her offer and fly to the UK and spend a week or two. She wants to spend some time with her grandson and her sister is declining rapidly, making it difficult for her to travel.”

“Sounds like a wonderful idea.” Her hand cupped his jaw. “I love you Leo. Thanks for giving me what I have been craving all my life.”

Tilting her chin up, he brushed his lips on hers gently. “Thank you for my life.”

The end...