



Level With Me

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Category: Romance, Adult

Description: When I hire a husband-and-wife consulting team to help my family's struggling business, I'm appalled to discover the handsome husband is the very man I shared a 'moment' with the morning before our very first meeting. Firing him is obviously the first order of business. But when Blake confesses his high-profile marriage is a sham, and asks me to keep his secret in exchange for deeply discounted services, I know I'd be a fool to say no. Our resort needs major work, and I'm scraping the bottom of the credit accounts to make it happen. But keeping Blake's secret isn't as easy as I thought it would be. The more time we spend together, the harder it is to deny my growing feelings for him. I promised myself I'd never get entangled in a messy situation again. But the deeper I get, the more complicit I become, and if Blake's business goes under, my heart—and family business—could too.

Level With Me is a steamy, romantic, enemies-to-lovers story with NO cheating. Read if you love swoon-worthy men, smart, strong women, and ramshackle family of adult siblings doing their best to keep their family business afloat and hearts intact. Happily Ever After guaranteed.

Total Pages (Source): 105

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:23 am

1

CASSANDRA

There are three things I never thought I'd do:

Take over as CEO of my family's resort—alongside all four of my siblings;

Take up running—and not just for the subway;

Get rescued by a random fisherman after going ass-over-teakettle into the Quince River.

And yet all three of these were true by eight AM this morning.

Today had started out just fine. Great, in fact, considering how deeply stressed I'd been this past year since I'd come home to Quince Valley to run The Rolling Hills resort. Most mornings I woke up with a sense of dread, thinking about my to-do list before even opening my eyes.

I'd stepped into the Chief Executive role of our family business eight months ago, after discovering our mother didn't leave the operation of the family business she'd run for the past 30 years to our father like she'd always said she would. She'd left it to her five children.

Together.

It was my middle brother Griffin who'd read the letter over the phone to me, only a few days after Mom passed. "You sure you're ready to hear this, Cass?"

"I'm fine, Griff."

I wasn't fine, but as the oldest, I didn't like being not fine for my siblings.

Griff paused—he always knew when I was lying. Then his grumbly voice began to read the pertinent parts of the letter. "I have left the Rolling Hills resort in the hands of my five children. While I understand it may not always be possible to drop the important things you have going on in your own lives, know that it is my deepest wish that you operate the hotel together, as a team. Consider this the grown-up version of us throwing you children together to play nice."

Mom knew that we'd drifted apart. This was her way of trying to pull us back together.

I'd hardly been able to breathe as he read the rest of it. I could tell Griff was trying to contain his emotion too. "Your father, bless his darling heart, was always the caregiver of this family. He volunteered, of course, to put himself at the helm of this company, but I know he only said it to appease me. We agreed that saddling him with this task wouldn't be fair given his age and inclinations."

I could feel Mom's heart bleeding through those words. By the time Griff got to the end, I was sobbing.

"Your father never had any interest in running my sixth baby. But I hope my babies might."

"The lawyers said the letter's not legally binding," Griff said.

“But it’s what Mom wanted.”

“Yeah. It is.”

That had been right after she’d passed. Back then, the only thing the five of us agreed on was that there wasn’t a chance we were going to do it. We were all doing our own thing: I was living in Manhattan, working grueling hours as the CEO of a major hedge fund. My twin Eli was flouting his business degree and working as an electrician in Jewel Lakes County, New York, while trying to start a family with his college sweetheart. Griffin, meanwhile, had been doing whatever Griffin did at his cabin up in the woods a half-hour drive from here. Jude was in extended mourning over the end of his pro-tennis career in France, and Chelsea was partying and planning weddings in Martha’s Vineyard.

But while we all carried on pretending like none of this had happened, Dad quietly booked a one-way ticket to Spain. He said he was going to ‘find himself’ on some wilderness trail. Worse, we discovered that the employee who’d been left in charge of operating the hotel in the short term, George, had nearly driven the place into the ground. George had canceled all the required unsexy maintenance on the rooms, like replacing furniture and reinforcing plumbing, and instead had launched a major renovation without doing any due diligence on the companies he’d hired. The company that built the elaborate spas in the hillside had triple charged, and the other company hired to upgrade the hotel itself had gone bankrupt. A whole wing of the resort was now cordoned off. The lost income on those rooms alone was staggering, and our accountant told us point blank that we needed to either up the income fast or sell now before we were left bankrupt.

After a deeply heated, tearful meeting, we decided selling the hotel we’d grown up with would not only be a disservice to Mom, but it would also be like selling a part of our family. For the first time ever, we all agreed on something: we had no choice but to take over operations.

But ever since I'd taken over as CEO, I'd felt like I was in completely over my head trying to figure out what to do to save this business. Yes, the last manager had screwed us over. But over my first few months at the helm, I'd learned that the business had been slowly atrophying anyway; that the spas and other upgrades were his way of trying to refresh the place.

But today that was all going to change. This morning, I woke up filled with optimism.

It wasn't just the sun streaming in my windows after several weeks of gray clouds and torrential rain, either. Today the Harringtons were coming, and they were going to save the Rolling Hills resort.

It was Eli who'd first mentioned Harrington Consulting.

Blake and Lila Harrington were a husband-and-wife business consulting company whose specialty was resurrecting flagging or outright failing companies. They were so good at what they did, they were dubbed Mr. & Mrs. Fixit. Or sometimes Mr. and Mrs. Shark. Eli had gone to school with Lila Harrington. He'd even been at their wedding—an elaborate New York City Society affair. Eli said they hadn't kept in touch since school, but I knew if my brother mentioned them, it was because they were solid.

My siblings thought today's meeting with the Harringtons was going to be to discuss the results of a remote review we'd hired them to do. It had been the cheapest item on their menu—a light-touch analysis of our financials, business plans, and related documents, after which they'd give us recommendations for getting the resort back on track.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

But I'd already gotten the results last week, and the Harringtons' strong recommendation was that we take a deeper dive with their operational review, where Mr. and Mrs. Harrington would spend six weeks on site, shadowing every aspect of our business to give us a fully individualized plan for how to turn the resort around.

"Unfortunately, you'll have to act fast if you want this done," Blake Harrington had told me over the phone. He'd said they'd had a rare last-minute cancellation and could do the review now. The alternative was to wait a full year for their next available time.

A full year would be too late.

I knew Blake Harrington wasn't bluffing. I'd called several friends who'd worked with Harrington Consulting who backed up what the online testimonials had said: They're the best. They saved us. I'd sell them my firstborn. I also liked that they were a husband-and-wife team.

So last week I'd made the snap decision to sign the contract and pay their eye-watering deposit without consulting my brothers and sister. I knew they'd never agree to spend that kind of cash. Not that we even had the cash—it was credit that I would have to use to pay the fees until the hotel started earning again.

Today I was going to tell my siblings they had a week to prepare their respective departments for the review; that I was assigning my day-to-day CEO duties to other staff so I could focus on being in the office with the Harringtons; and that the review was starting next week. Eli in particular was going to throw a fit, I knew—he was Chief Financial Officer and knew just how thin the ice was. But once he heard from

Mr. and Mrs. Shark directly, he'd be just as excited as I was.

So, that morning, I didn't drag myself out of bed for my run. I bounded out, feeling hopeful for the first time in eight months.

My phone buzzed just as I was heading out the door to my baby sister's apartment.

Chelsea and I lived side-by-side on the top floor of the staff apartments, while Eli lived below us. This was where we'd grown up, though back then the three apartments had been combined into one large family home. Other staff members lived on the lower floor, while our two other siblings, Jude and Griffin, lived nearby, in town and in the woods, respectively.

Chelsea and I went for a run together every other morning, down on the trail that ran alongside the Quince River.

I pulled out my phone in the hallway to check the message, my door clicking shut behind me.

CHELSEA:I can't do our run, sorry.

"As if!" I exclaimed into the empty hallway, doing my best Cher inCluelessimpression.

It was 29-year-old Chelsea who'd gotten me into running; when before, the only time I'd ever move faster than a purposeful stride into a boardroom was to catch the subway. But Chelsea has been slipping lately. She'd canceled another run last week, too. She was getting as bad as our brother Jude, who only seemed to show up to stuff when it suited him.

I was about to bang on Chelsea's door when a second text came through.

CHELSEA:Don't knock. I'm not home. I mean, pretend I'm not home. I'm not alone.

Now that I saw the text, I seemed to recall a loud banging at midnight last night, followed by the muffled sound of Chelsea laughing.

"On a Tuesday?" I asked the empty hallway.

I should maybe try to live vicariously through my younger sister. My social life consisted of bringing work home to eat over a TV dinner, and occasionally putting on one of my guilty-pleasure 80s or 90s rom-coms—movies my ex had said were 'beneath me'—when I was feeling really wild.

Instead, I shoved my phone into my running belt and pushed through into the stairwell, trying to stay on top of the slight panic crawling up my chest.

I'd planned on doing a soft reveal about the Harringtons' review with Chelsea this morning. She almost always supported my decisions, and it would be good to have at least one person on board before dropping the news on the rest of them. But it didn't matter. I was the CEO. And at the end of the day, I held ultimate responsibility. Plus, sometimes in business, risks were required. Calculated risks.

A few minutes later, I was jogging down the trail that ran through the trees from the resort property. I emerged from the trees along the short edge of our golf course, which fronted the river below. The resort was on the south side of the Quince River Valley, which was cut through by the Quince River, running east-west. On the other side of the river was the town of Quince Valley, which glittered like the river in the early morning sunrise.

Spring had been dreary this year, with every morning coming up gray and overcast, so the sun was everything today. There'd been torrential rain, and the Quince River had come close to flooding several times in the past couple of months. But this

morning, the sky was pink and orange with the rising sun, promising the first real day of sun this April.

It was strange being home, and even stranger running the resort with my brothers and sister. The resort was Mom's baby, and we'd always felt like Mom would run it forever. We'd never contemplated what would happen after her death. An ache squeezed around my chest as I reached the trees by the riverside. Mom's death really had changed everything.

But here, birds were singing, and sun filtered through the early spring leaves.

You've got this, Cassamatass.

That was Dad's voice in my ear, and the silly nickname he gave me when I was a kid. We'd been close, me and Dad, and my heart hurt that he'd gone so far sideways since Mom died.

Having not been down to the river this week, my jaw dropped when I cleared the trees. Normally this stretch of path ran several feet above the Quince River, which on this part of its path was a wide, meandering strip of water with a few small islands dotted throughout. Today, the water was running higher than I'd seen it in years, with only the largest of those islands visible at the moment. In fact, as I ran, I was alarmed to see the path had eroded in parts, as if the river had come all the way up and taken bites out of the gravel trail. So far, it looked intact enough to continue, but I had to go carefully, leaping across large muddy patches. I'd have to post an announcement down in the lobby to let guests know to take care when I got back.

Back the way I'd come, the path crossed over the bridge and followed the road into downtown, on the other side of the water. But over here, it was all nature, and at this hour, I rarely ran into anyone. As I reached a higher part of the trail, where flowers were beginning to pop up on the slope next to the trail, the going improved and I

allowed myself to let down my guard, focusing on my run and the surrounding scenery.

I actually loved running. Ever since coming home, it was my greatest form of stress relief. I took in deep breaths and finally slipped into the zone—the space where all thoughts left my head and I could focus only on the feel of my feet hitting the path and the air in my lungs. To my right, I vaguely noticed I'd reached the spot where the river narrowed into a deeper stretch of water, with some small, treed islands mid-stream. While the water was fast here, the area just a hundred feet down smoothed out again. That part was popular for fishing, and even now I could see a man downriver in hip waders.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

There were several fishing outfits down here south of town, and I'd often see groups of tourists awkwardly throwing lines—city guys getting away from it all. But this man wasn't one of those. He was experienced, I could tell that right away. He cast a line out into the middle of the water with the quiet ease of someone who'd been doing this all their life.

Dad used to take me and Eli fishing when we were young. He took all the kids fishing, but Eli and I went first as the oldest and I had fond memories of standing right in this spot or further down, doing just what this guy was doing. This guy had an arm like Dad's, only he was a lot younger than Dad, I could tell. He was wearing a cap and though I couldn't see much of his face, I could see a hint of scruff, along with broad shoulders in a dark shirt the color of the forest.

I don't know what it was that captivated me about this fisherman—maybe the fact that he looked like something right out of a glossy tourist brochure the way the early morning sun glistened on the water around him, sparking on the line as he reeled it in and tossed it once more. Or maybe it was seeing someone in their happy place. But I was focused on him and not the patch of mud in front of me. When my heel hit the mud, it skidded. I cried out in surprise as I flipped forward and fell onto my hands and knees. Only I didn't stop there. I kept going down the slope.

Normally there was a bank I would have landed on, but with the recent rains, the rocky shore had disappeared, and instead, I tumbled right into the Quince River.

The water was freezing; the shock of it nearly stopping my heart. For a moment, I couldn't move at all.

Then my lungs began to burn. I hadn't taken a proper breath when I'd fallen in, and now it was too late. I realized, as I started moving my limbs, that I also didn't know which way was up.

For a moment, all I saw as the river tumbled me forward was my own thrashing limbs, and streams of bubbles caused by my movements. Panic had a grip on me, and I felt my chest seize.

No. Stay calm, stay still.

It was Dad now, talking to me. The thing to do if you fall in, Dad used to say, was first and foremost stay calm. If you see or feel land below you, push up. Otherwise, let yourself rise to the surface.

I was a strong swimmer. I'd be okay. I just needed air.

Spots began to form in my vision.

Stay calm.

It worked—a moment later, my head emerged from the water. I sucked in a jagged breath, spreading my hands out to balance myself. I was fine. I'd just scared myself. Eying the landscape while I caught my breath, I forced myself to focus. Though it looked lazy, the river was moving fast. I needed to be mindful of currents, too. If I aimed diagonally, I could—

My thoughts were interrupted by something hooking around my waist. The abrupt stopping of my momentum caused the river to rush over me in a torrent, tugging at my legs, threatening to bring me down again. I took in another breath but choked on the water running over my head. My head came free of the water once more and I shoved at the thing around my waist. It was hard and thick. A branch? But no, I was

being pulled backward.

“I’ve got you!” said a voice.

Then, I was being lifted out of the water.

“Hey!” I sputtered as a pair of broad hands wrapped around my waist. Before I could protest further, I was flipped upside down, gasping and then coughing on the water still in my lungs. I felt like I’d inhaled half the river. I was being carried, ass-up out of the river. “What—?” I gasped.

It was only when I pressed my hands against the glossy rubber in my face, trying to push myself off, that I understood it was the fisherman who had reached out to snag me. It was the fisherman who now had me thrown over his shoulder like a caveman’s bride as he waded onto the shore.

“Put me down!” I hollered, and he froze. Then the man flipped me upright like I weighed nothing at all, and unceremoniously dropped me on my ass in the sand.

2

BLAKE

She looked like an angry cat.

A soaking wet, long-legged cat ready to swipe at me.

My chest, still heaving from exertion, prickled with heat, and no small amount of disbelief. She was mad that I’d saved her.

“You’re welcome,” I said, pulling my hat off and flicking my sopping hair off my

forehead, before pulling my cap back on. I leaned on my thighs, trying to steady my breath.

“You’re welcome?” she sputtered.

The woman stood up. Though she was a good eight feet from where I stood now, she looked to be only a few inches shorter than me, which was surprising enough to interrupt my irritation, given I was a good three inches over six feet.

I began pulling off my waterlogged hip waders. “Yeah, you know, for saving your ass.”

When I’d heard the shriek, I’d jerked my face in her direction, only to see the jogger in pink I’d noticed a moment ago disappear under the water, the sound of the splash swallowed by the rush of the river.

My stomach had lurched at the sight, and I’d had to make a quick calculation. She was too far out for me to reach from shore. But knowing the way the river bent, she’d pass by the island across from me in a few seconds. I’d chucked my rod as hard as I could in that direction—which was stupid, given I could have left it right there on the shore. What was I going to do, go fishing over there later? But my brainpower was apparently all used up at that moment. I’d jumped in, swimming hard for the island. My waders limited my speed significantly and for a panicked moment, I thought I was going to miss her, especially because when her head popped up, her face was turned toward the shore, away from me. But my feet touched the riverbed just as she approached, and I reached out and grabbed her, pulling us both to safety.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

I'd saved her from ending up in that logjam further downstream—or worse. And now she was pissed about it? Heat flared in my chest, but I was still catching my breath, too. I willed myself to calm down.

She didn't.

The woman was an angry vision of pink and gooseflesh, and now she was walking toward me, her feet slipping in the sand. Suddenly, my already faltering anger took a backseat to my more primal instincts.

Well shit, she was hot.

She wasn't a young ingenue as I'd first thought. She looked to be about my age or a bit younger; mid-thirties maybe. Her thin running clothes clung to her body and her hair—dark blonde maybe, though it was hard to tell with it being so wet, stuck to her pale cheeks in wet strands. But the thing that grabbed me was her size. Besides her height, she was sturdy. She looked firm and strong and like she could maybe kick my ass—not really, given the punishing regime of gym training I'd used as a stress outlet since I was fifteen years old—though maybe. I bet she'd be athletic as hell in the bedroom.

Fuck me.

No literally, fuck me.

I looked away, hoping to God I didn't spring a hard-on in this particular situation.

She stopped a few feet away from me. “I grew up on this river; I know what to do when you fall in a river. I wasn’t panicking. I didn’t need a knight in shining... hip waders.”

For a moment I didn’t say anything, not because I was too incredulous—I was—but because I was suddenly struck by a weird sense of *déjà vu*. There was something strikingly familiar about her. But maybe it was the way she was slicking her hair away from her face. That move was right out of my teenage fantasies, like how women in barely-contained bikinis emerged from pools in the movies. Except her pink top—already a thin, breathable fabric—was somehow sexier than a bikini the way it suctioned onto her skin, accentuating the curve of her breasts and the hard points of her...

I averted my eyes, cursing my caveman brain. “You didn’t look fine,” I said, recovering my common sense and coming back to the matter at hand. Remembering my irritation, too. “Is it every day you decide to go for an upside-down dip in a flooded river? Or just today?”

“I fell,” she said, her face indignant. “It was muddy, and I slipped. But I sorted myself out and I was heading for shore. My head was above water until you stepped in. Now we’re stuck on this island and I’m going to be late for work.”

I tried to restrain myself from laughing. “Late for work? That’s what you’re worried about?”

“I have an important meeting!” she exclaimed.

Now it was my turn to step toward her. “Where were you going to get out if I hadn’t grabbed you?” I asked. “There?” I gestured to a gnarled collection of logs downriver.

I saw the realization slide over her face as she followed where I was pointing.

“Or were you just going to wait a couple miles and get out in the next town?” I tacked on. I didn’t need to say that part, but I was making a point.

“It’s normally clear there,” she said. Her voice was a little shaky now.

“That’s what I thought.” I hung my hip waders upside down, letting the water splatter onto our feet.

I tossed them on the ground, walking back to the river’s edge.

“Goddammit,” I said, more at our situation than at her now. Though I was still irritated as hell at her ungrateful ass.

This was supposed to have been a relaxing, meditative morning of fishing—a moment to myself ahead of a tight-as-shit day. I had a client meeting this morning, for someone who’d paid an exorbitant fee to have me and my business partner Lila tear their business to shreds and build it back up again.

Shit, it’s a good thing I hadn’t told her where I was going this morning. She hadn’t even wanted us to take it at first.

“Why are you talking about taking a project out in the country?” she’d asked, like I’d told her I wanted to take a job on Mars.

“Because this is a winning project,” I’d said. “Goldman has scooped our last three clients from under our noses.”

“You’re being paranoid,” she’d told me.

“You know that’s not true.”

It used to be that we were the top choice for business consulting in Manhattan, with a waiting list of clients bidding for our services. We still had the waitlist, but we'd already had three from this upcoming year jump ship. Goldman had appeared out of nowhere, and suddenly people had another place to turn when their businesses were failing. His record, though shorter, was almost as stellar as ours. There were others, too, who were climbing up the ranks, but he was the only one close to catching up. With Goldman nipping at our heels, we'd had to pull out all the stops. Big splashy ads and cushy meetings to attract new business to backfill the ones flocking to him. We weren't going under, but he was becoming a serious pain in the ass. The only edge we still had was our reputation and the fact that people liked that we were a married couple.

Even though we'd never been married.

"Lila, it's a good job." I wanted this job.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

I needed this job.

The Rolling Hills would mark a goal I'd aspired to since we launched Harrington—one I was very public about when we first started out: my company would resurrect one hundred consecutive failing companies and turn them into—at a minimum—million-dollar businesses.

As far as Lila knew, that was the point of taking this job.

“Lila, if we set it up right, with this resort becoming a favorite playground within weekend driving distance for New York's elite, no one will forget it was us who turned it around. They'll be reminded we're the best every time they walk through those doors. Can't you just see limos dropping off a string of New York City billionaires under that portico?”

Lila had a photo of the place up on her computer screen, and her expression, glowing white from the screen, showed me she saw it too.

But it wasn't just hitting 100.

It was hitting it specifically with a hotel. My dad and certified asshole Brian Harrington owned a chain of luxury hotels on the west coast. Ones I knew were flagging. If I turned the Rolling Hills around he'd see I wasn't just exceptional at business. I was better at his own flavor of business than he was.

I wanted to hit 100 with this big ol' fuck you, Dad.

In the end Lila had agreed to do it, but only if we doubled our already hefty fee. “No pro bono travel either,” she’d said. “And I get to bring Brynn.”

“Fine,” I said, even though a knot twisted in my stomach at that last condition.

Brynn was our only employee, and having her with us would make our job a lot easier than having her working remotely. But Brynn was also Lila’s actual wife. The house Lila and I shared had a rental suite at the back, which Brynn rented—on paper, anyway. It was me who lived there. But lately, I’d been hiding out at the office, even spending at least a night a week on my office couch. More and more I couldn’t stand spending time with them. It wasn’t just my drive to get to 100. And I loved Brynn, and Lila too. They were like family to me. But when they let their guard down in private, it was hard not to notice how in love they were. It wasn’t that ooey-gooey kind of early love, either. Lila and Brynn had been together for over a decade. Theirs was the kind of love that was as worn in as my old baseball glove. It was the kind of love that hurt my damn chest every time I saw it because I knew it would never be something I’d have. I’d made sure of that the day I ‘married’ Lila.

I rubbed my face with my hand now. I needed to focus on how we were we going to get off this island. And what the hell happened to my fishing rod?

When I looked back at the woman, she’d sunk down onto the sand, staring out at the jumble of logs downstream. I could see the contrition on her face. No, the fear. She hadn’t known she was in so much danger. If those logs hadn’t been there, she could have easily gotten out—at least, that’s what I’d have thought if I were her.

I let out a breath.

“Hey. I wasn’t trying to be a hero, okay?” I said. “You seem like the kind of woman who knows how to help herself. You sound like one, anyway.”

She scoffed. “What is that supposed to mean?” She still had her guard up. And why not, when I’d come off like a condescending asshole.

“You seem... tenacious. Anyway, we all need a hand sometimes. And I couldn’t stop to ask you if you wanted one.”

“I couldn’t see the logs from the water,” she said finally.

I raised an eyebrow, then made a show of sliding my hands down the arms of my drenched sweater, sending water slopping down onto the sand.

Then she let out a breath. “I’m sorry. Shit, I’m sorry. You did the right thing.”

I was over it. And I felt bad that she was embarrassed. But I still wasn’t going to let her completely off the hook. “You can make it up to me,” I said.

For a moment, a flash of alarm went over her face.

Heat hit my chest once more. “You can help me find my fishing rod.”

“Oh,” she said, seeming to relax, at least a little. “Yes, okay.” She pursed her lips but glanced briefly toward shore. I followed her gaze as she glanced upriver toward downtown. The bridge that led to downtown Quince Valley seemed so close, and yet so far away. No one could possibly see us from over there. We’d have to flag someone on the trail.

Except she’d been the only one I’d seen all morning.

“How are we going to get back there?” she asked. “We can’t get back in the water.”

“Fishing rod. Then we’ll figure it out.”

She chewed on her bottom lip, sending an unexpected jolt of heat through me.

What the hell was wrong with me?

It was too long since I'd been with anyone, that was all. I had the odd quiet and wholly meaningless tryst in the city, though most often I reserved those for when I was out of town. I couldn't be seen with another woman, just like Lila couldn't be seen interacting with Brynn in a way that didn't look like she was just a colleague and friend. Our business depended on the facade of our marriage. More importantly, Lila's whole life did, too. The whole reason I'd agreed to marry my friend from our pick-up soccer league in college was because her parents—her rich, powerful, beloved, devoted, parents—would have disowned her if they knew she was gay.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

“They keep trying to set me up with their friends’ asshole sons,” she said. “They’re relentless.”

She’d said it with a joking tone, but I saw the look on her face. It was dread. Fear.

I’d been drunk when she’d confessed this to me. Out of my mind when I joked that I could act as a decoy for her. “My dating life is shit anyway,” I’d said, apparently. I even made a fake proposal. I had a problem with remembering anything when I drank too much, which was why I very rarely did.

But that time, when we sobered up, she told me what I’d promised. The painfully hopeful look on her face had made my heart hurt.

Lila and her parents had the relationship those of us with messed-up families only dreamed of. They’d given her everything she’d wanted growing up—they’d been older when they had her and she was a miracle baby, her mother said, after over a decade of no success.

They were generous philanthropists. Doting parents. They had lunch once a week in the city and she told them everything about her life.

Everything except one thing. Lila told me they’d made their views about certain things very clear, and having a gay daughter was not something they’d take easily into stride.

I saw the heartbreak on her face the first time she told me—the choices she’d had to make. Loving people so much when she knew their love was conditional.

What did it matter if I fake-married someone, if it would save their life? A real committed relationship was the last thing I ever saw as a goal for myself. My only goal back then, anyway, was to make a name for myself—to be the best.

I'd be protecting my friend, and the truth was, it was protection for me too. I got to hide in a place where I'd never have to deal with real love, something I knew I couldn't handle anyway.

So we'd gotten married. Fake-married. My younger brother Conrad was the only one who knew in my family. We were close, and we'd managed to talk Lila's parents into letting him officiate. They didn't know he hadn't gotten certified like we said, or that Lila made the certificates in a graphic design program.

Then we'd started to talk business—we were both in school for it anyway. As it turned out, Lila and I wanted the same things, only for different reasons. She wanted to make her parents proud, while I wanted to show my father I was good for something—even if he thought I wasn't. So, we turned our fake marriage into a real business relationship. And the rest was history—very successful history.

But now, all these years later, every day I was a little less convinced that all our success was worth it. I'd thought I was going for true happiness by making sure I could never have a real relationship and focusing only on work. So why did I feel so goddamn hollow so often?

I could have found someone maybe—someone who didn't mind being tucked away. But I saw how hard it was on Lila and Brynn, too. For all the ways they were settled and loving and happy, I could see the strain between them, the way Lila watched couples holding hands and leaning into each other.

I saw those couples too.

No. What we had worked.

Well enough, anyway.

The water-logged woman had migrated up shore—not far, but far enough I had to take several steps to catch up with her, during which time I grew deeply irritated with myself for where my brain kept wanting to take me.

“You don’t really have to look for my rod with me,” I said, hoping it was enough to be a peace offering.

“It’s fine,” she said, without turning around. “I don’t exactly have anything else to be doing.”

Our wet sneakers crunched and squeaked as we walked up the shoreline.

The island was small, maybe only a couple hundred feet long, and studded with trees, but thin enough that I could see through them to the other side of the river. There were a few sticks snagged along the shore, but no rod.

“Maybe we should look in there,” she said, moving towards the trees. “I can’t see much from down here.”

This was ridiculous—the rod was long gone—but for some reason, I didn’t want to stop. I wanted to forget everything else and spend the whole day walking up and down this beach with this woman in amicable silence, pretending there was no one else in the world. A life built on the simple truth of anonymity, instead of a lie.

But when she looked at me, giving a quick, small smile as if to show she was no longer upset, that tingling sensation came back. There was definitely something familiar about her. But any thoughts about who she was were wiped away when she

angled her body to peer around a tree, stretching her damp clothes tight against her skin. I turned away, rubbing my hand against the back of my neck. Maybe the tingling wasn't familiarity, but something more primal.

I was suddenly aware of how alone we were, how removed. We were mostly concealed from the trail on shore now.

When she looked at me she must have sensed the shift, because she swallowed, then turned quickly away. "So... where did you say you threw it again? And why?"

"I don't know," I said, honestly. I forced myself to focus. "When I saw a pink blob in the water I just yeeted it as hard as I could."

She paused. "I'm sorry. Yeeted? Pink blob?"

"What?"

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

“Did you learn that on the internet?”

I grinned. “I have a tween nephew,” Whenever I talked to Conrad’s ten-year-old on the phone, he threw in words I swore he’d made up. He thought it was hysterical when I used them on him.

Apparently, she did too.

“He teaches me all the cool words. Like pink blob.”

Her lips began to turn up and my stomach dropped. I knew, in this bizarre moment, that a smile might undo me, so I looked away.

“Unbelievable,” she said. I could hear it in her voice. The smile.

Don’t look. Don’t fucking look.

But it was impossible. I turned back to her like the absolute sucker I was. And when I did, she was grinning easy and wide. It changed her face completely, making her blue-gray eyes sparkle. My insides went to jelly.

But it wasn’t just attraction. I realized at that moment I knew exactly who she was. This was Cassandra Kelly, CEO of the Rolling Hills resort. The same Cassandra Kelly who Lila and I were meeting later this morning.

Fuck.

I could be wrong. I prayed, desperately, that I was wrong. In most of the photos in the dossier Brynn had compiled, Cassandra had worn her hair either neatly pinned or slicked back with some kind of hair gel, and she wasn't normally smiling. I remember thinking that serious look was sexy as hell, but her expression was guarded. She looked like a sharky CEO, which she was. Or at least she had been when she worked in Manhattan.

But there was one candid photo Brynn had included that I'd halted over, returning to again and again. The photographer had caught her mid-laugh. Her hair was loose and wavy, her blazer undone, her face tipped up. She looked, I remembered, like Kelly McGillis in *Top Gun*, a woman I'd had a giant crush on from when I saw the movie as a kid.

No, I wasn't wrong. This was Cassandra fucking Kelly.

I should tell her who I am. Right now.

But things would get awkward fast. Maybe she'd even want to talk about business, and I wasn't prepared for that. I liked to make an entrance, to come in hot with the senior staff. But more than that, she'd stop smiling. She'd stop talking to me with that playful tone I'd only just gotten to hear. For the briefest moment—and the first time since getting into this mess, because that's what it was, a mess—I thought about what it would be like if I had a normal life. If I was able to just take a woman out on a date.

A woman like Cassandra.

Fuck.

"You okay?" she asked, stirring me from my muddled thoughts.

I blinked.

The thing was, Cassandra was out of the question even if I wasn't fake-married to Lila. She was a client, and crossing professional boundaries with a client was just... messy. I'd seen it happen to colleagues. Things never went right, either with the job or the relationship.

"I should be asking you that," I said. "I never asked if you were okay."

"That's because I came out of the water accusing you of... saving me."

Tell her.

"I told you, you don't seem like the kind of woman who needs saving often."

"You're right," she said. "I don't. But I did then. I was scared and I took it out on you. I'm sorry. Thank you for jumping in after me."

"Anytime," I said.

Tell her. There's still time.

"Though you're still not forgiven for calling me a pink blob," she said.

"If it helps, you're the most beautiful pink blob I've ever seen."

Fuck.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

Her smile dropped.

I shouldn't have said that for a thousand reasons. Not least of which because she was in a vulnerable position here with a strange man. Alone.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I shouldn't—"

"It's okay," she said softly, a pinkness rising in her cheeks. She wasn't scared. "I'll take it."

Something crackled between us. She had a strip of hair plastered to her cheek, and I had the most absurd urge to brush it from her face. I even lifted a hand.

Then I remembered myself and pulled my cap off, running my free hand through my hair instead. "Guess that's it for my fishing rod," I said, trying to make my voice light.

"Seriously? That's what you're worried about?" She laughed.

My tied-up stomach relaxed slightly. This was safer territory.

"I like that fishing rod. It's my lucky rod."

Her lips did a strange twist, and she cleared her throat.

To my horror, my dick twinged. Notsafer territory. Then my mouth ran away without me. "What's so funny about my rod?"

Her mouth opened, but instead of being horrified, she laughed, sending a spasm tingling down to my toes.

God she was beautiful. My eyes went to her lips automatically, and that's when I saw they had a slight blue tinge to them. There were goosebumps on her arms, too.

"You're cold," I said, my smile falling away.

"I'm fine."

But now I couldn't stop my hand from coming up to her, and I pressed my hands against her arms. The touch of her cool skin was like a lightning bolt shooting straight from my guts down low. I kept my eyes on hers.

What the fuck are you doing, Harrington?

But I didn't stop. Her eyes seemed to deepen, the gray widening. I lifted my hand to her face like it was on autopilot. My thumb brushed against her bottom lip, like I could warm the cold that way.

Her eyelids fluttered at my touch. My dick definitely jumped then. We were standing partially obscured in some brush—but still exposed. My damp sweatpants didn't offer any coverage for my rapidly stiffening cock. If she looked down, she'd know exactly how I felt.

Fuck. This was so bad. So so bad. But at that moment, I didn't give a fuck. I leaned in toward her. "I—"I'm Blake Harrington. We've talked on the phone. Say it, motherfucker. It's easy.

But I didn't say it. I leaned in so that our faces were close; I could feel her breath on my lips. Her eyes were just closing when they darted sideways, over my shoulder.

She craned her neck, her mouth falling open in surprise, and I dropped my hand.

“Oh shit,” she said, pulling away from me.

She crashed out of the brush, waving her arms. “Eli!”

There was a jogger up on the trail, the first one I’d seen since Cassandra. He slowed to a stop, looking around, confused.

Eli.

Eli Kelly. Cassandra’s brother, and Lila’s old college buddy.

Fuck me. Fuck, fuck, fuck me.

I came out after her. The jogger—Eli—drew to a stop, looking around, confused.

“Over here!” Cassandra shouted.

“That’s my brother!” she said to me. The joy in her expression made my chest hurt.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

“I know,” I said, my voice stiff.

She was waving frantically but halted as she registered my words. “Wait, what?”

“Cass?” Eli shouted from shore. “And... Blake? The hell?”

Cassandra’s face went pale, her eyes widening. “Blake?”

“Blake Harrington,” I said, thrusting my hand out to hers. “Pleasure to finally meet you, Cassandra.”

3

CASSANDRA

Blake Harrington jumped into the Quince River to save me.

That fact should have been what I was focusing on. Instead, as I stood under a scalding hot shower back in my apartment an hour and a half later, all I could think was that bastard.

Blake Harrington knew who I was and didn’t say anything. Worse, I was pretty sure, like ninety percent sure, that if I hadn’t seen Eli at that choice moment, Blake Harrington would have kissed me.

Blake Harrington was a married man.

Red rage flooded my vision as I pulled on my skirt and blazer. I pictured Blake not as I'd met him on that island with his sopping hair and beard, but like he was on the front page of his website, leaning back-to-back against his wife. What an asshole.

It would be hard to tell Lila exactly how her husband had behaved with me this morning; but it would be much better than letting that asshole get away with... with what exactly? We hadn't done anything. He could have been looking in my eyes, seeing if I had signs of hypothermia.

But I knew that was bullshit. What had happened between us did not feel innocuous. No, it wasn't cool, and given how I'd been on the other side only last year—granted, with a much bigger betrayal by Ned, but still—I wouldn't stand for it.

Blake Harrington was getting fired.

Unfortunately, it would have to be after the meeting with him. I wished not for the first time that I'd scheduled the intro meeting for later in the afternoon so I could have at least had the option to talk to Lila first. Though in some ways, it was a good thing it would go ahead. I did need them to share the results of the study, even if they weren't going to be continuing on with us.

Even if I couldn't stand the thought of listening to a single word Blake Harrington said.

Even if I knew in my heart, too, that the study wasn't enough—we needed that operational review. But I could never work with a man like Blake Harrington.

There was no way.

Luckily, I knew from the meeting agenda their employee Brynn had sent me that they'd agreed with my proposed schedule of sharing the results of the remote review

first. When I'd asked them to set it up that way, it was so I could warm my siblings up. Show them how the initial review outlined that the full review was not only recommended, but necessary. After that, I was going to call for a break and tell them I'd booked the whole thing. Now, I'd pull Lila aside after the break and tell her what happened.

Never mind that I'd have to suffer through any part of a meeting with Blake Harrington pretending things were fine.

God I was an idiot. I was an idiot now, for not having recognized Blake, and I was an idiot last year, when I'd sat down with Ned completely unaware he was about to shatter my heart in a million pieces—and my trust in any man ever after.

I just wished I'd remembered that standing in those trees.

The heat that had spread through me then threatened to come back now, but I shoved it aside with all my might. I wouldn't be charmed by a philanderer.

My hands shook as I hooked in the pearl earrings Mom had given me when I graduated college into my lobes. Somehow, I managed to stroke on some mascara without stabbing myself in the eye.

Still, the memories from this morning came creeping back.

After Eli got over the shock of seeing the two of us together in the middle of the Quince, he'd pulled out his phone and called Griff, who of course had access to a dinghy with an outboard.

The wait on shore with Blake had been awkward—I'd shut down when he told me who he was, wanting very badly to hit him. I'd never wanted to hit anyone before. I'd never even wanted to hit Ned, not even when he told me he wasn't coming with me to

my mother's funeral. Not even when he told me he was leaving me for a friend of mine—a friend he'd apparently been sleeping with for over a year.

I'd been shocked to my core, but I hadn't wanted to hit him.

But this guy? When Blake held out his hand for me to shake, I didn't take it. Instead, I managed to say between gritted teeth, "I guess you know who I am already," while my mind reeled with what to do. Mortification rippled through me. In the end, I opted to pace the gravel rather than talk—or enact physical violence. He seemed to understand I needed time to process and didn't try to speak. Instead, he peeled off the sweater he'd been wearing, revealing a white t-shirt, plastered to his body. It was then I noticed his gray sweatpants, which were also very plastered to him. To everything.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

I'd let out a gasp, then jogged all the way to the tip of the little island to keep myself from seeing him again. The man was horrible. Shitty. As bad as Ned, almost. And the fact that I found him physically attractive after knowing that made me ill.

Griffin showed up twenty minutes later, and I'd never been happier to see my grumbly brother and his buzzing outboard motor in my life. Unfortunately, my happiness drained away when Griff screwed up his face and yelled over the roaring engine at Blake as we crawled into the boat, "Didn't I see you yesterday at the resort?"

Blake had thrown me a look and I knew he hadn't wanted me to know that.

"Wait, what? You stayed at the resort?"

He'd kept his eyes on me when he shouted back to Griff, "Yeah, good memory."

My brother did have a good memory, and he was never wrong about stuff like that. He knew faces.

Humiliation ripped through me. Had Blake been watching me at my job ahead of our start date? That's part of what the Harringtons did, I knew. They shadowed employees at the businesses, though I didn't know they did that before contracts started.

And shit, neither Griffin nor Eli knew Blake was preparing for a longer stay.

The only saving grace I could think of was that I hadn't really shown my face at the

resort this past week at all—I'd been holed up in my office, preparing for the meeting with this very asshole. I should have fired him right there, but the motor was so loud I'd have had to yell it—and then explain myself to Griffin. Plus, it was only a moment before we hit the little beach Griff had navigated us to a bit upstream, where Eli was waiting. Blake jumped out. He stood on shore and looked me in the eye as he said goodbye, and I knew my brothers—Eli, on the beach, and Griff, at the stern of the boat—could sense the tension between us.

“I'll go back with you,” I yelled to Griffin.

Blake had lifted a hand to me, which I hadn't returned. But I couldn't just ignore him—Eli and Griff could already tell something was up. They were looking at me with expressions of confusion.

Finally, I brought my eyes back to Blake. At least I could admit through my anger and humiliation that he had saved me—possibly even my life. I could respond to that.

“Thank you,” I called out. “For pulling me out.”

Blake said nothing, just held my gaze a moment longer before giving a curt nod and walking away with Eli, his hip waders slung over his arm.

I hated myself for the tug of pain in my chest as I watched his back shift under his still-damp shirt. We'd had a moment, I knew we had, and how pathetic was it that the first person to spark those feelings in me in so long was a married man?

Asshole.

My stomach had churned wondering what Blake and Eli were talking about. But now, even though I'd cranked the ringer up on my phone, it was silent as I pulled on my shoes and a light jacket. No messages from Eli.

When I stepped out of my apartment, my insides were still a tumultuous hurricane of emotions. But I forced myself to breathe as I opened the ground-floor door onto the still-gorgeous morning. By the time I entered the patch of trees that lined the four-minute walk between the staff apartments and the resort, I'd cooled down enough to think a little more generously about the situation.

As the staff entrance of the Rolling Hills resort came into view, I wondered if somehow I'd misread the whole situation. Maybe Blake hadn't been flirting. Lord knows I wasn't exactly up on my skills in that department. I hadn't even contemplated dating again since splitting with Ned, let alone put myself out there. I wasn't sure I ever would.

When I jogged up the steps to the quieter west wing staff entrance, instead of going right inside, I leaned back against the wall, closing my eyes and taking a deep breath. I needed a level head for this meeting. I could do this—I just needed a minute.

“You want to tell me what you were doing on a secluded island with a married man?”

A jolt of adrenaline shot through me as I opened my eyes. “Goddammit, Eli,” I said. “You scared me.” Then I pushed myself off the wall. “You know I would never do anything like that.”

“Oh no?”

“Not in a million years.” I wouldn't. Even before everything went down with Ned, I wouldn't have done that. But after? I'd have to be some kind of self-flagellating sociopath. I'd left home to live with Ned, back when my future was brighter than the sun warming my skin right now. I'd trusted him. Sure we'd been busy with work the past few years, doing fewer and fewer things together as a couple, but I never would have dreamed he'd cheat on me.

To my horror, I felt a lump forming in my throat.

Eli saw me getting affected; I could tell by the way he shifted as he leaned against the banister, his eyes darting sideways for a moment. Something almost softened in his expression, but I could tell he still wasn't clear about what had happened between Blake and me.

Join the club.

"Eli," I said. "Do you honestly think I would be messing around with a married man, after what Ned did to me?"

Eli knew exactly what had happened between me and Ned. He'd called only a few minutes after Ned broke the news to me. The door had just clicked shut when Ned left to 'give me time to process' when my phone had rung. I knew it would be Eli. That's what it was like between us. That stuff they say about weird, psychic connections between twins was sometimes right on the money. Like how I felt it in my guts when he fell off his bike on the South Road Trail when we were ten, and he'd broken his left arm. Or when my partner of thirteen years told me he'd been seeing someone else.

Eli shook his head now. "I know you wouldn't do anything like that. I don't really know Blake though. I always thought he was a good guy, but Lila's the one I had classes with. She's the one who invited me to their wedding."

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

A wave of nausea hit me. Their wedding.

“Did he hit on you or something?” I could see my brother’s jaw clenching.

“No!” I said. That was the truth, wasn’t it? It wasn’t like that, it was...

I pinched the bridge of my nose, then reached for the door. “Nothing happened. He pulled me out of the river.” I don’t know why I didn’t share more than that. Maybe because Eli was always kind of hot under the collar—who knows what he’d do if he knew what I was really feeling?

“I know what it’s like to be the person left behind,” he said, following me inside.

He thought I was still thinking about Ned.

“No. You don’t. Your wife never cheated on you.” The words were too loud in the narrow corridor we’d stepped into. But the memory of what Ned did to me always came in too loud; the sting too deep.

“Maybe not,” Eli said. “But you know she told me she wasn’t in love with me, after I devoted my whole goddamned adult life to her.”

I stopped and stared at my brother, the sick feeling rising. “Listen, Eli. I’m sorry for what happened to you. But it’s not the same thing.”

I realized I was essentially goading my brother into a game of suffering Olympics. Which was ridiculous in the first place, but also, I did not want to discuss any of this

right now.

Eli ran his hand up and down over the top of his head, mussing up his thick brown hair. I knew a lot of women found Eli attractive. They really went for that scruffy mop-head thing my brother had going. But to me he was just Eli, my idiot brother. Who of course I loved and cared about.

“So what sound did you make when you fell in the river?” He asked. “Was it like AHHHHH or AUGHUGHGUH?”

My jaw dropped.

Eli’s lips lifted into the beginnings of that grin girls loved so much. In high school, one of my girlfriends had called his grin devastating, and the thought still made me want to puke.

I narrowed my eyes. “You’re hilarious Eli. A riot. Why don’t you go on tour?”

The only reason I didn’t shove him now was because a tiny piece of my heart broke, seeing him smile like this. Eli used to be easy with it before his wife left him, and before Mom died. Now, I couldn’t remember the last time he’d smiled like that.

But he laughed now. “It’s a little funny. But I don’t wish falling in the river on anyone. And I’d never wish my big sister harm.”

He always used big to remind me he was younger than me. By seven minutes.

“Excuse me, I seem to remember youcheeringwhen I fell out of that tree when we were eight.”

Eli scoffed. “Only because you were too scared to get down. You didn’t want me to

leave you there so I had to send Griffin to go get Dad. Then you slipped and fell out anyway.”

“You were throwing sticks at me! What if I had broken something? Would you have cheered then?”

“Depends what you broke.”

I stifled a laugh. “Why’d Mom and Dad have to have three of you guys? Imagine how nice our family would have been if it was just me and Chelsea.”

“Speaking of Chelsea,” Eli said, “we should get her to put up some signs warning people to stay off the trail for now.”

“She’s not your secretary, Eli. Why don’t you print some signs?”

“I’m the CFO,” he said with mock indignation.

“And she’s head of events! Between conferences and bar mitzvahs, our baby sister pulls in almost a third of our operating revenue.”

“I was the one who told you that,” Eli said.

“So who’s more important? The one who tells me that, or the one who does it?”

Now it was Eli’s turn to scowl.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

“Come on,” I said. “We’re going to be late for this meeting.”

He pulled ahead of me, then I picked up speed, passing him with my chin up.

When we were kids, we weren’t allowed to run in the hallways of the hotel, so we’d do power-walk races. We got surprisingly good at it. It helped if you stuck your elbows out too.

I couldn’t help but grin at Eli sashaying ahead of me. When he swung his hips back and forth, I even almost laughed. He may be an idiot, but my twin brother did know how to cheer me up.

But the cheer was short-lived—we’d reached the conference room.

I closed my eyes, bracing myself.

“You okay?”

“Fine,” I said. “Perfectly fine.”

Then I pulled the door open.

I’d wanted to greet Lila. While Blake and I had talked on the phone, it had been Lila I’d videoconferenced with ahead of their remote review. I knew what to expect.

But Blake was all I saw.

He was standing at the window, overlooking the valley below. He looked completely transformed. His hair no longer stuck up in damp chunks but was brushed back in a clean swoop. He wore an expensive-looking gray suit but had taken off the jacket and was in the process of rolling up his shirt sleeves with his broad hands and tapered fingers, revealing smoothly muscled forearms. He looked right at me as I walked in, his gaze burning my skin.

Asshole.

“Good afternoon,” I said, directing all my attention to Lila. She smiled broadly at me from beneath a perfect poker-straight bob of brown hair. I brought a hand to my own wild dirty-blond waves, which I had to work to tame. She was petite and almost birdlike, which made me feel like a clumsy giant, given my 5’11 height and less-than-frail bone structure.

I smiled as warmly as I could as I held out my hand. “It’s a pleasure to finally meet you in person, Lila.”

“Cassandra,” she said, standing. “Wonderful to meet you! I understand you’ve already met Blake?”

A rush of adrenaline hit me in the gut. He told her.

“Oh,” I said. “Yes.”

“Cass decided to go for a dip in the Quince this morning,” Eli said as I moved to the head of the table, sliding into my chair opposite the two where the Harringtons would sit.

Eli and Griffin sat adjacent to me on the left side of the table.

“What?” Chelsea asked, incredulous, from the opposite side. There was an empty seat next to her. Jude was late, of course. If Chelsea hadn’t blown off our run this morning, I never would have known she’d had a night of fun. Her chestnut hair was twisted up in a tight chignon and she wore a fitted white blazer.

But my chest squeezed. Everything to do with Blake aside, I had the panicky image of my baby sister floundering in the river. “It was good you weren’t with me this morning,” I said. “The path is a disaster right now. But Eli said he was going to put up signs to let the guests know.”

“I did not,” Eli said.

Chelsea shot him a glare. “I’ll have my team do it. But Cass, are you serious? Are you okay?”

“She is, thanks to Harrington,” Griffin said. He sat back in his chair with his arms folded. He knew something was up, he just hadn’t sorted out what it was yet.

“I’m sure Ms. Kelly would have been just fine on her own,” Blake said, speaking for the first time.

His voice sent heat running through me. Hot rage, that’s what it was, I told myself. Nothing else.

Blake continued, walking toward his chair and placing his two broad hands on the back. “But I happened to be out for a bit of peaceful fishing and saw a pink...” He glanced at me and cleared his throat before finishing. “I saw her bright running gear in the water.”

“Oh my God,” Chelsea said.

I cleared my throat. “Yes, I’m very grateful to Mr. Harrington for assisting me. However, plucking Kellys out of the water isn’t what he and hiswifeLila are here for today.”

Blake's jaw tensed.

New fury ran through me. That was how he reacted to the mere reminder that he was married?

"Quite right," Lila said. "Rather an exciting start to our project, don't you think?"

Shit.If Brynn had suspected anything was up, she hadn't shared that information with Lila. I noticed the other woman now, sitting on a chair in the row at the side of the room. I'd been so consumed with Blake that I hadn't noticed her there at first. Her eyes were wide, telling me she hadn't thought anything was up before, but did now. Too late. But it wasn't her responsibility to read between the lines. Anything that happened now was Blake Harrington's fault.

"Project?" Eli said, his face snapping toward mine. Eli knew what services the Harringtons offered.

Shit again.Alright, not telling any of my siblings my earlier plans was my fault. Not that it mattered now.

"I thought this was a one-off consultation meeting," he said, alarmed.

"It is," I said. "Would you mind actually going over the results of your remote study, Lila?" I asked. "Per the agenda."

"Oh," she said, looking deeply confused. This was getting messier by the minute.

“No,” Eli said, his jaw tensing. Any good humor he had from earlier was gone. He was pissed.

I gritted my teeth, trying to send him a psychic twin message.

Drop it, Eli. It’s not happening anyway.

“Where’s Jude?” Griffin asked Chelsea. He was throwing me a bone. Distracting Eli.

Eli hated how Jude was always late for our meetings, or blew them off altogether. It pissed me off, too. If he wasn’t my brother—and he wasn’t pulling in so much business with his name on all our brochures (Recreation at the Rolling Hills is overseen by five-time world champion tennis player Jude Kelly)—I’d fire him too. But right now I couldn’t care less where Jude was.

Chelsea shrugged. “No idea.”

“It doesn’t matter,” I said. “We can fill him in later.”

“Maybe it’s best to get started,” Blake said, his voice commanding enough to get all our attention. He hadn’t spoken while the room had gone tense, had just watched us volleying words back and forth. “Perhaps now is the time to tell all of you about our operational review service, and why we not only recommend one in the case of the Rolling Hills resort, but why we told Ms. Kelly if you all agreed to sign with us we’d guarantee a tripling of your profit by next year.”

That got Eli’s attention. “I’m sorry, tripling?”

It also got mine. Blake had framed it as if we hadn’t already signed a contract.

He was pulling me out of the water again.

I gripped the arms of my chair, half-furious that he was jumping in to rescue me again, and half-relieved that he had. Then I registered what Blake had said. Tripling our revenue? He hadn't mentioned that to me. He hadn't even provided me with a guarantee. He'd only indicated he was confident we'd become profitable.

He was raising the stakes as he spoke.

He knew. He knew I was going to cancel the review. And he was making sure that didn't happen by getting Eli on his side right in front of my face.

The warmth turned to a hot blue flame of fury. That bastard.

No, that shark.

"Yes," he said, reaching for the black remote on the table. "Barring any extreme situation such as cataclysmic building failure or executive corruption—which we, of course, do not anticipate will arise—following this review and your implementation of each of our suggestions to the letter, we guarantee a profit increase of double your previous year's earnings within one year of implementation, and triple once the executive wing is reopened."

"Wait," I said. "The executive wing?"

"Yes. Allow me to explain in the presentation. That is, if you want to continue?"

Blake leveled his gaze on me. This was a challenge.

But what could I do? Eli and the rest of them were looking at him with nothing short of awe.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

“Please,” I said. I was going to snap the arms of my chair in two. Good, maybe I could throw the pieces at his head later.

“Go ahead.”

4

BLAKE

If Cassandra Kelly looked like she wanted to fire me when she first walked into the boardroom, she now looked like she wanted to full-on murder me, dig my grave, and toss me in all by herself.

With everyone watching.

But it was too late to lose.

At first, after I'd parted ways with Eli and gotten into my rental car, I'd intended to get cleaned up, then head straight to the resort to talk to Cassandra ahead of the meeting. To explain that I hadn't known it was her. That I always checked out places before I was hired to get a candid feel of the business. That I was sorry for whatever had happened between us just now. But I knew the moment I thought it out that anything I said to Cassandra ahead of the meeting would come off like an excuse. Like I was more worried about the project than her feelings.

Which wasn't true at all.

Though I wanted this project so bad I could taste it. Competent clients. Potential so potent I could smell it.

Business number 100.

But I also knew Cassandra wouldn't cancel this meeting. She didn't seem like the kind of person to act rashly and cancel something at the last minute—and I knew she'd want the results of our preliminary study. That in and of itself had been expensive, and that's what her siblings were waiting for.

That was when I'd decided I'd have to swim—fast, sharp, and sure, like the shark I was.

Now, as I launched into my presentation, I shifted my attention to the work. I felt myself loosen up, the words coming easily as I strode around the room. Some of these were things I said at every client meeting of this type. Our experience. How we'd started. How we'd resurrected massive, deeply in-debt firms everyone else said were dead. I could talk about this stuff in my sleep, but I knew better than to give anything but my absolute best here. I needed to win everyone over, including Cassandra. Because if I did manage to salvage this project, it would be she and I working closely together. For six weeks.

But I couldn't think about that now. Instead I went on, flipping through my succinct, sparing slides with the pointer—images mostly, and a few hard-hitting numbers I used only to hammer points home, or to keep names and numbers in my clients' minds.

As the minutes flew by, I could feel it working. I always knew when I was killing it. I could feel the energy building in the room. This morning's events may have shown that I was no good at winning over a woman, least of all Cassandra. But there was no one better than me at winning a room. Maybe it was cocky, but it wasn't unearned.

This was how we'd gone from ambitious college students to the most in-demand consultants on the East Coast. This was business, and I'd studied business like it was a science and I was after the Nobel Prize. When I was a kid, I'd read business books like my life depended on them, which maybe they did, considering how my father had hammered into me that success in business was the only kind of success that mattered. It was never about the money for me—though that helped. It was about doing the best. Being the best. Knocking it out of the goddamned park.

Getting to 100.

And I was doing it now. I knew, if my father could see me, he might offer me a begrudging frown—his version of a smile. Maybe. Or maybe he'd shoot me a text like the one he had this morning, when he heard Goldman had poached another of our clients lined up for this fall. He tracked my business like it was his own special side hustle.

Always the bridesmaid, Blake. Never quite pretty enough to be the bride.

I shoved that aside fast, telling one of my home-run quips, which sent the room into peals of laughter, which gave me a quick moment to take a sip of water and a breath.

Thinking about my dad was the only thing that could throw me off my game right now—he'd poke holes in a gold-medal win, if I was on the podium. The only reason I didn't cut off communication altogether—theonlyreason—was because I wanted to tell him personally when I hit it.

But that wasn't true anymore, was it? It wasn't just Dad who could throw me right now. Cassandra could too.

I'd never been so fucking rattled by a woman.

Even when I paused, I didn't look at her. I looked each of the other Kelly siblings in the eye, but I knew if I looked at her before I was finished, I'd falter.

I was nearing the end of my presentation, and the entire room was hanging on my every word. Even Cassandra was rapt—I could feel her eyes on me.

“In closing,” I said, “The Rolling Hills resort is going to undergo the most phenomenal transformation any of us have ever seen, and we've seen a ton of transformations with our work. The Rolling Hills will have name-brand recognition that will perk the ears of travelers worldwide. We guarantee it.”

With that, I lowered the pointer down on the table.

My temples were damp with sweat and across the room there was a murmur of excited, bubbling conversation.

Jude stood up. The tennis star had come in just after I'd begun, looking slightly wobbly. He wore dark sunglasses, and his blond hair was tied back in a man bun, which I realized I remembered from the sports pages. I never did follow tennis, but Brynn practically had stars in her eyes—she was a sports nut, and her enthusiasm at getting to work with Jude Kelly was probably one of the reasons Lila had finally warmed up to the job.

I held my breath as he opened his mouth, even though I was pretty sure he was now my most enthusiastic fan. Then he slapped his hand on the table. “Sold!”

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

Jude had practically whooped when I got to the best parts of the presentation.

“Shit, if even half the things you say are true—”

“They are.”

“That was really incredible,” Chelsea said. She looked almost awestruck.

“Yeah man,” Eli said. “I’m impressed.”

Even Grumpy Lumberjack Griffin frowned, but it didn’t look like an unhappy frown.

But while all the Kelly siblings’ opinions were important—critical—to the decision making, there was only one person whose opinion mattered to me right now. Cassandra. The woman I’d nearly kissed this morning.

Finally, I allowed myself to look at her.

Cassandra’s eyes were on me, her expression somehow still murderous. But layered overtop of it was something like... admiration.

Relief washed over me in a wave. Elation, too. I’d just saved this project.

And only she and I knew it.

Now I wanted to whoop like Jude had done. Instead, I gave a nod and straightened my tie, unrolling my sleeves to reattach my cufflinks.

While everyone at the table chatted excitedly—except Cassandra, who spoke quietly to Eli—I sat down, sliding the remote over to Lila, who’d give an outline of the technicalities of the six-week review.

I willed myself to focus on Lila and the numbers. Cassandra and I needed to talk, more now than before. I tried my best not to look at her, telling myself I’d catch her the minute the meeting was over. That looking at her would only make things worse.

But it was impossible. Now that I wasn’t in action, my eyes went to Cassandra like they were magnetically drawn to her. I knew that if she interrupted the meeting and asked me right there and then what the hell had happened this morning—why I’d looked at her the way a supposedly married man should never look at another woman—I would have told her the truth.

It was you, Cassandra. You did something—made me feel something.

Also, I’m not fucking married. That would probably be number one.

But I couldn’t say that, not now that we had her business. I was going to have to tread carefully. Be impeccable with my actions and words.

Somehow forget about this morning.

I’d been attracted to women before, sure. I’d wanted to be with them. I’d even occasionally wished I could tell them my marriage wasn’t real. But I’d never been tempted to do that. I’d always been able to push those feelings aside. The company was more important. Our business was more important. Lila’s life was more important.

I’d just have to try harder.

But my eyes kept going back to her.

Why was I so interested in Cassandra, anyway? I was attracted to her, absolutely. Painfully, almost. But there was something else. Something about the way that she held herself—confident but like her shoulders were holding something up. Or like her confidence was an exoskeleton too shiny and perfect to be real. She held deep pain underneath. I could see it in the way her eyes had darted away when I told her she was attractive this morning.

Someone hurt her.

Some men, I knew, went after damaged women because they knew they could control them. They were despicable assholes. But the pain I saw in her—I wanted to find it, to excise it like removing a bullet lodged in flesh. To throw it away and make her see how perfect she was, scars and all.

For a few moments, I focused intently on Lila's words. She was talking about the order of the review. When we'd be with each department. What kind of interaction we'd have with the staff.

But as Lila went on, Cassandra tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, and I found my eyes going back to her. Her hair, dry and loose now, fell in those Kelly McGillis waves around her face.

God, she was sexy.

When she'd walked into the room earlier, I couldn't get over how even her walk was sexy. Determined. Sure. Purposeful. She probably destroyed in Manhattan boardrooms when she worked there.

I let myself wonder once more what had happened to precipitate Cassandra taking the

fall for her previous company's wrongdoings. It was clear from Brynn's research that that's what had happened when she'd stepped down, with apologies to the shareholders. She had a stellar track record before that and was known for business practices not normally seen on Wall Street, like helping people move up through the ranks, hiring diversely, and privately capping her annual salary while offering bonuses to even the lowliest of staff. She was fierce, but she had a kindness to her, too. Most people like that got chewed up and spit out in business, but she'd persevered. She'd killed it for over a decade. Then she'd stepped down, split from her long-time partner, and taken over her family business away from the bright lights of New York City.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

It felt strange, knowing that bit about her ex. But Brynn always gathered personal information about our clients. Nothing that wasn't public or easy enough to discover, but I did always know more about my clients than they knew about me. A lot more. Our data collection was designed to help us understand our clients' motivations and to tailor our approach to their personalities and lives.

But even before I met her, I knew I'd wanted more on Cassandra than I had. I'd resisted, until just before this meeting. I'd looked up her ex to determine what kind of idiot would leave Cassandra Kelly. He was an investment banker, and just last month he'd been featured in the social pages of Manhattan Magazine with his current girlfriend, a woman who used to work for Cassandra.

That had explained a lot.

"Alright, any questions?" Lila asked.

Shit, she was wrapping up.

"Will you be following the rec team?" Jude asked. His siblings threw daggers at him as he lowered his phone. "Sorry if you already explained this," he said sheepishly. At least the guy was humble enough to know when he'd messed up.

Lila smiled graciously. She had already explained it. But we never made clients feel bad for anything. Ever. "Yes, we'll be following all departments, and as much as we can, all staff. We'll have Blake start with a full walkthrough with Cassandra starting next week."

Cassandra's eyes darted to mine. Did I imagine it, or had a flush gone up her cheeks?

"We'll be starting in the head office, going over the business planning with Cassandra and books with Eli," Lila continued, "Then we'll do the departmental walkthroughs after that..."

Lila went over the schedule in detail again, but this time, all I saw was Cassandra, dropping items into her bag.

She was getting ready to go. Nervous energy shot through me—I needed to catch her now.

"... then we'll deliver a final report with our findings and recommendations after our review concludes," Lila finished.

"Are you going to be staying at the hotel?" Chelsea asked.

"No," I said, eager to wrap up. "While we'll be spending the bulk of our time here, we've rented a home in town. We'll be up in your business, but not all up in your business."

Now it was Jude who laughed. "I like you guys," he said.

"Great," I said. "That's always a nice bonus."

I spent the next few minutes answering questions, my eyes returning constantly to Cassandra, who now looked eager to leave. It occurred to me that she knew I'd try to talk to her. That she might be trying to avoid me. That stung, but it made sense. But it was too bad. There was no avoiding me now that the project was officially on.

"I have a question," Eli said. People were getting up now, Cassandra saying

something to her sister.

“Sure,” I said.

“This one’s for Cass. How are we paying for all this?”

Cassandra folded her hands on the table as a sudden awkward coolness slipped into the room. This was normally the place where we’d bow out—financial discussions didn’t need to include the ones being paid.

“We’re running tight as it is—” Eli began.

“Eli, these questions really don’t require the Harringtons’ presence,” Cassandra said, echoing my thoughts. “But to be succinct, I’ve negotiated a deal with the best consulting firm on the East Coast. The costs will be covered out of contingency A.”

“Contingency A?” Eli repeated, bunching his brows.

“A fund under my accounts. If you have more questions, please come to me directly.” Then she stood. “I believe that concludes this meeting.” She wanted out of here. “Thank you, Mr. and Mrs. Harrington, for the comprehensive presentation.”

Eli didn’t look pleased. He opened his mouth, but I spoke first.

“How about dinner?”

All eyes turned to me. I realized, when Cassandra’s eyes went wide, that it sounded like I’d asked the question of her. I’d only been trying to deflect Eli’s questions for her. It was clear she hadn’t talked funds with him and I’d put her in a shitty headspace to do so.

“The Kellys and the Harringtons,” I said, as if it was obvious. “It’ll be a chance to get to know each other in a less formal setting,” I said. “On our dime, of course.”

I glanced at Lila. Though it wasn’t at all out of the ordinary for us to have a kick-off event, it was one more thing I’d sprung on her without asking.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

But Lila knew as well as I did that things always went better with these reviews when we developed a personal rapport with our clients first. They tended to be more friendly and less formal, and therefore more candid with our questions during the review.

She smiled. “Great idea, Blake. If the Kellys are amenable.”

“We should definitely celebrate,” Chelsea said.

“For sure!” Jude agreed.

Cassandra’s face made it clear she’d rather do anything else, but she gave a polite smile. “Sounds good. Saturday at L’Aubergine?”

“How about somewhere in town?” Eli said, looking vaguely uncomfortable.

“Why’s that, Eli?” Jude asked, looking at his brother point blank.

Now it was Eli who looked like he wanted to do some stabbing, but Griffin was the one who stood up next. “Eli needs to suck it up. I don’t love eating there either, but we could use the business.”

I was confused by the whole exchange but too distracted by the fact that Cassandra was heading to the door to try to sort it out. I shook hands with the four remaining Kelly siblings, hoping it wasn’t obvious I was trying to bolt out after their sister.

“Blake,” Lila said.

My partner, on the other hand, could read me like a book.

I froze, then turned and smiled. She was standing over by Brynn on the far wall.

It was fine; I'd just have to catch up with Cassandra at her office. If that's where she was headed. I could find it easily enough.

I was sure Lila was going to give me shit for going off-script—she was a planner and didn't like surprises. We were far enough away from the remaining Kellys—their conversation deep in conversation—that no one but Brynn could hear.

Instead she said, "Good job back there,"

"Yeah, that was awesome, even for you," Brynn said.

My shoulders relaxed, just slightly.

"Thanks," I said.

"Why was she wavering?" Lila asked.

Just like that, my shoulders tightened again. Of course. Lila knew I'd only stray from our carefully thought-out meeting agenda if there was something wrong.

"It's... complicated," I said.

I'd only told Lila about pulling Cassandra out of the river briefly. She'd been incredulous, but had immediately looked at it as a good thing—how could this morning not go well after I'd rescued the CEO? But she knew something else was going on, I could tell. I couldn't say it was nothing. But couldn't tell her the truth about what had happened either. She'd lose it, and rightly so. It could very easily

have lost us this account.

It could have lost us our whole business, if word got out.

The longer I hesitated, the tighter their faces grew with concern. They could be so happy if it weren't for our situation. They were so happy, I thought. They made it work. I thought about Lila's parents; how their faces had dropped when we told them last year we wouldn't be trying for a baby. If only they knew that wasn't even the biggest issue. I hated them for how they'd put Lila in this position.

I hated myself for nearly blowing it.

"I didn't know it was her at first," I said finally.

That, at least, was the truth.

"Oh shit," Brynn said.

"And I didn't get a chance to check in with her when we figured it out," I continued.

Lila's eyebrows were bunched together. "Surely not recognizing her wouldn't be enough for her to pull out of the project?"

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

“Unless you said something that insulted her?” Brynn said. “When you rescued her?”

Lila’s mouth fell open as she turned to Brynn. “I can’t believe you’d bring that up.”

Thank you, Brynn.

Once, we’d almost lost a client when Lila had expressed her frustration at a lunchtime debrief over how the CEO wasn’t following any of her advice. As it turned out, he’d been at the table next to us.

“Listen, I have to go,” I said. “We can talk later.”

“Alright, see you at home,” Lila said, loud enough for the others to hear.

But I was already out the door.

5

BLAKE

I was halfway down the hall when I realized I had no idea where Cassandra’s office was. Or if she was even going there. It was lunchtime now. Maybe she’d left, and I’d have to find her phone number to call her. But I didn’t want to do that. This had to be dealt with in person.

Then I heard voices.

I found Cassandra around the corner, standing with another woman dressed all in black. The other woman looked up when I appeared, and Cassandra turned around, following her gaze.

The way she stiffened when she saw me made my guts twinge, but I gave a smile as if nothing was the matter.

“Sorry to interrupt,” I said.

“Can it wait?” she asked. She still wanted to murder me.

Maybe if she gave me a chance to explain, she wouldn’t have to keep being so goddamned angry.

“Not really,” I said.

Cassandra’s eyebrows went up.

“It’s fine!” said the other woman. Clearly, she sensed the tension.

“Reese,” Cassandra said, putting on what might be construed as a smile. But it was nothing like her real smile. I knew what that looked like.

For a flash, I was back on that island, her lip under my thumb.

“This is Blake Harrington,” she said. “He and hiswifeLila”—once more she punched the word out—“are the consultants I mentioned at the manager meeting last week.”

If I heardwife come out of her mouth one more time...

“They’re going to be doing an operational review on the resort. Blake, this is Reese

Franco, L'Aubergine's manager."

"Pleasure to meet you, Reese," I said, forcing myself to look at the other woman and extend my hand. She was pretty, with sandy blonde hair tied up in a bun.

"We need to talk," I said to Cassandra, trying to contain my impatience.

"I'll see you later, Cass," Reese said after politely shaking my hand. "We're short-staffed this weekend, so I'm heading to the floor. I'll be at dinner tomorrow too," she said to Cassandra. "I'll take your table until Coco takes over at nine." At this, Cassandra looked relieved, though she only smiled briefly. "Thanks Reese. I appreciate it."

The other woman was just walking away when she froze, her eyes widening.

I turned to see Eli, similarly frozen, behind me. I could sense the awkwardness as they exchanged stiff hellos, then both carried on, Reese down the hall and Eli out the door, but not before glaring at his sister.

When I turned back to Cassandra, all I saw was her back as she rounded the corner up ahead.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

“Cassandra,” I said, my voice hard, jogging after her.

“They have history,” Cassandra said, without turning around. “They dated, briefly, after Eli’s divorce. Pretty sure, being an idiot, he dumped her and is now pissed that I dared to hire her at the restaurant.”

“She seems nice,” I said vaguely as we reached the exit door. Frankly, I didn’t give a shit about Eli and his relationship issues at the moment.

“Oh, are you interested?” she said as she pushed through the door, sending sunlight streaming inside. “I think she’s single.”

That was like a swift kick in the gut. “Jesus,” I said. “I’m not—”

I followed her outside, heat roaring in my chest. We were on the back side of the resort. Out here, beyond the concrete landing and steps, thick trees lined a forked path—one side led into the trees and the other around the building.

“Goddammit, will you let me talk?” I snapped.

Right. Yelling—that would solve this problem.

Yet it seemed to work for the moment. Cassandra turned around, fire in her eyes.

“Why should I let you explain yourself? There’s nothing you could tell me that would make what happened this morning okay.”

I gritted my teeth. “Cassandra, it’s not how it seems,” I said. “Between me and Lila.”

“Oh no? What, do you have some kind of open relationship?”

“It’s not like that either.”

“So you were just going to cheat, then?”

To my astonishment, I saw her eyes were wet with tears. I knew, then, why this was so huge. Someone had done this to her. I took a step toward her. “I would never cheat on someone I was married to.”

She frowned, and I realized it had been a strange way to phrase it.

But it was true.

“My dad, he cheated on my mom,” I said. “Several times.” I couldn’t keep the vitriol from my voice. “It destroyed our family.”

The truth was, Dad had left Mom for his secretary—the most clichéd trick in the book. He was now on wife number three.

Cassandra studied me for a moment. I must not have been doing a great job of hiding my feelings now because, for the briefest moment, she looked like she believed me. No, like she wanted to believe me. But she didn’t. And that somehow felt worse than her not believing me at all.

“I was going to fire you,” she said. “But you knew that, didn’t you? That’s why you launched into your little sales pitch. You wooed my brothers and sister right under my nose because that’s what you do, isn’t it? You spin things.”

The heat came back, burning up my lungs. “That’s not fair—”

“Oh yes it is. You think I can’t fire you now? Because I can. I—” she took a breath, hesitating. Then she said, “Actually, you know what? I am firing you. Right now. I didn’t want to hurt your wife by letting you go, but you know what? That’s not—”

“We’re not married,” I said.

Cassandra froze.

Fuck.

No one knew our marriage was fake outside of me, Lila, Brynn, and my brother Conrad.

I fisted my hands, but I didn’t let my eyes leave hers. She had to know I was telling the truth this time.

Cassandra’s brows bunched together. “What?”

I gritted my teeth, then absurdly, thought of something my father used to say. He may be the reason for every single one of my issues, but he’d wedged a few gems between his constant disapproving remarks.

Page 20

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

Don't be chickenshit, Blake. When you mess up, say what you need to say and do it with surgical precision.

"Cassandra, I should have told you who I was this morning. I didn't recognize you at first. But when I figured it out, I should have said something. I was just afraid of..." I realized I was afraid of this. Of fucking blowing it.

"We were never married, Lila and I. There was a wedding, but the paperwork wasn't real."

"So, it's a lie?"

"Yes."

Surgical precision.

"Why?"

Where everything had come out clean a moment ago, here I hesitated. I couldn't out Lila. Besides, it wasn't only for Lila that I kept this charade up.

In the end, I settled on the least complicated part of the truth.

"It's for our business. We're Mr. and Mrs. Shark. It gives us our competitive edge." I realized that sounded like I had to lie to get business, but she was sharp. She saw the way my eyes had left hers.

She knew there was more to it.

Cassandra shook her head. “That’s bullshit. I saw you up there. You were on fire. You could do this work on your own, and she could too.”

But she was wrong about that.

“Why did you hire us? I know you called Goldman.”

I didn’t have confirmation of this, but Lila said after she talked to Cassandra that she’d said she was looking at all her options. Harrington and Goldman were the top options.

Cassandra pinched her lips.

“You liked that we were married. Lila and I are a team. A good team, and better than Goldman at what we do. But people go with us because they like the image we present. Devoted, loving, husband-and-wife. We make them feel good.”

My tone was bitter. I knew it. But I couldn’t stem the anger spiking through everything. This was the life I’d gotten myself into. It was my own damn fault.

Maybe I could branch out on my own. But it wouldn’t be the same. It would be like starting over. I’d have lost everything I’d worked for. Plus, I had no idea how to work without Lila. We were a well-oiled machine. And what would happen if that broke? If I had to start all over again—maybe not from the bottom, but definitely from several steps back? A whole flight of stairs back?

The thought made me sick.

What would my father say?

What would Lila's parents say?

It worked both ways—if we were the lie holding the business up, the business was the lynchpin holding us together for her. If we broke up Harrington, we'd be breaking up our fake marriage, and everything would fall apart after that. All those years posing would land in pieces at our feet. I'd have to face the fact that I spent so much of my life hiding behind a facade. Lila would be disowned. While she wouldn't face the kinds of repercussions she might have back when she was still living at home, her relationship with her parents was everything to her. They were close. She was their darling—they'd named their foundation after her. For her, that relationship was more important than her business.

It was her whole damn life.

"I won't do it," I said. I used a tone that told her I wasn't going to back down on this one, because I couldn't. I made a promise to Lila.

I'd made a promise to myself.

Cassandra examined me for a moment, then shook her head. "I'm sorry, Blake. I have no way of believing anything that comes out of your mouth. I don't even know if what happened this morning was—" She flushed. "I'll get my lawyer to sort out the contract. We'll terminate, I'll pay you what we owe you and we can—"

"You can't afford what you're paying us."

She froze.

The words were harsh, but they landed right where I wanted them.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

“Of course I can.”

“No you can’t. I saw the financials. You’re running on fumes. You’re banking on us turning you around so you can pay it all off after.”

She gritted her teeth. I was right. She knew I knew it.

“That’s why I’m going to make you an offer,” I said.

I wasn’t going to lose this project. I wasn’t going to lose the chance to show her I wasn’t the asshole she thought I was.

“What could you possibly offer me that I’d want now?” Cassandra asked.

“Don’t fire me. I’ll wave the retainer and expenses. If I don’t turn your resort around, you don’t have to pay us.”

For a moment, Cassandra said nothing.

“In case you don’t believe me, I’ll have my lawyer write it up into our own contract. Between you and me.”

For a moment, there was only silence.

Then she said, “What’s in it for you?”

“You don’t tell anyone my secret. And you do everything I say.”

Her brows lifted.

“If you succeed, I succeed.”

She hesitated.

“This is the deal of the century for you,” I said. “And it’s only on the table right now.”

Just then, there was a bang as the door behind us opened. A couple of staff in gray uniforms came out, looking surprised when they saw their boss on the steps. Their eyes went wide at the sight of me. Maybe I was looking intense. Or maybe they sensed the tension between us, as tight as a wire.

“Ms. Kelly,” said one.

Cassandra smiled, softening for a moment. “Julia, Louise—how are you two? How’s your daughter, Louise?”

“We’re great, ma’am,” one of them said. “So are they. They’re going home with the baby tomorrow.”

“Amazing,” Cassandra said, sounding genuinely happy.

“See you at the all-staff meeting next week?” the woman asked her.

“Can’t wait.”

The way she was with her staff—it made me twist inside. Cassandra was a good person. Too good for my life of lies. I wished I’d never embroiled her in my shit. I wished I’d stayed the hell away from her on that island and acted like a decent human

being.

Or never suggested we take this job in the first place.

The moment the two had gone down the stairs, I stretched on my jacket, which I'd been gripping in my hand. "The offer closes the minute I hit that bottom step," I said.

I was done bargaining, done begging. I was going to go home to New York, pretend I never met Cassandra Kelly. We hadn't started here yet—I could make another client our 100th.

But with each step I took, the storm cloud over me grew darker.

It wouldn't be the same.

My phone buzzed. I pulled it out. It was my father. Of all fucking people.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

BRIAN: You think you know about the hotel business? You think you can do better than me?

He'd heard. Of course he heard. I gripped my phone in my fist, so tight I was sure I would crush it.

I was at the second-to-last step when Cassandra said, "Wait!"

I froze, my foot hovering over the last stair.

Cassandra came down the steps behind me, circling around so she was below me, looking up. For the briefest moment, looking at her determined face, I wished none of this had happened, that I was just a fisherman in the river who'd saved her. That we'd kissed and stayed all day on that island and had completely different lives than we did.

"Okay," she said.

It was there, still, that heat from before.

But I couldn't let it control me. I pressed it down, shoving it as far as I could.

"Good. See you next week, Cassandra." Then I walked past her, leaving her standing behind me, watching me go.

It should have felt good. It was a victory, what I'd pulled off there. So why did it feel so fucking hollow?

CASSANDRA

Dad's lips moved, but no sound came out.

"Dad!" Chelsea shouted. "You're muted."

"Ow," I said, moving away from her. She'd yelled right in my ear. "He can hear us just fine!"

"Yeah, Chels, damn," Jude said on-screen, making a show of taking out and reinserting his earphones.

It was Saturday evening, a full five days from when I'd made the deal with Blake Harrington.

And an hour before we were supposed to meet him and Lila for dinner.

Lila, his non-wife.

Blake, not a married man.

I still couldn't quite wrap my head around it. If I was being honest with myself, I still felt like I shouldn't believe him.

But somehow, I did. I saw the way he flinched when he mentioned his dad leaving his family. I recognized that flicker of pain. Even though it wasn't him who'd been cheated on, he had been betrayed. I knew the look that had danced across his features.

What was wrong with me? Why wasn't I enough?

He could still be lying, but I didn't think he was. Still, I'd trusted before and been burned. So mostly, I maintained a sense of caution. I'd wait until I saw the new contract; the private one between us that only my lawyer would see. Blake and I had emailed back and forth a few times on the terms, and he was bringing the final version to dinner tonight.

Nerves shot through me at the thought of seeing him again. I should have been getting ready, but instead, I was waiting for my dad to set up his technologically impaired butt on this call.

I'd just gotten out of the shower twenty minutes ago when my phone buzzed on the counter. It was Dad, texting me to say he needed the five of us to call him urgently. He'd sent a cryptic text the day before; a question I hadn't thought much about relating to the east wing. I thought he was doing more research for this history book he'd been plugging away at in earnest since Mom died. But today's text had alarmed me.

DAD: Get everyone together—urgent.

I'd hurried to pull on my sweats, then ran across the hall to bang on Chelsea's door. Between the two of us, we managed to get ahold of all three of our brothers. Jude was home and able to join the call from the millionaire mansion he rented up on the other side of town. Eli was out at baseball practice, but on his way back. Griff told me straight up that he wasn't going to join the call.

"It'll be some bullshit, Cass, you know that." Griffin didn't have a lot of time for Dad's flightiness. He was probably right—the chances of it being actually urgent were not high. Dad had absolutely gone off the rails when Mom died, and Griffin wasn't quite over it.

"There's a chance it isn't," I said.

“Then you’ll let me know.”

He wouldn’t budge.

Concern had tugged at me as I’d set up the video call, though the moment Dad picked up, it slipped several notches. Dad was at some kind of beach bar. There were palm trees swaying behind him, and though he was muted and hadn’t told us what the emergency was, he appeared to be alive and well. And sipping a drink with an umbrella in it.

I leaned back on the couch next to Chelsea now, annoyed that Griff had been right.

“Dad, this better be good,” I said. I knew he could hear us even if we couldn’t hear him.

Dad picked up his phone, skewing the view behind him so for a moment all we saw was bright blue sky, then he angled it so his camera gave a vertical upshot of his face; specifically, straight up his nostrils and the forest of his nose hairs.

“Oh my God,” Chelsea said, laughing.

I laughed too, despite my quickly growing irritation.

“Dad, gross,” Jude said.

The only good thing about Dad texting like this and freaking me out was it was a distraction from the anxiousness I’d been feeling all day about dinner tonight. But

now that the worry about Dad had abated, nerves skittered through my stomach.

Finally, Dad's voice came through. "Hello?"

"Yes!" I said. "It's working."

"Where are your brothers?" he asked.

"Eli's supposed to be coming," I said. "Griff... I'm not sure." I couldn't exactly tell him his son blew him off.

"Hey, I'm here!" Jude said.

"Where's my grandson?" Dad asked Jude.

"He's at the babysitter's," Jude said. Jude, arguably the least responsible of all of us, had a three-year-old son, Jack. Granted, it was because of his irresponsibility that he had a son in the first place, though he was now the apple of his—and all of our—eyes.

"Dad, what's the emergency?" I asked.

"I need all of you there first."

"Are you hurt?"

"No. Nothing like that."

Now the annoyance scrunched up in my stomach. I hit the mute button. "You know," I said to Chelsea, "if we had pulled this kind of thing on Dad when we were in college, he'd have lost it."

“He’s different now,” she said.

“You’re being charitable.” Really, it was deeply painful for me to see Dad like this. He’d always been the one I came to when I needed a sensible take on things as a kid. Mom was good for that too, but she’d always been so busy running the hotel. As a stay-at-home dad, it had been Dad who put the bandages on our knees and gave us the pep talks we needed. Dad had been the one to talk Mom down when Eli and I told her despite both of us going to business school, neither of us wanted to take over the hotel.

Still, I turned back to Dad, who was just giving the waiter another drink order, and unmuted us.

“How’s Majorca?” I asked when he was done.

“I’m in the Canary Islands.” The tone of Dad’s voice was so casual I had to fight to keep the anger out of my voice.

“You said you were going to tell us when you were going someplace new! We have to know where you are.”

Dad waved his hand like he wasn’t a seventy-year-old backpacking around the world.

“You act like I’m some frail old man.”

I bit my cheek to keep from snapping at him. He wasn’t frail, but Mom hadn’t been either.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

“I love the Canaries,” Jude said, leaning back in his chair and threading his hands behind his head.

I sighed, resigning myself to Dad not getting how hard this was on us. Or maybe just me. “Don’t you have to get ready?” I asked my brother.

Jude looked down at his shirt—a coral-colored t-shirt with sweat still ringed under his armpits. “I’m dressed!”

Jude would look good—and continue to have women falling over him—if he wore a paper bag. But he knew he couldn’t wear that to dinner—not when it was a business meeting, and our high-end restaurant had a dress code. He saw me scowl through the screen. I know, because he laughed.

Just then, my apartment door banged open and Eli appeared, flanked by his best friend since childhood, Seamus Reilly.

“Finally!” I said, even though it had only been a few minutes since we started the call. I shifted sideways to make room for him.

“Hey Seamus,” I said.

“Hey Cass,” he replied, standing awkwardly at the door. I couldn’t help notice the way his eyes darted over Chelsea, as if trying not to linger. “Chelsea,” he said, before glancing away.

Chelsea was already dressed for dinner—she took events seriously, given it was her

job. I realized she looked gorgeous sitting there—her purple blouse offset her green eyes perfectly. Even if those eyes had dark shadows under them, only partially concealed with make-up.

Worry danced over me at my little sister's behavior once more. She'd been like this ever since Mom died. She'd actually been there when Mom died—Chelsea had discovered Mom on the floor of her office.

Heart attack, Chelsea had said to me over the phone from the ambulance, her voice sounding high and lost and entirely not hers. That's what they think, because she's already gone.

That's how I found out.

"Don't touch us," Chelsea said now as Eli flopped down on the couch next to us. Both he and Seamus were in sweaty, dust-coated t-shirts.

I forced myself to push my worries aside for now. Not much I could do about it here, and she seemed to be in good enough spirits most days, anyway.

"I'm just here for water," Seamus said. "I forgot my water bottle—Eli said he'd give me some at his. Er, yours, I guess, Cass."

"What's yours is mine," Eli said, to me or him I didn't know.

"Of course!" I ignored my brother and gestured to the kitchen, which was open to the living room where we all sat. "Help yourself."

It was strange being polite with Seamus. Given how inseparable he and my twin brother were when we were kids, he'd been like just another of my brothers growing up—just as annoying and smelly, anyway. But that was years ago, and we were

adults now. While Eli had kept in touch with him, before this year, I hadn't seen him in 15.

"Wow, living the hard life, huh, Dad?" Eli said under his breath. Dad and Eli didn't always get along, though I thought it was because they were practically the same person. That is, if you didn't count Dad losing it and taking off on a plane. They even had the same smile.

While Eli talked to Dad, Seamus set his phone down on my kitchen counter to pour himself a glass of water. While he chugged it down, I glanced at my sister, who was looking intently at the screen with Dad, though I saw her eyes dart toward him.

I glanced at my watch once more. Our dinner was in under an hour now. Absurdly, stupid Blake Harrington's face flashed in my mind—the one on those back steps, where he'd looked at me so intently while slipping on his suit jacket. I thought about the photo on their website once more. I'd pulled it up again last week and noticed the smallest detail: they weren't actually touching. It was a minuscule thing—only an inch between them, but I found myself reading into it, as if that tiny fraction of non-proximity would prove he was telling the truth.

Seamus put his glass in the dishwasher and gave us an awkward goodbye before slipping back out the door. Chelsea's eyes were trained hard on the screen, even though I knew she couldn't care less about Eli and Jude's conversation about various beaches on the Canary Islands.

"Alright Dad," I said, turning my attention back to the screen. "Eli's here, and we have to go in ten."

Dad, who'd been arguing with Eli about something, cleared his throat and leaned in, looking left and right as if someone might be listening.

“For God’s sake, Dad,” Eli said, rolling his eyes.

“Cassandra,” Dad said. “Chelsea told me you’ve hired someone to fix up the hotel.”

I threw a look at Chelsea. It was way easier when Dad didn’t know what was going on. He had a way of getting involved from afar these days that wasn’t helpful.

“What? It’s not a secret,” she exclaimed.

“You said you didn’t want to get involved in the business,” I said to Dad.

“Are they going to renovate the east wing?” he asked. He sipped his drink, making a comically loud slurping noise.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

“Dad, they’re not—” It was too difficult to explain what exactly consultants did, and how construction on our shut-down wing wasn’t even in the planning stages yet. All that would come after the Harringtons’ report. “They will be,” I said. Dad would probably ask me the same question next month, anyway.

“Okay. This is critical then. I’m glad I caught you. Tell them... not to go into 114.”

I actually placed my hand on my forehead, incredulity growing like a balloon. “This? This is what you called an urgent meeting for?”

“Dad,” Eli said. He looked at me as if to verify he wasn’t hearing things.

I grimaced.

He looked back at our father. “You’re not serious?”

“Wait, is that the haunted room?” Chelsea asked.

“No,” I said. “There’s no hauntedroom.”

“Of course there is!” Dad said.

On screen, Jude leaned forward on his steepled hands. “Oooh, I haven’t heard this one.”

“Don’t encourage him!” I said, exasperated. “We don’t have time for this, Dad. And we need to develop some code about what’s truly urgent. Falling into a well—that’s

urgent.”

“Breaking your hip,” Eli said.

“Knee, even,” snorted Jude.

That surprised me enough that I glanced at him, sharply. But it was too hard to read his expression through the screen. An ACL injury was what had ended Jude’s pro-tennis career a few years ago. He never talked about it.

But Dad was already encouraged. “I told you and Eli on our last call,” he said to me.

I’d called Dad from the office a couple of weeks ago just to check in, and he’d warned us about the same thing—construction on the east wing. I tried to tell him we weren’t even looking at that yet, but when he started going on about ghosts, I’d crossed over to Eli’s office and tossed my phone at him. He could deal with Dad’s nonsense. I was frustrated—every call was something ridiculous instead of the fatherly check-in I so badly wanted. Dad had always been interested in the history of the hotel, but since mom passed, he’d become slightly obsessive. If he cared so much about this place and its ghosts, why wasn’t he here?

But I didn’t say that. It would be insensitive to the way Dad was still grieving. Instead, I said, “Dad, we’re meeting the consultants right now for dinner. I honestly thought something was actually wrong. I’m going to go, so why don’t you stay on the call with Jude and tell him on his own, seeing as he seems so interested?”

“I want to hear too,” Chelsea said.

I raised my eyebrows at her.

“Fine, Jude and Chelsea,” I said, moving to get up.

But it was Eli who spoke. “Her name was Eleanor Cleary.”

I gaped. “Eli, seriously?” Eli was the biggest skeptic of us all.

“Don’t you remember?” His voice had gone somber. “She was a guest at the hotel in the year 1922. She was staying at the hotel with a man she claimed was her husband. But her husband came looking for her the day she was supposed to check out. He found her dead.

“Her lover missing,” Dad added, beaming at Eli.

“Ugh,” Chelsea said. “I don’t like hearing that word come out of Dad’s mouth.”

“Me neither,” I said.

“Wait, so what happened to the lover?” Jude asked.

“Jude’s mouth either,” Chelsea said.

I nodded. “I agree. But apparently he was never found.” Then I realized I’d played right into Dad’s hands.

“And now,” Eli said, holding his hands up, Thriller-style, “Eleanor haunts the east wing, looking for her lover!”

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

“What did I just say about that word?” Chelsea said.

“Oooooooh!” Jude made ghost sounds on-screen.

At that, even I had to suppress a laugh. “Okay, that’s enough.” I grew serious again. “Dad, this still doesn’t constitute an urgent call.”

“Wait,” Jude said. He hesitated, and we all waited. “Was room 114 the one that flooded the rest of the rooms?”

“That was 220,” I said. “A totally different nightmare. But not as much of a nightmare as I’ll be if you don’t get dressed in some proper clothes and be in the lobby at five to!” Then to my father, “Dad, write us an email, okay? I’ll share it with the... contractors.”

“I will. I’ll share my research too. But you need to know the most important thing. It’s the whole reason I needed to talk to you. It’s about spending time in that room. Anyone who does, whether they’re sleeping there or whether it’s under construction, working on it. Something always goes terribly wrong. It’s why the previous owners hid it.”

At that, even I felt a chill go over me. “Hid it?”

“Oh yes, it’s been walled over.”

“What?” Eli said. “Does Griffin know about this?”

Griffin, while he didn't officially work at the hotel, was our go-to for anything like that. He'd hired our facilities manager, Gus, and even though he didn't report to him, he didn't do much without his say-so.

"Oh yes," Dad said. "He knows."

That surprised me. I'd have to ask Griff about it tonight.

"In any case," Dad said, seeing he was losing me. "I needed to tell you right away before any workers started meddling in the supernatural. It could sink the whole place."

"Dad, what have you been reading lately?" Eli said.

"I'm glad you asked," he said, holding up a stack of books. They all had glossy covers and were filled with tabs where Dad had marked off important pages. He showed us *Ghosts and their Secrets*; *Hidden Vermont*; and *A Biography of Richard Remington*.

"That's the tycoon, right?" Jude said.

"Alright," I said. This had gone on long enough. "Dad, I'm going to end this call now."

"I love you," he said to me—I knew it was to me, because it's what he said anytime he wound me up and wanted me to get back onside. When he said it, he sounded like the Dad I used to know, the one who helped me with my math homework and psyched me up before my softball games. Who held me when I fought tears every night for half a year in the fifth grade when the kids called me Cass-man-dra for how tall I'd grown over the summer.

“I love you too, Dad,” I said, partly annoyed and partly awed at how he could still do that to me. Despite his irritating idiosyncrasies over the past few years, he was still my dad, and I still loved him to death.

Fifteen minutes later, after kicking Eli out to shower, I stood in front of the closet, my mind muddled with everything that had been going on. There was no time to try a bunch of stuff on now. Plus, my heart ached—I was worried about Dad. He was all alone, clinging to stories about ghosts, I think because he wanted to believe somehow that Mom was still here.

I wish you were, Mom.

Every day I wished she was.

I pulled on the first dress I saw—a scoop neck black number that ended at my knees. Ned never wanted me to wear this dress, I remembered. Or maybe it was the heels that went with it. Ned had hated that I wore heels. He didn’t like me being taller than him.

Go to hell, Ned, I thought as I headed for the bathroom.

“Hey,” Chelsea said from the couch, her eyebrows slanted in concern. She was still talking to Dad and Jude. “You okay?”

Had I said that out loud?

“Fine,” I smiled. “I’m good.”

I heard Chelsea speak softly as I crossed the room. She was talking to Dad with a kind of reverence. “It’s all bullshit,” I mouthed, but when she understood what I’d said, she looked so wounded a slice of guilt hit me. Sometimes I forgot that Chelsea

had lived with our parents the longest; that she'd had a special relationship with them that wasn't the same one I'd had. It had just been her at home after Jude left, and there hadn't been the franticness of all the little kids to help raise.

And now I was too far away from her to apologize.

What was the matter with me? It was like that moment on the island with Blake—before I knew it was him—had thrown my whole life off-kilter. Like the universe was teasing me with something I couldn't have.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

In the bathroom now, I grimaced at myself in the mirror. My hair was all over the place—Ned would have laughed if he saw me.

I had a flashback to him sitting me down on the couch in our apartment, that moment. “I’m leaving you, Cass.”

I’d smoothed down my hair then, too.

You met someone else, didn’t you? I’d asked. It was my worst fear. Worse, it was like a premonition had come to fruition. Like this was always how it would end—with my humiliation. After all those years talking myself into staying with him, thinking he was a good guy—or at least the best I could get.

I didn’t exactly meet her...

Anger, as hot as it had come that day, shook me. I gripped the tube of lipstick I’d picked up, startling as the lid popped up and clattered into the sink.

“You okay?”

I startled, looking up to see my sister in the mirror. I turned to look at her in person. “I’m sorry, Chels, about Dad—”

But she shook her head. “It’s okay. He’s definitely gone a little off his rocker since Mom, but hey, so have I, right?”

I opened my mouth to protest, but she glanced at my lipstick. “That’s a power shade.”

She hated talking about what she was going through, even if she acknowledged it herself.

I fought the urge to ask again what I could do to help her. It would end the conversation fast. Instead, I extended the color out of the tube. “Ned hated this shade. Told me it looked like I was trying too hard.”

“He was the king of negging, Cass. I wish we’d have known.”

“I wish I’d seen how twisted it was when I was in it.”

She smiled sadly. “It’s hard to see when they’re your whole world.”

Was she talking about one of us now? I looked at my baby sister in the mirror. “You know, I’m supposed to be the older, wiser one.”

Chelsea shrugged. “Maybe you were wise in not telling our brothers everything about Ned, at least. Griffin would have kicked his ass.”

I laughed, but a lump had formed in my throat, tears pricking my eyes.

“All of them would,” I said.

Chelsea nodded, brushing my hair back with her hands.

I studied her for a moment. She’d been out again last night. She’d painted over the exhaustion under her eyes with concealer, but I could tell.

“Sometimes brothers are good for something, huh?” she took the lipstick from me. She was pre-empting my asking her what was going on yet again.

This time, shamefully, I didn't have the energy to fight it.

Chelsea kicked the toilet lid down and guided me over to sit on it. "Let me help."

For the next five minutes, I let Chelsea brush and style my hair and put makeup on me while she chatted about one of the conferences she'd been working on for next month. I relaxed into the cadence of her voice, knowing she didn't necessarily need me to hear the words; that she was just distracting me. But after a long pause, when she was brushing lipstick on my lips, she said, "What spurred this sudden bout of feelings about Ned? Was it Dad?"

I looked up at Chelsea. Her face showed soft concern. But sharing my feelings was not my strong suit. My strong suit was... showing my strong suit. Being the brave one; the leader. Still, what was the point of hiding everything? It would be a relief to let at least the cap off the pressure.

"It's both of them," I said. "And... someone else."

Chelsea's eyes widened. The hint of a smile played at her lips. "Oh?"

"It's not like that." But even as I said it, that little voice in my head contradicted me.

It's exactly like that.

I hesitated. I couldn't say who it was. Even if I said it was just some guy, the details were too obvious. Not only that, I didn't know how to explain how much I'd been rattled by Blake.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

“Maybe I’ll tell you at some point,” I said.

Her shoulders fell, but she didn’t push it. She knew what it felt like to have a sister trying too hard to help. “I’ll be here,” she said.

My phone buzzed. I picked it up off the counter. It was a text from Griff.

GRIFFIN:Heading out of town. It can’t wait.

I gaped for a moment, though I shouldn’t have been surprised. This was Griffin’s way of telling me he wouldn’t be coming to dinner.

“He’s unbelievable.”

Chelsea looked over my shoulder at my phone as she poured product in her hands and smoothed it over my now pinned-up hair.

“Well, at least he’s not technically employed by the hotel,” she said pulling out a few strands around my face. “So he’s not blowing off work.”

“Griff never blows off work,” I said. Social stuff, always. Work, no. Not like Jude, who was the opposite. “At least if he was employed, I could fire him.”

“We don’t report to you,” Chelsea reminded me.

We’d made up very specific contracts when we took over the hotel. None of us reported to each other, instead voting equally if decisions needed to be made about

each other. It was the only wise advice about this place Dad had given us.

Right before he took off.

“I could still fire Griff,” I said. “For fun.”

Chelsea laughed. But when I stood up and looked in the mirror, I couldn’t help my mouth falling open slightly.

“How did you do that?” I looked like night and day from when I’d walked into the bathroom only a few minutes before. “I look...” I didn’t have the words. Chelsea had pushed my unruly hair into a soft, wispy chignon, and given me subtle eye makeup but crimson red lips that looked not like me, but somehow...

“Hot?” she finished for me.

I’d never thought of myself as hot. Sometimes I felt attractive, or powerful, at least when I wore a suit. But hot? That was Chelsea’s domain.

I smiled. “Thanks, Chels,” I said.

“Anytime,” she said. “Now let’s go celebrate the turning of this new leaf you keep talking about.”

7

BLAKE

The housewe were renting in Quince Valley was perfect for us—and I hated it.

The place itself was beautiful: a modern three-bedroom bungalow right in town, just

off the main strip. There was a heated pool in the backyard, but more importantly, a two-bedroom guesthouse on the back side of the lot, almost as large as the main house where I stayed. We could have all shared a single house—it would have been easier on my wallet given I was now footing the bill—but I couldn't stomach the thought of staying even closer to Lila and Brynn for six weeks.

Even the separated houses didn't feel like enough.

While I should have been pleased I'd salvaged the Rolling Hills project—for a second time that day—I'd sunk into a shit mood ever since negotiating the deal with Cassandra. Lila and Brynn noticed, and kept trying to ask what was going on, but I'd said I was just in focused planning mode, which I often fell into at the beginning of these big projects. It was partially true—over the past week I'd buried myself in work. But it wasn't exactly the kind of project planning I usually did. Half of my time had been spent going back and forth with lawyers over this new contract with Cassandra, and half of it had been dealing with my accountant trying to assess how to cover our stay to conceal the fact I was paying for it from Lila. But the whole thing was making me feel like a complete piece of shit. Now, not only was I lying to the world about my life, I was lying to Lila, too. Several times I considered telling her what had happened between me and Cassandra, and about the new deal I'd negotiated. But she'd freak out. Someone knew our secret, which meant both the business and our lives were vulnerable. She'd also insist we bring the project back onto Harrington Consulting's books, rather than me paying out of pocket. On top of all that, I couldn't stop thinking about the CEO herself.

I wanted to turn her resort around. I wanted to show her how good I was at this. I wanted her to like me.

I thought about the way her hair fell across her cheek. The way she'd walked down that hallway in long, angry strides. But other times my thoughts were more... base. Maybe I just wanted to fuck her. Maybe that's why I'd reacted the way I did on the

island. Maybe that's why I'd blurted out my secret identity to her. Maybe if I did that, I'd get everything out of my system. But that couldn't be it. I'd wanted women before—plenty of times. But I'd never obsessed about them the way I did with Cassandra. Each night since I'd seen her, I'd replay that moment on the island in my mind, picturing taking her right there in the wild. I'd jerk off in the shower to that image, but even after releasing, I wouldn't feel any different. It didn't feel like it was enough. I still didn't know whether I'd made the right choice in telling her. The obvious answer was I hadn't, but there wasn't much I could do about that now, so I came up with all the ways this was going to be good for our business, and for her business, too. I wasn't normally a morose guy, I didn't think, but this past week had been hugely messed up for my personal identity. I wondered, most of all, if this was what Dad felt like when he was living an elaborate lie. Then I got pissed at myself for identifying in any way with my father.

I'd tried to reach Conrad a couple of times—at this point he was the only one I could tell everything as he had no skin in the game, knew all about my fake life with Lila, and would mostly listen instead of giving advice. He was usually a reliable shoot-the-shit-over-beer partner, even over the phone. But the second time I called he'd texted to let me know things were shit over on his end, too. I knew he was going through a rough patch with his wife, and his son was taking it hard, and suddenly I felt like an ass for wanting to call and dump on him, too.

My only salvation before Saturday was the pool—when I was fed up with working, I'd spend time swimming endless laps, even during the giant dumps of rain the valley had that week. That part was at least mildly therapeutic, at least.

By the time Saturday evening rolled around, I was in a deeply shit mood.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

“You ready?” I asked Lila after coming in her and Brynn’s back door. It was sometime close to sunset—the gray overhead was darkening to a deeper shade of charcoal. At least the weather matched my mood.

“You look like you’re going to a funeral,” Lila said when she saw me.

I was wearing a charcoal suit with a black tie. “I don’t look any different than I do on a workday,” I said. “Except maybe the umbrella.”

“He looks nice!” Brynn said. Lila was dressed and running around looking for earrings or something. Meanwhile, Brynn was in her PJs, looking eager for us to go so she could kick back with a movie. I half wanted to ask if I could join her.

“It’s the dour expression,” Lila said to me in the mirror. She was slashing on that red lipstick she always wore.

I smiled, but it came out a grimace.

“Jesus,” Lila said. “Don’t do that.”

In the car, she inspected me for a long time as I made the quick ten-minute drive up to the resort. “What’s the matter with you?”

“Nothing,” I said.

“Bullshit.”

I glanced over at her. Rain pecked against the windshield, and for a moment, that and the soft thump of the wipers was the only sound in the car. Lila was usually good to talk to about whatever was up with me, even if it was about us and our situation. But I couldn't talk to Lila about the specifics on this one. Maybe that's what was getting at me the most.

"Do you ever feel like quitting?" I asked her instead as I turned up the winding road to the Rolling Hills.

"What do you mean? Quitting the business?" Her voice sounded as shocked as I should have suspected it would.

My chest tightened.

We'd talked about it before, how long we wanted to keep the business going, but not for years. Back then, I'd said I'd never want to quit. I'd had no reason to.

"Never mind."

"Maybe someday," she said, suddenly serious. "Maybe. But Blake, you're the one who wanted to take this one as far as we could."

"Yeah, I know," I said. I did know. This business was our whole life. It was our whole identity. Mr. and Mrs. Shark.

"Are you unhappy?" she asked.

I almost laughed. The thing was, most of the time, I wasn't so grim. This arrangement suited me. But ever since we'd gotten here, things had changed.

"I'm fine," I said, realizing how tightly she was holding herself.

The truth was, ending this would destroy her life more than mine.

“It’s fine. It was just a theoretical question.”

She studied me for a moment longer. Lila knew me well. Better than I knew myself sometimes. We were familiar. Old friends. I didn’t have any sisters, but that’s what Lila was like to me, were anyone to ask. If I were to answer honestly.

“I’m not unhappy,” I said finally, when she didn’t say anything. Maybe it wasn’t true right now, but it was enough of the time that it didn’t feel like a complete lie.

The resort came into view up ahead.

When Lila and I strode through the front doors of the resort a few minutes later, I felt the strangest thing—the faintest kernel of hope.

I’d almost forgotten why I’d wanted to take this job in the first place. While yes, I’d been deeply intrigued by the resort’s CEO, I’d first been wooed by the project itself.

The resort truly was stunning.

The front entrance opened onto an expansive lobby, white marble with a massive modern chandelier overhead. To the right were the counters for check-in and the entrance to the restaurant. On the left, a wide hallway led to the rest of the rooms, and directly across from where we stood, a massive floor-to-ceiling window overlooked the Quince Valley. A gap in the thick cloud cover had appeared where the river ran out to the horizon, and shafts of light—God’s fingers, my mom used to call them when she was still all there—made the water below twinkle like diamonds. Inside, a water feature running from one wall to the other, meant to replicate the river, twinkled with underwater lights.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

While I'd stayed here for two nights before Lila and Brynn arrived, and had seen the place at this time of night before, I'd never caught it at just this moment—the golden hour.

“Well, I gotta hand it to you,” Lila said. “I think you were right about taking this job.”

Even though my guts were roiling, I felt the slightest glimmer of satisfaction. “Of course I was. I'm always right about what jobs to take.”

Lila rolled her eyes. “Please. What about the bagel empire on Long Island?”

“It wasn't my fault they went out of business. They didn't take any of our advice. We did get free bagels while it lasted, though.”

But Lila was serious now. “I'm worried about you, Blake. And Goldman is cutting it close these days, going after our best prospects.”

Irritation shot through me. That little spark of a positive mood vanished. “I'm well aware. I have faith in this project, okay? And you should too.”

I was tempted to show her my bank accounts to prove my point.

My accountant had been horrified when I'd told him what I was doing. He'd advised me strongly against leveraging my personal assets, but I told him the deal was already done.

“So let me get this straight,” he’d said over a video call. “You’re paying for everything until you get this place on its feet again. There’ll be a gap, too, from when you finish your work and the resort begins earning the kind of money it needs to.”

“Yes,” I said. I’d explained everything to him except the reason I was doing it this way.

He’d shaken his head in disbelief, but in the end, it was my business, my money.

Now, a heaviness slid back over me as once more I thought about the gravity of this situation—how deep I’d gotten myself. It wasn’t a guaranteed success. Nothing ever was, and with the way Cassandra felt about me, it was more possible than ever that this whole thing could go sideways. That would not only cost me a shit-ton of money, but the goal I’d been working toward since the beginning.

100 companies saved.

Proof I was a success.

The 100th company a resort.

Proof I could do better than him. If I failed at this project, my father would know. He’d never let me forget it.

But I couldn’t think about that. I needed to appear hopeful for this dinner. Excited about the project ahead. Not worrying I’d already fucked it up.

I clenched and unclenched my fists.

While Lila walked the length of the window, peering around the lobby, I adjusted my cufflinks, turning to glance at the clock over the check-in desk. This dinner was going

to be fine. This project was going to be fine. I'd taken plenty of business risks before. I'd handled disastrous situations before, too. Whatever happened, I could handle it.

Then the front doors swished open.

What I wasn't sure I could handle was Cassandra Kelly, looking like sex on a goddamned stick. I had to restrain myself from groaning. Every image I'd had of her over the past few days paled when I saw her before me.

Cassandra walked shoulder to shoulder with her sister. Chelsea was objectively very pretty too, but Cassandra—I realized it right at that moment—she was my fucking kryptonite.

She'd poured herself into a dress that hugged her hourglass figure like a glove. Hers wasn't the barbie-style hourglass, but a fuller, more luscious give-me-a-handful kind of shape that evoked some caveman gene in my brain. But it wasn't just how she looked that made heat pool in my abdomen. It was the way she held herself—shoulders back, chin up, eyes scanning the massive space and not missing a beat. Heads turned as she passed, and I felt the strangest kind of protectiveness when I saw the men eyeing her.

Really, I felt like growling like a goddamn guard dog.

She hadn't seen us yet, so I could watch her with at least a little impunity.

"Jesus, Blake," Lila hissed, back at my side.

Except I'd forgotten about Lila.

Lila inserted her arm into mine. "Maybe try not to look like you want to eat her for breakfast?"

“I’m fine,” I said. “She just looks different.”

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

But Lila was right. What kind of asshole couldn't control his attraction to another woman when he had one on his arm?

Me, that was who. But these weren't normal circumstances.

They'd spotted us now, and we closed the distance between us and began exchanging greetings. I deliberately shook hands with Eli, Chelsea, and Jude first, while Lila went for Cassandra. The grumpy lumberjack wasn't here.

Finally, Cassandra was in front of me. For a moment, all I could do was breathe her in. I was used to women being a full head shorter than me, but Cassandra was only a few inches below me, and with heels, we were nearly eye to eye.

Man the fuck up, Harrington.

"Cassandra," I said. I held out my hand and she hesitated. Up close her eyes swam with something fierce—she still held onto a spike of anger at me, I could tell. Good—that was a good thing. I knew, once I was in her presence, that I wouldn't be able to be physically close to her. Just being next to her sent heat pooling in my abdomen.

For a moment, I wondered if she wouldn't take my hand at all. But then she did, slipping her fingers into mine. "Blake."

An ache of something too close to desire scraped across my skin.

I could feel Lila's eyes on me. I wished I could send her a psychic message. I've got

this under control. But I didn't have this quite as under control as I should have.

I'd given myself a pep talk about seeing Cassandra before picking up Lila. I'd splashed cold water on my face and reminded myself how this was business. Strictly business. And Lila, noticing my attraction just now, should have been all the reemphasis I needed on how important it was that I focus strictly on work.

Luckily, Cassandra still looked like she wanted as little as possible to do with me. She pulled her hand from mine.

I forced myself to regain control. I remembered Conrad, who'd played college football, talking about his game face. No matter what you're feeling, dude, put on that cocky-ass game face and no one will be able to tell the difference, not even you.

While everyone chatted amicably, I leaned into Cassandra's ear. Her scent was intoxicating. Something soft and warm and intermingled with just... her.

"I've got papers for you," I said, before straightening back up. I wasn't sure I could speak if she was swirling in my nostrils like that.

"Later," she said.

"Should I leave them at the front counter for you?" I said, a little hard.

But I wanted to get this done so I could relax, at least a little. Until she signed our new contract, everything was a liability. She knew about me and Lila. She could still fire me. Hell, she could still fire me after, but I doubted she would once she saw how heavily this contract operated in her favor.

She narrowed her eyes. "Fine. I'll take them now."

To the group, I said, “Should we eat?” I smiled broadly. Game face.

“Yeah,” said Jude. “I’m starving.”

It worked. Everyone joined in with their assent, and with their attention turned to the restaurant, I could ignore the turmoil in my guts.

As the others drifted toward L’Aubergine, I shifted so we were facing each other, her back to the restaurant. I pulled the envelope out of my breast pocket. “I’ll need this back before Monday,” I said, looking her in the eye. “Tonight would be best.” That blue-gray swirl in her irises made my stomach jolt.

“Fine,” she said, taking it from me and tucking it into her purse.

Over her shoulder, I saw Lila look back at me.

I forced a smile. “Let’s eat, Cassandra.” Then I walked past her, joining the rest of the slow-moving group headed across the lobby.

8

BLAKE

As we cut across the wide-open marble space, I slid to the opposite side of the group, next to Eli. It was only when Cassandra was out of my direct line of sight that I realized Eli looked as rough as I felt. His hands were jammed into the pockets of his slacks like a kid.

“You all right?” I asked.

“My ex is working here tonight,” he said.

No mincing words—I appreciated that.

“Want me to play point?”

Eli glanced over at me, looking almost physically pained. He must have been able to tell I was in a shit mood too, because he gave a wan but grateful smile. “I appreciate that. What’s up with you? You look like you got bad news or something.”

“It’s nothing,” I said. Even if I could say anything to Eli, which I couldn’t, the situation was so complicated I wouldn’t know where to start.

“Do you have sisters?” he asked. We were trailing behind the rest of them and hopefully out of earshot.

I considered Lila a sister, but couldn’t exactly say that. I shook my head. “Brothers.”

“Well, they both suck, sometimes. But sisters... I swear to god Cass hired Reese on purpose. Just to make me suffer.”

I made the mistake of looking toward Cassandra now. She was up at the doors to L’Aubergine, and I happened to get an outrageous view of her perfect, round ass.

And he wanted to talk about suffering.

I looked away as quickly as I could, lest Cass’s brother see me ogling her. Luckily, he was too absorbed in his own shit.

The restaurant was dimly lit, but once we crossed the threshold, I could still see the way Eli scanned the room, as if going into a war zone. “I thought it would be okay,” he said. “Reese is the manager, so it wasn’t like I’d see much of her being in here. But then Cass tells me she’s going to be working our fucking table?”

“They’re short-staffed,” Chelsea said.

I hadn’t noticed her also trailing behind, on Eli’s other side. She held her phone out in front of her. It pinged and buzzed like a damned arcade game. I wondered, briefly, what it was like to have a social life.

“Short-staffed? Who’s fault is that?” Eli said, his voice bitter. He was lashing out, I could see as much.

I cleared my throat, hoping he’d remember he wasn’t just griping to his sister. Not that he seemed to care about expressing his personal shit to me.

“Actually, Reese is selflessly pitching in because the server has some kind of childcare issue on the weekends,” Chelsea said. “So you know, it might not be all about you?”

“See?” Eli said to me. “Sisters.”

Chelsea rolled her eyes and went back to her phone. Once she’d moved far enough ahead, Eli leaned in and said, “I’m getting shit-faced tonight. It’s the only solution.”

Up ahead, Cassandra arrived at a table by the massive plate-glass window. Golden sunlight streaming through the glass lit her up like an angel.

I harrumphed. “Maybe I’ll join you.”

Eli grinned.

It was a terrible idea, of course. Not only because Eli was a client. There was something about me and overdoing it that didn't mix more than most people—if I drank too much, I remembered nothing the next day. Not a person, not a conversation.

Not a fake wedding proposal.

That's why I almost never overdid it. But tonight, the thought of obliterating anything resembling feelings or memory was deeply appealing.

I definitely wouldn't do that at a client dinner, though. I didn't think.

The table we arrived at was similarly sized to the one in the boardroom we'd sat at last week. I slid in next to Lila, with Eli on my other side. Our backs were to the window while Cassandra, Jude, and Chelsea sat across from us.

"Where's Griff?" Jude asked.

"He left town," Cassandra said, sounding annoyed.

So maybe it wasn't just me pissing her off.

I knew the thought was more hopeful than likely.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

She picked up the menu. “Another one of his mysterious trips.”

“Like father like son, huh?” Eli’s voice was bitter.

“At least Dad calls us sometimes,” Chelsea said.

Cassandra looked up. “Yeah. To warn us about ghosts.”

Next to me, Lila raised an eyebrow. A moment later, while the siblings went off on their two absent family members, she whispered, “This family may be a whole mess, but this place is screaming potential.”

“Not everyone’s got a perfect family,” I said, for some reason feeling the need to defend the Kellys. There was something deeply appealing in their messiness. Something familiar, maybe.

Lila blinked. “It’s not so perfect.” She was wounded. But she had a point. While her family and her were tighter than a knit blanket, there was that one big lie, sitting like a fat albatross between them.

You’re being an ass, Harrington.

Besides, Lila was right, this place did have huge potential. In fact, L’Aubergine was nearly there. Like the lobby outside, that single massive sheet of glass behind us with a view of the valley was its main feature. But the rest of it looked in decent shape, too. There were around fifty candlelit tables scattered between here and the bar on the far wall, which was tastefully lit and scattered with a handful of people. The sound of

a martini shaker from the bartender provided a percussive background to the clink of dinnerware and soft jazz music.

“Do you ever have live music?” I asked Eli, my eyes on the stage at the other end of the room, near the bar.

Eli scowled. “We used to.”

I wasn’t sure how that was a touchy subject, but then I saw the woman from the hallway—Eli’s ex—approaching our table.

“Hello, Kellys. And Harringtons.” She smiled. “Lovely to see all you fine-looking people here.” She took our drink orders without writing them down, barely looking at Eli when he mumbled his.

I would have wondered what happened between them, except Chelsea started chatting to me and Lila, this time asking us questions about some of the other businesses we’d worked with.

For a while, it seemed like the night might actually go okay. Eli brightened up after Reese left, and even told the story about how he met Lila in economics class.

“I gave you girlfriend advice,” Lila said.

“If only you’d stuck around,” he said. “I seemed to lose my touch after I married her.” He explained how he’d married that girlfriend—and gotten divorced just last year.

Reese must have been a rebound relationship.

Jude told a story about how he’d given girlfriend advice to one of his team members

at the world open, and the girlfriend had dumped his opponent the next day.

“You threw the game!” Chelsea said.

“No way! It was good advice. She just liked me.”

He grinned, and Cassandra threw her napkin at him.

Even I warmed up enough to talk about the time I’d joined a lacrosse team in college. After Lila and I went public on our engagement—for her parents’ sake—I couldn’t stomach staying on in our co-ed soccer team, where everyone naturally expected us to act like an engaged couple. After that, I found I preferred solo sports. Track. Boxing. Swimming. Things where I could compete against myself.

Then a friend told me about lacrosse, and how it was a surprisingly violent sport.

“There was one small league, and they were extremely serious about it,” I said. “I got knocked out at our first practice. Never played again.”

Jude had howled at that one.

After Reese came back with our drinks, Lila cleared her throat. “I’d like to make a toast.”

Usually, this would be me, especially considering I’d invited everyone to dinner. But she must have thought I wasn’t up for it. It was fine. I held up the Bordeaux she’d ordered for both of us when I said I didn’t care what we drank, glancing over at Cassandra. I was on my second glass already. That dress of hers left far too little to my imagination, and with her arm up, she looked like some kind of sexy royal. Maybe Lila was right to have me sit down, in case I gave a toast to Cassandra’s cleavage.

“I’d like to raise a glass to this exciting new venture,” Lila said. “I see great things for this project, and I appreciate the Kelly family trusting us with this review. I know it’s not easy going under the microscope, but I promise, we’re going to have a lot of fun, too.”

When I looked at Cassandra next, her eyes were on mine. They quickly went back to Lila. She still didn’t trust me, I realized. Or maybe it was that she just didn’t like me.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

While everyone drank to the toast, I downed my overly large sip to my thoughts.

Chelsea made a toast next. "I wish Mom were here tonight. Dad, too."

I knew their father, who'd been uninterested in running the business, was somewhere overseas. I didn't know why, but I was sure I'd learn over the course of our stay.

I drained my wine, glancing over at Cassandra once more, but her eyes were on Eli, who was standing up.

"What is he doing?" she asked as he strode off across the room toward the bar.

Jude shrugged. "Looks pretty obvious to me?"

When Eli came back a few minutes later, he was double fisting what looked like two double scotches.

"Those both for you, big guy?" Jude asked.

"No. One's for my friend Blake here." Eli handed me one of the glasses.

Cassandra's jaw was tight, and I could feel Lila stiffen beside me too.

"Easy," Lila said under her breath.

For some reason, this pissed me off. "I'm fine," I said. Then I took a generous gulp. I knew I was being petulant. I didn't care. While things had been improving a few

minutes ago, having daggers shot at me by two out of the three women at the table wasn't exactly enjoyable.

"Anyway," Chelsea was saying on my other side, to Lila, "We don't do weddings here. Everyone asks, but Cassandra's not into them."

"The only reasonable thing I've heard about my sister tonight," Eli said, taking a long sip of his own drink.

"I'd love to do them," Chelsea said. "But we're pretty full with conferences and other parties, so it's not a huge thing."

"Weddings are something we might want to consider," Lila said. "Select weddings, anyway."

I could practically hear both Eli and Cassandra grit their teeth, while Jude shrugged. "Makes no difference to me. I love weddings."

"Oh really?" Cassandra asked.

"Sure. I'm just never having one myself. But happy to crash!"

"You'll change your mind one day," Chelsea said. "Mark my words."

Jude laughed at that. "Not likely."

"How about you guys?" Chelsea said. "What was your wedding like? It must have been amazing. The social event of the year, I bet."

I had to bite down a bitter laugh. It had been hell. Lila and I had hung out in the hotel bar before the event, willing each other to call it off. "You don't have to do this for

me,” she’d said.

“I don’t back out of promises,” I’d lobbed back. I’d known her parents were likely freaking out right at that moment, wondering where their darling daughter was for the photos they would later submit to the society pages. Their darling daughter who was gay and fake-marrying her soccer buddy to hide it from them—her soccer buddy being a man who didn’t give a flying fuck about his own personal life. Who cared only about his blind drive for success.

Obviously, I didn’t say any of this. Though tonight, I was tempted. Lila and I had a canned answer—I often gave it myself: ‘An intimate gathering of two hundred of our closest family and friends.’ But I wasn’t in the mood to play along.

“It was nice,” I said.

“Typical man,” Lila laughed, but she kicked me hard under the table.

I knew that particular kick. Whatthe hell is wrong with you?

I angled my legs out of kicking distance and took another sip of my drink.

“Actually, I remember your guys’ wedding,” Eli said.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

My stomach dropped. I'd forgotten he was there. I only vaguely remembered the event, if I was being honest. I'd stopped myself from getting fully forgetful drunk, but it was all extremely hazy.

Eli's brows furrowed now. "You guys had separate hotel rooms."

Were his words slurring or my hearing going fuzzy with the whiskey?

"I remember thinking you were either really weird or really rich."

"Both," I said. "I was weird, Lila was rich."

"Blake," Lila said under her breath, even as Jude laughed.

"See, this is the kind of candid conversation I was talking about," Jude said, leaning back in his chair and lacing his hands behind his head. It wasn't the kind of conversation any of us had been anticipating, I'd say that much. Least of all me. Our client dinners were usually friendly and sometimes a little tipsy, but we usually tried to veer away from any bad blood topics.

But tonight, it felt liberating not to care.

"Lila's parents are traditional," I said. "They wanted us in separate rooms until... you know. After."

Why the hell did I look at Cassandra when I said that? It was like I wanted to tell her we never consummated the wedding. I think I wanted her to know because I

understood then why she was still so stiff around me. Even with that contract, she didn't quite buy our arrangement. This dinner was a terrible idea. This project was a terrible idea. I took another swig of my drink. Her eyes met mine but didn't stay.

A man had lied to her before, I realized. And she thought I was a liar too.

"Damn," Jude said. "Well, Eli's wedding was nice." He'd either not picked up on the tension or was possibly enjoying it.

Eli lowered his drink onto the table. "What the hell is your problem, Jude?"

"What? It was."

"I'm divorced. My wife fucking left me."

"Doesn't mean it wasn't a nice wedding."

I couldn't tell if Jude was playing innocent or if he meant what he'd said. Either way, the tension had suddenly ratcheted up, and I suspected it was somehow my fault, for not giving a pat answer. I felt my phone buzz in my suit jacket pocket, but I ignored it.

"It was nice, actually," Cassandra said, intervening. "As far as weddings go. On a lake... what was it, Diamond? Ruby?"

"Emerald Lake," Eli said. He threw back the last bit of his drink.

Reese came back to take our orders. I think the whole table—save Jude—collectively held our breath while Eli ordered his food, letting it out when she left the table without incident.

But immediately after he'd ordered, Eli got up and went back to the bar.

"Should we stop him?" Chelsea asked.

Cassandra shook her head. "He's a grown man."

The words might not be kind, but I didn't miss the concern in her expression. That specific look you gave when you knew someone was hurting themselves, but you couldn't properly stop it.

"I'll talk to him," I said.

"Blake—" Lila began.

But Cassandra looked grateful. "That's probably a good thing, actually." She turned to Lila. "If you don't mind, Lila. Eli just needs an ear when he gets like this.

"Where's Griff when we need him?" Chelsea asked.

Her sister shrugged.

Lila gave me a smile as I stood, but I could tell she was upset. I'd smooth that out later. Maybe. Even though my urge had been to make Cassandra feel better, I was feeling a bit nihilistic.

Page 36

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

At the bar, Eli had seen me coming and was already ordering another two scotches.

“Your wife doesn’t look too happy about you joining tonight’s problem child,” Eli said as I settled onto a stool.

I cringed at the word wife, but masked it with a smile. “It’s fine.” I glanced back at the table, but it wasn’t Lila I was looking at.

“Part of our job is to make sure our clients are happy.” I turned back to the bar. “And you don’t seem very happy.”

“Neither do you, buddy.”

I let out a breath. “Well. I’ll be honest. It’s been a shit few days.”

It felt good to say it. I checked my phone as our drinks came. Lila had texted a minute ago at the table.

LILA: Get your shit together!

I almost laughed. She sounded like my father.

It was going to be a shit few more days, too.

I pocketed my phone.

“So?” I asked Eli. “Want to talk?”

“Not unless you want to hear about what it was like to have the love of my life dump my ass.”

“Your ex-wife?”

“Yeah. I won’t depress you with the details.”

“Feel free,” I said. “This dinner’s gone kind of sideways, anyway.”

Half an hour later, I’d learned a lot about Eli Dunham—not Kelly. He’d married a woman he’d met in New York State. He’d devoted himself to her—even taken the generous step of changing his surname for her when she married because her name was Kelly. “She couldn’t be Kelly Kelly, but she still wanted to take my name, so I took my mom’s last name.”

“Wow,” I’d said.

By then our drinks had come, also our dinner, brought over not by Reese, but by a bubbly blonde woman who brushed against me as she handed me my beef bourguignon.

“Oh gosh, I’m sorry!” she said. She didn’t look sorry, but I was now officially inebriated. I’m pretty sure she winked at me too, which maybe should have been flattering, but only made me scowl. Why couldn’t Cassandra brush against me and wink at me instead? But Cassandra didn’t seem like the type.

The server hovered a moment longer, unabashedly drawing her eyes up and down the length of my torso. “You need anything else—anything at all—you let me know.”

I grimaced, hoping that would be enough to pass as a polite smile. Thank God I wasn’t back at the table. And thank God Eli had immediately dug into his burger, so

he hadn't noticed the exchange.

"So, what happened with you and Reese?" I asked as I poked at the dish I'd ordered. My stomach was woozy from all the booze.

"We hooked up right when I was going through my divorce," he said, chewing. "It was messy. My divorce, I mean. Reese was... she was too sweet for my shit, you know? She wanted to be all in with me, but it just... wasn't a good time. And, hell, I didn't handle it well."

"Then your sister hired her to work here."

Eli scowled, shoving his plate aside. "I swear to God she did it on purpose."

I wanted to ask him more—why she'd do that, for instance. But Eli took a swig of his drink. "What's up with you and her anyway?"

"Me and—"

"Cassandra."

My stomach jolted. I glanced back at the table, where the rest of them seemed to be having a good enough time without us. Suddenly I felt queasy.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

“What do you mean?” I hoped my voice was casual.

“There’s something weird,” Eli said. “Did she get mad at you for saving her or something?”

I laughed at that, surprised. “Yeah.”

“She has this thing about figuring stuff out for herself. I think it came from our dad, back when he was normal.”

I raised my brow. “Normal?”

“He taught us how to take care of ourselves. How to be self-sufficient and all that. Guess he had to, looking after all of us. Cassandra kind of idolized him. Always brought stuff to him when she figured it out. Looking for a pat on the back or something.”

My chest twinged as I thought of Cassandra as a little girl, bringing her carefully constructed stuff to her dad for his approval. Would he pat her on the back? Or was he like my dad, who would have laughed? He wouldn’t accept any attempt at anything that wasn’t perfect. But it made sense why Cassandra seemed so upset about her dad being gone. She wanted to show him how well she was doing. She wanted his approval.

I knew what that was like.

“Well, sorry about her,” Eli said. “Not everyone hits it off with Cass. But she’s a

softie on the inside. Loves sappy movies and shit. She'll never admit it, though."

"We did okay on the island," I said.

"What do you mean, did okay?"

I realized what I'd said and looked away, shoving a bite of food in my mouth to give me room to think.

What the hell do I say? I liked the way Cassandra got mad at me? That we'd nearly kissed? That she'd blinked and looked down when I called her attractive, like she didn't believe it?

But Eli spoke before I could. "She's really messed up, you know."

Messed up? "What do you mean?"

"Her ex—Ned—he cheated on her, with one of their friends. Not just once, either. A long-time thing."

Understanding hit me then, like a slow-moving gut punch. It was why she was so upset about what had happened—or almost happened on the island.

Fuck.

I couldn't stop thinking about punching Ned in the fucking face. Several times. Then myself, for trying anything with her. Even though I didn't know. It didn't matter—I'd known it was wrong.

Eli was looking at me. I wanted him not to be.

I cleared my throat. “We had a messed-up introduction. But we didn’t fight as much as you and Jude.”

“Fucking Jude,” Eli said.

My red herring worked.

I looked back at the table, wanting to see Cassandra again.

But it was empty.

“They ditched us.” Eli stated the obvious, yawning as if he couldn’t care less.

What the hell time was it? I pulled out my phone.

There was another text from Lila, this one from only a few minutes ago.

LILA:I’m going home. Taking the car. Find your own way back.

Shit.

Eli popped a fry in his mouth. “That Lila?”

“Yeah.”

“Did I get you in trouble?”

“I got myself there.”

“Shouldn’t you go after her?”

“Nah.” I shook my empty glass. “Let’s stick to the plan. Shit-faced, right?”

Eli grinned. “Yeah boy.”

9

CASSANDRA

My brother was being an ass. I still wasn’t sure about Blake.

“I’m so sorry this has been such a bust,” Lila said as we strode from L’Aubergine. She seemed truly embarrassed at how the dinner had turned out.

“This is par for the course for our family,” I’d assured her.

“No,” Jude said, yawning. “There was no yelling or Griff breaking up a fight, if he’d been here. So, you know, totally civilized.”

“We didn’t even really get to talk about the ghost, though,” Chelsea said, her phone in her hand. It was buzzing with texts once more. Clearly, my sister wouldn’t be going home to watch a sad-sack movie on her own like I planned to do.

Lila looked confused. “Ghost?”

She’d missed the earlier conversation. “It’s bonkers. And deeply untrue, of course,” I assured her.

“I’m going to head out,” Chelsea said, her thumbs flying on her phone.

“Do you need a ride back to your place?” I asked Lila.

“No, I’ll take our car,” Lila said.

We exchanged a grin then. I respected a woman who’d leave her husband behind if he was being an idiot.

Even if he wasn’t actually her husband.

The envelope in my pocket burned suddenly, and I swallowed, smiling as naturally as I could as I walked her to the front of the hotel.

“Blake’s not normally like this, by the way,” Lila said, clutching her bag at her waist.

“Like what?” I asked. I couldn’t help myself.

“So... grim,” Then she seemed to catch herself. “Sorry. Not appropriate for client talk.”

“Honestly, our family is never really appropriate about anything,” I said. “If one of us

can do something awkward, we absolutely will.”

Lila seemed relieved. Not for the first time, I found myself keener than I should be to know the story between them, now that I knew they weren’t together. Did she care about Blake? Was it he who didn’t want to be married? He’d made it very clear he didn’t have romantic feelings for her.

I recalled the server who’d come in to look after us when Reese left. She’d been pretty, her ample cleavage on full display. Reese had sought advice from me on this particular employee before. “Trish is extremely flirtatious, but she’s kind of like that with everyone.”

“How’s her performance?” I’d asked.

“She’s one of my best staff.”

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

We'd decided given there were no complaints about her, there was nothing particularly egregious going on and no action needed to be taken. But tonight, knowing it was Trish bringing Blake and Eli their food, I'd questioned that decision. Then I was run through with shame. What was I, jealous? But when she left with their dishes, I'd glanced toward Lila, who I saw watching the server like me. But her expression didn't reflect anything like the schism in my stomach. It seemed more like exasperation. But maybe I'd been misreading things.

"Well, I'm glad this wasn't out of the ordinary for you," Lila said, knocking me out of my thoughts. "This is probably the worst client dinner we've ever had. Absolutely no fault of the client, of course."

"Oh, it's definitely the client's fault," I said. "Grim is my brother's middle name these days." I couldn't see inside the restaurant from where I was, but I knew Eli was sitting at the bar like a human thundercloud. Even though he drove me nuts, worry tugged at me too. "I meant it when I said it was a good thing Blake kept him occupied."

This seemed to give Lila some relief.

"Is he going to be okay?"

"Absolutely. It's just a quick stumble home."

Once we'd parted ways, I should have headed home myself. Instead, I turned on my heel and went to my office. I sat at my desk with the lamp on low as rain began pinging on the darkened window. I took care of a few loose ends, but after an hour,

I'd actually run out of things to do. Since I'd handed over much of my work to department leads for the duration of the review, only the most pressing issues were now ending up in my inbox. Unless I wanted to start something new at ten o'clock on a Saturday night, it was time to go.

Then I remembered the contract.

I pulled the envelope from my purse, then slipped the folded paper out.

Blake had stuck a yellow sticky note on the front page.

Hope this is to your satisfaction.

His writing was smooth; confident, with long, almost lazy strokes. If writing could be sexy, his was.

"What a stupid thing to think, Cass," I said out loud. Yet I still ran my finger over the lines his pen had made.

I hated how Blake made me feel. Hated the way I wanted his hand back on my cheek, his thumb on my lip.

Hated the way he'd looked physically pained when I'd accused him of lying when he'd first come after me.

I flashed back to the moment in the lobby when he'd angled himself in front of me to hand me the envelope. He'd been so close I'd felt like I was breathing him in. But I hadn't wanted anyone seeing the envelope, so I hadn't moved away. I'd still been reeling from our earlier handshake—our handshake—how his skin had lit up like fire against mine.

I brought my hand to my lips, as if he was still there somehow. Then I pulled my fingers into a fist, pressing it first against my mouth, then down on the desk.

Fuck you, Blake Harrington.

Was he still here in my hotel, sitting at the bar next to Eli? Or was he in a dark corner with that server who'd been fawning over him?

An angry heat twisted in my stomach.

I hated that I knew I clearly felt more than professional curiosity—that ever since he told me about his non-marriage, it was like my brain knew it could go ahead and replay that moment on the island on repeat, heat running through me at every replay.

I took a breath. It was fine. It was only thoughts. I was allowed thoughts. I wasn't breaking my promise to myself not to trust again. I couldn't get hurt by thoughts, could I?

I forced myself to focus on the contract. I was sure I'd have to read it several times due to my problem focusing right now, but after a few minutes I found myself reading with growing surprise. The terms of our arrangement were deeply favorable for me. Had I been thinking Blake had some other angle? That he would show his shark self by slipping in ways for him to get out of his work if things weren't looking like they'd turn around?

I wasn't a lawyer, but everything I saw before me painted a picture where I was getting the best package Harrington Consulting offered for nothing. Even when it was time to pay—and only when we were turning a positive cash flow—it wasn't the rate we'd talked about over email. Not even close. It was way lower.

He cared that much about keeping his secret.

I wanted desperately to know why it was so important to him. Did he honestly think I would tell everyone the truth about them? The risk of damage to their business and reputation could be catastrophic for their company if they were turning the kinds of profits I thought they were, sure.

But I felt like there was something more. There had to be.

Still, I was no fool. I pulled a pen out of my blazer and signed on all the required lines. My lawyer hadn't seen this latest iteration, but the only thing that had changed since our last email was the figures. After signing, I tucked the contract back into the envelope, sealing it before I could change my mind. I realized I could hand it back to Blake right now too, if he was still here. Then there would be no going back at all.

The lobby was relatively quiet when I came back down. The spas were closed at this hour, so the regular stream of people coming from that area downstairs was gone. The only other people here were a rain-soaked couple at the check-in desk—I'd vaguely noticed the rain pinging against the window in my office—and a small group leaving L'Aubergine, laughing.

I passed them, striding back into the dim light and soft music of the restaurant.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

But stopped short. Eli was alone at the bar, stirring the ice cubes in his glass.

“Where’s Blake?” I asked when I reached him.

Eli scowled, not even looking up at me. “He left.”

“What? How?”

“I dunno.” Eli waved a hand vaguely. “Terri... Trish... whatever her name is, she was coming onto him.”

“What happened?” I asked, even though it was none of my business.

“He gave her a hard no.”

A warmth spread over me; which was stupid because again, I shouldn’t have cared.

But I did.

Just as I was about to turn and look for him, Eli crunched ice in his jaw. “Why are you so obsessed with him, Cassandra?”

“Obsessed?” My stomach did a full roll. “I’m not obsessed.”

“You have like... a thing for him. You know he’s married.”

I gaped.

It was only then I noticed Eli swaying slightly on his stool.

“You’re drunk,” I said, “So I’ll consider forgiving your assholery tonight. But we’ve already been over this. I would never go for a married man.”

“Except Blake.”

I gritted my teeth. “You know, I was going to offer to walk you home. But you can find your own damn way through the dark.”

Eli managed to focus well enough to glare at me. “I don’t need a babysitter.”

How bad would it be to strangle my brother in our restaurant in front of all our staff? I reached into my purse and pulled out a few bills, getting the bartender’s attention and then handing them to him. He was a good kid; his name was Manuel. I knew he had a baby at home. “Can you make sure he at least gets pointed in the direction of the staff apartments?” Even if our meals were all comped here, I didn’t want our staff to have dealt with our nonsense for nothing. They deserved all the tips in the world.

“I have a break in a minute,” he said. “I can walk him there myself.”

Relief ran over me. I knew Eli would have made it back home, but that didn’t mean I wouldn’t worry about him. “Thank you,” I said. “I’ll tell Reese to add an extra half hour to your timesheet for your trouble.”

I strode out of the bar at first looking for Blake, and when I didn’t see him, told myself I was going home.

But I didn’t head in the direction of the staff entrance. Instead, I went to the front. I stepped out onto a wide walkway flanked by beautifully landscaped foliage. Right now, they were only shadows, but I didn’t notice that. I didn’t take in the rain

dampening my skin or the parking lot spotted with puddles.

The only thing I saw was Blake Harrington, sitting on a bench, rain plastering his hair to his forehead.

I was soaked too by the time I reached him. “You look worse than the first time I saw you,” I called.

He turned, his face pained. When he saw it was me, he stood up fast. “Cassandra,” he said, and I wasn’t sure if it was a greeting or surprise. “Lila took the car.”

“I know.”

“I was going to get an Uber.” He swayed slightly. He was drunk, of course. Very drunk if he’d been keeping up with Eli.

“We don’t have those here,” I said.

Blake nodded as if he’d already figured this out. He looked out to where the road leading from the parking lot twisted into the trees.

“It’s not that far. I can walk.”

“Do you remember where it is?”

“Marple Street.”

There was no Marple Street in Quince Valley.

There was no way he was walking home. Even if we figured out where he lived, he’d get lost on the way there. In the rain. It could actually be dangerous.

“We should get inside,” I said. “I’ll call you a cab.”

“We’re not in the same house,” he said.

“What?”

“Me and Lila. Lila and I? Ila and Lie?” He screwed up his face, then shrugged. “It’s a different house. I’m in the back.”

“Okay,” I said.

“Cassandra—” Blake said, taking a step. “I don’t get drunk very much, but I’m really dunk.”

Dunk.

“I know,” I said softly. I moved toward him, intending to push him in the direction of the door, but he spoke again.

“The last time I got drunk like this, I told Lila I’d marry her. I didn’t remember the next day. That’s my problem. I don’t remember when I’m in this much alcohol.”

I would have laughed if it was anyone else. Maybe. Instead, I hooked on to what he was saying.

“Is your memory just kind of fuzzy?”

“No, it’s gone.” He waved his hand like a bird flying away. “It’s a big problem. It’s why I never do this much.”

“So you won’t remember any of this tomorrow?” I asked.

“Nothing. Blank slate.”

He wouldn’t remember what happened tonight.

Something ran through me then, a bad, daring kind of thought. Something I should have ignored but didn’t.

“Why did you marry Lila?” I asked.

He gave a giant sigh. “Her parents... don’t want her to like other women. Her parents are like her best friends. She was a unicorn... no, a rainbow baby. Funny, rainbow.” He laughed softly, then grew serious. “Now we have a consulting together and it’s too much, so complicated.” His drunken shoulders slumped.

But something ticked in me about what he’d said. A rush of understanding, like two

puzzle pieces snapping together. If I should have left it earlier, I really should have left it now. This was a private matter between Blake and Lila. But I had to know.

“Lila’s gay, isn’t she?” I said softly.

“You knew that?” Blake was incredulous.

“You just told me,” I whispered.

He didn’t hear me, and I didn’t repeat myself. I was too busy trying to sort out the twist of emotions running through me. Guilt, wrapped up in relief, wrapped up in something sadder. All of it drenched me as thoroughly as the rain.

“We can never tell,” he said, blinking slowly.

Lila wasn’t pining for Blake. There was nothing unrequited. Then the gravity of what this meant landed on me hard—Blake definitely wasn’t married—that had been the absolute truth. But more than that—he’d been posing as Lila’s husband to help her. Her parents didn’t know. Maybe nobody knew. They’d gone into business together—or maybe they’d already been in business, and they’d rolled with it. He’d stayed married for his friend as well as for his business.

Page 42

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

The selflessness of what he'd done made my chest squeeze. Blake was stuck now; I could see that. Unable to extricate himself from the entanglement he'd created.

Somewhere there was a remnant of that thought I knew still existed.

Remember what happened with Ned? Remember how you said you'd never put your faith in a man again?

But I wasn't putting faith in Blake. I was only... not disliking him.

Still, I let the rain running down my face wash my old promise away for the moment as I stared at Blake.

"Blake," I said. "You can stay here."

The words had come out before I articulated the decision to myself.

"It's okay," he said, swinging his gaze to the trees. "Walk. I can walk."

He was looking in the opposite direction of town.

"No, really," I said. "Let me rescue you this time. Just for tonight."

10

CASSANDRA

I was the good girl growing up. Responsible. The one my parents could rely on and put in charge. While my twin goofed off and did whatever he wanted, I helped Dad sort the laundry. I reminded him at the grocery store that Eli didn't like green grapes, and that we couldn't get the kind with seeds because Jude would spit them everywhere.

It was a lot of pressure, being the responsible one. When I messed up, everyone made a huge deal about it. My brothers gave me shit and my parents always put on this expression of vast disappointment.

"We just never expected something like that from you, Cassamatass," Dad would say, looking personally wounded.

I made sure I never showed them anything except what I wanted them to see.

But I still did some bad things.

Sometimes, when I knew it wouldn't impact my grades or my parents wouldn't find out, I skipped school and went to the movies. I even got a belly button piercing when I was sixteen.

But the most secretive thing I ever did—the thing that would have gotten me in more trouble than a tattoo—was sneaking my friends into the empty rooms at the Rolling Hills resort. It was a skill I never thought I'd have to use again.

"This way." I planted my hands on Blake's damp back, trying not to notice how his muscles shifted and flexed under the layers of fabric.

All I was doing was repaying Blake for pulling me from the river.

And maybe paying a little penance for being so hard on him every moment after.

I led Blake along the treed path to the side entrance now, giving him a gentle nudge in the right direction every time he veered sideways. There was a set of rooms in the west wing that had been closed off for various repairs recently, but were still made up with bedding. That's where I was going to take Blake; where I'd leave him for the night to sleep it off.

"It's so nice out here," Blake said, stopping to inspect a giant rhododendron.

Technically, I wasn't just a grown woman now, but CEO of this hotel. There was no one to get me in trouble.

"Come on," I said, urging him forward. We had to get around this whole east wing to hit the west wing from behind.

But there would be questions—lots of questions—if any of my siblings knew I was going with a drunken Blake Harrington to one of our empty rooms. Even if some of my staff saw.

That's what I told myself, anyway.

After we'd reached the backside of the hotel, Blake looked down at me in the shadows. "It seems like you've done this before," he said, his voice an exaggerated whisper.

I glared at him, but it went way over his whiskey-addled head. I assumed he'd been drinking whiskey, anyway; that was my brother's morose drink of choice.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

“Not for a long time,” I said.

“So I’m not the first boy you snuck into the hotel?” Blake sounded delighted.

I scowled. “Do you want my help or not?”

“Ow,” Blake said.

I turned to see he’d gotten whacked in the face with another large shrub.

I fought to contain my laughter at the sight of Blake looking slightly dazed, a leaf fluttering off his cheek. “That wouldn’t happen if you stayed on the path.”

“I think you pushed me,” he accused.

I laughed. “Oh really?”

“Yes. You don’t like me.”

“I don’t—” I hesitated. “That’s not true,” I said softly.

Then, to my surprise, Blake reached out and took my hand. “There,” he said. “Now if I go, you go.”

A tingling spread up my arm at the touch of his skin. His palm was warm and surprisingly dry, given the rain. I should have taken my hand away. I should have tucked my hands under my arms and led him, untouching, to the door. Even if the

fake marriage situation didn't exist, we had a business relationship.

But it felt good holding Blake Harrington's hand. Like it was the most natural thing in the world. Like we'd created our own little bubble, even if it was just for this moment. Even if Blake didn't remember it tomorrow.

Maybe it was because Blake wouldn't remember it tomorrow.

"Just because you're holding my hand doesn't mean I couldn't still hurt you," I said.

It was meant to be lighthearted, a joke about pushing him in the bushes.

But Blake's voice went serious. "I know."

When I glanced up at him, his eyes were on mine. Not quite steady, but definitely on mine.

We didn't say anything as we passed under all the darkened rooms of the shuttered east wing. Luckily, that in itself proved enough of a distraction. I shivered, despite myself, knowing we were passing the boarded-up Room 114. It was ridiculous. But still creepy, especially at this hour.

Finally, we crossed over to the west wing.

"Come on," I said. I flashed my universal key card at the door, and a moment later, we were pushing through into the brightly lit stairwell. I was already at the stairs when Blake, behind me, said, "Wait."

I stopped before taking a step up.

"Can you turn around?"

I didn't want to turn around. I'd look like a mess under these fluorescent lights. But also, now that we were out of the rain and inside the building, it was like if I turned around and took him in, I'd have to admit I'd done this in a strange way. I could have brought him through the lobby. Gotten a room key from the front desk and come back down a few minutes later on my own, leaving no room for suspicion.

But I didn't do that. I'd snuck him around the side entrance, to a room no one would be visiting for days.

He wasn't going to remember this tomorrow, I reminded myself. This would be like a strange dream to him, at best.

When I turned, Blake was leaning back against the door, his palms low.

He was soaking wet. Rumpled. Drunk.

Gorgeous.

I could admit that now. Before tonight, I wouldn't have let myself think anything about him. Now, I couldn't deny it. He grinned, the dimples I'd seen on his website—and, I realized later, in the pages of the business magazines I used to subscribe to—popping under his beard. He flipped his wet hair out of his eyes, but a wet lock of it fell across his forehead.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

His eyes bored into mine, his gaze surprisingly steady.

I looked down. “Happy now?”

“Not yet,” he said. He moved toward me.

My pulse pumped fast and hot in my throat, and I gripped the handrail. “I thought you were drunk?” My voice came out slightly strained, like I hadn’t quite found it all.

“I am. Shit-faced.”

I instinctively backed up as he came closer, my heels hitting the stair riser.

“Blake,” I said. “I’m taking you up to a room to sleep it off.” I turned away, unable to face him. Not wanting him to see me. All the bravado I put on every day like a mask was stripped away under these lights, so close to him.

When Blake brought his finger to my jaw, turning my face back toward him, I sucked in a breath. The energy in the space around us snapped with electricity.

“What are you doing?” I whispered.

He leaned in so his lips were beside my ear. “What do you want me to do?”

His hot breath on me made everything sway for a moment, and I swallowed, gripping the handrail like a lifeline.

He was standing so close to me that I could take in the tiniest details about him. The texture of the skin at his throat. The gold at the edges of his caramel-colored eyes. The scent of his hair and the whiskey on his breath.

A drop of water dripped from his hair onto the bare skin of my chest, making me gasp.

His eyes followed it as it ran down my décolletage and into the crevice between my breasts.

“I want you to go upstairs,” I said, my skin burning with his gaze.

“Okay,” Blake said. He took a step back. Respectful. Waiting.

Somehow, we made it up to the third floor, which was quiet and dimly lit, with a few room service trays on the floor outside the occupied rooms. I found the room in question and swiped my card, my pulse still throbbing in my throat.

“Okay, here you go,” I said as I briskly walked into the room and stood between the two queen beds, extending my arms. “Take your pick.”

Blake came over, veering slightly so that his leg hit the bed on my left and he stumbled. He sat down hard on it and flopped backward like he was doing a snow angel.

“Okay, I’m going to go now,” I said. “You should probably take that wet suit off.”

Blake raised himself up on his elbows. “Wait,” he said.

I was already at the end of the bed.

“Please,” he said. “Not yet. I just... please stay for a bit. I hate being alone. I’m always fucking alone.”

I hesitated.

When I turned, his expression was so pained my chest squeezed. Me being alone, that was a choice. What must it be like to have the facade of a relationship but go to bed every night alone? To have everyone think you have everything, but at home you have nothing?

I supposed that was a choice, too.

“Okay,” I said. “But I’ll wait in the bathroom while you get undressed. Tell me when you’re under the blanket and I’ll... I’ll stay over here for another minute.”

Suddenly all the bleakness from a moment ago disappeared, and he grinned goofily once again.

I pinched my lips to keep the smile from spreading on my face. I liked this side of him, this uncensored, unbuttoned version of the careful, controlled Blake Harrington I was getting to know in our undrunk lives. Not that I was drunk—I’d stuck to soda water tonight.

But I couldn’t relax with Blake, not like this. If I did, it was a quick and slippery sideways step to giving in to the heat that still simmered down low from that moment in the stairwell.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

I headed for the bathroom, grabbing a towel to dry off my hair. I was definitely rumpled myself. But it was fine—from this side of the resort I could go right down to the staff exit and be back at my apartment in five minutes.

“Cassandra!”

Blake sounded alarmed.

I rushed back out.

He was stuck in his wet suit jacket, his elbows askew.

I bit back a laugh. “Here,” I said. I went over to him and tugged on the collar of his jacket. With great effort, we managed to extricate his arms. As I was straightening it out, he fumbled with the buttons on his shirt, missing them.

His eyes were beginning to droop.

I hesitated. Then, before I knew what I was doing, I’d placed my hands on his and gently moved them away. “Let me do it.” My fingers went to his buttons, undoing one, and then the other. I tried to ignore the heat reigniting inside of me, growing intense as I revealed more and more of his skin.

His face was tilted up at me. “You’re good at buttons.”

I smiled. “I’m sober.”

I peeled his shirt off, trying not to ogle his thick shoulders. His muscular chest was right in front of me, his taut stomach below. A strip of hair disappeared into his navel.

That heat pooled low, and an absurd thought occurred to me: I could easily hike my skirt up and straddle him right here on this bed.

“You’re thinking about taking advantage of me, aren’t you?” Blake said.

I gaped. Was I that obvious? I yanked his shirt down with maybe more force than required.

“Ow,” he said as I twisted his lead-heavy arm, getting it off.

“Sorry. And... there. You can do your own pants.”

Blake stood up abruptly. “Okay.” He unbuckled his belt.

I was too startled to move. He reached for the button and zipper on his suit pants, fumbling to get them open.

Heat rushed through me. I whirled around, mortified.

The sound of his pants falling to the ground made my knees go slightly weak.

He was right there behind me, his whole naked body separated only—I assumed—by his underwear.

Unless he’d already removed those, too.

I strode to the hallway, facing the darkened door.

I heard the thud of him kicking off his shoes, the clink of his belt on the ground as he stepped out of his pants, and finally, the rustle of sheets. The whole time I clenched and unclenched my hands, my heart pounding. I should leave. I needed to leave.

But I didn't want to leave.

"Okay, it's safe," he said.

I turned around. Blake was lying on his back on the bed, one gorgeous, thickly muscled arm bent under his head. The sheet was pulled up to cover his bottom half, but that was it. Above that, his broad, ridged chest and torso were fully exposed.

God help me.

I went over to the opposite bed and sat down. "I'm just staying a minute, okay?"

"Okay," he said.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

I thought about how combative we'd been before. Was this what it took for us to get along? Blake being three sheets to the wind?

God—sheets. I could see the outline of him under it, just like I could on that island.

I brought my gaze up fast, to his face. His expression looked... concerned.

“Are you okay, Blake?”

“I get worried sometimes.”

“About what?”

“Not remembering, when I have too many whisks... whiskseys.”

“Whiskeys,” I supplied, my voice soft. “Why do you worry?”

“My mom—she doesn't remember.”

“When she drinks?” Then I caught myself. We were veering into territory like that information about Lila. “You don't have to tell me anything.”

“S'okay. I want to. I never tell anyone stuff when I don't drink. It's lonely.”

I smiled, my heart twinging once again. “You're not alone now, Blake.”

He smiled. Then it fell. “My mom is sick.” He tapped his head. “She's got Alz.. early

Altz...”

My stomach dropped. “Alzheimer’s?”

He nodded. “She doesn’t remember me.” He laughed, briefly, but it was like a clap in the room. Pained. “That’s not funny, is it?”

“No,” I said, my voice soft.

His eyes grew wet. “Sometimes she thinks I’m my dad, or my brothers. Those are good days.”

My heart twisted harder. I still grieved for my mom’s passing—every day—but I wondered if having her there but not there would be harder than her being gone.

I wanted to cradle this man’s head in my arms, tell him it was okay to feel. I shifted my hands beside me to push myself off the bed.

But then Blake waved his hand. “It’s okay.” He opened his mouth and closed it like he was physically wrenching the feelings away, and apparently it worked, because when he turned back to me next, he was smiling.

“You wanna ask me stuff? I’ll forget tomorrow.”

I really reallyreallyshould have gone. But I found my legs glued to the bed. “Where did you grow up?”

“Seattle.”

“How many siblings do you have?”

“Two. Brothers.”

“Did you have a happy childhood?”

“My dad’s a dick.”

God, this man.

“He still watches every move I make. He likes to tell me whenever I fuck it up. He texts me to tell me.”

He said it so matter-of-factly, like this was a normal thing. My own dad may be off in some weird world of his own, but he was never, ever cruel. He loved us. He was always on my side. Even if he was as far away as he could be when I needed him the most. Even if he couldn’t give me business advice, moral support would have been invaluable.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

“I love my brothers, though,” he said. “And my mom.”

“Where’s your mom?”

“A special home in Seattle.”

I had to sit on my hands to keep myself from getting up and going over there.

“It’s not so bad. She reads romance books. Sometimes she’s more happy... happiness than when I was a kid.”

My chest squeezed, but I smiled. I never told anyone about my secret affection for romance. I never thought it fit with my CEO persona. But this warmed me. And talking to Blake now was a free pass. “Your mom is smart,” I said. “I love a good rom-com. Movies, mostly. Especially from the 80s and 90s”

“Like Top Gun?”

“Not exactly,” I laughed. “But I mean, yes, it’s got romance.” And bare-chested men.

I couldn’t help looking at the gorgeous bare chest in front of me.

“You wanna go to the movies?” Blake asked, wagging his brows. “Kelly McGillis?”

My stomach gave off a little teenage fluttering at getting asked out by a cute boy, and compared to a beautiful woman like her. Even if it wasn’t real.

“More questions. This is fun.” Blake was still looking at me, but his blinks kept extending. He needed to sleep. I bet if I stopped talking, he’d be passed out in a matter of seconds.

But there was one more question I wanted to ask him.

“Blake,” I whispered. I half hoped he wouldn’t hear me.

“Yeah.”

I swallowed. “Why do you look at me the way you do?”

“The what?”

“Like you care about what I think. And like you think I’m... pretty?”

Blake’s eyes fluttered open, his brows slanting. “Because you’re beautiful.” He said it like I was crazy to think otherwise.

I thought of Ned one morning on my way to a critical client meeting with another firm. You should wear the flat shoes today, Cassandra. Men don’t like it when you’re taller than them. Maybe tone down the lipstick too.

I thought of all the times I’d felt too big; too loud; too much.

I’d been all of those things to Blake, and he still liked me. When he was drunk, anyway.

A lump formed in my throat. I was trying to pull compliments from a nearly-passed-out man. I was that desperate.

“And you’re smart,” Blake said, his eyes closed again. “I read what you did at that... your company... Wells... what they did to you. They did you dirty, but it was a smart move, not naming names...”

He was talking about my last job, Wellsborough. He’d read up on me. Of course he had, for his job. Still, the fact that he’d formed an opinion on it—that he knew it wasn’t my fault what happened there—I was strangely touched. It had been a scandal—one of our board members had been indicted on fraud charges. I knew it would incriminate all of us if I didn’t take the fall. Innocent people would have been unhireable. People with families. Important lives. It made sense for me to take the hit. My life wasn’t so interesting or important.

When I next looked at Blake, his eyes were fully closed, and his mouth slightly open. He was out.

I got up and knelt beside the bed, studying his face for a moment. He had a little scar in his eyebrow I hadn’t noticed before; a little white streak where no hair grew.

“You were going to kiss me on that island,” I whispered. “Weren’t you?”

Despite the fact the man was asleep, my stomach fluttered again.

Then Blake’s eyes pinged open. “Kiss you?”

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

I startled. “Oh,” I said, nerves suddenly ratcheting through me. “I didn’t—”

“Do you want me to kiss you?” Blake asked, rising up on one elbow. “Cassandra?”

I hesitated. There was no point in lying to him now. “I want you to want to kiss me,” I said. That was the awful, pathetic truth.

Blake forced himself to sit up. “Goddammit Cassandra, I’ve wanted to kiss you all fuckin’ night. All week, since—”

I leaned forward and planted my lips on his. They were full, soft, tinged with sweetness and whiskey.

At first, Blake didn’t move. Then he sprang into action, wrapping his arms around me and pulling me over him, onto the bed. He rolled so I was on my back and he was leaning over me. He stared at me a moment, his expression hungry. “Beautiful.” Then he kissed me once more, slipping his tongue into my mouth, drawing his teeth down on my lip before releasing it again.

I made a sound halfway between a cry and a moan as his hand slid up my leg, under my skirt.

“Did you think I didn’t want you?” he asked, pulling his face away from mine, but continuing the slip of his hand up my thigh. His eyes seemed slightly hazy, but they stayed focused on me.

Heat ran through me, fomenting down low.

“I don’t know anymore,” I said.

Ned messed up my sensor. But Ned was the last thing I wanted to think about right now.

“I want you,” he said.

The sheet was still shrouding his bottom half. His upper half was gorgeous—sculpted, smooth, hard.

He grasped my hip under my dress.

Desire swam in my stomach, roiling down low.

I should have gotten up. I should have moved from the bed, gotten up, and left him there to pass out.

Instead, I whispered, “Show me,” my eyes going to the sheet draped over his hips.

Even in his state, Blake understood, and didn’t hesitate.

My heart pounded as he rose onto his knees, and when the sheet fell down, only his naked body remained, his cock taut.

My stomach swooped with adrenaline at the sight of it. It further hardened before my eyes, a drop of liquid forming at the tip.

Blake gripped his length in his hand. “This is how much I want you, Cassandra.” He squeezed it so the beaded liquid dropped onto my bare thigh, marking me.

I let out a little sound—I wanted to taste it. I wanted to taste him. I wanted

everything—my whole body cried for it; my underwear was already wet, soaked through for him. But when I looked up at his face, met his gorgeous, caramel eyes, I saw the Blake Harrington from the cover of that magazine. The professional. My consultant.

The fake married man.

A drunk man with impaired faculties, who wouldn't remember this tomorrow.

“Blake,” I said. “Stop.”

It was the hardest thing I'd ever said, but it was the right thing. I couldn't do this, even if he wouldn't remember it tomorrow. Especially because he wouldn't remember it tomorrow.

He didn't argue, just closed his eyes. “Okay,” he said. Then he gave himself one long stroke of his cock. It was so hot I had to stop myself from reaching for it.

Then Blake pulled the sheet back up, lying back down on the bed. “If you change your mind, I'm right here.” He held open one arm, and I hesitated, then lay back down, resting my head on his shoulder. I inhaled him; his soap, the whiskey, and his own distinct scent, which made my chest hurt.

At some point I fell asleep because when I blinked my eyes open, the clock said it was three in the morning. Blake was curled around me, one arm under my head, the other wrapped around my waist, possessive in his sleep.

Carefully, I pulled his arm off me and slid off the bed, pulling the blanket up over his sheet. He snored as he turned over, but didn't wake. I found my purse and pulled out our contract, leaving it on the bedside table, along with a glass of water, and two of the painkillers I kept in my bag.

He'd know, at least, that I was here.

Everything else would be my secret.

11

BLAKE

"And here's the current year," Eli said, hauling another file box onto the boardroom table.

It was Monday, the first day of our operational review. The day after I'd woken up with the most god-forsaken hell raiser of a hangover I'd ever known.

I still didn't know what had happened the night of the dinner, but given Jude and Chelsea, who I'd seen downstairs coming in, had smiled and waved rather than looking at me with disgust, I hoped it wasn't bad.

I still hadn't seen Cassandra, though.

"This is everything?" I asked, trying to shake off the worry. I'd discovered the contract next to the bed I'd woken up in, so whatever had happened, it hadn't been bad enough to fire me.

"As far as I can tell," Eli said.

The boardroom was going to be Lila's headquarters for the next few weeks. She'd be

examining all the financials and then launching interviews with key staff. I was helping her set up—and giving her the key questions I wanted to ask—before meeting with Cassandra at nine.

Cassandra, who I hadn't seen since Saturday.

Cassandra, who I wasn't sure if I'd...

No, I wouldn't think about it. Not now, in her goddamned offices.

"Thanks, Eli." I slid the box off the table and placed it in the stack against the wall. I needlessly rearranged several of the boxes for good measure, needing the physical effort. While I'd spent Sunday morning swimming several miles of laps in the pool, I hadn't made it to the gym since last week, and feeling my muscles work—however lightly—felt good. Simple and uncomplicated, unlike the mess I'd created here.

"Yes, thank you, Eli," Lila said, tucking her phone back in her blazer pocket. She'd been talking to another client while we brought in the boxes. "I appreciate you having these all ready for us this morning.

"No prob," Eli said, pressing his fingers to his temples and shooting me an apologetic look. If Eli was anything like me, he was suffering from hangover day two.

"Lila," he said. "I'm sorry again for leaving you all at the dinner this weekend. I... wasn't in a good place."

"Of course," Lila said, her voice sweet on the outside. "I hope you two didn't get into too much trouble? Blake wouldn't tell me much about what happened after we all left."

She put emphasis on that last word hard enough for a dagger of pain to shoot through

my temple.

“None at all. Blake helped chill me out,” Eli said.

“I think that was the McCallan,” I said.

Eli groaned. “Don’t remind me.”

After Eli left, Lila flipped over a page on her notepad and scribbled something out.

“Lila—” I said.

“Don’t,” she flung back.

I sighed, sinking into a chair. Lila had barely spoken to me since Saturday. She’d sent Brynn over to check on me at nine AM yesterday morning. Judging by Brynn’s expression when I’d hauled open the sliding door, I’d looked as much of a zombie as I felt. “Just seeing if you made it home last night.”

As far as Brynn and Lila knew, I’d come home Saturday night. Thank everything above I’d woken up at dawn Sunday morning and stumbled home on foot. The only thing worse than the growing pounding in my head had been the shame of what I’d done. Lila was angrier than I’d seen her in a long time. The only words she’d said to me were via text last night: confirmation that we were starting at the Rolling Hills at eight AM in the main boardroom, and that I better not have done anything to fuck with this project. Not after making her take it on.

This morning, after a six AM swim, I’d walked to the resort, not up for a tense ride in the car with Lila, no matter how quick. The trip was only a half-hour on foot, and nice too—a winding route through the side streets of downtown Quince Valley, followed by a trek over the pretty red bridge that spanned the water, and up the hill to

the Rolling Hills.

“Lila,” I said now, but paused. I wanted to tell her I didn’t jeopardize the project, but I didn’t know if that was true. I didn’t think it was, but I couldn’t remember shit about Saturday night. Nothing except flashes after sitting down at the bar with Eli. And I couldn’t tell if those were real or dreams.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

All I could do was apologize. “I’m sorry. I behaved like a total shit.”

“In front of new clients.” She still didn’t look at me, just scribbled something on her notepad.

“Yes, that.” I stood up and began pacing the room. I fucked up, it was true. But I wasn’t going to eat shit all morning, either. It hadn’t been a normal situation.

“But Lila, nothing about this job has been like our normal work so far, has it? This family—,” The door was ajar, so I lowered my voice. “This family has its own issues, and had no real qualms about showing them on Saturday. Eli needed a buddy. Plus, you know you can count on your hand the number of times I’ve gone overboard like that, right? Hell, it’s not even a full hand.”

Lila looked directly at me for the first time. I wasn’t going to bring up the last time it had happened. That had been fifteen years ago. But she remembered.

She lowered her pen, seeming to soften just a little. “You’re right. It’s not exactly a pattern. But that’s what makes this worrying in its own right. I don’t know what’s going on with you, Blake, but I’m a little worried, okay? First you insisted we take this job out here—you convinced me it was the best thing to do for our business. Then, when I’m finally onside, you asked me if I ever thought of quitting. And that’s after whatever the hell went down with you and the flipping CEO when you were out fishing!”

I was standing by the window now. It was a gorgeous view from here. The same one I’d woken up to on Sunday morning.

“Then—”

“Then I get drunk with the CFO.” And God knows what else. I turned to look at her. “This has been a messed-up start, I know that. And I apologize. But I’m not going to back out on you, okay?”

I wasn’t sure if I was talking about the project, our business, the fake marriage, or both. My head started throbbing again.

“I’m going to get a coffee before my meeting with Cassandra,” I said.

I suddenly couldn’t get far enough away. I still had twenty minutes before the meeting.

“Brynn was getting us some—”

“I need some air,” I said, my voice hard.

For the hundredth time since Sunday, I wracked my brain trying to remember something—anything—about Saturday night. When I’d woken up in the hotel room, I’d still been half-drunk, though it was quickly transforming into a monstrous hangover. At first I’d thought it was Eli who’d gotten me the room. Then I’d seen the envelope. I’d opened it with shaking hands, already knowing what it was. I didn’t know in what state I’d find it, though. Torn up? Scrawled on with a note that I was an asshole or a pig?

But Cassandra had signed it—every page. I hadn’t been fired.

Of course, that wouldn’t make much business sense—the contract was essentially a gift to the Rolling Hills with how I’d laid it all out. She’d be screwing herself if she turned it down.

But I was also naked in a hotel room, with my clothes draped neatly over the bathtub.

Every time I thought about what might have happened—all the options—I felt sick. Had I made a fool of myself? Did I hit on her? Had I slept with her?

The only thing I'd landed on was I couldn't let it just sit there, nebulous and unknown. And I wasn't going to wait around for Cassandra to tell me.

I was going to ask her, point blank.

Then I'd deal with the consequences.

At five to nine, I was back upstairs, this time in front of the doors to the executive offices, my briefcase in one hand and two Americanos in a holder in the other, my pockets stuffed with creamers and sugar as I had no idea what she took in her coffee.

Cassandra's door was ajar when I reached it. Her face was tipped down, and for a moment I didn't say anything, just watched the way she tucked a wave of her hair behind her ear as she read whatever document was in front of her.

"Morning," I said.

When she looked up, I nearly swayed on my feet. She was wearing reading glasses, which were perched halfway down her nose like a sexy librarian.

Good God, she was gorgeous. My idiot brain went right there, sending an electric message straight down to my dick, which twitched as if it had some business doing that.

Did it remember something I didn't?

“Good morning,” she said to me. She looked slightly stiff, nervous maybe. But not like she wanted to kill me. Point one Harrington.

“Come in.” She said nothing as I stepped inside and settled down in one of the seats across from her desk. My mind flew in all directions as I took in her lips, pink and pressed together. Had I known those? Her hands, laced together—had those been on me?

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

My idiot dick jumped again, thankfully out of her line of sight.

“Is one of those for me?” she asked finally.

“Shit. Yes. Here—I didn’t know if you took cream or if you even drink coffee.” I pulled out the accouterments from my suit jacket and set them in a pile on the desk.

“Thanks,” she said.

Ask. Just ask now.

“Cassandra,” I said. Then I realized that her office door was open. I got up to close it, but Eli was sitting in the office directly across, and he looked up when I reached the door.

I hesitated. It would look weird as hell to close the door right now. “Will talking bother you?” I called to him.

“Cassandra talking always bothers me,” Eli quipped.

I gave a half-hearted laugh. Then I shrugged, perfectly casual, and closed the door partway. Inside, my guts were swirling.

But I’d had enough of this hemming and hawing. I clapped my hands together, then raised my voice. “Well, it’s great to finally get this review going, Cassandra.” I hoped it wasn’t obvious I was trying to ensure Eli heard. “I wanted to kick off by showing you the plan we talked about... it’s probably easiest if I show you.”

I reached down into my briefcase and pulled out a folder, then came around beside her and laid it open. I braced my hands on the desk and leaned down like I was showing her something important.

Eli was visible through the gap in the door, but he was tapping on his computer.

I dropped my voice low now, so only she could hear me. “I’m just going to ask you point blank. Did we sleep together?”

Cassandra froze. Her eyes lingered on mine a moment, then she looked down, pointing to something on the document. “No.”

Relief flooded through me. Okay. This was good. I closed my eyes, letting out a breath. “Thank Christ.”

When I looked at Cassandra again, her eyes were trained on the document in front of us.

She was avoiding looking at me.

A phone rang somewhere outside.

“Yo!” Eli said, loud enough that I said a little prayer of gratitude. I strode back to the door. He held up an apologetic hand. I smiled and shook my head, but now had a reason to close the door.

When the door clicked shut, I turned back to Cassandra.

Of all things, she looked like she was trying to suppress a laugh.

For a moment, I was too surprised to speak. Then a flame of irritation hit me. “What

the hell is funny about this?”

Her smile faded, and she leaned forward onto the desk. “You.”

“What the hell happened on Saturday?” My voice was hard now, challenging her to cut the shit.

“You really don’t remember?”

“When I drink too much, I don’t remember anything. It’s why I never drink too much.”

“But you did, on Saturday.”

My stomach twisted. “For God’s sake, will you put me out of my misery? If we didn’t sleep together, what happened?”

“Why should I tell you?”

I wasn’t sure if she was joking or... if she was mad at me. Well hell, I was mad too. I let out a low breath, then walked over to stand opposite her, leaning on the desk once more. “Because I just signed my fucking life away. You know that contract gives you everything, with no obligation for you not to fuck me.”

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

I realized what I'd said a moment too late. But she didn't laugh again. "I woke up naked, Cassandra, in an out-of-service hotel room. Alone, hungover as hell. But you'd been there. You signed our contract, which makes me think I didn't completely screw the pooch, and you left me water and painkillers, which was nice."

"You're welcome."

The stiff pleasantries would have been funny, but I was too preoccupied with needing the truth.

"My clothes were laid out, not by me."

Cassandra sat back in her chair. "Are you happy we didn't sleep together?"

"What? Of course I'm happy."

Her face fell. Just for a moment before she put on her mask again.

She was wounded.

"Jesus, Cassandra, it's not like that."

"So, you would have been happy we slept together?"

"Goddammit, you are aggravating." I pushed off the desk. "What exactly do you want me to say? That I'm attracted to you and I wish we'd started off our professional relationship in bed? When I was blackout drunk? What the hell kind of relationship

would that be?”

She'd blinked at the attractive part. Or the relationship part. Some distant, fuzzy memory came to me, just out of grasp. But a clearer memory slotted into its place, of yesterday.

That hazy, headachy, hungover feeling had been swirling around me as I'd gotten in the shower. But it wasn't the headache I was focused on as I turned on the water as hot as I could stand. It was Cassandra. I stood with the hot water beating down on my back, holding my dick in my hand, picturing Cassandra's face. I'd stroked hard and fast and angry. I'd wanted her—wanted to have slept with Cassandra and wanted to have remembered it.

Fuck. I wiped the memory from my mind before my dick got any more ideas.

I sighed, rubbing my temples. “I shouldn't have said that part about you being attr—”

“No, you shouldn't have,” she said. She'd softened, her anger abating. “You're right, it would have been a very bad start.”

But she wasn't quite looking at me.

Then a horrible thought struck me.

“I didn't try anything, did I?” Dread ran over me now as quickly as the relief had come a moment ago. That was the only thing that would be worse than us having slept together. Me making an attempt where it was absolutely not wanted.

“Not really.”

“Not really!?”

“You were... receptive to something happening.”

I groaned, placing the heels of my hands in my eyes.

“Blake, listen,” she said, finally taking pity on me. “I made sure nothing happened, okay? I don’t exactly want to be forgotten about the next day.”

I sank into my chair and took a sip of my coffee, which had gone to lukewarm. “Okay.”

Then she picked up a pen and began tapping it on the paper in front of her, then realized what she was doing and put it down again.

She was nervous.

I should have done that thing my dad taught me—that I hated because he’d taught me and it worked—stayed silent, waiting for her to fill in the gaps. But I was tired of waiting. “Cassandra, please. Tell me what did happen. I’m at your fucking mercy.”

“You told me something.”

My stomach dropped, pulse pounding.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

I shouldn't have gotten out of bed this morning. I should have postponed work for another week.

Another lifetime.

I swallowed. "What did I say?" Did I tell her the truth about Lila? Because if I did, I was scum. Lower than scum. Lila had schooled me early on that outing someone for them was the worst betrayal you could perpetuate. It was their information to tell, to determine whether it was safe to tell. And Lila had trusted me with her secret, a secret she hadn't even told the people she was closest to—her parents.

Cassandra was silent a moment, then said, "You said you don't like being alone."

I almost sighed with relief. "Well, that's embarrassing." But at least it was my secret to tell.

I considered keeping quiet to see if there was anything else, but the way she was looking at me, I found myself talking.

"My father—he did this thing with each of us, my brothers, when we were little—he made us spend a night on our own out in the woods behind our house when we were eight. Said it built character. But he'd also rig it so things would happen. He'd come out and make a twig snap. Played a recording of a wolf howling. Scared the shit out of us, honestly. If we didn't make it through the night, he'd make us go out again the next night. It took me two nights. My brother Connor four."

Mitch had done it in one, but only because I'd told him it was Dad. I figured it out

with Connor and I'd been so pissed, I'd risked Dad's wrath by telling Mitch.

He didn't let us sleep in the same room after, but I'd let both Connor and Mitch sneak into my room the night after, let them cry softly into my pillow while I slept on the floor, rage building in my little chest.

"He wouldn't let Mom read us stories once we started school," I said. "He wouldn't even let her come in to comfort us if we had a bad dream."

I took a gulp of coffee, suddenly deeply embarrassed. "I don't know why I told you all that," I said.

Her expression was so sad that I cleared my throat. "It's fine," I said. "Therapy fodder. But I guess I figured you deserved to know after I shared that with you while I was out of it."

"I'm sorry that happened to you," she said after a moment. "Anyone would hate being alone after that."

"I got over it," I said. "I can sleep without a nightlight now."

She didn't laugh. "You also told me about your mom."

I grimaced. "Oh. How much?"

"Just about her condition. That she's in a home in Seattle."

Okay, that wasn't too bad. Just facts. But it was beyond inappropriate for a work meeting. Of course, so was Saturday night.

I straightened. "Well, I'm glad we got that all out in the open and I apologize again,

Cassandra, for this auspicious start.”

She studied me a moment longer, then said, “I’m sorry too, for driving you to drink on Saturday.

I smiled. “That was on me.”

Her lips twisted like she was trying not to smile. Then she sobered again. “I think we should set some ground rules, though.”

“That’s fair.” My chest felt tight. I don’t know why—it was a good idea.

“This relationship should remain wholly professional, going forward,” she said, looking down. “Because of... the consequences.”

She was right, of course. My business. Lila’s secret, which she didn’t even know about. Cassandra’s business. If mine went down, so did hers. But when she lifted her gaze to mine again, the squeezing in my chest grew tighter.

For a split second, I wanted to tell her no. I wanted to demand that she let me have this freedom; the freedom to want her. To be around her. To get to know her and have something resembling a normal life, like other people got to have.

But to do what, exactly? Date? I didn’t date. Would I, if I was free to? I never thought so. I’d always been so single-mindedly focused on our business, I’d never wanted to be with anyone.

I never felt like I’d be good enough for anyone. But that wasn’t a nut I needed to crack open. No, I didn’t want that. But the freedom to be... looser around Cassandra, without consequence, would be nice. But I’d made that impossible for myself. Plus, I couldn’t presume she felt any way about me just because she wasn’t pissed at me

right now.

In fact, it was probably the opposite, given she'd stopped things from going anywhere that night.

"Alright," I said. I hesitated, remembering her expression when I'd been so gleeful we hadn't hooked up. "But one more thing before we put this behind us. You have to know that if we had done anything in that room, I don't think I would have forgotten."

Cassandra smiled, but said nothing.

I couldn't help but think I might not be the only one with secrets.

12

CASSANDRA

I don't know why I didn't tell Blake about what happened that night. Maybe because it was easier that way—and it absolutely was. But maybe I just wanted to hold on to that moment, keeping it mine, tucked away where no one would ever find it.

But despite our rocky start, the first couple of weeks of the review went surprisingly smoothly. I worked half with Lila, and half with Blake. Getting to know Lila was nice—she was smart and, though curt, funny sometimes too. I could see how Blake would have enjoyed being friends with her. How he'd wanted to protect his friend from harm.

Working with Blake was more of a challenge at first. Mostly because of me. Because no matter how much I tried to shove it aside, I couldn't stop seeing it.

I couldn't stop thinking about the way he'd opened up to me. The emotion he'd expressed while talking about his family. The way he knew what happened to me at my old job and admired what I'd done.

And I couldn't stop seeing the way he'd looked at me when he showed me his need for me.

Because of this, and because we'd both acknowledged that our interactions so far hadn't been strictly professional, our first few days were slightly awkward, our conversations stilted. We kept our distance, but still managed to bump up against each other, both in words and body. We'd give each other too-large berths when passing each other, stepping awkwardly aside when grabbing files and pointing out things on laptops. We took exaggerated care to ensure we didn't bring up anything tricky or personal, unless it was strictly related to the business. But by the end of the first week, we'd both started to relax, and I commended myself for doing a good job of shoving down the electric heat I felt around Blake. I still felt it, but it wasn't quite as intense as it had been, so long as I made an effort to contain it. It was easy if we butted heads about something—which happened several times. But there were these moments when that heat came roaring back to life. When Blake leaned over me to look at something on my computer, forgetting to keep his distance, and his now-almost-familiar scent filled my nostrils. When he handed me my coffee in the morning and our fingers brushed. In those moments, I'd be hit with a kind of pain—an exquisite ache of a feeling I'd never get to have again with him.

That was the only reason I was feeling that way, I knew. Because he was something I'd never have. I was sure if I'd known him in some other capacity—as a man I'd dated even—I wouldn't feel so strongly.

Would I?

Or would I still get a spurt of adrenaline when I saw him smile? Would I still yearn for a moment when we'd accidentally touch, or when we'd argue about something with enough of a volley that by the end we were almost physically affected—my chest heaving and having to turn away so I didn't... what, grab him by the collar and smack him?

Or try to kiss him?

Over those first couple of weeks, Harrington Consulting was getting to know the ins and outs of our business—the business plans, the annual reports, the financials. While Lila began interviewing employees, Blake and I spent a lot of time together going over all our planning structures.

I learned more and more each day about how Blake Harrington ticked. He was thorough. Methodical. Thoughtful.

Irritatingly able to push all of my buttons at once.

But even though we continued not to see eye to eye on some things—like what we’d been doing at the resort to rectify the errors George had made—Blake listened to my point of view. He considered it, weighed it against his experience, and if he still had an issue with it, told me in a way that left room for a more flexible, nuanced approach.

Although sometimes, I felt like he said things just to get a rise out of me, too. Usually it was inconsequential stuff, like one time how he insisted I had a too-elaborate series of keystrokes to do a command in a spreadsheet.

“You know you can just right-click there, right?”

“I don’t want to right-click,” I said, leaning into my computer.

We’d been sitting next to each other in the boardroom that time—not too close, of course—and Lila had gone to get coffees. I’d tried to replicate my way of doing it, but with his eyes on me, I couldn’t remember the keys to press. “Do you mind?” I’d moved my laptop sideways.

“There’s also a button that does it,” he said. “Right there.” He pointed vaguely at my keyboard.

I'd thrown a pencil at him.

Then Lila had come back, and we'd grown serious, as if we'd been doing something wrong.

Which we hadn't been.

Had we?

* * *

Somehow, two weeks had passed, and it was already time for a check-in meeting. Lila had suggested we do it at a cafe in town for a change in scenery.

Lila, Eli, and Jude were all there. Griffin was still off wherever he was, though he'd sent me a text a few days before telling me he was at least alive and would be back 'soon'. Chelsea had called in sick, though I suspected she'd overdone it the night before. It was the first time her social life had impeded on her work, so I hadn't pressed. Maybe she was sick, anyway. I hadn't had the chance to check on her.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

We'd taken care of everyone's check-in items and had ordered food when Blake had turned to me and asked if I could share some more personal history about my mom.

"My mother?" I'd asked, surprised. This was outside Blake's and my tacit understanding of safe topics.

But we weren't alone. And it was related to the business—Mom was stitched into every part of this resort. Since we'd started the review, I'd been thinking about her a lot—probably because her name was all over the old documents; in the annual review photos; on every piece of correspondence.

"Yeah. What was she like?" Blake asked, stuffing a forkful of salad into his mouth. "I feel like I know who she was, but I don't know what she was like, if you know what I mean."

Something went warm inside my chest. It was like he knew how I'd been feeling. I was touched. But Blake was sitting next to me, and I was also suddenly keenly aware of his leg under the table, only inches from mine.

"She built this place up from nothing, right?" he asked.

"Yes. But she didn't intend to buy it," I said, tearing my eyes from his. Everyone's eyes were on me. At first I was worried they somehow knew about the warmth tingling through me. But when I realized they were waiting for me to continue talking, I relaxed, settling back in my chair. The noise of the busy cafe fell into the background as I thought back to the story Dad had told us so many times.

“When Mom’s parents passed, she got a small inheritance. They sat on it for a while, but Dad was really hating his job. He was doing some kind of insurance work in Cincinnati—it’s where his job had taken them.”

Even though they’d also heard it a hundred times, even Jude and Eli had their ears perked as they ate.

“She always had a dream of running a hotel, and when Dad said he’d rather stay at home and look after kids than do the grind every day, they’d started looking for a place.”

“Did they always know they wanted to settle in Vermont?” Lila asked.

I shook my head. “No. They looked all over the Midwest, mostly at small hotels in smaller towns—Mom always figured she’d run a smaller one for a while, grow her chops and investment, then move onto something bigger. But it didn’t occur to her to look back in their hometown until Dad casually mentioned it.”

“Wait, so both your parents were from here too?” Blake asked. I guessed their research hadn’t gone that far back.

“Born and raised.”

“Why didn’t she look at the resort first?” he asked. “It had been shut down for years, right?”

“Yes.” I took a sip of my water, hiding my smile at the rapt attention around the table. I loved how invested everyone was. I loved that it felt like us coming back to run this place—and getting the Harringtons to help us fix it—still felt like exactly the right thing. Even if there was that distraction of Blake.

“The Rolling Hills resort used to be called the Vista Grand,” I continued, “and it had been hugely popular in the 1920s and 30s. But during the war, visits plummeted.”

“Dad thought the owners’ sons had been killed in action, didn’t he?” Jude asked.

Jude was especially into the history of this place. He really ought to work with Dad on doing some kind of actual research project—if Dad ever came back.

And if they didn’t get distracted by silly ghost stories.

But I nodded. “It was our dad who’d been into the lore of the place,” I explained to Blake and Lila. “He figured the previous owners had been so heartbroken they didn’t have the drive to renew the place once the war was over. In any case, they ended up leaving it to a cousin, who kept the building chugging along for another decade or so but didn’t really do any major upkeep. He started shutting down rooms when they needed work, and according to the records, they finally sold it to a developer in the 60s with only about 50 operational rooms.”

“How sad,” Lila said.

It was sad. I hated thinking about these bereaved parents, too devastated to greet the visitors they’d once loved. Watching their baby fall into ruin.

“But the developer didn’t do anything with it?” Blake said.

“That’s right. That’s when it went fallow. Dad said he remembered the building kind of looming over the town for years. The local kids all said it was haunted.”

“Dad still says that,” Eli said.

I rolled my eyes, but Blake’s eyebrows went up. “Oh yeah, the ghost in room—”

“114,” Jude supplied.

I threw Jude a look. “In any case, Mom and Dad didn’t think to look at the place as a potential for purchase, even though Mom said years later it was the Vista Grand that got her inspired to run a hotel in the first place.”

“They thought it was too big,” Eli said.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

“Yeah. But Mom was home for Christmas that year they were looking, and saw it was for sale. Her sister worked at the town hall and casually mentioned there were some tourism grants available—”

“Revitalization grants,” Eli said.

“Right. Anyway, one thing led to another, and they let go of the other place they were considering in Ohio—a ten-room inn on a farm—and ended up purchasing the 300-room resort right in their hometown.”

“Wild,” Blake said.

“It really was,” I said.

“Literally,” Lila said. “I saw some of the old photos in the files. The golf course was almost completely grown over.”

“And half the windows were boarded up,” I said. “I guess some of the east wing was closed off back when the resort started losing guests, and nobody opened them back up again.”

“That’s where the haunted ones are,” Jude explained. Then added a ghost sound: “Oooooooooooooo!”

Eli and I groaned.

“Anyway, Mom and Dad got the place fixed up,” I said, “and it turned a profit in

their... third year?" I glanced at Eli for confirmation.

He nodded. "Yep—once Dad ended up staying home with us. They figured it would be better if they saved money on daycare by stepping down from the business."

I picked up my fork again. "Dad never really cared about running the hotel, anyway. He went along with buying it for the history."

"The hotel was always Mom's baby," Eli said. "Now it's yours, Cass."

I swallowed the forkful of food I'd put in my mouth, oddly touched. Eli wasn't usually sentimental with me, being my twin. He always said he hadn't planned on staying on as CFO. He'd come home to help us, but he'd run away before, working in a completely different field despite his business acumen. I wondered when he'd leave this time.

We were all quiet for a moment, and I didn't know about Eli and Jude, but my throat felt thick with emotion.

"This was never your dream either, was it?" Blake asked.

I shook my head. "No, but I think I was being obstinate. I wanted to try my own thing. Now it feels like the right decision but... I want it to function in a way that doesn't keep me awake at night. At least not all the time."

"That's why we're here," Blake said, smiling.

I'd smiled at him, suddenly beyond grateful they were.

That Blake, specifically, was here.

While the others started chatting—about ghosts, or the hotel, or lunch—Blake held my gaze. “You know, I think your mom would be proud of you,” he said, soft enough that none of the others looked our way.

My chest bloomed with warmth, both at what he’d said, and that he’d said it.

“Because we hired you?” I said, my lips twisting. I couldn’t stand not teasing him.

“Exactly,” he said. But his eyes kept that same genuine hold. And when his leg brushed up against mine when we turned back to the others, I didn’t move it away.

* * *

The end of Week Three was significant—it was our last week in the office before we shifted out into the field. It also marked the end of the first half of the review. But I tried not to think about that.

I was proud of the work we’d done so far. Lila had completed the financial review with Eli, and the department manager interviews. Blake meanwhile had pored over everything process related I’d shared with him, both executive and departmental.

Next week, Lila was going to meet Reese to go over the restaurant and food services, while Blake and I launched a physical tour of the property before I passed him off to Jude to shadow all the recreation facilities.

I was looking forward to the change in scenery, but I was also a wreck, knowing that next week—at least for the first couple of days—Blake and I would be fully alone together, away from the safety of everyone else in the office.

By the time the weekend came around, that heat I’d tamped down had come back full force, and I spent Sunday evening tossing and turning, my mind going everywhere

except sleep. Half of it was nerves, but the other half, surprising me, was a revival at my earlier anger: at Blake, irrationally, for being him and having this ridiculous life of his, and at myself, for caring.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

It was just feelings; just chemistry and proximity, and wanting what I couldn't have, I knew. But having spent the past three weeks resisting any hint of fantasy from my brain, on Sunday night, faced with the knowledge that the next day I'd be spending all day alone with him, everything was coming in hard and fast.

My thoughts were relentless—everything I came up with to distract myself just brought me back to Blake.

Baseball? No, Blake had played that as a kid.

Office supplies? What about that time Blake had made a Mr. T necklace out of paperclips while we were going over annual meeting minutes to see if I'd notice.

Gardening—that had to be safe. But there was that patch of flowers in the community garden across the street from Blake's mom's facility he'd told me about. He paid one of the community members to keep it going all year round because his mom could see it from her window and it made her smile.

It was hopeless.

I finally gave up, letting myself run wild with every thought I'd suppressed. Maybe if I got him out of my system that night, I could work with him with neutrality the next day.

Finally I got out of bed and got in the bathtub, hoping the warm water would lull me to sleepiness. But before I knew what I was doing, I was imagining Blake in there with me, his hard body at my back, his beautiful, broad hands roaming my body. In

the end, I'd stood up and pulled out the jet attachment on the shower, dialing it into a hard, forceful stream, and directing it between my legs.

I stood against the wall, breathing hard as water vibrated against my clit, picturing Blake in the shower with me, stroking that beautiful cock I hadn't dared picture while he watched me pleasure myself.

I came hard and almost violently, imagining him spurting his hot seed alongside me.

Apparently, that was what I'd needed, because after getting back into bed, my mind finally rested long enough to let me sleep.

13

CASSANDRA

I started Monday of week four with a run—on my own again, as Chelsea had once more texted to say she wasn't going to make it. Normally I didn't mind when she skipped our runs. But this time, I'd been worried.

Chelsea had been meeting her obligations at work still, though she'd been coming in later than usual some days. But I could no longer ignore the fact that it seemed like her constant socializing wasn't a phase. That she was prioritizing it over her own health, and if she wasn't careful, her work.

I'd taken her out for coffee in town last week, and asked her point blank what was going on.

"I'm fine," she'd said, defensively, but I saw the way she'd twisted her bracelet around and around on her wrist. Mom had given her that bracelet on her twelfth birthday, I remembered.

Chelsea had taken Mom's death harder than any of us, maybe other than Dad. And I realized as I watched her pick at the scone she'd ordered that maybe all the partying she was doing wasn't just a distraction or blowing off steam, but a grief response. I also realized I'd known that all along but had been turning the other way, hoping she would burn through it on her own.

"Have you thought about therapy, Chels?" I asked. "We have an extended health plan."

"I'm too busy."

"What, with going to the bar?"

She'd stiffened, looking at me pointedly. "Why aren't you in therapy?"

Next to us, two women laughed as they chatted. In the background, the clank and hiss of the espresso machine at the front amplified the time it was taking me to answer.

"I don't know," I'd said finally. I was being honest. Chelsea and I were rarely at odds, so I think her response had surprised both of us. My excuse, if she hadn't already used it, would also be too busy. But that wasn't good enough.

"Why don't we both look into it?" I said finally, reaching for her hand across the table. It was so thin. Guilt ran through me. I hadn't noticed how thin she'd gotten. "We can do it separately," I said. "No pressure, but maybe we can let each other know if we find any good providers? Then we can check back in a month?"

Chelsea nodded, her eyes welling with tears. "I just miss her," she said, her voice breaking. "And dad, too."

As I went over and wrapped my arms around my little sister, I couldn't help the fresh

spark of anger at Dad's absence. It was so selfish of him to disappear. Couldn't he see how much we needed him?

"Have you heard from him lately?" I asked, after sitting back down in my chair.

"Not for a couple of weeks," she said, frowning. "Should we be worried?"

"No," I'd said, waving my hand. She shouldn't be. But I was. It wasn't call-the-authorities level worry yet—he'd slipped off the grid before, once on a silent yoga retreat where he vanished for ten days and came back saying he hadn't said a word the whole time and how exhilarating that was. Another time when he went on a camel trek in Mongolia without telling us.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

I sighed. I wished Griff was around so I could ask him to find out where he was—Griffin seemed to have mysterious resources to figure stuff like this out. But I hadn't heard much from him either.

This morning, I vowed not to worry about my sister, trusting she had her reasons for partying, and heading off on my run, daring to take it down by the river again instead of on the trails around the resort as I'd been doing the past couple of weeks.

Blake and I were going to be outside today, checking out the outdoor amenities like the golf course and some of the outbuildings. The rain had let up over the last few days, but today the clouds hung low, heavy and gray once again and I knew it wouldn't last.

We'd be riding in one of the golf carts, which would be fine if it was drizzling, but no good at keeping us dry in a deluge.

I picked up speed, hoping to beat the weather, and after a while, allowing myself to fall into the rhythm of my feet and heart beating in tandem. Now this was good for clearing my mind. Perfect, actually, and the harder I ran, the clearer I felt. I was going so hard I almost didn't notice when I reached the corner where I'd slipped in last time. I slowed down, careful to stay on the slope side of the trail rather than the river.

The county had set some cones out here to mark the edge of the path, and I focused on those, working hard not to look over at the island coming into view offshore. If anything could throw me today, looking at the place Blake and I first met would be it.

I was still looking down at the trail and riverbank a few minutes later when my eyes

caught something shiny on the rocks further downstream. I slowed to a stop, squinting, and debated whether it was anything important or just a piece of trash. But something compelled me to check it out, so I climbed down to the bank. The river was lower than it had been when I'd fallen in, and there was now enough riverbank that I could easily walk along the water until I reached the brush I'd seen the glinting in.

I actually laughed out loud when I saw it. It was a fishing rod, and I'd bet money it was Blake's.

A warmth ran over me at the memory of his accidental innuendos on that island about his rod. It seemed like so long ago. I picked it up and disentangled the line from the bushes and made my way back home.

* * *

"Morning," Blake said, coming in with two coffees in hand an hour later. This had grown to be our routine over the past few weeks, though its days were numbered now given we wouldn't be in the office all day as before.

My heart clenched as I smiled. "Morning, Harrington." I was going to miss that moment he'd appear at my door, his smile wide, ready for another day together.

I'd asked Blake on our first week together if he bought coffee every morning for all his clients, and he'd shrugged. "Only the ones I like."

I'd looked away to hide the pink in my cheeks, but I was sure he'd seen it. I hadn't yet learned how to control the heat that arose around him, especially with moments like those—that verged on the edge of flirting. Did he talk to his other clients like that too, I'd wondered? A spike of something like jealousy had hit me, which scared me more than the other feelings. I had no right to be jealous of Blake and any imaginary

woman he might be flirting with.

Now as I reached for the coffee, his eyes meeting mine, I'd thought I was over that feeling. I'd spent the past few weeks doing just fine with this sweet coffee routine. But this morning I was thrown back to last night, when I came against the wall of my shower, picturing him doing the same.

Could he see it on my face?

A spasm of heat shot through me now. If this was how the day was going to go, I was in trouble.

"Thank you," I said. I cleared my throat. "I have something for you," A distraction—that's what we needed. "Before we head out."

"Oh yeah?" Blake's eyebrows went up. Behind him, the door to my office was open. That's how we'd been leaving it all week, whenever he was in here. Wide open, like an insurance policy.

I reached behind my desk and paused. "Drumroll please?"

He set his coffee down and patted the desk in a two-handed rhythm.

I pulled out his reel.

His jaw actually dropped, and I laughed.

"You found my rod!"

This time I laughed so hard I threw my head back.

“What’s so funny in there?” Eli called from across the hall.

I bit back on my laugh, my stomach squeezing. I needed to watch myself. Not just because Eli might see, but for me. Last night had been a mistake.

Blake turned. “Nothing, man, just glad to be getting outside today. Going a little wiggy with all these numbers. Don’t know how you do it all day.”

“Me neither, honestly,” Eli called. Luckily, with the attention back on himself, he didn’t press. I appreciated that Blake hadn’t told him about the fishing rod. It felt like a private joke between the two of us, and I didn’t want Eli anywhere near it.

“Where was it?” Blake asked, holding it up in his hands and looking agog at the battered aluminum.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

I described where I'd found it, and Blake actually scratched his head. I had to look away because the gesture was frankly adorable.

When he looked back up, he smiled. "Thank you. My mom gave me this, before..." He shrugged.

My arms itched to reach for him, but I picked up my coffee with both hands, holding it in front of me like a shield.

"Well, thank you, Cass. It means a lot."

It meant a lot that he'd tossed his beloved fishing rod aside to pull some strange woman out of the water, but I didn't want to bring that up again. I couldn't, not when I wasn't sure what kind of confusing feelings it might pull out of me.

He lowered the rod, leaning it against the wall, and our eyes met. That old heat burned, incinerating the restraint I'd put up over the past few weeks. It was like my body knew we were going to be alone together within an hour.

What did it expect was going to happen?

Something my mind wouldn't entertain. Couldn't entertain.

"Should we get out of here?" I asked, my voice coming out tight.

He nodded, looking down. "Sure. Sounds good."

* * *

We had to meet Jude to get the keys to one of the golf carts before heading out to the course, which was our first order of business. Blake was going to scout spots all over the property to photograph for the funding prospectus Lila was going to be preparing as a part of their final report. This would be a thoroughly researched and vetted application to submit to financiers who would help us fund the work we would do to fulfill the project's vision. The golf course was one of the key assets at the resort that we needed to highlight, which was why we were spending half the day there today.

Jude told us he'd be in the tennis dome, and we found him there a few minutes later, standing in the middle of a crowd of women, all looking adoringly up at him as he spoke.

"Of course," I laughed.

"Does this always happen with him?" Blake asked.

"Ever since he was a teenager. Actually, before then, though it got way worse once he got famous."

Jude had always attracted the attention of members of the opposite sex with his blonde hair, easy grin, and naturally flirtatious demeanor. Members of the same sex too, though he always said it was a shame he didn't swing that way. But it wasn't his looks that made him cocky. It was his prowess on the tennis court, or at least it used to be, until his injury.

He was the best, and he knew he was the best.

Mom told me once that his cockiness was a product of how much pressure he put on himself. That he used it to try to talk himself up, when really he was a scared little

boy half the time, terrified of failing.

I tried to remember that at times like these, when all I wanted to do was roll my eyes and tell the blushing women around my brother that he had a giant wart on his toe he couldn't get rid of for years as a teenager. That his gym clothes smelled like a rodent had died in them.

That he hadn't been with anyone seriously since he'd been injured—and had his son Jack—because he was too scared of disappointing anyone.

But if I sat here psychoanalyzing my brother, we'd be here all day.

Besides, I was on edge. Something had shifted when I'd given Blake his fishing rod; some fundamental thing in the energy between us. As we stood there next to each other, I felt as if there was a new heat radiating off him, and my body was responding. My palms were beginning to sweat, and I felt like I could feel my pulse throbbing.

I thought Blake had felt it too—or at least some version of it—from the way he'd looked at me after I'd laughed, and the way we'd walked most of the way here in mostly charged silence, our small talk coming off in awkward spurts.

But he seemed okay now. He gave a soft laugh as Jude answered questions from a wealthy-looking blonde woman who kept interrupting the other women to ask even more questions.

Blake leaned in to me. "Should we rescue him?"

Heat roared across my skin at his sudden proximity, but I responded as normally as I could. "I'd rather not, but seeing as we need him," I said, trying to be light and funny. But when I lifted my hand to try to get Jude's attention, my fingers brushed across the

length of his bicep.

We'd accidentally touched before. I'd even 'not untouched him' in the cafe that time, and I hadn't imploded. But this time it was like I'd struck a live wire. Or stroked a live wire.

I jerked my hand down. "Sorry." It had been a while since that had happened. I was good at making sure it never did. So this time, the shock of it washed through me hard. By the way Blake was looking at me, I could tell it was going through him, too. Or at least, something was.

"We could just stop, you know," Blake said quietly.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

Nerves jolted through me. “Stop what?”

“Walking on eggshells.”

I turned to face him. “I’m not walking on eggshells.”

“Then why did you just act like you were getting burned touching me?”

“I didn’t—” I took a breath, facing forward again.

Blake kept his eyes on me. “Why do you shut down after laughing at something I say, like you can’t be happy around me?”

So he’d noticed. He’d felt it too. But just as quickly as I felt the shock of his response, an angry heat ran through me. “Because,” I said, not daring to look at him. “We agreed we’d keep things professional.” I was unable to keep my feelings from my voice, though I kept the volume low.

All attention was focused on Jude. Still, we were very public.

“We are keeping things professional,” Blake said. “It’s not a crime to touch each other.”

Heat simmered in my chest. He was upset with me because I was being careful? What did he expect? I reached up and put a hand on my neck as if I could physically keep myself calm. “I can’t just ‘be natural’ around you,” I said, “laugh whenever I want to.”

“Why not?”

The heat exploded, and I turned on him. I tried to keep the words in, but they flew out of me in a rapid-fire whisper-yell. “Because if I let myself be the way I want to around you, it would be too easy for us to slip into something that would be devastating for both of us. Don’t you remember how panicked you were when you thought we—”

The woman in front of us had turned and was eyeing us both. I shot her a look; she startled and faced forward again.

I pulled him back a few feet and lowered my voice to a softer whisper. “When you thought we’d slept together? You were horrified. So I don’t know why you’re being so cavalier about this. Maybe it seems like fun now, but it wouldn’t be. Not if anyone found out. Both our businesses would collapse, Blake, and Lila—”

“Okay,” he said. “You’re right.”

But he wouldn’t look away. When I dared a quick look at him, he didn’t look sorry, either. He looked like he was barely containing his own anger. A hot, tense beat passed.

“I wasn’t horrified about the idea of sleeping with you, Cassandra,” he said.

I said nothing, just looked forward at the crowd. I was mortified to feel my eyes burning with hot tears, the crowd blurring.

I blinked rapidly, willing them to disappear.

Then, of all things, Blake’s hand brushed against mine once more.

I looked at him, incredulous. No one would see what he was doing. Only I could feel the touch of his finger against the back of my hand. My stomach jolted with as much adrenaline as if he'd leaned forward to kiss me.

Because that's what you really want him to do, isn't it?

His eyes stayed on mine, their caramel color seeming to darken as he stroked the back of my hand with his knuckle. Somehow, the touch, innocent as it was, was deeply intimate. Erotic, even. Liquid heat poured into my lower abdomen. It wasn't that moment between us when I'd surprised him with his lost fishing rod that changed everything, I realized. That was the catalyst maybe, the spark. But this—this was the fuel. A test. A dare, to pull away.

A challenge.

Move it away.

But I didn't. My eyelids fluttered as he stroked at the side of my palm, the sensitive nerve endings there snapping and fizzing.

I imagined his finger stroking other parts of my skin. Warmer, wetter parts.

My center throbbed with heat and I swallowed, my mouth, in contrast, bone dry.

But then applause rang out—thunderous, across the whole group, and I slipped my hand away, smoothing down my blazer.

Jude spotted us then, waving. "Sorry ladies, duty calls. It was a dream talking to you."

Page 61

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

Blake took a step away from me, which felt like something tearing off of me.

Several of the women tittered and for the briefest, unhinged moment, I thought they were tittering at us. But of course it was only Jude, smiling and shaking hands.

“You guys okay?” Jude asked when he reached us, genuine concern on his face.

“Fine,” I said, plastering on a smile. I hoped I hadn’t answered too quickly or too loud. “Big day ahead of us.”

Jude studied me a moment longer, then lifted a chin at Blake in greeting. “Hey man.”

Blake smiled. “Hi,” he said, his face a mask.

Thankfully, after a moment, a grin spread across my brother’s face. “Alright, you need keys to one of our carts, right?”

“Please,” I said, letting out a breath. I didn’t look Blake’s way, but I felt his heat radiating; my body responding to it with fire. I knew the only thing that would help would be to stay far away from Blake. But it was too late for that now.

Jude kept grinning, like a happy puppy dog, oblivious. “I didn’t bring the keys,” he said. “Thought I’d walk with you guys down to the club.”

My stomach churned, but it was good. I needed time to get my head on straight.

One last attempt to keep whatever was happening from happening.

I glanced over at Blake, but he was already turned for the door, his hands carefully shoved into the pockets of his slacks.

14

BLAKE

In only a moment, everything had changed.

No, that was a lie. When I met Cassandra, everything changed. But at that moment? That precious, perfect moment where I'd taken her hand, and she didn't let go? That was the culmination of all of that. An ache ran through my veins, lighting me up like fire. I concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other.

This was not good. I could stop this still, I knew.

But I knew she wanted me too. I saw her shiver when I'd stroked her palm.

I knew this was bad, what I was doing. I was playing with fire, a fire that could easily destroy every part of our lives. But I didn't care about anything else. I didn't care about my life; I didn't even care about our business, or my business partner.

I only cared about Cassandra.

That was the worst part. That was selfish of me. I wasn't thinking straight. But she'd consumed me.

These past weeks with Cassandra, I'd felt like I'd been allowed a glimpse into what other people got to have. What it was like to be truly alive.

And it had scared the shit out of me. Being around Cass was exhilarating and

terrifying. I woke up with her on my mind, and nothing felt right until I got to her office and she'd look up at me with that smile.

That fucking smile; every time I saw it, something tore up inside of me.

Lila and Brynn had been looking at me like my head wasn't on straight. After hearing me joke around with a potential client, telling them Harrington was 'pretty good', they'd both asked me if I'd been drinking. Or had lost my mind.

The truth was, I hadn't touched alcohol since that night at the staff dinner. I would again, I was sure. For now though, I wanted to be present for this review.

For Cassandra.

But in the past week leading up to the end of our time in the office, the shadow had come back. I knew our time was dwindling, that soon we'd be on the other side of this review and everything—even Cassandra—would be a memory.

A painful, beautiful, heart-wrenching memory.

And even memories could be lost. I knew that better than anyone.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

This weekend I'd nearly destroyed my body at the gym I'd been going to in downtown Quince Valley. I'd lifted and pressed until my muscles were a wobbly, shredded mess. But nothing could take the feeling away—a sensation of loss so strong it was like a knife in my chest.

And I hadn't even lost her yet.

So this morning, when Cassandra had surprised me with my fishing rod, my heart had gotten lodged in my throat. Her smile was so wide that for a moment I forgot to take a goddamned breath. It was that smile I'd seen on the island; the candid one in the photo. I hadn't seen that smile since we'd been working together. Sure, she'd smiled, but they'd been furtive, controlled smiles. Pinched off so as not to let herself get happy.

She couldn't let anyone see her happy around me.

And that had finally made me snap.

It was my fault, I knew. I'd wondered for the thousandth time how things would have been if it weren't for my fucked-up situation. Maybe she wouldn't have wanted to be with me, but at least she wouldn't be tempering her feelings. Hiding herself.

Or worse, blaming herself. When she'd said that thing about me being horrified at the thought of spending the night with her—when I'd seen the ways her eyes went wet, I hadn't thought. I'd been filled with a flash of rage at the fact that our lives and situation had made her come to that messed-up and completely incorrect conclusion.

I couldn't abide by that. I was sick of the secrets, sick of all of it. And I needed to show her.

The last thing I wanted to do now was go with Jude on this walk down to the clubhouse. What I wanted to do was take Cassandra's hand again; but this time, not leave it at a furtive touch. I wanted to run away with her back to that secret room she'd brought me to that night. I wanted to peel the clothes from her body and spend all day showing her just how much I desired her. Showing her with my hands, my mouth, my tongue. My cock stiffened even now at the thought of her naked. Of all the things I wanted to do to her. God help me if anyone noticed, because walking through the grounds of the resort with a boner was not a good look. I glanced at her now. She looked gorgeous, with that purposeful stride and pushed-back shoulders. As she tucked a strand of her waves behind her ear, I nearly groaned in pain. I wanted to fuck her, to show her she was mine, all mine. Luckily, Jude was oblivious to my torture, and his words—along with his happy-go-lucky attitude—provided at least a little distraction. So did the cool air when we stepped outside. The sky was thick and dark and looked like it might burst at any second.

Just like me.

Cassandra's phone buzzed as we reached the road, and she didn't even glance at the screen before answering.

She needed a distraction as well as I did.

As she spoke to the person on the other end of the line, I had the oddest stroke of possessive jealousy. I wanted to be the one speaking to her. I put Jude between us because I knew if I could see her, I wouldn't be able to pay him any attention. My mind, and every cell in my body, hummed a song strictly to the tune of Cassandra.

"So," I said to Jude, needing to block it out—I was freaking myself out. "You have a

son, right?”

“Yeah,” Jude said. “Jack.”

Jude blessedly filled the rest of the short walk to the clubhouse by chatting about his three-year-old. Apparently, Jack had just figured out how to ride a glider bike and just this weekend had put his tooth through his lip careening down the driveway.

“Shit, is he okay?”

“Oh yeah,” Jude waved his hand. “That kid is bouncy.”

Jude seemed like the least likely of all the Kelly siblings to have kids, and yet he was the only one who did. I didn’t know the story, and it wasn’t exactly appropriate for me to ask, given it had nothing to do with my work. But I knew the mom wasn’t in the picture.

“Check it out.” Jude pulled up a photo on his phone of an adorable boy with Gallic features—dark hair and straight-across brows over big brown eyes and a sharp nose. A good-looking kid, but so different from his all-American blond father with his easy smile.

“See?” Jude said. “Only two stitches.”

“Jude!” Cassandra exclaimed, hand on her mouthpiece, her eyes on the image. “Why didn’t you say anything? Is he okay?”

“He’s good,” Jude said.

Cassandra shot her brother a look, then her eyes landed on me. A new streak of need shot through me, and I clenched my hands in my pocket. She turned away fast,

returning to her call.

Jude, meanwhile, shoved his phone back in his pocket. “This is why I don’t tell my sisters shit.”

He smiled as he said it, but there was an undercurrent of defensiveness in his words. I recalled him showing up for our first meeting looking kind of hungover; and how his siblings had made some kind of comment about him being irresponsible.

“My brothers and I broke or bashed up pretty much every part of our damn bodies growing up,” I said, hoping to alleviate what I was pretty sure was guilt on Jude’s part.

“So did we,” Jude said. “Cass has just blocked that from her memory.”

Despite the admonition and eye rolling, the two siblings did seem to get along well enough. I’d learned in my time here that Jude was the second youngest in the family, and I guessed he was less like a peer to Cassandra than a charge. My youngest brother Mitch had been the same in my family—he’d been an accident on my parents’ part—a happy one for Mom, not so much for Dad. Mostly when I looked back on our childhood, I remember him being young enough I had to babysit him rather than play with him.

“Where are your brothers now?” Jude asked, interrupting my thoughts. Cassandra, listening on her phone and saying the odd word, looked up, her eyes on me.

No getting personal.

Did wanting to get her naked count as personal? How about that twist in my heart when she laughed?

“They’re both back home in Seattle,” I said. Close to my mom. I was the one who sent money home instead of visiting. Guilt punched at me, but I shoved that away—nothing I could do about it now. “My brother Conrad has a son—Arthur. He’s ten, but I remember him having a few trips to the emergency room at Jack’s age, too.”

Jude gave Cassandra a look that said, see?

But she was still on the phone. I realized then she’d probably gladly taken the call so she wouldn’t have to talk to us. My own phone was in my pocket on silent—I’d gotten into the habit of turning off the ringer when I was around Cassandra. I’d said it was so I could put all my attention on the review, but I couldn’t help thinking about that calendar deadline looming ever closer. The one where I left the Rolling Hills, and Cassandra, and went back to my slick, back-to-back appointments, all-work-no-play life in New York.

Cassandra ended her call and, just like that, all thoughts of anything else vaporized.

“Welcome to my alternate lair,” Jude said, waving at a staff member coming up the path, and again at one of the caddies. A few of the mostly older crowd of golfers milled around the front entrance of the garage, but they appeared to be of the wrong generation to recognize him.

“It must be exhausting for everyone to know who you are all the time?” I said. I already knew what it was like to walk into a conference lunch in Manhattan and be surrounded by people who knew me in the industry. It felt gratifying, sort of, but also overwhelming when I wasn’t in the mood for eyes on me. Which was more and more often these days.

“It’s fine,” Jude shrugged. “At least, I’m used to it.”

“You love it,” Cassandra said.

Jude shrugged, but the corner of his mouth went up. “Most of the time.”

I still wasn’t sure if he was putting on a show or not. Cassandra’s brother was more complex than I’d first guessed.

“Alright,” Jude said then, unlocking the door to the garage. “I’d like to introduce you to my beloved girls.”

He switched on the fluorescent lights overhead, revealing a large concrete space filled with a fleet of a half-dozen carts. There were empty stalls for at least as many more. It was cool down here and smelled vaguely of gasoline and grass-clippings, thanks to the other fleet of drivable lawnmowers on the far wall.

“Now, because you’re family, I’m going to recommend you take my favorite cart, Skeleton Sally.”

“You’re not serious,” Cassandra said.

“Of course I am! Nothing but the best for family.”

“I meant the name!” Cassandra said. “S-Kelly-ton.”

“There’s also Five-hole Harriet—which I know sounds kind of rude,”

I coughed out a laugh as I walked along the line of carts. I stopped at the one at the end of the row. Unlike the others, which were glossy and fresh, this one was scuffed-up; dented on one side; and even had a screw sticking out, sideways and bent.

“Ah. Sweet Chitty-Chitty,” Jude said. “A good ol’ gal. She’s got a few miles on her. Reliable though, and full of flavor. Will she veer right when you steer left? Maybe. Does her horn sound like a dying duck? Most definitely. But will she show you a good time? I guaran-fucking-tee it,”

Even Cassandra laughed then. She came around to the side of the car where I stood. She was so close now. So fucking close.

“Let’s take it,” I said. I just wanted to get the hell out of here. I needed to be alone with Cass.

“You’ll be the first one to drive this puppy in a while though. She doesn’t get much use these days.”

“Perfect,” I said.

Jude grinned and tossed me the keys.

“Your man’s got taste,” he said to his sister, not registering that what he said might be misconstrued.

Your man.

She shifted closer to me—close enough that we were standing side-by-side, almost, but not quite touching.

My skin was on fire. I reached out, blood roaring in my ears, and placed my hand on the small of Cassandra's back.

Page 64

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

You're mine.

"Alright kids, I'm going to go open the garage door for you from outside so I can clear the driveway. Hang tight."

Jude whistled as he crossed the garage.

"See you," Cassandra said, while I slipped my hand under her blazer, tugging up the soft silk of her blouse.

Reaching her skin and hearing her swallow a gasp.

Jude gave a wave and a little smile as he opened the door.

"Bye," I nodded as he passed through, drawing my fingers in circles along Cassandra's bare skin.

The door felt like it took an eternity to close.

Then it clicked home, and I was on her, pulling Cassandra Kelly toward me with the hand already on her back, my other gripping her jaw as I leaned down and slammed my mouth to hers. Our lips were hungry, tongues searching. The moaning, gasping sounds she made turned me into some kind of beast, walking her back until she was pressed up against the wall.

"Fuck, Cassandra," I said. My hand slid down her throat, tipping her jaw up as I lunged for her neck, knowing we had only seconds before the garage door rolled

open.

“We said we weren’t doing this,” she whispered as I drew my mouth down her neck, kissing the hot flesh there with raw, unbridled need, my dick already throbbing and fat.

“Fuck what we said,” I growled in her ear, sucking on her earlobe. “Fuck it all.”

15

CASSANDRA

We jumped apart as the door rattled open. I smoothed out my hair, panicky. But we were in shadow, in the back corner of the garage, and Jude was chatting with someone right outside the door.

“You should drive,” Blake said, his voice tight and low. He slipped me the keys, interlacing his fingers between mine for a moment as he transferred them into my palm. “You know where you’re going.” His eyes met mine and I swear I felt heat spurt between my legs.

I shook as I started up the car, and Blake lay his hand on my thigh, pulling it away as I backed up and angled us out of the garage.

“Have fun!” Jude called after us.

I wove us down the path with agonizing slowness thanks to the throngs of golfers, mostly senior citizens.

“Do you know any of these people?” Blake asked.

I did a scan of their faces but saw only tourists. “No.”

“Good,” he said, bringing his hand back to my thigh, gripping my flesh. I’d worn a skirt today, a knee-length linen that crumpled under Blake’s fist.

A ripple of heat ran through me. A warning, too, in my brain. You can’t come back from this.

We went over a bump and his hand slid across my thigh, the scrape of his palm across my bare leg sending lightning to my center, as if fate was deciding for me.

With his free hand, Blake waved at the last couple on the path.

I sped up, going as fast as the cart could go. Rain pinged against the plexiglass windshield. “What are we doing, Blake?” I whispered.

Blake slid his hand further up, hiking my skirt up around my upper thighs. “We’re being alone together. Doing whatever the fuck we want.”

“You know what I mean,” I said, and realized I was on the verge of tears. Hot, angry, desperate tears. I was taking one last grasp at the sane, rational course of action.

“Do you want me to stop?” Blake asked, but his hand slid up and cupped my mound over the fabric of my underwear. I let out a sound at the pure, abject pleasure I felt as he pressed his fingers against me.

He didn’t move his hand, just held it there as if claiming the spot. I remembered the way he held his cock that night in the hotel room, as if in no rush.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

“Do you, Cassandra?”

I grew wet, and I knew Blake could feel it because he gave a sharp intake of air. “I don’t think you do.” He drew his fingers up so they barely touched my cloth-covered flesh.

Still, he didn’t make any more movement, just held his hand there in exquisite torture. I pinched my lips between my teeth. Maybe if I didn’t say anything he’d stop, the decision made for me.

But my hips rocked against him without me thinking, pushing me into his hand. The pleasure from just that movement sent a shudder through me.

“It feels like you want me to keep touching you.”

My clit ached, though he wasn’t even properly touching it.

“Tell me to stop,” Blake said.

I should have said it. I should have. But the way he was touching me, all I could think was more.

“Don’t stop,” I breathed.

In the distance, on a hill, a quad of golfers stood under large black umbrellas. They were far enough away I hoped they couldn’t see what Blake was doing to me. What he very much shouldn’t be doing to me, but what I wanted so desperately I was

having trouble concentrating on keeping the wheel straight. It would have been dangerous if we'd been at any speed.

"Fucking touch me, Blake," I said, gritting my teeth.

Blake looked at me, his jaw clenching, his mouth curling up in a smile. Then he slipped a finger beneath the fabric, sliding it inside of me. I gasped.

He inserted a second finger next to the first and tugged at the mound of sensitive nerve-endings inside. "Oh God." I breathed, gripping the wheel.

"Fuck," he said. "You're so fucking wet, Cassandra. So fucking perfect."

He leaned back against the seat, closing his eyes. He lifted one arm up and gripped the bar behind him with his right hand, his elbow up, while he worked his fingers inside of me, until I was riding his hand, moaning, whimpering, and gripping the steering wheel, about to go off onto the grass.

I saw the bulge in his pants as he worked me, and that was what nearly took me out.

"Stop," I squeaked, then realized he couldn't hear me. "Stop!" I exclaimed. "I'm going to come if you don't stop!"

Blake slipped his hand out and I breathed hard. He tipped his head back against the bar, his other hand staying where it was. He grinned.

"I didn't know I could come like that," I said. "I mean, I still don't know, but Jesus, Blake."

"I'm happy to experiment."

I pinched my lips, hating how I wanted his hand back. How I wanted him to try everything on me. How I wanted to try everything myself. Blake was testing everything about me.

The path forked up ahead. This was where I could either keep left, and go to where we were supposed to, or right, on the service road—an uncharted place where no one was supposed to go. That path led into the trees.

Blake watched me but said nothing. He didn't touch me, didn't try persuading me even though it was clear one way was the safe way and the other was not.

I gripped the steering wheel, aiming left. Be practical, Cassandra. He's not here to stay.

But that was the very reason that at the last minute, I jerked the wheel to the right. Blake's hand slid back onto my thigh, his grip tight now, squeezing my flesh. Desire shot through me. He wasn't here to stay. So I should enjoy him while I could.

A moment later, a low, rough-hewn building emerged from the trees. It was a storage shed, only about a hundred feet square. Inside I knew there were tools, buckets, fertilizer. It wasn't exactly comfortable, but it was private. That was all I needed. I pulled to a stop outside and powered off the cart. I got up and strode to the shed fast, thinking I might change my mind.

I didn't want to change my mind.

Jude used the same universal code for all the buildings, even though I'd told him to change it. Now as the door lock whirred open, I thanked God he didn't listen.

Blake appeared at the side of the shed, rain darkening his suit jacket in tiny spots.

“If anyone sees us,” I whispered, “You know it’s more than just two people sneaking off for fun. I’m the CEO, I—”

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

“There’s no one here,” Blake said. “Get inside.”

My stomach swooped at his sudden hardness. He was right, there was no one around. There was no one to see him cross over to where I stood and grip my face in both his hands. No one to see my arms wrapping around his neck like they belonged there. No one to see Blake’s mouth hungry on mine; greedy, nipping at me like he had that night he didn’t remember.

He didn’t remember.

I tensed, bracing my hands on his chest.

“Blake,” I said. “Stop.”

He froze.

I took a step back, needing space so I could get the words out. “I have to tell you something.”

Even if this was a onetime thing, I couldn’t go into it with anything less than total honesty. If everything else was a lie, I needed to at least keep what we had true.

He looked alarmed. “What is it?”

Heart pounding, I blurted it out. “We kissed, that night.”

He froze. “What?”

“That night, when you were drunk. We kissed. And you...”

“You told me we didn’t sleep together.”

“We didn’t!” I exclaimed. “I didn’t... I stopped anything from happening.”

“When?” he asked. I still couldn’t tell if he was upset or just shocked.

“What do you mean, when?”

“When did you stop it?”

“After we kissed. Well, after you... showed me.”

My eyes went down to the still-swollen bulge between his legs.

His eyes went wide. Then he turned around. “Jesus.” He strode to the wall opposite the door, the only one unadorned with equipment.

“You’re mad,” I said, even as a streak of heat went through me. “I’m sorry I didn’t say anything. It just didn’t make sense to tell you at the time,” I sounded defensive, I knew. Like I was making excuses. “Things were awkward enough.”

He turned around to face me. “Cassandra, if I’d known—”

“You held my hand, Blake. That night. You held my hand when we walked to the room. You told me I was pretty, you...”

I trailed off. What was I supposed to say? He’d stroked my ego? That I was that insecure? It would sound like I was blaming him, and I wasn’t I truly wasn’t. It was on me.

It was dim in here, the only light coming in from the murky, overcast day outside. He took a step toward me, his face laced with anger.

But that only revived my anger. It might not be his fault, but I did stop him. And yes, he had been drunk, but he'd been the one instigating. "I stopped before anything happened—"

"No," he said.

No?

"This is not on you. This is my fault for getting drunk that night. I was being nihilistic. I put that pressure on you by saying that... I"—he grasped my hand—"You're beautiful, Cassandra, but I'd want you even if you weren't, okay? Yes, I was attracted to the way you looked that first morning, and our... isolated situation. But I liked the way you pushed back. I liked watching you that first day in the boardroom, not ready to take my shit. I like how you've never let me get away with being your savior. And now that we've spent time together? You're the highlight of every fucking day, Cass, I swear to God. I don't want you to think you're incredible because I tell you that you are. I want you to know that because it's true."

I swallowed, having a hard time absorbing everything he'd said. This man... this incredible man. I realized right at that moment that I'd broken my vow to myself. My heart was wide open.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

And then he kissed me. It was long and soft and beautiful.

When he pulled away, I could tell he was still grappling with anger, at himself, at me for being his client, at his whole situation. Something twitched in me, some understanding. Blake needed to get mad. Maybe not at me, but at everything. His whole life. He needed to get pissed.

“Stay mad,” I said, my voice steadier now.

“What?”

“I said stay mad. I am. I’m mad you’ve made it so we have to hide. I’m mad you think...”

That you think I’m not worth enough to turn your life upside down for.

Admitting that was a gut punch. But it pissed me off, too.

“I’m mad you’re not coming after me right now.”

That was the truth; a condensed version of it.

Blake nearly grimaced then, his voice coming out in a low growl. The anger was easy for him to access. It was right there, raw and hard. On the other side of that was the pain he was avoiding; I knew because that was true of me.

But this was what he needed.

While I was stoking his anger, I funneled all of my own into it. “You’re too chickenshit to even fuck me.”

That did it. A shadow passed over him, as heavy and dark and loaded as his desire, which I could see in his eyes, and pressing at his zipper.

“You want me to fuck you?” Blake asked. He snaked his hands in my hair, gripping it and tipping my head back. “You want me to be pissed off when I fuck you, Cassandra? Is that it?”

“Yes,” I said, my voice hard, meeting his challenge.

It was what I wanted. I wanted him to own me, to take it all from me and give it all back. To tear it up until there was nothing left.

“Show me, Blake.”

His hand slipped to my jaw then, his wrist on my throat. “Fine,” he said. “I’m going to make you fucking mine.” He plunged his tongue into my mouth then, his hand still holding my jaw in place like he’d done in the garage. He pressed me up against the wall.

I clawed at his chest, ripping his jacket off his shoulders. My whole body cried with need for only one thing.

Blake Harrington.

Blake pulled away from me, his chest heaving.

Blake prowled in front of me like an animal while I stood bereft, wanton with need. He stripped off his suit jacket and laid it on the ground. Then he grasped my jaw

again. “Strip for me. I want to see you. I want your tits out and your wet pussy waiting for me.”

Heat zinged through me, sharp and hard.

The chance of us being discovered was low, but it wasn’t impossible. But I did what he said, because it turned me on. This was what I needed—to transfer the power to him, just in here, just right now.

I swallowed, slipping off my blazer, then unbuttoning my blouse. “Is this what you want?” I dropped my shirt to the ground.

“Yes,” he grunted. Then he unbuckled his pants, and in one quick move, pulled his swollen cock out of his shorts.

“Oh God,” I moaned. He was hard. Gorgeous. Dripping.

“You want this, don’t you?”

I nodded.

“Not until it’s all off,” he said, stepping out of his own pants. He gave his cock a long, slow stroke again. I loved this about him. His unhurried confidence. His languorous attention both to me and to his dick.

I unsnapped my bra, slipping it off.

Blake groaned and squeezed his shaft again, giving it another slow stroke as I shook my breasts free, knowing what I was doing to him. His tongue darted from his mouth and I felt my knees shake, thinking about where he could put it.

“What are you going to do to me?” I asked.

But he just shook his head. “I told you to take it off.”

My wetness slicked my legs as I removed my underwear, dropping them to the ground. I stepped out of my kitten heels and then I was naked before him, fully, completely. For a moment, self-consciousness struck me, and I folded my arms across my chest.

But Blake shook his head. “No hiding, Cassandra.” His voice had a softness to it when he said that. This was him talking.

Hiding. It’s what I’d been doing for years. Putting on a persona of a person in charge but not showing the real me. Shrinking, playing it small and safe.

I hesitated, then lowered my arms to my sides and lifted my chest up, shoulders back.

“You’re perfect,” he said. Then he came over to me, stopping right in front of me. He still held his cock in his hand, stroking it slowly, like he was drawing out the feeling.

“You can still tell me to stop,” he whispered in my ear. His voice was low, and when

he pulled back, he met my eyes. He wanted me to feel safe.

That softness opened up inside of me, the place I'd kept tightly guarded, almost behind bars. I didn't want to stop. I wanted to show him everything.

"No," I said.

"Okay." He pulled off his shirt. "I'm going to say some things, Cassandra, just for right now. I'm going to talk dirty to you—is that okay?" He drew a hand along my pussy, just one soft stroke up the nub of my clit.

I moaned, shivering.

"Is it?"

"Yes, Blake."

He took his hand away and backed up. I watched him, licking his lips as his cock swayed before me. "You want this, don't you, Cassandra?"

I nodded.

"You wanted it that night, didn't you? When I showed it to you?"

"Yes." I was whimpering now. I brought a hand to my clit.

"No," he said. "That's mine."

I moaned, sliding my hands flat against the wall, tipping my head back, and closing my eyes. Desperate, I reached for my tits, massaging them, knowing he was watching. Relinquishing control like this—while still knowing I had some slice of

power over him with how much he wanted me—all of it was so hot.

“You’re a dirty girl, aren’t you, Cassandra? My little slut?”

I quivered, my pussy throbbing, needing him. I tugged on my tits. “Yes.”

“Tell me you want me.”

“I want you, Blake,” I breathed. “So bad.”

He took a step back, my eyes on his shaft.

“Get on your knees, Cassandra.”

Hot need ripped through me. I shuddered with the pleasure of taking the order, lowering myself down onto the hard wood-planked floor.

He walked forward and held the tip of his cock just in front of my lips. “You want it?”

I nodded. “Take it.”

I didn’t wait. I grasped his shaft with two hands, first hungrily licking up the salt of his pre-cum like I’d wanted to before, licking my lips, and then plunging his head into my mouth.

Blake groaned.

Still holding him in my mouth, I flicked my tongue over his tip before sliding my lips farther down. He let out a strained sound as I took all of him in. I shifted my hands so one grasped his balls and the other gripped his ass, pulling him toward me. The only way I could take all of him was to let him hit the back of my throat. When he did, I gagged, but the feeling wasn’t a bad one. It was so hot I felt myself grow even wetter down low.

He slid out and then thrust into me again, his hands gripping my head. “Yes,” he said. “Take it, Cassandra. Take that big hard cock.” He braced his hands on either side of the wall and thrust his hips toward my face over and over until I was pressed up against the wall too, moaning. The sound was muffled by his dick in my mouth, which only made me moan harder. Finally he slowed, pulling himself out, cursing.

“No,” I said, hard, grasping his hips and licking my lips.

“What do you mean, no?”

“I want more.”

“Oh God, Cass,” he said, forgetting himself for a moment. “You have no idea...”

“I. Want. More.” I demanded.

I’d never wanted to keep doing this before. But with Blake, I felt power in it. I felt like his pleasure was mine to control.

He backed up, keeping himself out of reach of my mouth. I slid my fingers across my swollen lips.

Blake made a strangled sound of desire and brought his thumb to my lips, too. “No,” he said, his voice rough. “I need to fuck you.”

He wouldn’t let me have it. He pointed to his jacket, open on the ground. “Get on your back.” His gorgeous torso rippled, every muscle tense.

I massaged my tits once more, knowing I was making him even harder.

“I said get fucking down, Cassandra.”

This time I moved, getting onto my back. Blake stood over me, looking hungrily at my pussy. He got down on his knees, hooking my legs over his shoulders. Then he lowered his face over me, hovering for a moment as he spread me apart. When he dove down and flicked a tongue over my clit, a river of pleasure tore through my whole body. I let out a high, uncontrolled gasp.

He sucked on my clit then, tugging it between his lips as I bucked under him.

But I thought of his cock, too; how I hadn’t finished. How I’d been so turned on making him need me.

“I want to do both,” I said, suddenly gasping because he was still tonguing my clit.

He paused, lifting his head.

“I want you in my mouth when I come,” I said.

Blake sat up, closing his eyes for a moment. I could tell if I asked him, he’d do whatever I wanted. He’d be whatever kind of lover I wanted him to be.

For a moment, anger gripped me again.

Goddamn him for being perfect. So perfect and so not mine.

But I shoved that aside as Blake came toward me. He knelt over my chest now, his cock in his hand. I vaguely noticed the pummeling of rain on the roof, louder than before, like it was keeping up with the intensity of what we were doing.

Then every other thought left me as Blake stroked himself over me, once again showing me the dominance I wanted.

“What if I say no? What if I just come on you right now and don’t give you any of this?”

“I’d be pissed,” I said. “But I’d rub your cum on me and make you hard again. Then I’d give you this.” I parted my knees, sliding my hands down my thighs and showing him where his tongue just was.

“Fuck me,” he groaned. He was slipping, forgetting what I told him.

“Let me,” I said.

Blake growled, lunging forward and kissing me hard, this time with little mercy. When he bit down on my lip, a sharp twinge of delicious pain shot through me.

“You’re not telling me what to do,” he said. “Not this time. I’m going to eat your pussy and fuck your face because I want to, got it?” He grabbed my wrist, stopping me from reaching for him. “Do you fucking understand, Cassandra?”

I nodded as the thrill of this whole moment ran through me.

A moment later, Blake was hovering over me, dipping his cock in my mouth. But this time, when I took it, his mouth landed on my clit at the same time. Pleasure rippled through me as I took him deep in my mouth. He worked his tongue over me expertly, making me pulse. My legs tensed, my nostrils flaring for air—he was fucking me hard with his cock, his balls dancing across my face with each thrust.

It was the hottest thing I’d ever experienced.

He dipped his fingers into me as he sucked on my clit and tugged inside like he had in the cart.

That was it—it was over for me. I exploded onto him, a tidal wave of pleasure rocking my whole body. I thrust my pelvis at him, feeling myself squirt; soaking his face.

“Oh god,” he said. “Fuck!”

He came then too, emptying himself in my throat like I'd wanted. Waves of ecstasy washed through me as I swallowed him down. He was still tensed, still spasming, making a sound that almost sounded like pain. I lay there, shuddering, his cock still in my mouth.

No, that was the hottest thing I ever experienced.

Finally, he slipped himself out of me and turned around, lying down beside me, panting. He pulled me into his arms and held me so tight I had to look up into his eyes to make sure he was okay.

"Blake?"

He looked shell-shocked. Bewildered. Like he'd died and woken up again.

"That was the best sex I've ever had in my life," he said. "Hands down. And I didn't even get to fuck you."

I smiled, rising up on my elbows and looking down at him. "Maybe we can do it again, somewhere more comfortable. If I feel like it."

His eyes flickered, but he smiled and pulled me tight against him, kissing the top of my head.

"Yes," he said. "I think I can do that. If you feel like it."

16

BLAKE

After the best sex of my goddamned life—transcendent, I would call it, if I had to

choose a word—we got dressed and headed back to the golf cart.

But outside the shed, I stopped Cassandra. “Wait.”

She was locking up and paused to turn around. For a moment, I forgot what I was going to say. I just saw her face before me, her perfect pink lips that had spent so much time on me, her eyes going almost hazy as she looked back. Her rumpled clothes. Her wild, gorgeous hair.

I bent down and kissed Cassandra Kelly, softly. Tenderly. As if it was our last time.

I didn’t want it to be the last time. So I slid my hands up under her skirt. “I want these,” I said, hooking my thumbs onto the waistband of her panties.

“Hey, we have work to do!” She laughed.

But I saw the way her pupils dilated as I kept my eyes on hers.

“We’ll get to it. I think it’ll go better if I know you’re walking around commando.”

She flushed. “Fine. But you drive this time. I want your hands occupied.”

Cassandra handed me the keys, then stepped out of the thin undergarment and handed that to me, too. I pocketed both, then kissed her once more.

Page 71

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

Leaving Cassandra Kelly was going to be hell. Because that's what I was going to be doing in only a couple of weeks.

Remembering that landed on me like a brick.

But Cassandra didn't seem to notice. She strode to the cart, looking gorgeous and happy. "This road goes all the way to the east side of the property," she said.

It was where we were supposed to have been going.

I hadn't planned on doing anything else—she was right, we had work to do. But sitting next to Cassandra, knowing she was exposed under the stretch of her skirt, was too much. A breeze flipped her skirt back just an inch, and my cock got hard again almost immediately.

She saw it and lazily slipped her hand over my pants.

I pulled the cart over. "Nope."

"What?" she asked, innocently.

"We're not finished." I killed the motor, unbuckling my pants once more and sliding them down just enough to take my cock out. Then I pulled Cassandra onto my lap. I gripped her thighs while she straddled me.

She placed her hands on my shoulders. "I'm sorry," she said innocently. "Did you want this?" She pulled her skirt up, revealing her glistening pussy.

“Good God, Cassandra.” I slid my hands up to her bare hips, guiding her where I wanted, then slid her down onto my waiting shaft. The feeling of her engulfing me—squeezing me with her hot, wet pussy—was nothing short of goddamned ecstasy. I groaned, my fingers tightening on her hips, working her on me. Up, down, harder, faster. Her ass clapped against my thighs.

“Cass,” I said as I slid my thumb onto her swollen clit. “I’ve never felt like this. I can’t take it.”

I don’t know how long it was—a few seconds or minutes. It just felt so fucking good.

But then Cassandra cried out, clenching on my cock, and I felt the brink coming fast. I bounced her on me, thrusting hard even though I knew this would only take me right there.

“Cass,” I grunted, barely getting the words out. “I can’t—I have to pull out.”

“It’s okay,” she said, panting. She was still gasping for air. “It’s safe.”

That was all it took.

I shuddered with a sharper, more intense release than before, my whole body succumbing; my mind too. I gripped her, holding her hard against me, needing to anchor myself to her until the waves ran out.

Finally, I relaxed. I leaned my forehead on her chest, letting out a long breath, whispering, “You’re everything, Cass. Fucking everything.”

Then I looked up into her eyes.

“I couldn’t stop.”

“It’s fine,” she said, her head tipped onto mine now. “I’m on birth control and checked everything after...”

She looked down. I knew she was talking about her ex.

“Me too,” I said fast, wanting her never to think of that fucker again. “The checked everything part, anyway.”

She smiled, and I kissed her neck. “But we still shouldn’t have done that.”

She laughed. “Understatement of the century.”

Then we both laughed, hard and long, clinging to each other because it was all we could do.

Finally, she sighed and climbed off me. We cleaned ourselves up as best we could, adjusting our clothes in silence.

I thought that would be the moment—the one where we’d look at each other and acknowledge what had just happened. Agree it could never happen again.

But when Cassandra looked out at the world around us again, she let out a gasp.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

Overhead, the clouds had miraculously parted, though a light rain still fell. She jumped out of the cart, holding her hands out in the glowing droplets, turning to face me. She was like a dream—a beautiful, perfect dream.

“Sun shower,” she cried. “My mom always said these were good luck.”

My chest squeezed. She was so good, Cassandra. Too good. “You’re good luck,” I said, too quiet for her to hear.

As Cassandra walked along the path, I turned the cart back on, following her slowly, laughing as she ran in the rain like a little kid. If I never had another moment with her—if everything turned to dust—I’d still have this one. This precious, perfect moment.

But like the flip side of a coin, my mind flashed back to another time. Another sun shower, another little kid.

A cool dread slipped over me. I knew this memory.

It was me, at one of my little league games. My dad, who never came to any of my games, had decided to show up for this one. Something about a meeting being canceled. He stood up on the bleachers when I went up to bat, his hands on his hips. I’d been nervous, my hand slippery on the bat, but my little heart floating like a balloon. He came.

The first time I swung and missed, he shook his head. My stomach dropped. I swung and missed the next pitch and the next. He sat down and I knew his face looked the

way it did when Mom made a dinner he didn't like.

The next time I was up to bat, he cheered for the other team.

"You're not good enough to cheer for," he said on the drive home.

I wasn't naïve enough to think he'd be like my mom, who got up and yelled my name anytime I so much as appeared on the field or took a step in the direction of the ball.

But I didn't expect him to actively cheer against me, either.

"Maybe if you didn't half-ass it, I'd be on your side."

"He was nervous," Mom said, trying to intervene, but Dad shut her down. "I know what I'm doing, Delilah. Goddammit, don't undermine me."

I stared at the ball in my lap, turning it over and over, running my thumbs over the stitches with my throat burning.

I wouldn't cry. That was the only thing I had left. And I didn't. I didn't tell Dad about my games after that. I didn't tell him I kicked ass at the next game. I knew it wouldn't be good enough for him. So I just promised myself I'd be the best and only the best. That failure was not an option. I didn't know it then, but that was the genesis of my business. I'd not only not be a failure, I'd stop others from being one too.

I was failing now with Cassandra. I could picture my fucking dad on the sidelines, jeering at me as Cassandra spun around under the golden rain.

And that's when I knew. I couldn't stay here even if I wanted to. Even if Lila was out of the equation.

If I didn't see Harrington Consulting's goals through, I'd have failed, and my father would have won.

Then what would all this have been for?

"You okay?" Cass asked, slipping back into the cart.

I wanted to come back to her, but I couldn't help the darkness that stretched over my heart, the anger at my father for tainting this memory, too.

I looked out at the rain, still falling. "You know, my dad, he always said I didn't have what it took to make it in business."

"What?"

"He still says that. He sends me these texts. I'm pretty sure he thinks they're helpful, like he's keeping me on my toes. But they're just reminders—amplifiers—of everything I've ever done wrong."

I glanced over at her. "Aren't you going to ask why I let him do it? Why I don't just tell him to fuck off?"

"Why would I say that?"

"It's what I would say."

She smiled, but her eyes were so sad. "Sometimes people are scared of where you'd be without them. So they try to bring you down. To hold you down, so deep you feel like you can't breathe."

I gripped her hand, working hard not to hold on too tight. I didn't want to be the one

dragging her down, too. “We should go.”

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

She nodded, and I turned the cart on. I felt as if lead were running through my veins, coursing around my heart.

We rumbled through the trees in silence for a moment. Then Cass said, “You know Dad says there’s a part of these woods that’s haunted too.”

“What?”

The comment was bizarre enough to distract me from the weight on my chest.

Cassandra looked into the forest. “Eleanor—the ‘ghost’ my dad is obsessed with—he thinks she used to meet her lover out here.”

I looked out into the trees. “Sounds familiar,” I said. I squeezed her hand, hoping I could bring back just a flash of our time together; just the tiniest bit, so I wouldn’t have to feel anything but good.

“He wasn’t always this way, you know,” she said. “He didn’t use to go on about ghosts and not call for weeks at a time.”

“What was he like?” I asked. Suddenly, I was desperate to hear about a good father. One who cheered for his children, who told them they were winners, even when they failed.

“He was a good dad. The best, honestly. He used to take me and Eli fishing...”

Cassandra told me about her father and growing up here in Quince Valley. How he’d

been the main caregiver—played with the kids while her mom ran the hotel. Took them fishing. Helped them with their homework. I thought about my nephew Arthur, how much fun we had together. I never thought about having kids—in fact, if anyone asked, it was easy to tell people Lila and I were too busy with work. But right now, sitting here with Cassandra—her talking about a happy childhood, one where everyone didn't sit strained at the table, the dad complaining about everything that wasn't right with each of them—I couldn't help imagine a different life. For the briefest moment, I let myself think of what I could have had with a woman like Cassandra. A real marriage. A family.

The image crushed me.

“When's he coming home?” I asked, forcing brightness into my voice.

She looked down, and I knew this was a sore point for her. “I don't know. I keep asking him, but he says he's not ready. He's still grieving, I know. They lived in each other's pockets, Mom and Dad, right until the very end.”

My heart hurt for Cassandra now. “I'm sorry,” I said. “I feel like people forget, when they're hurting, that they can still affect other people.”

I thought of Lila now, and how she looked away when she saw me struggle. How I knew she knew this was hard for me, but was too scared of her own pain to tell me to go.

We were reaching the end of the treed part of this path. Up ahead was the end of the course, the rest of the trail naked and exposed.

I pulled the cart to a stop. When I looked at Cassandra, her expression was impossibly sad.

I brushed a knuckle against her cheek. “I’m sorry,” I whispered. But I felt like the word was losing its meaning. How could I be sorry and still leave her?

“You know, I said I wouldn’t do this,” she said.

“Do what?”

“Trust another man again.”

My stomach clenched. I wanted to tell her she could trust me, but I’d be lying. I couldn’t keep from hurting her. She could trust me with anything else, but promising I wouldn’t hurt her? The tears on her cheek were evidence I’d broken that promise before I’d even made it.

“I wish... I wish things could be different, Cassandra.”

She sat up and smoothed her hair, looking over at me. Then she lowered her hands and looked ahead out the front of the cart. The rain had abated; the only drops now coming from the tree branches.

“Why did you offer to marry her, Blake? You’re a savvy businessman. You knew fake-marrying Lila would mean you were forsaking your own happiness.”

“My life isn’t terrible.” I hated the defensive edge I heard in my voice.

She was quiet.

I ran my hand through my hair.

She deserved honesty. Hell, I needed to be honest with myself.

“I never thought of myself as the marrying type. It didn’t go well for my parents. It’s not going well for my brother. I just—I know it’s ironic, but things are cleaner this way.”

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

“Where you can’t have a real relationship with a woman you care about. That’s what you mean, right?”

I shifted in my seat.

“I am happy,” I said. I knew that biting those words out contradicted them. I could hear myself. But I didn’t know how to fix myself.

Finally, Cassandra shook her head, looking resigned. “It doesn’t matter. This was never supposed to happen, right? So we can leave it as it is, its own discrete memory just for us.”

“Yeah,” I said. At least this one I’d get to keep.

* * *

I took the pictures I needed to, and we’d said goodbye as politely as if we were leaving a corporate meeting. I might have imagined the day as a fever dream, if it weren’t for the way it kept replaying in my mind. The visuals were so intense—not to mention the physical aftershocks. It wasn’t just the sex, either. It was Cassandra, in the cart, telling me about her life. Cassandra, in the sun shower, spinning around like an angel. Cassandra, everywhere, in all my senses, seared there as if for life. The minute I got home, I’d pulled on my trunks and jumped straight into the pool. I swam at least a dozen vigorous laps, letting the water sluicing off my skin take the memories with it. It worked, a little.

But what finally expunged Cassandra Kelly from my brain that night was when I

came up for air and saw a pair of black pumps on the pool deck in front of me.

I startled. “Jesus, Lila, you scared the hell out of me.”

“We need to talk.” Her arms were folded across her chest, her phone tucked into her hand.

My stomach dropped a few notches.

She knows.

Had she seen me come home with grass clippings or leaf-blower gas all over my suit jacket? Something worse?

“You’ve been ignoring my texts,” Lila said after I’d gotten dressed. She’d been waiting for me outside on the lounge chair.

Shit—I hadn’t even looked at my phone since earlier this morning.

But Lila looked pissed, but not code-red level, and she hadn’t insisted we talk before I got dressed. It wasn’t Cassandra.

If not that, then what?

“Goldman’s been sniffing around Persephone.”

Lila thought this would put the fear of God in me. But I let out a breath, relieved. Business—this I could handle.

Persephone was a giant bookseller chain that was next up on our operational review slot. They’d booked us in last year.

They were going to be business 101. I'd hardly thought at all of what would come after number 100.

But I wasn't afraid of losing them. "It's fine, I'm tight with John," I said. Getting Persephone's business had been easy. Their CEO, who was headquartered in the UK, had sought me out, and I'd sold him a full review in half an hour flat. He'd taken all the advice I'd given him so far without complaint.

"Well, he sent us a courtesy email letting us know he was considering going with them."

The lightest pang of worry hit me. Were my instincts off? Was I getting sloppy?

"I thought you might want to call him to reassure him personally that we're looking forward to getting to his review. I know how you like to travel."

I almost laughed. I always took the overseas work, looking forward to the long stints of solitude—at least in my hotel room. Long stints where I could pretend to be someone else, someone who wasn't entangled in this messy as hell life. It was the only time I enjoyed the company of other women, if I felt like it. But the thought of that made me physically sick.

Still, it wouldn't do us any good to lose his business, not when I wouldn't see any return on our work here until the Kellys implemented the plan Brynn had already started writing up.

"Fine, I'll call him. Anything else?"

Lila hesitated, then folded and refolded her hands. She glanced over to her and Brynn's place—Brynn was inside, moving around in the kitchen. Then she looked at me directly. "We need to talk about Cassandra Kelly."

Fuck.

“No, we don’t.”

I realized she likely only had suspicions, and I’d just confirmed them.

Lila took a deep breath, her nostrils flaring.

I considered giving her the denial she’d been waiting for. But I couldn’t lie to Lila. She knew me too well. I looked her in the eye. “Lila, I’m human, okay? I have... urges.”

“Is that what it is? Urges?”

I’d been trying to downplay it, but now that she said it, it sounded cheap. But if I could convince Lila that’s all it was, we’d all be better off. Including me.

“It’s probably amplified because I can’t have her,” I said.

I knew I was lying to myself. Still, Lila looked relieved.

“I’m not going to be seeing her for the rest of the week anyway.” I picked up the towel I’d left out here earlier. “I’m doing the rec stuff with Jude.” I’d planned on doing more touring with Cassandra this week, but it wasn’t necessary for her to accompany me. I could ask Jude to do it.

Some space would probably do us good after today.

Maybe it would be best if we didn’t see each other again at all.

That was impossible given our professional relationship, but maybe I could find a way.

You're being a chickenshit.

"Fine," Lila said. "Just... think very carefully about what you do. A lot of us depend on that."

Guilt plunged through me.

I looked up to avoid looking at her face. I'd already betrayed Lila's trust. But I'd do more damage if I let my feelings dictate my actions.

The sky overhead was a patchwork of white and blue now. The sunset from up at the resort would be stunning. Would Cassandra be watching it?

"I'll figure it out, okay, Lila?" I said. "Don't worry about me."

Then I strode back into my lonely little house where I could sulk in peace.

17

CASSANDRA

I strode into the office with my own coffee on Tuesday morning. If how yesterday had ended was any indication, I suspected my days of Blake sweetly bringing me coffee were over.

And I was right. Lila let me know when she came in that they'd shuffled the recreation schedule of the review around, and Blake was going to be with Jude for the rest of the week.

“Okay, that’s great,” I said, smiling. She studied me for a moment, but I’d left her and gone into my office, closing the door behind me.

But even though I spent that day and the next busy with catch-up, I couldn’t help my eyes from going to the empty chair in my office, feeling like I was missing a limb.

Even after the sticky way it had ended.

I kept replaying our day together; all the things we’d done.

And how he’d given me the answer I’d pushed for. That he didn’t want a relationship at all. Not with me, not with anyone. I’m not the marrying type.

But I still couldn’t help the old pain that festered; the self-doubt. Did he mean that? Or was it just me?

And why did I care? It’s not like I wanted him to marry me.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:24 am

* * *

On Thursday, there was a knock on my office door. My heart lifted, and I considered shoveling my coffee in the trash before I called out. Blake.

I didn't, and it was a good thing because it wasn't Blake. It was Lila.

"Hi," I said, surprised and not a little disappointed. Then I was upset with myself for feeling that way. At least I hadn't binned my coffee.

"Hi," Lila said.

We exchanged a few stilted pleasantries where, in between talking about the running path and how the town had finally fixed up the area I'd fallen in, I tried and failed to read her face to know what she was thinking—did she know about me and Blake? Did she know I knew they weren't married? Did she think I thought I'd been with a married man? That last thought made me sick, but I suspected Lila wouldn't jump to that conclusion first.

Finally, Lila smiled. "I'm on my way down to meet Reese and your sister for food and events. By next week, we'll have reached the part of the schedule where I'm meant to tour the east wing."

"Right, the construction zone."

"Yes. The plan is to get a sense of whether we should recommend continuing the work of the previous contractors, or to scrap and begin again, considering all the

income potential of the space.

Suddenly, I understood why she was here. “Griffin’s name was on this part, wasn’t it?” I asked.

“Yes. And unfortunately, I still haven’t been able to get hold of him. I didn’t want to bother you with this, but I’m wondering if you might know when he’ll be back?”

“Lila, I don’t even know where he is,” I sighed, taking a long sip of my coffee. I said a second prayer above I hadn’t tossed it.

Lila looked surprised. Slightly concerned even.

“My brother Griffin is a bit of an enigma,” I said. “As you might have guessed.”

“Yes. Eli explained to me that he’s not on the payroll. He’s got a share of the ownership, but he’s not actually employed here.

“Right.”

“It’s... interesting.”

“It’s weird. But it works. Griffin comes in when we need him and disappears when we don’t. I suspect he’s not back because he doesn’t really care about the potential of the east wing, or profitability. He only cares about the actual nuts and bolts of putting it back together again.”

Lila quirked a brow.

I realized I liked her, but I was angry with her too. Even though Blake’s situation was his own choice, it was because of her. I wondered if she’d fought him on it. If she

ever opened windows for him to leave.

But of course they'd talked about it. They were grown adults. Really, I had no reason to be upset with her. I only wanted someone else to blame, because Blake not wanting to change their circumstances was the worst part of it all.

Luckily, she didn't see all this pass over my face. "Griffin is kind of a savant, isn't he?"

I smiled, thinking of my brother. He was definitely the oddest one of all of us. Quiet. Withdrawn. But fiercely protective of us all, too. A beast.

"One of the golf club lawnmowers broke down once when we were kids, and before Mom called in the repair guys, Griff asked if he could look at it. He ended up taking apart the engine completely—like right down to screws all lined up neatly on the ground. He was nine years old."

"Did he fix it?"

"In only a couple of hours. Dad wanted to write the local paper to brag about it, but Griff wouldn't let him."

Lila smiled. "I'm sorry I won't get to work with him. But I was hoping you'd come with me to do the tour next week, seeing as you and Blake—"

I stiffened. If she didn't know what was going on between me and Blake, she suspected something was up.

"Seeing as you're not working together anymore," she finished. "Construction review is our penultimate week; the final week after that is select staff interviews and closeout, then we're gone."

I swallowed. I knew the schedule, but I hadn't looked at it recently. I'd been ignoring it, hoping it might go away.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:25 am

“You okay?” Lila’s brows slanted.

“Sure,” I said. “Tired, that’s all. Yes, of course I’ll do the east wing with you next week. Happy to.”

“Great,” she said. She moved for the door, then paused. “Cassandra?”

“Yes?” Nerves shot through me.

“Can I ask you something?”

My stomach churned. She was going to ask me about Blake. What was I going to say?

But instead, she came around and sat in the chair in front of me. “You were close to your parents, right?”

It wasn’t anywhere near the question I’d expected. For a moment, I was too surprised to answer. Then I did. “Yes,” I said simply. “I was. Not so much anymore. I mean, my mom’s dead, obviously. And Dad is... away. But when we were younger, yes. We were very close.”

She looked like she wanted to hear more, so I continued.

“I was Dad’s little helper, with the other kids. I liked being the person he could count on when he was running around looking after us. And Mom, well, Mom was always busy with the hotel, but at night she’d come home and come to me for the rundown of

how everything went. She treated me like... her source, if that makes sense. She knew Dad would gloss over the hard stuff, or the little details about what each of the kids had done that day. So we had a special relationship that way.”

Lila nodded. It seemed like she wanted to say something, but was holding back. Then she blurted out, “Did you ever have to hide anything from them? Something they’d be incredibly upset about?”

She was trying to play it cool, like this was a casual question, but I could see the way her lip did a quick quiver before she pinched it against the other.

My chest suddenly hurt. I knew what she was asking. I’d been so cavalier about the arrangement she and Blake had made, but I thought about what it would be like if I had a secret so big, and so devastating for my parents, that they’d have severed ties with me.

They wouldn’t have, I realized. I knew that in my bones. They would never have told me there was something about me that made me unlovable.

When I looked at Lila, I didn’t see the person standing between me and Blake. I saw a person trapped in her own pain, so damaged by a painful truth—the threat of losing the love of the people who were supposed to love her unconditionally. And I saw how her business with Blake was the one thing she could count on. Blake had promised he would stick with her. How could he possibly let her down?

I swallowed down the lump that was threatening to form in my throat.

He’s not yours to have.

“Can I tell you something about Blake?” I asked. “It’s related, I promise.”

Lila blinked, but recovered quickly. “Of course.”

“I’ve really appreciated getting to know him during our time together. He respects what my mom was trying to do here. I mean, at first he kept talking about high-end luxury; clean lines and marble porticos. But he’s adapted.”

“He suggested we propose a few iterations of how the hotel could look in our final report,” she said.

“Right. And you know what shifted his viewpoint?”

She twisted her hands in her lap. “We haven’t had a chance to discuss it.”

I suspected they weren’t talking about a lot of things right now. Because of me.

“It was after we had that staff lunch a couple of weeks ago.”

That meeting where our legs had met under the table and we’d both just kept still, in a tacit connection so ridiculous and so completely innocent compared to what we’d done earlier this week. But it had been special, and symbolic somehow. Like we decided to be close to each other because it felt better than moving away.

“Remember how I talked about how my parents found the hotel after that other family lost control of it?”

“I remember,” she said softly.

“I think the story really affected him. He pulled up photos of older hotels in the United Kingdom and on the east coast, and talked about how we could embrace our historical roots instead of cutting them off. I hadn’t thought I’d cared about whether the place was modern or classic; I’d just wanted the business not to fail. I’d wanted

my mom to have been proud of me.”

Just like Blake had said he thought she would be at that same lunch.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:25 am

I swallowed that lump down again.

“He thought it was important I honor my parents,” I said. “He was going to suggest scrapping the modern proposal altogether.”

I paused. “But I asked him to keep it.”

Lila looked surprised. “I thought he’d convinced you to keep it. He loves the avant-garde modern stuff.”

“Right. But the thing is, I told him I knew my parents would be happy with whatever the five of us kids wanted to do together. Yes, they had their own preferences—my dad lives and breathes the history, and would probably be devastated if we erased every last trace of it. But I know he wouldn’t disown me even if I tore the place right down and opened a... shopping mall.” I held up a hand. “Actually, Dad would blow his top if that happened, but he’d forgive me. At a certain point, love is more important than any dogged attachment to the past, or to what someone else thinks is right, you know?”

Lila was nodding, but blinking rapidly, like she was trying to hold back tears.

“But I’m not naïve. I know not everyone can just get over stuff that’s important to them, no matter how wrong it is. I know I’m lucky I had that. If my situation had been different—if I’d had a secret or something that would actually affect our relationship—I honestly don’t know if I’d tell them. Not to save them the hurt, but... because sometimes you have to make those hard decisions. And you only get one set of parents.”

The next part was the hardest, but it had to be said. “But no matter what, you have Blake. He told me...”

He told me a lot of things, things that hurt, but things that made me proud to know him.

“He told me he would never let you down. And I believe him. Blake cares about you without condition. I was with someone who didn’t, and I know the difference.”

Now my eyes were wet. “I’m sorry,” I said. “This isn’t about me.”

“Love is hard, isn’t it, Cassandra?”

“It’s hard, but it’s everything. And even if we don’t get the kind of unconditional love we want, just know we deserve it. We’re worthy whether we get it or not.”

Lila looked away then, and I knew she was crying too. But she briskly brushed the tears away and stood up.

“Cassandra,” she said. “I’ve seen the way he looks at you.”

My heart felt as if it had stopped. She knew. Or was she guessing and my response would confirm it either way?

I swallowed, but she only smiled, her eyes going wet once more.

“He gets this look when you’re not around, too. When we just mention your name. It’s like... it’s like he’s truly happy, where he never was quite before. We like you too, Cassandra. Me and Brynn. You made this work feel... worthwhile. So, thank you.”

Before I could react, Lila said a mumbled goodbye, and when the door clicked shut behind her, I let out the sob that had been lodged in my chest.

I knew I'd sealed my fate with Blake. He already told me he never saw himself being with anyone, but this stubborn part of me had known he could change that if he really wanted to. But now I snuffed out my last selfish hope for that.

Blake wasn't mine to keep. Even though my heart was ripped straight through, I knew it was the right thing to do.

I'd have to be okay with losing him.

18

CASSANDRA

After Lila left the room on Thursday, I'd picked myself up and gone about my day, checking in with all my departments and answering calls and emails I'd been putting off while I'd been with Blake.

And while my heart felt heavy, my shoulders felt lighter.

I realized I'd been hanging onto preemptive guilt. I'd known what Blake and I had could devastate Lila, and I couldn't in good conscience do that to another person. I felt liberated. Heartbroken, but liberated.

It stung that Blake hadn't even so much as texted since last week, but I shrugged it off. It didn't matter. I'd see him next week for the final part of the review, and that would be that.

I was fine.

Completely fine.

Or I would be.

By the time Monday rolled around, I was actually looking forward to meeting with Lila for the construction walk-through. It had been awhile since I'd been into the east wing. I stayed away because normally, it depressed me. It was a public representation of what George had done to our resort. I didn't resent him for it—he'd been trying to save the hotel. He'd just colossally screwed up.

I could relate to that.

A sheet of polyvinyl covered the lobby entrance to the east wing, and when I stepped through, it took a moment for my eyes to adjust. The space was dark—the only light that came in was filtered through the plastic from the lobby behind me, and from a few of the room doors that had been propped open. Those rooms were ones where construction had started on and were stripped down to the studs, I knew. The place smelled stale, with undercurrents of sawdust and oil from whatever machinery or tools had been in here last year.

But as I walked, I found my eyes drawn to a space far down at the end of the hall. A space where two doors had a longer stretch of wall between them.

That was where Mom had boarded up Room 114.

For a moment, the air seemed to crackle around me, and the hairs on the backs of my arms stood up.

Behind me, the sounds of the lobby—the click of high heels and ring of laughter and

conversation—seemed to grow muted.

What if Dad was right? What if Eleanor Cleary was real?

Okay, no. There was no way. But maybe he was right about the actual history. Maybe she'd been murdered here by her husband and—

The plastic crinkled behind me and I nearly jumped out of my sensible heels.

“Whoa!” Blake exclaimed, his hands up.

I couldn't help it, I shrieked. “Ship swell mother bells!” I yelled.

Blake's jaw dropped. “I'm sorry, what?”

My heart was pounding too hard to respond. I leaned forward, hands on my legs, catching my breath.

Finally, I stood up straight and allowed myself to register that Blake was standing before me.

Trying to hold in a laugh. “Are you okay?”

“I'm fine,” I said. “It's just a little... creepy in here.”

“What exactly did you say back there?”

I grimaced. “Ship swell mother bells. My dad used to say that when he couldn't swear around us.”

Blake frowned, nodding. “I think it's the best thing I've ever heard.”

Then my heart finally caught up to me, squeezing in my chest. This was Blake. The Blake I'd been with in carnal ways last week. The one who knew how I took my coffee and that I used too-elaborate 'shortcuts' on my spreadsheets.

The one who was staying in his fake marriage to protect a friend and their business and because he didn't want to be with anyone in the long term, anyway.

"I'm surprised to see you here," I said. Was my voice stiff? I tried to relax. But now that I was over the shock of having the living daylights scared out of me, my heart felt like it was cracking right in two.

I knew I could have run into him anywhere in the building. But somehow, I still thought I'd have more time to prepare for his effect on me.

"I asked Lila if I could take this meeting," he said.

I swallowed. "Why?"

"Because I spent a whole week away from you, and it nearly killed me. In two weeks, Lila and I will be home in New York, preparing for our next project."

While my heart squeezed at the first part, the way he finished was like he was reminding me of the cold, hard facts.

"And I'll just be a distant memory." I was unable to keep the wobble out of my voice.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:25 am

Blake's face looked physically pained. I couldn't look at him. I turned and looked down the hall, but his presence seared my back with heat. I remembered that night on the other side of the hotel, when I'd brought him up to that empty room. I hadn't needed to check that he was behind me—I could feel him.

For a moment we were quiet, the only sounds the muffled lobby noises and the rush of blood in my ears. Hot tears filled my eyes.

“Cassandra.” Blake's voice was strained. “You know it has to be this way.”

“Of course I know!” I cried, turning back to him. My voice echoed down the hall around us and I swallowed, embarrassed. I knew because I'd made sure of it.

Blake had pulled his mouth into a straight line and he stuffed his hands under his arms. “It's not like this makes me happy.”

I laughed at this, a dull, dry laugh that didn't feel funny. “I don't think you know what makes you happy.”

Blake said nothing for a moment, just looked at my face with the quickest flash of infinite sorrow. Then he nodded. “You're probably right.”

My mind screamed at him. Stay. Stay and we'll figure it out. But I couldn't say it. I'd already made my decision, and so had he. Anything else would just mess things up worse than they already were.

“Cass, I have to tell you something.”

But I shook my head. “Is it that you care about me, Blake? That you have feelings for me?”

He opened his mouth and then closed it again. My chest felt heavy. “Then it doesn’t matter. Don’t you see? You’re leaving. Anything else we share with each other is just going to make things harder.” I took a breath. “Why don’t we spend the last of our time together not pontificating, or fighting, but just... enjoying the good parts?”

I tried a smile then, as if I could force myself into enjoying this.

He wasn’t smiling. “There’s just one—”

“No, I—”

“Goddammit Cassandra, will you let me finish?”

I clamped my mouth shut.

“I’m leaving tomorrow morning, okay? I’m catching a plane to London.”

I gaped. “London, England?”

“Yes. We have a client there who’s getting cold feet. We thought it would be better if we nipped things in the bud. Brynn’s going to step in and assist Lila with the final portion of the review.”

He must have seen that my jaw was still hanging open, because he said, “I’ll reduce our fees for the final two weeks, of course.”

“You think that’s what I care about?” I said.

“No. But it’s only fair.”

I took a breath. I didn’t care about the fees I’d be billed for later. I didn’t care about anything at all, except the fact that this was probably the last time I’d ever see Blake.

The tears came back then, and when I blinked, they didn’t go away. They spilled over, running down my cheeks.

Blake didn’t hesitate. He just pulled me to him, wrapping me in his arms. I sobbed then, hitting my fist against his chest just once, where his heart was. We stood there, Blake holding me, stroking my hair, whispering words in my ear to if not soothe my tattered heart, to patch it up for this one, final night.

Eventually, my tears died down. I pulled back, wiping at my face with the heels of my hands, embarrassed. I couldn’t look at Blake. But I knew I didn’t want to spend the day weeping, or like I said before, bemoaning our situation or fighting. I wanted to make the most of it. “Is there anything you have to do tonight?” I asked.

“No, I’m mostly packed.”

I don’t know why that stung, but I nodded. “Okay. Well, what do you say we go out on a date?”

Blake grinned and I couldn’t help it, I brought my finger up and pressed it to his dimple, over the bristle of hair there. “It sounds perfect,” he said, his voice going thick with emotion. Then his smile dropped, his eyes on mine, and he pulled me back in. “But can we kiss now?”

“We can do all the things now,” I whispered. All the things for the last time.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:25 am

Blake took my cheeks in his hands and brought his mouth to mine. The kiss was so tender; so soft and perfect, I nearly cried again. But I didn't. I fell into it, allowing myself to go to that soft, open place. Might as well do the last night together right.

When Blake pulled away, I kept my eyes closed for the briefest second, relishing the memory of it on my lips. Then I opened my eyes and smiled at Blake.

Outside in the lobby, someone went running by, their shoes squeaking, and I heard the soft rumble of a bellhop pushing a luggage cart. "Actually," I said, "I hate to say it, but it would be good if we did what we came here to do today." The sounds of daily life at the hotel had reminded me that I wouldn't have time to reschedule this tour. At the end of last week, I'd called off the people who'd been filling in for various aspects of my job, planning on getting back to my regular routine. It had been so I'd have an excuse to see less of Blake and Lila, only making room for the official meetings. Now I was glad I had, as keeping busy would probably be the only thing keeping me afloat after Blake left.

"As you wish, Cass. I was looking forward to this too."

"So it wasn't just me you wanted to see?"

He shrugged. "You were a nice bonus."

I fake-shoved him, laughing. It felt both good and tragic to laugh, but I vowed right at that moment not to let the sadness take over. Not today.

"Should we start upstairs?" Blake asked. "Work our way down?"

Just then, there was a soft thud from down in the shadowy hall.

Both of us froze.

“What the hell?” Blake said.

“Room 114!” I said, my voice hardly more than a whisper.

Blake looked at me, confused.

What do I say, the ghost? Eleanor?

I pointed to the space way down at the end of the hall. “The boarded-up room.”

Blake’s eyes went wide, but only for a moment. He remembered the story.

“Stay here.” He made like he was going to investigate on his own.

“No way!” I whispered. “This is my hotel.”

Blake frowned, but grabbed my hand, locking his fingers with mine. “Then stay with me.”

Those were the words I’d wanted to say earlier. I would have laughed if I wasn’t nearly shaking with concern about the sound we’d heard.

“It was nothing, right?” I squeezed Blake’s hand, grateful for its broad, warm grasp, and not caring in the least about being tough.

“I’m sure it was no—”

But another bang came now, louder than before. I startled, letting out a little yip. Then, embarrassed at my reaction, I reached down and picked up a short stub of 2x4, grasping it in one hand like a bat.

Blake, though alert, raised an eyebrow. “Seriously?”

“It’s something! What are you going to do, punch them out?”

Blake looked at me with an expression that said duh.

A moment later, we were at the space where Room 114 would have been. It was then I noticed a hole in the wall, about as big as a football.

“That wasn’t there the last time I was in here,” I whispered.

We tiptoed toward it. My heart was ramming against my ribcage so hard I was sure I was going to alert whoever—whatever—was inside.

“I’m going to look inside,” Blake said.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:25 am

His temple was beaded with sweat—the only tell that he had any nerves about this. That and the tenseness of his body.

I flattened myself against the wall a few feet before the hole and lifted the 2x4 up like a bat. My breathing came short and shallow.

Blake released my hand and kept going. He was just squatting down when a hand flew out of the hole, grasping Blake's shirt.

He yelped. I shrieked. Then I brought the 2x4 down as hard as I could, which, as it turned out, wasn't very hard, because of the way my body was angled. The wood hit the wall on the way down, slowing its momentum, and when it landed on the arm, was more like a heavy slap than a bone-crushing blow.

But it was enough that the person on the other end yowled, releasing Blake.

For a moment, everything was still.

Then awareness hit. I knew that yowl. It was the same sound that had come out of my brother Jude's mouth when I smacked him across the face with my purse a few months ago after he'd snuck up on me and Chelsea in the dim hallway of our apartments late at night.

"Jude!?" I exclaimed. I was going to kill him.

Heat was just riding up my throat when another voice sounded.

“Back up, give us eight feet.”

“Who the hell is that?” Blake was still tense, his face awash with confusion.

I had no trouble recognizing Griff’s low grumble. “Griffin, and when he says watch out, watch out!”

I pulled Blake’s hand, and we jumped back in just enough time for a sledgehammer to go through the wall. I clung onto Blake’s arm for no reason other than because the sound of the hammer made me jump each time it landed.

After a few hits, there was a big enough hole that Griff popped his torso out. Dust plumed around him; his dark auburn hair was gray with it.

“Hey there,” he said, “Only a few more hits and I’ll have a door for you.”

Then Griffin froze. He was wearing goggles, which made it difficult to see his eyes, but it only took me a minute to realize what he was looking at.

I had wrapped myself around Blake Harrington’s arm so tightly, his bicep was nestled between my breasts. I swallowed, pulling myself away.

Blake had seen too; I could tell because his neck went a shade of pink.

But Griffin said nothing, just pulled himself back inside and hit the wall down low again, and again and again.

The hits may have been harder that time.

A few minutes later, after allowing time for the dust to settle at least a little, Blake and I were standing in an empty room alongside my brothers.

After I inspected Jude's forearm, which was bright red but didn't look like it was permanently damaged, I gave him a shove. "I can't believe you pulled that!"

I shoved him once more for good measure.

"Ow," Jude laughed, though my pushing didn't do much.

"And you!" I said to Griff. I tried to shove him, but of course it was like pushing on a tree trunk.

"He made me do it," Griff grunted.

But Griff's voice was even rougher than usual, and he gave me a look that said he wanted to talk to me, pronto.

"Hey, I'm sorry about grabbing you, man," Jude said to Blake. "It was just too perfect—you were walking by..."

While Jude and Blake talked, I met Griff's eyes and pointed my chin toward the hallway. I had to deal with this before I could even think about what was in here.

Griffin was good with secrets. Secrets were his MO. But he was also deeply, almost religiously loyal. He would not abide by anything like his sister getting close to a married man.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:25 am

Before I could speak, Griff said, “Gus sent me an email while I was away.” His voice was tight with anger.

“You were checking your email?” Griff was not known for responding to any form of communication, especially when he went off on his mysterious jaunts. Still, I’d sent him a couple, asking where he was, which he’d ignored.

He ignored me this time, too. “You know what was in the email?”

Gus was the facilities manager, but he was also in charge of security across the whole property. What could he...

No. Oh my God, no. I felt the blood drain from my face. “Griff—”

“It was a video clip. He caught a couple of people in business attire making out outside the shed on the south side of the golf course.”

I was going to be sick. I glanced over at Blake. He was watching us but listening to whatever Jude was telling him. I angled Griff so our backs were to them, worried Griff might actually murder him if Blake appeared in his line of sight.

“The footage wasn’t that clear,” Griff went on. “There was some kind of smudge on the lens. But I know my sister when I see her. And I know her married fucking consultant.”

“Griff, I can explain—”

“I tried to convince myself it was someone else, that there was just a striking fucking resemblance. But now I see you holding his fucking hand!?”

“Griffin,” I said, my voice as loud as I could make it while still whispering, placing a hand on his arm. “Calm down, okay?”

He looked down as if I’d lain a waiter’s cloth over his forearm.

“What about this is okay?”

I took my hand away, my heart hammering in my chest. I hadn’t thought this part through. What was I going to say? My brother could sniff out a lie a mile away.

“It’s not real.”

Both of us whirled around. Blake.

For a moment, panic ballooned in my chest as Griff took a step toward him.

“Griff, wait,” I said.

But Blake was calm, and held his ground with Griffin. While Griffin was thicker around the chest and shoulders, Blake was not insubstantially sized. He also had an inch or two of height on my brother.

For a moment, tension crackled in the air. I was going to have to step in between them.

“Guys, this is—” I began, but Griff spoke up.

“What do you mean, it’s not real?”

“My marriage. To Lila. It’s part of the business.”

Griffin eyed me, checking for my response. Even after this, he trusted me. My heart swelled. “It’s true,” I said.

“I knew it!” Jude exclaimed from behind. “Lila’s into women, isn’t she?” Jude said.

Blake’s jaw clenched.

“Jude!” I glared at my other brother. “Keep your trap shut!”

But Jude never kept his trap shut. “I saw her checking out the women’s group tennis lesson,” he said, all innocence. Then he waggled a brow. “It didn’t look like she was admiring their outfits.”

I nearly slapped my own forehead.

But Griffin had visibly relaxed—at least a little. He was still giving Blake a mild stink eye.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:25 am

“For obvious reasons, I ask that you not tell anyone outside this room about our arrangement,” Blake said. “Though... I won’t force anyone to keep my secret.”

He looked at me when he said that. Something squeezed in me.

No, this was only a tactic—a way to make my brothers think it was their idea to keep the knowledge in confidence.

Jude held up three fingers. “Your secret’s safe with me, man.”

“It doesn’t sound like it, but Jude’s actually good at keeping secrets,” I said. “Even if it’s just because he forgets them five minutes after you tell them.”

Jude shrugged.

“Griff?” I asked.

He was still eyeing Blake, but after a moment, grunted. “For you.”

“Great,” I said. “That’s great.”

“Okay, so now that we got that out of the way,” Jude said, “Come check out what we found!”

Blake gave Griffin a nod, and briefly met my eyes before heading back to Jude, who was kneeling by the wall under the window.

“It’s a long story,” I said to Griff once the other two were out of earshot. “But I can explain it. And anyway... Blake is leaving tomorrow.”

“I thought things weren’t finished until next week?”

“Like I said, it’s a long story.”

Griff raised his eyebrow and folded his arms. “I got time.”

“You going to tell me where you were the past month?”

Griff grimaced. “Fine.” Then he gave me what passed for a Griff smile—it wasn’t far from the grimace. “I found Dad.”

My heart lifted. “Oh my god, where was he?”

“Indonesia.”

My jaw fell open.

But then Jude was calling us over, his voice excited.

“I’ll tell you more later.” Griff wrapped his arm around my shoulder as we headed to the others.

“Ugh, you’re covered in dust! And you stink!”

“That’s just the old familiar Eau du Griff.”

I laughed. Then I held my breath as I wrapped my arms around his torso to give him a squeeze before freeing myself, coughing exaggeratedly. “Thank you,” I said quietly.

“For finding Dad. And for understanding the thing between me and Blake.”

“I’m glad things are on the level, Cass,” he said before we reached them, his voice serious.

I smiled, though I imagined it was as sad a smile as there ever was. “As level as they can be.”

“You’re right, Jude,” Blake said, his voice awed. “There’s something in there.”

Okay, now I was interested. I squatted down between Blake and Jude. There was a heat vent here; the old kind that sat on the wall, its cover an ornate design of flowers and vines. But inside, it was too dark to see anything.

“Where?” I asked.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:25 am

Blake pointed with one hand, his other slipping over the small of my back. It was a subtle, barely-there move, but the rush of tingling it sent through me distracted me enough that I looked at him instead of the vent.

His mouth turned up in the slightest smile. My chest clenched.

Stay. I want you to stay.

“What is it?” Griff asked from behind us. “A box?”

I dragged my attention from Blake back to the vent. He couldn’t stay. And I didn’t want to insist he did. I wouldn’t do that.

Jude looked over his shoulder at Griff. “Seriously, man? A box?”

“I don’t have my glasses on,” Griff grunted.

“Since when do you wear glasses?” I asked him, incredulous.

Griff kneeled down between me and Jude, squinting inside as if he hadn’t heard me.

Even with me this close, it was shadowy in there, with little light hitting it as the window was on the same wall. I pulled out my phone, flipping on the flashlight and shone it in. It was a small rectangle.

“Looks like a book,” Blake said.

Griff pulled something out of his pocket—a utility knife, I saw now—and in a few quick moves, he'd popped the grill off the wall.

Jude reached in and pulled the thing out. It was small, about 4x6 inches, and thick with dust.

My stomach flittered with excitement. “Is that a—”

“Holy shit, it's Eleanor's diary!” Jude exclaimed.

“You haven't even opened it,” Griff said.

Jude blew hard on the cover. Dust exploded in a plume around us and the three of us leaned back, cursing and waving at the air in front of our faces.

“Jesus, Jude,” Griff coughed. He went to grab the book, but Jude was quick and held it away.

I rolled my eyes, then sneezed. I would have stood up, but I wanted to see what was inside as badly as Jude did.

When Jude opened the cover, the first thing we saw was an inscription on the inside of the front cover.

Property of J.E.Q.

“Who's J.E.Q.?” Jude asked, his voice strung with disappointment.

“Who knows?” I said.

Blake tipped his head at Jude. “Keep going. Let's see what else is inside.”

Jude turned the page. There was writing inside, but it was illegible. Not because it was blurred or faded, but because the writing wasn't in English. It wasn't in any language I recognized.

“What the hell?” Jude said.

“Let me see,” Griffin said.

But just then, a soft creak sounded.

Not in this room. We all looked at each other.

“Did you hear that?” Jude whispered.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:25 am

Suddenly, I remembered Dad's words from that call. Anyone who spends time in that room... something always goes terribly wrong.

It was ridiculous, but Dad said it was why the last owners had plastered over the door.

How long had we been in here?

"It sounded like it came from over there," Blake said, his voice soft. He was looking at the hole in the wall that led to the adjoining room.

Blood rushed in my ears, my heartbeat so loud I could feel it shaking me. I gripped Blake's hand, not caring what my brothers might think.

We held our breath as another creak sounded.

Then a face appeared.

We all jumped, hollering.

Except for Griff, who looked unphased.

But the face had jumped too—that's when I saw it was Seamus, his eyes round, dark hair mussed as if it had gotten scared too.

My heart was still skipping at an elevated speed. "Holy hell, Seamus!" I exclaimed, my voice shrill. "What are you doing here?"

“You scared the shit out of us!” Jude said, his eyes wild.

“You guys scared the shit out of me!” Seamus said.

I let go of Blake’s hand, conscious I was probably crushing his knuckles.

Griff waved him in. “I asked Seamus to come do a walk-through with me. To see if Reilly and Sons might be up for the reno.”

“Griff,” I whispered. We hadn’t even finalized the plans for the wing, let alone started soliciting bids from interested contractors.

“Relax,” Griff said. “It’s just preliminary.”

I gaped, but Seamus was already crawling through the hole and thumping across the floor in his work boots, looking around at the space.

“What is this place?” he asked.

“It’s Eleanor Cleary’s room,” Jude said.

Seamus bunched his brows, then angled his head sideways to look at the book in Jude’s hand. “Why did Eleanor have a cipher?”

19

BLAKE

“I still can’t getover it,” Cassandra said. “A code. An actual secret code.”

We’d met at sundown for dinner at this tiny cafe Cass said was patronized strictly by

tourists, given its location—adjacent to the locals’ favorite hamburger joint. She’d scanned the place as we walked in, and even though she saw no one she recognized, I’d asked for a table in the far corner, tucked behind a pony wall.

We sat side-by-side, and with the wall and the tablecloth keeping things private, I was working hard to relax, as best I could, into my last night with Cassandra Kelly.

“It’s wild,” I agreed. It really was incredible what we’d found today. But as fascinating as the coded journal was, the excitement I’d felt in that room hadn’t lasted even through the rest of the tour of the wing. The only thing that mattered was the fact that I was leaving.

Still, I kept up as happy a face as I could. So did Cassandra.

Luckily, we had a lot to talk about—and talking to Cass was easy. Over dinner, we speculated about the diary, trying to guess who JEQ was, and most of all, what the book might say. As it turns out, Seamus had a thing for codes and puzzles, and he’d offered to take the book home to crack it, but Jude had refused, saying he wanted to try first.

“Jude’s a competitive baby,” Cass said. “Of course he wants to be the one to figure it out.” She’d rolled her eyes, but I could see the indulgent love for her brother on her face too.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:25 am

We discussed Cass's dad, too—how Griff had tracked him down via his cell phone records. He'd been in Borneo on some kind of jungle trek. We talked about Persephone Books and my favorite castle in Ireland, and before we knew it, the waiter was dropping off our dessert—a perfect-looking crème brûlée.

“Apparently, my family has a huge amount of Irish heritage,” she said. “If you hadn't noticed by our name.”

I smiled, enjoying her slipping a spoonful of sweet cream into her mouth.

“Also,”—she pointed the spoon at me—“our family is 25% more likely to have neanderthal heritage than other respondents.”

I nearly choked on my soda water. “Is that why you're so short?”

She laughed, covering her mouth, which was full of sweet cream and candy shell.

My stomach jumped. I'd been walking a line all evening between trying to push off the crush of pain of knowing I was leaving and wanting to take her back to the hotel to fuck her silly—or make love to her slowly. Or both. Spending the entire night in bed with her felt like a fitting end.

Right now, as she licked a smear of cream from her upper lip, desire was winning.

“Find any secret relatives?” I asked. Distant second cousins sounded sufficiently unsexy enough to distract me, though I didn't remove my hand from her thigh under the table. I'd been holding her knee protectively all night, wanting to be touching her,

knowing that when we walked outside, we wouldn't be able to hold hands on the small chance someone might see us. It was a minuscule chance, but it was still there, and the last thing we needed was to blow this on our very last day after managing to stay under the radar at Cass's place of work.

"No one very close." Cass took another bite and managed to get the whole spoonful in her mouth this time.

Even that made my dick twitch once more.

I picked up my spoon.

"But apparently you can check back anytime to see if anyone else has registered. So maybe it's not yet on the secret relatives?" She laughed.

I'd never seen her so lighthearted. Was this how she was in the face of the end? Or was this what she was like when she was truly happy? Either way, it hurt my heart.

"How about you?" she asked. "You said you did one a while ago?"

"Yeah. I took one for the health markers." I'd done it to see if I was at risk of Alzheimer's, like my mom. The test had confirmed what the doctors had said—triple the normal risk, which wasn't huge in the first place. It didn't make me feel any better. I didn't mention any of that—I didn't want to drag her down. "I got a slight probability of detached earlobes, 0.7% North African heritage, and discovered a whole branch of our family tree I don't know that lives in my hometown, apparently."

She scraped at the bowl, her spoon clinking against mine. "Did you know I've never been to Seattle?"

"Really?"

“Really. And it’s where two of my favorite rom-coms were set: 10 Things I Hate About You, and of course the iconic Sleepless in Seattle.”

I paused with my spoon by my mouth. “Wait, you like rom-coms?”

“You know that!”

“I don’t.”

For a moment, her expression was confused. Then her brows straightened. “Right. I told you that when you were... what was it...shit-faced?”

I frowned. “That’s not fair then.”

“I know. You don’t remember. But you said—” She paused, her tone softening. “You said your mom reads romance novels, and I said she has good taste, and I confessed to you my love of rom-com movies.”

“What did I say to that?”

“You asked me if Top Gun was a rom-com.”

For the second time that night, I nearly choked. “I didn’t say that.”

“You did.”

I looked at Cassandra, at the wave of her hair touching her chin. Kelly McGillis. That’s why I’d said it.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:25 am

“What?” she asked. “Is my hair sticking up?” She smoothed her hands over her head.

“No,” I said. “I just wish I had that memory, too.”

“I don’t,” she said. “That one’s just for me.”

It was Cassandra’s idea to go to the spas once we got back to the hotel. “They’re closed now, but I happen to know someone with the key.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to stay in the room?” I asked as we slipped in the back door of the hotel, hand in hand.

“Trust me, you’ll like them.”

Due to our wrangling of schedules, Lila had been the one to tour the spas during the review. I’d seen them in photos, but this was my first time experiencing them myself.

We entered via the service access door, where Cassandra flipped on the lights. They were low and atmospheric, and I knew from the photos there were different colors for the eight interconnected rooms. Music began streaming from the speakers; a Lo-Fi beat that sounded like the kind of thing they played in a sultry European club.

The spas had been installed early last year—possibly the one thing the man after Cass’s Mom, George, had done right, though it was Shannon Kelly who’d planned them years before. Along with the golf course, they were the reason the hotel still had the numbers it did.

“Griff had Gus keep all the rooms powered up until midnight tonight,” she said as she pointed me to the change rooms.

Cassandra insisted we change separately

“What about the cameras?”

“I told Griff to get Gus to turn them off, unless he wanted to see his sister’s bare ass in every pool.

My dick twitched at even the thought of her being naked.

Ten minutes later, we reconvened, showered and wearing the fluffy white hotel robes provided. “Ready?” Cassandra asked.

“I was born ready,” I said.

As she unbelted her robe and inched it open, I made a sound close to a groan. When she slipped it off her shoulders, tossing it on a nearby bench, it was more like a growl.

“I changed my mind,” I said, slipping off my robe. “This was a very good idea.”

She winked, then strode in front of me toward the first room, a cavernous space that looked like an ice cave, filled with steaming water. Benches lined the circular pool and low blue lights lit it up, so it looked cold, but felt hot.

She walked down the sloping floor, the water rising up to her knees, and then her thighs.

I made myself stay out of the water until she was all the way in. I didn’t know how else to keep my hands off her.

Her back was to me, and she trailed her fingers in the water, deep enough now that the water lapped at her ass.

My dick swelled, not quite hard, but no longer benignly soft, either.

Music filled the air around us, the beat pulsing just low and steady enough to feel like it was running through my veins.

“You look like a Viking goddess,” I said.

She turned around and sucked in air. “And you look like a god.”

That sent a fire to my limbs. I couldn’t stay away any longer. I walked into the water like a crocodile after a stork. When I reached her, I trailed my wet fingers down her body, from the sides of her neck down her collar, and over the soft peaks of her tits.

Then I kneeled and cupped them in my hands, a feast I’d been dying to taste.

She gasped as I took a nipple in my mouth, breathing in sharper and sharper jags as I sucked and teased it into a hard point.

“You’re perfect,” I said before taking the other one with my tongue, swirling its already-hardened peak. “I could spend all night on your perfect tits,” I said, massaging and sucking and tugging on the nipples until she placed her hands on my shoulders and pushed me away.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:25 am

“Not yet,” she said. “Let’s see more first.”

The next room was a steam room, a long oval with pink lights and spurting jets overhead. They came up under the wide, bleacher-style benches too. Cassandra climbed to the top and sat down, while I watched her from the bottom, my cock in my hand.

“I’m coming after you, Cassandra,” I said as a rush of desire hit my cock, making my balls strain with need. I didn’t want to come, not yet. I wanted to make this night last; to make it all about her. To lavish her with attention like I’d fantasized about from the beginning.

I took the benches like giant steps, kneeling before her.

“On your back, Cassandra” The bench was wide enough that she could lie all the way back, her legs still over the edge, on the step below. She propped herself back on her elbows and I pushed her knees open.

“This,” I said, drawing my tongue up the length of her slit, “is mine.”

She moaned as I pulled my mouth away. I stroked her opening with my middle and forefinger, teasing at the entrance before plunging inside, turning and angling my fingers the way I knew made her shudder.

“This part”—I curled against her g-spot—“this is mine too.” I worked her like this for a moment as she moaned, rocking on the bench.

I lowered my mouth onto her, drawing circles on her clit with my tongue for only a moment before looking back up at her. "So is this."

The steam came in gasps so I couldn't tell what was her and what was the room, but when I looked up, her face was hot, beaded with liquid.

My cock throbbed. I wanted her; I wanted to take her. Not yet.

"I want to watch you," she said.

My eyes met hers, while my tongue played with her pussy, her clit throbbing under me. I knew she was close to coming.

God, she was hot, so fucking hot. I was going to come all over myself if I didn't take her soon.

I slowed for a moment, teasing her, then brought my pace back up too fast and hard; she came then, gushing liquid onto my tongue.

I went crazy at the taste of her, the wet slippery squeeze of her on my fingers.

"I can't wait," I said when she'd slowed, panting. I was slick with sweat and steam, hot and hard.

"Then take me," she said, her chest heaving. Her hair stuck to her cheeks, and she bit her lip as I pushed her legs back. I held my cock over her pussy, then slapped it on her clit. She gasped, rocking under me. There was still a few feet of clearance between her head and the wall, so I pushed her gently onto her back, grasping her tit in one hand and my dick in the other, and slid myself into her.

I was at the perfect angle here with my knees on the lower bench, so I knew I was

hitting that spot inside of her again as I slid all the way in.

“More,” she gasped, and I pulled her hips closer to me so I could get deeper.

“More!” she cried as my balls hit her ass.

“Take me,” I grunted. “Take my whole cock, all the way.” I slapped my body against hers, my legs, stomach, chest, all of me taut and wet, hard and strained. She felt so incredible, so perfect, and when my eyes met hers, something opened up between us. Neither of us said anything as I pumped my dick into her over and over, our jaws tight, eyes locked.

When I felt myself getting close, I brought my thumb to her clit, pressing circles into it as I pushed harder.

“I’ll do it,” she breathed, touching her own pussy, working it in a fast, slippery rhythm that made her eyes go half-lidded.

That’s what did me in. “I’m going to come, Cass,” I said. “I’m going to come inside—”

And then I did, hot, gushing spurts of seed spilling from me and filling her, slicking me as I finished.

Cassandra cried out loud as she came, the sound reverberating around us as she caught up to me, clung to me, grasped me with her legs and arms.

* * *

Being in the spas was smart, I realized, not just for how incredible they were. They were like a different world, one where reality couldn’t come near. But I knew as we

went upstairs, separately, just in case, that this truly marked the end.

“Don’t say goodbye,” she said when we crawled into bed.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:25 am

So, we didn't. We talked until our voices were hoarse. We made love again, this time slow and soft, and when we were done, lying next to each other, she whispered into the darkness next to me.

"I love you, Blake Harrington. Do with that whatever you want. But just know I'm happy knowing I could trust myself enough to say it."

I swallowed, my throat strained.

Even if she didn't expect me to say it back, I could still feel the hurt radiating off her. But the longer the silence grew, the more impossible it got to say anything reasonable back to her. So, I didn't say anything. I kept quiet, feeling like there was a knife in my lungs. I waited until her breathing stayed, her body fully limp against mine. Then I kissed her hair—her Kelly McGillis hair—and lifted her arm off me.

Then, I was gone.

* * *

I didn't sleep for the hour-long journey by taxi to the airport in Burlington—an hour and fifteen, including stopping at the pool house to collect my things. Instead, I scrolled my phone, going through my personal emails for the first time in weeks. I'd neglected anything not related to Harrington or The Rolling Hills. Or Cassandra.

We were exiting the highway to the airport when I saw it—an email from my nephew Arthur.

I didn't know he had an email. It was in the spam folder; I'd only caught it because his name jumped out at me when I'd been about to tap the trash button.

Hi Uncle Blake,

I wanted to tell you something funny, and Dad let me make this email account just so I could send it to you (he also said it was time and I should have one even though I said I can send messages on Minecraft).

We were visiting Grandma yesterday, right after my ball game. I was still wearing my uniform and everything. Dad never makes me change it right away, like Mom does. And when she saw me, she said HI BLAKEY, HOW WAS YOUR GAME? DID YOU BEAT THE BOOGIES?

I didn't know what she was talking about except that she said boogies, but when the nurse came, Dad said she thought I was you, when you were my age. I think I look like my dad, but I guess I look like you!

Anyway, Dad thought I should tell you. I miss you and hope you can come for camping this summer if you're back. Say hi to Aunty Lila.

—Artie

I lowered my phone to the seat next to me, blood rushing in my ears.

The boogies was something Mom used to say to me when I was worried about playing a good team at baseball.

They all have boogies, Blake. Just like everybody else.

I'd thought it was hysterical—as 10-year-olds clearly still do—and it used to make

me feel like the opposing team wasn't so untouchable. When she couldn't be at my games, that's what she'd ask me. Did you beat the boogies?

"Sir?" the cabbie asked.

I startled—we were on the on-ramp to the passenger drop-off area.

"Yes?" I said, my voice coming tight and gravelly. My throat bobbed with something prickly.

"I said, International or Domestic?"

The boarding pass on my phone was for a flight direct to Heathrow. But the word came out before I knew what I was doing. "Domestic. Please."

I was going to lose Persephone by doing this. But right now, I didn't care.

* * *

Mom's homesmelled like antiseptic and fresh-cut flowers. It was as familiar as it was jarring. So was seeing her face as I stepped into the room.

She was young—so much younger than the other patients on this floor. Her hair still had brown streaks in it; her hands were still smooth and steady.

"Hello," she said, smiling. She had one of her romance novels in her hand.

My heart had already cracked open, but now it was like a piece fell right off.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:25 am

“Hi Mom,” I said, sitting down in the guest chair across from the one she sat in.

Immediately, her face fell, confusion taking over.

“Mrs. Harrington,” I corrected myself.

The worry in her expression eased slightly, but it didn’t go entirely away.

“We haven’t seen each other in a while,” I said. “So, you might not remember me.”

“I’m so sorry,” she said, apologetically.

“It’s fine,” I said, my chest squeezing.

“What are you reading?”

Mom brightened. She told me about the story, something about a baseball player and a woman sports reporter falling in love.

“Your son used to play baseball,” I said. “One of them.”

“Oh?” Clearly, she didn’t remember she had a son, let alone three.

“Yeah. That’s him, right there.”

I got up and went to the windowsill, where rain tapped against the glass. For a moment, I had a flash of sun shining through the rain. Of Cassandra, twirling, while

the drops fell on her face.

I blinked that away and picked up the photo of me posed over home base.

She smiled. “Isn’t he sweet?”

I set the frame down. I was about to sit down again when I spotted a photo I didn’t recognize. I knew all the photos here—they’d sat in this same configuration for the past three years. But not this one. It was unframed and was leaning against the window.

My stomach dropped. It was Dad, with a toddler on his shoulders.

Me. That child was me.

“Was Dad here?” I asked, my skin prickling. I flipped the photo over.

Brian and Blake, it said. That was it, our two names.

When I turned around, Mom sucked in a breath. Sometimes this happened, where she’d see me or one of my brother’s faces, and something must have been familiar, because she’d be startled for a moment, before going back to her blank confusion.

But this time, she didn’t go back. This time she said, “Do you remember that? That was on the pier by the market.”

My first thought was I was only a baby. How could I remember?

Then my heart twisted as I understood. She thought I was Dad.

This happened sometimes, too. We’d call it a good day, because it was a

remembering day, even if it was all mixed up. But I hated it. I hated being mistaken for my father.

“I don’t remember,” I said, my voice stiff. Why had I come here, anyway? What the hell had I done standing up Persephone? I was going to lose them, and all because I was being goddamned sentimental.

Because you wanted to see Mom. You wanted to ask her for help.

“Well, you have to remember Blakey’s laugh,” Mom said, laughing herself.

That knife that had been in my side since I’d left Cassandra slipped its way up now, slicing into my heart.

“He had the sweetest laugh. He was such a perfect little boy.”

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:25 am

I clamped my jaw tight, afraid I'd cry out, then. I stared at the photograph. Perfect. The boy—there was nothing wrong with him. How could there be?

“You loved his laugh too, Brian. Do you remember?”

How could she still be so kind when she thought she was talking to him? How did she not have that burning anger in her chest like I did? The one that fueled every decision and tainted every joy?

“Delilah,” I said. “Why aren't you angry with me? Do you remember what I did to you?”

He cheated. Cheated and lied and made his boys grow up with a version of love that harmed.

“I hurt you.”

“I forgave you a long time ago, Brian.” Mom said. Her eyes were on mine.

“How could you forgive me after what I did?”

She smiled. “Forgiveness isn't for you, darling. It's for me. Sometimes you did what you thought was right. Sometimes you just did the things you couldn't stand about yourself. It wasn't right, but I let go of it a long time ago. I forgive you for what you did to me because it frees me.”

For a moment, the world seems to spin and reel. Or maybe that was me.

I kneeled beside my mom, picking up her hand and pressing it to my cheek. “I love you.”

She nodded and smiled. Then she looked out the window, contemplative. When she looked back, her eyes went wide. She pulled her hand away as if embarrassed. “I’m so sorry,” she said. “But I’m not sure who you are?”

It was gone, that moment with Dad. But it was lodged in my chest—not like something bad, but like something that could be good, if I let it.

I swallowed against that pricking again. “I’m Blake,” I said.

“Are you okay, Blake?”

I shook my head. “I’m afraid I’ve messed up.”

“How’s that?”

“I love someone. I’m in love with someone. And I don’t...” I hesitated. “I don’t know how to love them. I’m afraid I’ll mess it all up. I think I already have.”

Mom beamed then, her smile going ear-to-ear. “Well, that’s easy! It’s all in here.” She patted the book on her lap.

The romance novels. I laughed then, thinking of the movies Cassandra had talked about.

“Thank you,” I said. “I have to go now. There are some things I need to do. But I’m going to come back soon, if that’s okay?”

Mom nodded, her expression confused. But she smiled.

“Goodbye,” she said, turning back to her book and opening it to the first page.

That’s what I needed to do, too.

I pulled up my phone and ordered a car to get me back to the airport. Then I sent an email to John at Persephone.

BLAKE:Got a bit delayed. Be there tomorrow with bells on.

Next, I sent a text to Lila.

BLAKE:I’ll be back in New York next week. We need to talk.

Though I hadn’t expected her to, it was only a moment later when she responded.

LILA:I was going to write you the same thing. I think it might be 15 years overdue.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:25 am

I was astonished. But maybe I shouldn't have been. Maybe this trip—her seeing me clearly falling for Cassandra—had been the truth both of us needed.

It wasn't until I was in the boarding area for a new, rebooked flight to Heathrow—arriving only half a day later than originally planned—that I pulled my phone out again. I'd only done it to pull up my boarding pass, but stopped short when I saw the text from my dad.

It had been awhile since he'd sent one of these. Since he'd heard I was working on a hotel, if I recalled correctly.

BRIAN: Heard Goldman's sniffing around that bookshop. You snooze, you lose.

At first, all I wanted to do was tell him off, once and for all. That was the thing about coming through catharsis—my tolerance for any of the old weights that used to hold me down was gone. I wanted to brag about the Rolling Hills, to tell him I was halfway done fixing what he couldn't at his own places.

But that wasn't right. It was a hit that wouldn't last and I'd be no better off than I was before.

I thought of what Cassandra had said, about how scared people bring others down. And I thought of what my mom had said about forgiveness.

After a moment, that old, ancient anger fizzled to rain. I sat for a while, mourning that anger that had fired me for so long. It may not have been right, but it had gotten me through. And somehow, through all of that, through its hardened, bitter core, I'd

found love.

Over the speakers, they were calling a flight that might have been mine.

I hadn't contemplated forgiveness—I didn't think I was there. I didn't want to give it to him. But maybe, like Mom had said, it wasn't for him. Maybe it was for me, and the little boy in that little league game. Maybe if I forgave Dad, that sun shower could be mine, too.

I typed the words in, hitting send before I could change my mind.

BLAKE:I forgive you, Dad.

For a moment, there was nothing.

Somewhere outside myself, I heard the announcement. "This is a final boarding call..."

Then three dots popped up on the screen.

BRIAN:What the hell for?

This time, I didn't hesitate.

BLAKE:For everything, Dad. Don't text me again. Maybe we can talk in a while.

I hit send before as I strode to the counter. Then I turned everything off.

20

CASSANDRA

THREE MONTHS LATER

“I think I got the ‘Irish Potato’ gene,” I said to Chelsea as we ran along the Quince River trail. It was later than we usually got out—eight o’clock—and already humid.

But Chelsea had actually shown up for our run today, so I wasn’t complaining.

Things had gotten a bit better with her since the springtime. She’d gotten a boyfriend, some guy called John, who was perfectly nice, if not a little bland. I didn’t think it was going to last between them, but at least he’d tamped down her partying over the summer.

“We have the same genes,” she said from behind me.

“But you don’t go all pink when you work out,” I said.

“Sure I do. I just don’t go that pink.”

“Exactly,” I said. “I’m an Irish potato.”

As she came up beside me, I squinted like I was inspecting her. “Okay, you’re kind of pink, too.”

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:25 am

“You look like you’re glaring at me,” she laughed. “Like that time you caught poor John in the hallway.”

I laughed hard at that one. “I wasn’t glaring, I was just seeing if I recognized him.”

“You were embarrassing.”

“That’s what big sisters are for, isn’t it?”

Chelsea made a sound but picked up speed so she was in front of me. She craned her neck as we passed through some trees, as if looking for something out on the water.

“Why do you keep doing that?” I asked. She’d been doing it the whole run. In fact, she’d been acting strange since she knocked on my door to get me this morning, which she never did. I was always the one dragging her out.

“I’m not doing anything,” she said.

It was the same thing, I realized, that Eli had said to me last week, after forwarding me a news story he said I might be interested in. He hollered it across the hallway, as he often did, asking if I wanted to see it, and I’d given him the thumbs up just to get him to leave me alone. Then I’d gone back to the document open on my screen—the same document I’d been working through for the past two and a half months—the Harringtons’ implementation plan for the review they’d completed on time and under budget.

Though I still hadn’t paid for any of their services, despite emailing Blake a few

times.

He'd kept brushing me off with, "Soon, I promise". Which would have been less irritating if I didn't also feel like I was getting punched in the stomach every time I saw his name anywhere, on any document.

And especially in my inbox. Even when I'd emailed him first.

I'd been doing okay in the weeks since Blake had left. Mostly.

I was sad, sure. Okay, devastated. I missed him all the time, and was even considering asking Eli if we could change offices just so I didn't have to sit looking at the spot he'd sat all that time.

It probably would have helped if I'd gotten rid of his fishing rod. I'd first discovered it was still in my office when I'd had a meeting with Seamus a week after Blake had left. I'd needed to distract myself with work, so I'd gone all in, speaking with people I knew I'd be considering for various parts of the implementation plan down the road. Per Griffin's recommendation, I was meeting with Seamus to see if he'd want to submit a proposal to do the east wing renovation, which wouldn't be happening until fall at the earliest.

It had been funny seeing Seamus wearing a suit. He looked handsome, I'd realized. I'd known him since we were kids, but I'd never seen him in anything formal. I'd only seen him in jeans and a t-shirt, like he'd been wearing the week before in the east wing; workout gear; or his baseball uniform, when I dragged myself to one of Eli's games.

We chatted briefly about Chelsea—he'd run into her downstairs—and I knew he was trying to politely ask if she was okay. He was worried about her, too. "She's seeing someone," I said, trying to reassure him. When his face fell, I realized how much that

wouldn't help. He was into her. And now he was crushed.

Join the club.

I was about to say something—an apology—when he brightened.

“That’s great,” he said. Seamus gave a half smile, and it looked as if maybe he was actually happy for her. Maybe he wasn’t crushed the way I was, just a good person.

A better person than me. I couldn’t think of Blake without my heart feeling like it had flattened.

Seamus had clearly wanted to move on with the work meeting—he’d sat up straight and adjusted his tie. But that’s when I realized I had seen him in a suit—that very same suit, I was sure—for Mom’s funeral. As if that hadn’t been sobering enough, when he readjusted his long legs under the chair, he’d knocked something with his heel. When he reached down and came up with Blake’s reel, he’d been deeply confused, and then horrified when I’d started to cry.

“Oh shit,” he’d said, standing up. Now he looked panicky.

“It’s fine,” I said. “It’s unavoidable.”

He had no idea what I meant, but he’d offered to snap the offending rod in two.

I’d laughed, teary-eyed. But it wasn’t like I could snap my memories of Blake in half.

Blake Harrington was all over the resort, in every room and hallway. As we started actually implementing their plan, it was like stitching him even more deeply into place.

It was fine,Iwould be fine, I knew I would. I just wasn't quite there yet.

But I was treating myself with grace.

I'd been journaling and seeing a therapist, like I promised Chelsea I would. Chelsea had gone to a few appointments, I knew, but I suspected she'd stopped going recently. I had a note to ask her after giving her some time.

My therapist was helping me focus onself-love,she called it, and it was helping. It would be the key, I knew, once this fresh pain from Blake settled down.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:25 am

It just hadn't yet.

Even though nothing about that last night with Blake should have surprised me, I'd still woken up in tatters. I'd told him I loved him, and he'd been silent.

Before I met him, if I'd said that to someone else, opened up like that and been responded to with nothing, I think it might have broken me. Now it hurt. It was like nothing I'd ever felt before besides grief—but I knew one day I'd be okay.

I'd meant what I said to him, that I just needed to say it. And it was better than having not done it.

Now, as I pounded along the path behind Chelsea, who'd stretched out to a few yards ahead of me, I thought about Blake once more. Because that's what Eli had wanted me to see. He'd forwarded me the article, and then he'd come over to my door and waited while I opened it.

"What are you doing?" I'd said as he stood in my doorway.

"I'm not doing anything."

"You are—"

"Just read the damn article, Cass."

When I pulled it up, I'd sucked in a breath. It was the front page of the business section; a photo of Blake and Lila—that same one from their website where they

stood back-to-back.

HARRINGTON CONSULTING SPLITS

I'd read the article so fast I'd had to read it again to make sure I was getting it right.

"Wild, huh?" Eli asked, leaning into the doorframe now. He was waiting for my reaction.

Oh my God. It hit me then that Eli knew about me and Blake.

"Who told you?" I asked.

"Told me what?"

I'd scowled, gone up to him, and slammed the door. I'd heard him laughing on the other side.

There was nothing to laugh about—Blake and Lila splitting—both the business and the marriage, was sad. Wasn't it? But in another article I'd found the other day, I saw something the first hadn't said, that Lila was planning on forming a new company with her partner, Brynn. That article had been called *Introducing Mr. Mrs. and Mrs. Shark*. There was mention of Harrington Consulting carrying on in some other iteration, but with no further details.

I'd grinned, my heart blooming for them.

But my happiness hadn't lasted.

The split—and the new company—had to have been in the works for a while, and it wasn't like Blake had reached out to me. What he'd said at the golf course that time

had to have been facts—that he just wasn’t the kind of guy who settled down. Not because he was some kind of rake, but because he didn’t know how.

I knew he felt at least some of what I felt for him. But I couldn’t change who he was.

I took in a fresh breath of air, reminding myself that everything else was good. I was doing well, the Rolling Hills was on its way to doing well, Chelsea was doing well... ish. Even Dad was planning on coming home next month for his grandson’s fourth birthday.

It was all just fine.

Then I noticed I was on the path alone.

“Chels?” I called.

Something was off. I knew it right away. Not bad off, I didn’t think, but something weird. That’s when I noticed where I was—the point in the trail where I’d fallen that day. Where I’d slipped in and been pulled out of the river a few short seconds later, by...

I slowed. There was a dingy parked on the riverbank up ahead, close to the place I’d found Blake’s fishing rod. I’d recognize that boat—and the auburn-headed lug standing next to it any day. It was my brother, Griffin.

Chelsea was standing next to him, hands on her hips.

What the—?

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:25 am

I started running again, my eyes so closely focused on my brother and sister on the beach that I nearly missed the sound. Someone was yelling.

My first thought was someone was in trouble. But when I scanned the river, I didn't see anything but fast-moving water.

And the island, dead ahead.

But the island wasn't vacant. I stopped again for the second time in only a couple of minutes.

“What—”

There, on the island, was a figure—tall, trimmed beard, broad shoulders, waving his arms.

In front of him, on the shore, was an elaborate row of driftwood.

I stopped when I reached the trail over where my brother and sister stood.

It was Blake, I realized, as I clapped my hand over my mouth. And he was yelling. It was difficult to hear over the rush of water, loud here against the rocks, but I was pretty sure he was saying the same thing I finally saw was spelled out on the beach in thirty feet of driftwood.

I LOVE YOU CASSANDRA KELLY

My body began to shake uncontrollably.

“Whoa, hey, you’re gonna fall in the river again if you’re not careful,” Griff said, scrambling up the slope to me.

On the island, Blake had stopped yelling. He was too far for me to read his expression, but his body language said he was concerned.

“It’s alright!” Griffin boomed, so loud I remembered myself. When he turned back, he was reaching up to me, hand outstretched. “Come on,” he said. “I didn’t come out here for a constitutional. Unless you don’t wanna go? I’m good either way.”

Wordlessly, I took Griff’s hand, and if I didn’t know better, I thought I saw him smile.

“Thanks for getting her here, kid,” Griff said to Chelsea as we passed by. My baby sister wrapped her arms around me briefly, then kissed me on the cheek. “Go easy on him, Cass.”

I was still too numb to speak. I looked back at Chelsea one time to see her walking back the way we’d come. She’d only come out here for me.

After that, I only looked forward. By the time Griffin had gotten us over to the other side, Blake was down by the water, his eyes on me. His expression was so filled with a mix of fear and dread and hope that Griff, once he helped me out, said, “Put the man out of his misery, would you?”

“I’ve got a few things to do,” he said. “I’ll be back in an hour.”

Blake nodded. “Thanks,” he said, his voice hoarse.

I didn't turn, didn't take my eyes off Blake. The outboard whined, then diminished as Griff drove to wherever Griff went when he was out here.

Then, and only then, did I speak.

"You came back," I whispered.

Blake took a step toward me. "I think I always knew I was going to come back," he said. "I left my fishing rod behind, didn't I?"

I laughed, but it came out a half sob, and that's when he came to me, taking my hands. "I'm sorry I didn't say it back then, that last night," he said. "I felt it, but I just... I didn't know how to say it in a way that would make me believe it was okay to do it."

"To do what, Blake?" I needed to hear the words again, up close, while he looked into my eyes.

He smiled, his expression so earnest I wanted to brush the stray hair from his forehead. "I love you. I love you, Cassandra Kelly, and I want the whole world to know."

I smiled as he grew blurry through my tears. "How long did this take you?"

"An hour." He shrugged. "A couple of hours. A bit longer than that."

He pointed his chin upriver, where, to my astonishment, I saw a banner hanging over the Quince River Bridge. It said the same thing.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:25 am

“It’s what the book called a grand gesture.”

“Wait, did you read a romance book?”

“I read a few. I have to say though, those books are a little... heated. I sincerely hope my mom hasn’t read the same ones, because, damn.”

I laughed then, long and loose and free.

When I tipped my face down again, Blake was staring at me, and that’s when I knew. I knew I’d be okay no matter what, that I was good and worthy and deserving of love. But I knew my life would be better if I got to love him, too.

So I said it back. “I love you, Blake.”

He kissed me then, long and hard and soft again, lifting me off my feet and then slipping and stumbling in the sand, just the two of us here on our island.

“Does this mean you’re going to move to Quince Valley?” I asked as he set me down once more.

He shrugged. “I was thinking about coming out this way.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Thinking about it, huh?”

Blake laughed, the dimples in his cheeks going deep. “I’ll go wherever you go, Cassandra.” He stroked my temple with his thumb. “Just maybe try not to fall into

any more rivers. I don't want to go there."

"How about I promise I'll say thank you next time you haul me out?"

"Deal," Blake said, and I rose up and kissed him once more, my hand on his cheek and an overwhelming love for this man rushing through me, as strong as the Quince.

Then we lay down on the beach, my head on his chest, his heartbeat under my ear, ready together for whatever else floated our way.

21

BLAKE

The bat cracked,echoing across the bleachers, and a baseball arced high up into the August sun.

Around us—save for a couple of isolated hoots from the opposing team—the crowd groaned.

I lifted up my cap to see the ball sail over the fence at the far end of the Quince Valley Ball Field. "Well, shit."

Cassandra cringed. "This is not looking good."

The Greenville Mastiff hitter, who'd already lazily dropped his bat to the ground, jogged around the bases.

"He's not even their star hitter," Chelsea said, on Cass's other side.

"Who's their star hitter?" I asked.

“I don’t know, that one, I guess?” Chelsea waved her hand at the opposing team’s dugout.

I laughed, but I wasn’t paying much attention to Eli’s championship game, either. I was too distracted by the feel of Cassandra next to me. Her shoulders under my arm; her hair against my cheek. I kissed the top of her head, my heart feeling too big for my damn chest.

Cassandra sighed, sliding her hand onto my knee. “At least losing is better when I’m with my favorite person.”

“Hey,” Chelsea said, looking over accusingly.

“Forget Chelsea, I’m right here,” Jude exclaimed, turning from the bench below us.

“I wite heeya!” Jude’s son Jack, next to him, mimicked his dad, right down to the little hands on his hips.

Cassandra laughed. “Sorry. Never mind my siblings; you’re my favorite person too, Jack.”

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:25 am

Jack beamed.

Jude turned toward him. “At least I’m someone’s favorite person, right, buddy?”

“Who’s favorite?” Jack asked earnestly, and this time, we all laughed.

“I’m honored,” I said into Cassandra’s hair. “But you don’t have to pick me over your siblings.”

“Of course I do,” she said. “Or at least, they can think I do.”

I laughed softly this time, even as a deep, almost painful love for her ran through me.

My heart had never felt so full. But it had only been a week since Cassandra had held it in her hands, when Griffin had ferried her across the water to our island.

That morning I’d held my breath as the boat pulled up and I saw her take in me and then the words I’d spelled out. I’d still been unsure if the gesture was too much. It didn’t feel like too much. I’d felt like I could write I love you on the surface of the moon and it wouldn’t adequately express how I felt about her.

Still, I’d willed my damn hands not to shake as the boat crunched up onto the sand and she’d gotten out.

Cassandra had told me she loved me before I left. But I still didn’t know if I’d taken too long. And while the words had buoyed me at first, after a time over those months apart, they’d worried me too. While I was shifting every piece of my life around to

make being with her possible—if she'd have me—I'd had to consider the very real possibility that she'd said the words in the heat of the moment. What if once real distance was between us, both time and miles, she'd realize I wasn't worth loving in the first place?

But each time I thought that, I'd remind myself that it was my old shit talking. I still might falter, but I knew now that my dad's never-good-enough rhetoric wasn't true.

“It was his shitty, harmful-as-hell way of trying to make men out of us,” Connor had said when I'd visited him and Art last month. I'd spilled my guts about everything that had happened in Quince Valley, and all my plans going forward. Running Harrington on my own. Selling my share of everything Lila and I co-owned—the apartment, the house, the business.

“You got the brunt of his shit,” Connor had said.

I had, I realized, now that I was shining a light on it for the first time. And I hadn't taken all that heat by chance, either. I hadn't wanted Dad pulling any of that shit on my brothers. I'd been the one to go to business school. I was the focus of Dad's critical energy because I'd followed his path. I'd had a minor crisis after meeting with Connor. Had I even wanted to go into business? Or had that been something I'd wanted to do first to prove myself to Dad, and then to beat him at? I decided I had wanted to go. I'd enjoyed it, and I was good at it. I loved what I did now. Dad may have influenced my decision, but in the end, it was a good one. And it was mine.

A few days after I got home from Connor's place, I'd heard Dad had hired Goldman to help with his hotels. Before everything, I would have taken that as a victory. I would have gleefully raised a glass to his failure, the hurt still burning in me like something molten. But now, having forgiven him—and finally understanding that my real happiness and love don't thrive on his or anyone else's failures—I just felt sad for him. He didn't know what real happiness was like. He'd destroyed his chance at

having it with his sons. He'd lost it with Mom, long before she lost her memory. He didn't have what I had.

The love of a brilliant, beautiful, kind woman who loved him back.

So on that island, standing there with my overworked heart going off like a jackhammer in my chest, my arms aching from hauling logs, all I could see was Cassandra. All I knew was Cassandra. My beautiful, fierce, windblown-Kelly-McGillis-hair Cassandra.

And when she came to me and told me she loved me too?

That was it. I was a goner.

Hers was a love I wasn't going to squander.

"I love you," I whispered above her head now, too quiet to hear.

Still, she leaned into me, nuzzling my neck with her hair as if she understood anyway.

Until Chelsea sucked in a breath.

We both followed her gaze to a couple of guys at the end of Jude's row. They were standing, their foam seats and cups in hand.

"They can't leave!" Chelsea exclaimed. She sounded indignant. "Liam! Tug!" she called. "It's only the third inning! Don't give up on them so fast!"

The pair of guys, who'd started making their way across the bleachers toward the steps, looked over at us. The one in behind grimaced. "It's too painful."

“Why do you care so much?” Cass asked her sister.

“Look at Eli and Seamus,” she said. “They’re so upset.”

Over on third base, Eli tossed his hat on the ground, not even trying to hide his displeasure. His friend Seamus, who Eli had dragged along last week when he helped me hook up the banner on the bridge, was a little less dramatic. He stood at second, head hung low for a moment as the next guy came up to the plate. I got the feeling if Seamus’s baseball pants had pockets and he wasn’t wearing a glove, he would have shoved his hands in them.

“Boo!” Jude said to the guys trying to leave. He threw a piece of popcorn at them as they passed us, which the guy at the back batted away, looking guilty.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:25 am

Little Jack tossed a handful of popcorn too, only his reach wasn't quite as strong, and the pieces tumbled off the backs of the people sitting in front of them.

Jack giggled as they turned around, brows knitted.

"Sorry," Jude apologized, but he was doing a poor job of holding in his laughter too.

"That guy's not wrong," I said, while Jude gently admonished his son. "It's hard to watch."

This was supposed to be a championship game, but the Quince Valley team seemed to have lost confidence early on.

The coach, who'd just called for a timeout, went to confer with his pitcher.

Jude stood up, stretching.

"Not you, too?" Cass asked.

"I'm just going to take Jack to the concession."

"I'll go," Chelsea said, tucking her phone in her pocket. "I need some water." She'd promised Cassandra she wasn't hungover, but she'd shown up in dark sunglasses and a wide-brimmed hat, complaining about the sun being 'too loud'.

"No," Jude said. "I'm on it."

“It’s fine, I—”

“Relax, I’ll get you your water.”

It was then I noticed the woman standing over by the food service area. Even from this far away, I could tell she was looking at us, her hand up in a little wave.

Chelsea sighed and leaned back against the chain link fence behind us. “Fine. Extra ice, please.”

Jude turned to us. “You guys want—” he began, but Jack let out an excited whoop—he’d spotted the woman too. She must have been waving at him. He began climbing around people’s legs to get to the stairs.

“Buddy, slow down!” Jude called, running after him.

“Who’s she?” I asked after they’d left.

I wasn’t sure Cassandra had heard me. She was gripping my knee now, assessing the situation with narrowed eyes.

“Nora,” Chelsea said for her. “The Quince Valley Town librarian. Which is funny, considering I don’t think Jude’s been in a library since... ever.”

“He takes Jack to story time there,” Cass said, bringing her attention partway back to us. “I think they’re just friends. Actually, that’s thanks to you,” she said to me.

Chelsea, meanwhile, had gone back to her phone.

“Me?” I asked, surprised.

“You’re the one who suggested Jude start going to the library to look in the archives. He’s really into this Eleanor Cleary ghost story.”

“He’s not the only one,” I said, remembering now that Lila insisted I tell her whatever they find out about the cipher. “Lila’s pretty invested too.”

Cass laughed. “Really? She seems so... practical.”

“She is. But ghosts or no, it’s a cool mystery.”

For a moment, we sat in silence, and I knew Cass was thinking about Lila. Her brows had slanted the same way on the beach that morning when she’d asked what happened with her.

“Lila came out to her parents,” I’d told her. Lila had given me permission to share with Cass. No more secrets, she’d said. “It didn’t go great. Her mom is working on getting there, but her dad’s not speaking to her.”

My heart hurt thinking about it now. It was the thing Lila had been trying to avoid her whole adult life. But you can’t run away from that kind of pain.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:25 am

When she told me we'd been sitting at our kitchen table in New York together, boxes of my stuff piled around us. I'd been putting everything into storage until I figured out what was going on between me and Cass. Brynn had sat next to her, holding her hand while she sobbed.

"Even with this much pain," Lila had said when she calmed down enough to take a breath, "It still feels better than holding onto the lie."

I'd nodded. Lies like that were poisonous, whether you told them to someone else, or to yourself. They fester.

"But that's not the worst thing, Blake," Lila had said, after a moment. She'd looked like she was on the edge of breaking into a renewed set of sobs. "The worst part is that I know I ruined your life, too, and for that I'm so, so sorry."

"What did you tell her?" Cassandra had asked on the beach, and for a moment, the memories blurred in my mind. The rush of water and soft titter of birdsong as we lay in the sand that day—the freeing sense of love I felt for Cassandra so strong I had to remember to breathe—and that moment in the kitchen, the table cold under my hands, clock ticking in the silence and pain radiating off my old friend.

I'd held onto the sand, focusing on the warmth of the sun and sparkle of the water. On the woman in my arms. "I told her it had been my choice," I said. "That all those years, as long as we lived our lie, I could feel good about protecting one person from pain. It felt like something useful amid all that hurt."

I'd told Cassandra everything on that beach, stroking her hair as she lay across my

chest. Every raw, painful truth I'd figured out over those months we were apart. The hardest one had been what I'd known all along but hadn't been able to articulate, and my heartbeat had ratcheted up as I spoke it. "But Cass, I also told her I never would have agreed to our arrangement if I'd felt like I deserved to be in love with someone. I never did. Not until now."

Cass's eyes had been glassy with tears when she'd looked up at me. "You're a good man, Blake Harrington. I'm sorry you ever had to think that wasn't true."

Later, I'd answered all her questions about the technical aspects of how we'd split the company. "I'm going to be Harrington Consulting, and Lila and I are splitting the clients who didn't want to jump ship to Goldman." There were quite a few, as it turned out. He'd tried poaching several of them the minute he heard we were splitting, and a lot of them didn't take it well. Like soliciting business at a funeral, one had called it. I wouldn't go quite that far. But either way, I took most of the clients who didn't care that I was moving to a remote model of business. One that had me headquartered in Quince Valley, Vermont.

"I hope she's happy," Cassandra said. "After all of it."

When I'd left the house, Lila and I had hugged for a long time, unable to speak for a moment as we were both so choked up. But then she'd cleared her throat, and she'd said something similar to me.

I hope you know true happiness, Blake. I've never known anyone to deserve it more.

Happy wasn't big enough for what I felt, I thought now. I was on cloud goddamned nine.

Just then, there was a crack of a bat connecting with a ball once again, and this time we both turned, looking at the game. Quince Valley had gone up to bat, and Seamus

Reilly had just hit a ball deep into the outfield.

“Damn, way to go Seamus,” I said.

“He’s pretty good, huh?” Chelsea said. She’d lowered her phone.

We both looked over at her.

“What?” She picked her phone up again, defensively. “He is!”

Seamus was one of the team’s best players, by the looks of it. But something told me she wasn’t interested in his skills on the field. Cass told me yesterday that she’d broken up with her new boyfriend just the other day, and the progress she’d been making at straightening out her life had already started slipping.

“Are you interested in Seamus?” Cassandra asked her sister.

“No!” Chelsea said, gripping her phone hard, not looking at Cassandra.

Cass threw me a look.

“Eli would freak out,” Cass said to her. “No, he’d knock Seamus out first. Then he’d freak out on you.”

“He’s just good at baseball,” Chelsea said. “Anyway, where’s Jude with that water?” She didn’t wait for us to answer. “Never mind. I’m going to get it myself.” She stood up and slipped through the crowd on her other side.

“Did you see that?” Cass asked me. “She’s into Seamus, right?”

I shrugged. “I guess. She was definitely giving him a look.”

Cass looked up at me. “What look?”

I met Cass’s eyes, and just like that, I forgot all about her siblings and the game. Even the sounds of the field faded away.

I smiled at Cassandra, warmth shooting through me. “This one,” I said. Then I reached my hand up to her face and kissed her, brushing my lips against the soft plushness of hers, my tongue flicking inside. An innocent kiss, yet still my body responded, everything stiffening. Tensing. Needing.

I was a live wire around this woman.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:25 am

“Blake,” she whispered, gripping my hand against her jaw. Her eyelids fluttered. “Are you always going to have this effect on me?”

“I sure as hell hope so.” I kissed her once more.

“Good,” she said against my lips.

We took full advantage of the absence of the others, and only when it became clear we were making a spectacle of ourselves did I pull back, grinning, and kissing her once more for good measure. Then I tucked her under my arm like she belonged there—because she did.

I looked out over the field and beyond, to the rolling hills of the valley and the Quince River sparkling below. Even from here I could see the tiny slip of land we’d found each other on. That was where I first caught hold of Cassandra Kelly, and maybe even back then I knew the truth: I never planned on letting go.

EPILOGUE

SEAMUS

I gripped my condensation-wet glass of soda and grimaced as Eli howled at another of our teammates’ jokes. I would have laughed too—it was funny—but I didn’t want to be here on the patio of O’Malley’s pub.

It wasn’t just because we’d just been absolutely trounced by the Greenville Mastiffs in our final championship league game today. It wasn’t even because half the

Mastiffs had decided to stay in Quince Valley for the night and had chosen the Blue Line bar across the street to celebrate in, rather than drive the two hours back to their hometown like a normal baseball team. Sure, these things sucked. But I didn't want to be here because socializing made me itch.

I'd gone against my better judgment letting my best friend Eli Dunham drag me for drinks to mark the end of the season, when all I wanted to do was be at home, decompressing from the pressure of that game. I'd rather be kicking back on my deck, listening to the crickets and watching the glow of fireflies in the trees from the comfort of my hammock.

I loved that hammock. And I loved being alone, too.

Mostly.

"Seamus, you're seriously not getting a beer?" Eli asked when the server left the patio with the team's second-round orders.

"I've got better beer at home," I said.

"Is it because we're at Seamus's?"

I narrowed my eyes at Eli and he laughed heartily. He knew it drove me nuts how half the team had insisted I had to come out tonight because the bar bore my name. It was stupid. Seamus at Seamus O'Malleys.

"Yeah, man. That's exactly why."

Eli let out another big laugh and clapped me on the shoulder. But I knew he wouldn't put the pressure on me to join in. He knew it was a big enough deal that I was even here.

The truth was, I was also just bone tired. I'd been working my ass off all week at the mega-mansion my family contracting business, Reilly and Sons, was building up in the Hills. Throw a baseball game on top of it—one where we knew we were going to lose, but pulled out all the stops giving the league champions a run for their money anyway—and I was spent.

Eli turned back to the rest of the guys at the table. They were talking about how we'd come so close to schooling the Mastiffs (we hadn't), and I told myself once I was done with this soda, I'd make my excuses and head home.

Across the street at the Blue Line, the door banged open and a couple of women stumbled out. They were in jeans and tank tops that hugged their torsos, and I said a silent prayer of thanks to summer. Not that I was ogling, but they were both cute, and I was a warm-blooded man who happened to not have gotten any for an embarrassingly long time. The women stumbled, laughing. They'd obviously had a couple drinks. More than a couple. The first one, who had red hair up in a ponytail, held something up in her hand and started singing.

Then the second one did a twirl, her chestnut hair flowing around her like a mermaid's. When she stopped, she was facing me. Her eyes locked on mine, even though there was a whole street between us.

Then she waved at me.

Oh shit. I sat up straighter, my stomach doing a little dive.

That wasn't just any woman. That was Chelsea Kelly, my best friend's little sister.

I glanced at Eli, but he was deeply absorbed in the conversation next to him. I lifted up a hand—brief and noncommittal—then quickly turned back to the table, taking a long gulp of soda to try to shift my focus.

I knew if Eli saw his sister like this, he'd be pissed. He'd been telling me how Chelsea had been going a little off the rails. I'd noticed. I'd tried to ask her sister about it awhile ago, but I'd been so fucking awkward about it. Then she told me Chelsea had a boyfriend and it got even worse.

But I didn't know if that was still going on, because Eli had been complaining about her again.

"I don't know what the hell is up with her," Eli had said, "but she spends more time out than at home."

"You're not her dad," I'd said, wanting very much not to get involved again.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:25 am

“But I am her big brother,” he’d said. “Same diff.”

I’d almost opened my mouth again to remind him she was a grown woman, but I didn’t want to bring attention to the fact I’d noticed. And fuck, I’d noticed. Gone was the little girl with golden brown pigtails and freckles I remembered from when Eli and I were kids. Gone too was the almost awkward young woman I’d seen here and there on social media when Eli posted shots of one of their family gatherings.

Now, she was a woman. A soft, kind, sweet woman who always said hi when she saw me and asked me about my family, even when I barely gave her more than a few-word answer.

But it didn’t matter. Chelsea was Eli’s sister, and if he saw me ogling his little sister, he’d probably punch me, best friend or not. Maybe especially because I was his best friend.

Thank god his back was to the street now.

I tried to concentrate on the conversation happening next to me—more talk about the Mastiffs and their sad starting lineup—which had just kicked the shit out of us. But then the first woman—Chelsea’s friend—giggled as she dropped something. She bent over and picked up an object that flashed in the evening light, shaking them up high over her head.

Keys. I sat up straight.

Were they planning on driving?

The woman held the keys out and a car around the corner chirped—I could just make out the lights flashing too. Then Chelsea’s friend hooked her arm in Chelsea’s and they toddled down the street toward it.

My heart thumped in my chest. I couldn’t let them drive.

“I gotta go,” I said, standing up abruptly. I pulled out a couple of bills and tossed them on the table.

“Wait, what?” Eli said.

But I took advantage of his confusion and slipped between the tables, hopping the patio partition and jogging across the street.

I reached the women as the first one was fumbling with the door handle of her sedan.

“Hey,” I said.

Both of them startled and when the first one tensed, reaching for her purse, I realized I hadn’t thought this out.

“Sorry,” I said.

“Oh,” Chelsea said. “It’s Seamus. Hey Seamus.”

“Hey Chels. You’re not getting in this car, are you?”

“Oh... yeah, we’re going to this party Mia heard about up in the Hills.”

Mia, who’d relaxed once she saw Chelsea knew me, jingled her keys in front of me.

“You wanna come?”

I looked at her a moment, assessing, then reached out and grabbed the keys from her hand. It was an easy take.

“Hey!” she’d exclaimed.

“Sorry,” I said, genuinely sorry. I wasn’t a rude person. I didn’t like doing it. But I wasn’t letting her drive like this.

Especially not with Chelsea in the passenger seat.

“I’ll drive you two home,” I said.

“I’m not going home,” Chelsea said. Then she hiccupped.

“I’m driving you home,” I said. I couldn’t in good conscious drive an already wasted Chelsea Kelly to another party. There was no way in hell. I was taking her back to her place, chucking her into her room, and hopefully, she wouldn’t remember any of it in the morning.

“You know what?” Mia said. “I think some of those Greenville guys said they were down to party. I’m going to go back inside. Can I have my keys, please? Promise I won’t drive.”

I unhooked her car fob from her key chain, pocketing the fob and handing the rest back to her.

“You can’t do that!”

“I just did. I’ll give them to Chelsea to give back to you.”

While she huffed, I tipped my head at Chelsea. “I’m right over there.”

My truck, with its Reilly and Sons logo on the back, was up on the other side of the street.

Chelsea studied me, and for the briefest flash, the saddest expression I’d ever seen passed over her, darkening her eyes. Then it was gone, so quickly I was sure I imagined it. She sighed. “I’ll see you later, Mia,” she said.

I had to help Chelsea up into my truck’s cab by grasping her by the ribcage. She was warm under my touch; her tank top slipping slightly so my hands brushed her skin. She laughed like I’d tickled her.

God fucking help me.

Once I was in the truck myself, I had to lean over to help her with her seatbelt. The scent she was wearing was some kind of tropical fruity coconut thing.

I tried to ignore both those things, focusing on getting the truck started so I could get my best friend’s sister home.

“You alright?” I asked.

“Mm-hmm,” she said. She leaned herself against the door of the pickup and stared at me as I pulled into the lane.

Heat crawled up my neck.

Just get her home. That’s all you have to do, buddy. It was a quick drive to the Rolling Hills resort from downtown. I just had to get back onto the main drag, then follow it up and around to the Quince River bridge, then up the hill, and bam, this would all be over.

“You’re a good guy, aren’t you, Seamus? You’ve always been a good guy. So quiet, too. Must be hard being around Eli. He has an opinion on everything.”

“I have opinions,” I said. “I just don’t need to tell everyone about them all the time.”

“Oh, so Eli annoys you too?”

“I didn’t say that.”

Eli was opinionated. But I liked that about my best friend. He wasn’t afraid to say what he thought. Unlike other people who trampled over me because I didn’t say whatever was on my mind all the time, he listened to me, gave me a chance to share mine if I wanted to. Anyway, why was she talking about me? I didn’t like talking about myself.

“How come you’re out partying so much, Chelsea?” I asked.

At this, she scowled. “Who says I’m partying so much?”

“Everyone.”

“Eli hasn’t exactly been keeping on the straight and narrow.”

“He got divorced. Then his—”

I was going to say his mom passed, but of course her mom passed too.

If Chelsea knew what I was going to say, she didn’t show it.

“I’d just rather be out than sitting at home.”

“Funny, I’d rather be at home than going out.”

“I don’t like being alone.”

“And I don’t like being around people.” Not all people, anyway. I wasn’t a misanthrope, I just preferred silence. Peace and quiet. Hard work. Reading a book.

Thinking about Chelsea.

Fuck.

“Do you think opposites attract?” She shifted closer, leaning into me so that her scent went swirling up my nose.

That heat that had been riding over my skin at her gaze came back hard.

I shrugged. I stopped at a red light. In a minute, we’d be back on Arbutus Street, on our way to the bridge.

“Why don’t you have a girlfriend?”

“What?” My truck rumbled under me, the lights on the dash feeling suddenly too bright.

“A girlfriend. You’re cute. Really cute with that hair and those eyes.” She waved her hand around at me. “You’re tall and your arms are probably strong from baseball—”

She reached both hands up and lay them on my bicep.

That heat drove down now, my dick twitching.

“Chelsea, what are you doing?”

“I was right, they’re big. I like arms.”

I should have moved my arm away, but the feel of her hands there was sending spikes

of electricity up my arms. There wasn't anywhere to move it, anyway. How long was this goddamned red?

"Don't you have a boyfriend?"

Chelsea shifted closer. "We broke up awhile ago."

That settled that.

"I haven't told anyone," she said. "You won't tell anyone, will you?"

My dick jumped again. No. Just... no.

"What if we just... hung out for a bit when you drop me off? Ever since Blake came back, Cass has been staying with him. They're in love."

Her voice sounded bitter at that. Hurt. Eli told me on the way to the game earlier that his sister had fallen head over heels for her consultant. I was happy for her, especially since she'd seemed so messed up when I'd done that interview with her. I'd even seen the two of them once, holding hands as they walked over the bridge downtown, eyes only for each other.

I could still feel Chelsea's eyes on me.

Finally, the light turned green. I threw my foot on the gas.

Maybe the momentum would force Chelsea to sit back in her chair.

I cursed the part of me that hoped it wouldn't.

"And you know Eli's going to be at O'Malley's forever."

“Not forever,” I said.

“So you’re thinking about it,” she said, and I could hear the smile in her voice. Shit. This wasn’t happening. But fuck yes, I was thinking about it. How could I not? Chelsea Kelly, if I admitted it to myself, played a regular feature in my fantasies, the ones I tried to wipe from my brain the minute they passed through.

She was Eli’s sister. His baby sister. His—

Chelsea’s hand slid onto my thigh. She’d kept the first hooked under my arm and was craning herself up now so her lips were by my ear.

The green light up ahead was red. If I stopped, I wasn’t sure what would happen, not with Chelsea’s hands on me. I slowed down. If I coasted a bit here, I wouldn’t have to hit the brakes and I could lay on the gas the minute it turned green.

“No one has to know,” Chelsea whispered. Her hot breath in my ear had a direct line to my cock. I had to bite back the groan threatening to come out of me.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:25 am

Part of me knew this was her self-destructive behavior, that Chelsea probably didn't feel anything for me. That I could be anyone.

Part of me didn't care.

"Chelsea," I said.

She took my earlobe in her mouth, her hand sliding higher up my thigh.

Even as the heat threatened to engulf me, some small part of my conscience knew I had to stop. Knew this could get really messy really fast. "Chelsea, we can't do this," I said. My voice was barely more than a whisper. The light up ahead was still red, but it was going to change any minute. I held my foot over the gas, ready to hit it the moment it turned.

Then her hand slipped over the bulge in my jeans.

"Fuck," I said. I glanced at her briefly. Her eyes were on mine, her bottom lip in her mouth.

"See?" she squeezed her hand. "You want to, too."

I glanced back up. The light had turned green, and we were almost on it. Thank God. I lowered my foot onto the gas.

Her hand slipped off, and I wanted desperately to tell her to put it back on.

Yes, I want it, Chelsea. I want it so fucking bad. But we can't. It's impossible.

I turned to look at her to tell her that last part, and that's when I saw the headlights behind her. Bright. Huge.

Too fast.

Too close.

The last thing I saw was her face; that sad, beautiful face, before the vehicle slammed into us with an explosive, sickening crunch.

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