



# My Grumpy Billionaire Soccer Star

**Author:** *Kathy Asher*

**Category:** Romance, Billionaire Romance

**Description:** Never meant to cross that line with a soccer superstar and my insufferable boss.

Vaughn Graham, a grumpy billionaire soccer superstar never valued me and I hated him for that.

But one explosive argument and we end up having fiery sex right on his desk, leaving my world spinning.

Now we're back to our roles—dutiful secretary and arrogant player—pretending nothing happened.

Yet the memory of his touch haunts me, and I can't ignore the electricity crackling between us.

As his demands grow more unreasonable and my frustration mounts, I'm torn between my burning desire and the need to prove my worth. He thinks he can have it all—the fame, the game, and me at his beck and call.

I'm done playing by his rules.

It's time to show this cocky athlete that I'm not just another conquest, and that he'd be lost without me.

But I can't resist falling for him...

**Total Pages (Source):** 90

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:43 am*

Chapter one

Chapter One

Rachel

Meow!

With the speed of light and the lurking feeling of failure hovering over me in my bed, I throw the covers off my body and sit up straight with swollen, pulsing eyes and hair that birds would rather die than nest in.

“I’m up! I’m up! I’m up!”

Leaning over to the large pillow by my side, I plant a heavy kiss on the head of my roommate and best friend, Archie.

Meow.

The chubby orange thing never fails me when it comes to getting me ready for the dreary days of my life. I blink the sleep out of my eyes and jump out of bed to stumble into the bathroom.

I don’t think about either the comfort of my bed or the comfort of homemade coffee as I pick up my toothbrush and, later, hop under a hot shower.

As the water pours through my scalp and down my body, I shake my head slowly and

wonder about the last time I've had a proper bath—with candles, a good historical romance novel, and wine on a cool evening with no worries or responsibilities the next day.

My life seems to be breezing right past me, and even now, I can picture Vaughn, my six-foot-four boss with his sleeve tattoos, kicking me around a field, a horn on either side of his head, and a wicked smile stretching his cheek.

Vaughn is a pain in my ass, but maybe I'm just the only one who sees him that way. Every time he pulls up to Vaughn Charity Center—which seems to be every day now, since his injury—he has a wide, welcoming smile for everyone except me. It's almost like once he sets his eyes on me, his face turns sour, and suddenly, he tugs at his collar like my presence is suffocating. It's something I don't seem to understand.

Everyone admires him, from the janitor who willingly offers to park his car properly to the receptionist who always has a cup of coffee ready. Most people call him an angel without a doubt, and boy, does he look angelic!

His face is in such perfect symmetry that it is almost otherworldly, sculpted with delicate lines that hold both strength and gentleness. He has high cheekbones and a jawline that speaks of his strength. Two large, soulful brown eyes stare at you when he speaks, conveying every flicker of thought and feeling without a word. When he is elated, they widen even more and have a lighter shade. When he is angry, you can see them turn dark amber.

I heard the faint ringing of my phone coming from the bedroom, pulling me from my thoughts. Quickly, I rinse the lather off my head and grab my towel. There are only two people in the world who call me so early in the morning: Vaughn and my mother. I enter the room and find Archie hissing at my phone, the hair on his back rising.

It's with great luck that he hasn't thought of knocking the phone off the bed yet.

Sometimes, I wonder why the orange cat thinks he has more rights to my bed than my phone. Before now, I used to keep my phone on the dresser, only to wake up and find it knocked to the ground, making me miss my alarms. Archie loves his sleep very much, and anything that dares to wake him from that slumber will have to deal with the consequences.

I see him raising his paw to strike at my phone.

“Don’t, Archie!” I yell at him. He looks up at me and cocks his head. “Go away,” I say, waving him off the bed with one hand while I hold on to my towel with the other.

I read the number displayed on the screen, the last four digits jumping at me and causing my heart to flutter. Somehow, I have convinced myself that not saving my mother’s number will do much good for me as I will no longer feel that anxiety creep up on me every time my phone starts buzzing. However, I can still recognize her number without even having it saved.

“Hello,” I say, pressing the warm device against my ear.

“Hey, Ray!”

I hate whenever she calls me that, like I’m still eight years old, standing in front of the bathroom mirror while she whispers sweet nonsense to me. I can imagine what conversation that girl would be having with my twenty-seven-year-old self now when she realizes that the mother we used to love so much has become our second biggest problem—after Vaughn, of course.

“Mother,” I reply in a flat voice.

“Didn’t expect you to be up this early.”

“Why did you call then? To interrupt my sleep?”

“No, can we just not fight right now?”

“I’m not fighting you or anyone. You are the one who is calling my phone, and how can I help?” I raise a brow, drumming my fingers on the dresser impatiently as the cold begins to seep into my bones.

“Leo and I are getting married this weekend.”

“Good for you,” I blurt, my eyes stinging, the news hitting me like a bucket of ice blocks thrown on my face.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:43 am*

“You don’t sound happy.”

“What do you want me to do? Throw a party because you are marrying your second husband since my father died?”

“Ray, you can’t keep blaming me for the death of your father. I’m sorry I moved on. He loved you as a daughter, but I have needs, too.” Her voice cracked as she spoke.

“Too bad. I had needs too when you left me and Father for months with a failing heart to go have fun!”

“Christ! What would you have had me do? We were divorced. Did you expect me to leave my husband and come running? You have no idea what your father did to me! No idea! You were just a kid!”

“I don’t care. I couldn’t care. It’s not going to change the fact that he died, and you seem pretty fine with that.”

“You can’t keep pushing me away because my marriage with your father did not work. You can’t keep doing that! It is as much his fault as it is mine.”

“Well, you’re not dead, Mom! Happy?”

“Ray, listen to me—”

“I’m going to be late for work. What do you need from me, Mom? Is there anything I can help you with?”

There is a brief pause with a lot of heavy breathing in the background. I am making lines on the mahogany table with my fingernail, a heavy weight on my chest making it difficult for me to breathe.

“Will you come? I want you to,” she says in a flurry.

“Why? Why would I come to your wedding? Why put myself through that level of hurt?”

“Ray . . .”

“Goodbye, Mother.”

“Don’t you—”

The phone line clicks dead. I drop my phone on the dresser and take two deep breaths. My heart threatens to give out, and a tear slips from my eye. Suddenly, I feel a soft thud beside me. I look down, and there is Archie, watching me with his big, green eyes. Without a word, he pads over and climbs into my lap, kneading my legs gently before curling up against me. I can feel the warmth of his body through my clothes, and as he begins to purr, the steady, soothing vibration feels like it’s unraveling some of the tightness in my chest.

“Hey, Archie. Thank you,” I whisper, running my fingers through his soft fur. He presses his head into my hand in response, his purrs growing louder. I can’t help but smile just a little as he curls tighter against me. Somehow, he knows. He always knows when I need him most.

Between my mother’s call and Archie’s little cuddle session, I managed to get to the office an hour late. As I sit in the traffic leading to the last turn before getting to the office, I contemplate exiting the car and just walking down to the office. Two missed

calls from Vaughn mean I have to put my phone in airplane mode.

His breakfast sits on the passenger seat next to me. My eyes glance at the clock on the dashboard—9:15 a.m. There is a sea of red brake lights stretching ahead of me. I sigh and rest my head on the steering wheel. I am going to have quite a horrible day. Vaughn will kill me for messing up his breakfast schedule by over half an hour and fourteen minutes.

He has a thing with time where anything later than thirty minutes is enough to incur his wrath. Even his managers know not to interrupt his schedule ever, and here I am, a sitting duck with no hope in sight, the universe playing some kind of cruel joke. I curse my mother under my breath for messing up my emotional and mental state.

I flick on the radio, trying to drown out the noise of honking horns and my own rising tension. The soft hum of a pop song fills the car, but it does little to ease the knot in my stomach. My mind is already at the office—meetings, emails, and the stack of paperwork I left unfinished the night before all racing through my thoughts.

The car in front of me crawls forward again, and I press the gas, moving another few feet before slamming on the brakes once more. I glance out the window at the chaos of downtown: pedestrians darting between cars, delivery trucks clogging side streets, and cyclists weaving dangerously close to bumpers. It feels like the entire city is stuck in this endless, infuriating gridlock.

The light ahead finally turns green, and the cars begin to move more steadily this time. I say a silent prayer as I switch lanes, hoping it doesn't end soon.

I finally arrive and race through the parking lot, juggling Vaughn's coffee, breakfast, and my bag in one hand while holding a stack of documents in the other.

"Miss Rachel!" the receptionist calls my name as I walk through the door.



“Hey, Carmen. Is Mr. Vaughn around?” I signal with my head.

“Asking that kind of stupid question”—I jump around to see Vaughn behind me with his hands in his pockets and a scowl on his face—“knowing very well that I told you I would be here every day for the next two weeks while my injury heals is just as annoying as handing me a cold breakfast which I assume very well that you are about to do.”

I open my mouth but cannot find the words. His jaw clenches, his nostrils flare, and his eyes are dark blue.

“Do you have an explanation as to why you are just coming now?” His voice is sharp, cutting through the noise like a whip. I wince internally before looking up at him. He is still wearing his sportswear after his usual rigorous training just before breakfast. Typically, he would have changed into a more formal outfit just after his meal but seeing that he is still in his sportswear means he is waiting for his breakfast.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:43 am*

“Are you deaf? Not a word?” He snaps his fingers in my face.

“I . . . I got caught in traffic.” My words stumble out of my mouth as I try to find a more fitting lie. “My car was at the mechanic, so I picked it up, then—”

“Where is my meal? It looks like you are about to tell me a crap load of nonsense that I am not interested in hearing,” he interrupts me.

Ouch! My eyes begin to sting. There’s never a chance that Mr. Vaughn gives a flying fuck what I am going through.

“Here.” I hand him the nylon containing his food and give him his cup of coffee.

“This had better not be cold or wrong in the least.” He yanks it out of my hands, unsettling my balance so that everything else falls out of my hands.

“Shit,” I mumble as I squat to grab the items off the floor while Vaughn opens his food. The savory smell of poached omelets and egg salad fills the room as Vaughn takes a bite of his meal.

“Still good.” He lets out a satisfying low grunt as he munches. I whisper a little prayer in relief, seeing that I won’t have to deal with the bigger problem of having to go back and get him a new meal. He was annoyingly picky. Too crunchy? Toss it in the bin. Half burnt? Hand it to a staff member. Wrong order? Nag about it all day.

There are times I want to quit my job, but the satisfaction that would give my mother always throws me back into my career. She has always wanted me to be a lawyer like

her, but I want to be a model instead. For two reasons: I love modeling, and my mother hates it.

“My office now, Rachel!” Vaughn yells at me with a mouth full before turning to walk away.

I finally get all the items off the floor and place them on the counter behind me, where Carmen is watching me with curious blue eyes. I try to ignore her and focus on putting everything together so it’s easier to lift.

“I don’t know what’s going on, but you have to put it under control. You seem to be the only one here who keeps riling Vaughn. At this rate, you might get fired. Are you sure you don’t want to ask the management for a different role? Working at the front desk isn’t all that bad.”

I feel the hot air escaping my nostrils as I level a firm gaze at her. Carmen is one of the several ladies in the center who desperately want to do everything within their power if it means that they can get closer to him, including switching places with me, as she suggests.

“I guess I’m glad he hasn’t fired me after all.” I shrug and pick my items off the counter. “You might actually make a great assistant for him, seeing how much you adore him,” I finish with the fakest smile that I can muster and watch Carmen’s face fall before walking away.

After two knocks, I turn the handle and walk in.

“Oh, God!” I exclaimed, turning my eyes away from the figure in front of me. Vaughn is topless, his hair wet from just having his bath.

“What? You’ve never seen a topless man before?”

I fumble with the stack of files in my hands, trying not to let my gaze drift, but it is impossible to ignore the sight in front of me. Vaughn stands over a cabinet looking through some files, shirtless, his back to me, muscles shifting smoothly under his tan skin as he stretches his arms above his head.

Oh, God.

I quickly turn my head, pretending to be far more interested in the paperwork I am holding, but my eyes betray me, flicking back to him. His body is perfect—lean but muscular, with broad shoulders and a sculpted back that tapers into a trim waist. The way the light from the window highlights every curve and line makes it impossible not to stare. Heat creeps up my neck as my pulse quickens.

This is not the time. I silently scold myself, but my thoughts keep slipping into dangerous territory.

“So, I called you into my office because there has been a recent development.” He turns to look at me while trying to ease into a shirt. His front is exposed in the moments it takes him to put it on. My breath hitches in my throat as my eyes rest on his firm, swollen chest, rising with every breath he takes.

My gaze travels lower, taking in the sharp lines of his abs, the defined muscles seeming to ripple with every subtle movement. I swallow hard, feeling warmth spreading through me that has nothing to do with the room temperature.

I shift awkwardly, pressing the files tighter against my chest as if they can shield me from the wave of desire slowly creeping up on me.

“We are traveling to the UK tomorrow. Once you finish all your tasks here today, head home and get packed.”

His words hit me like a pack of bricks, jolting me out of my drooling.

“What?”

His brows furrow together. “You heard me, right?”

“Well, the UK? I didn’t—”

“Your contract says you are available to travel at any time, doesn’t it?” I nodded my head slowly.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:43 am*

“We. Are. Traveling. To. The UK. Tomorrow!” He speaks slowly and dramatically, pausing at each word as though I have little understanding of the English language.

“Yes, sir. How long, sir?” I sigh, knowing there is no use arguing.

“I can’t tell. A week. Two. A month. Doesn’t matter. It’s part of the job now.”

“Not a problem,” I whisper, my thoughts screaming. Who will watch over Archie for a week a month or more?

“Well, what are you waiting for? Go get started. You can’t stand here all day,” he barked at me, dismissing me.

It was at least 10:30 p.m. before I got back to the apartment to find Archie growling with hunger.

“Hey, boy,” I say as he rubs against my feet. I lower myself to scratch his head, fondling him gently. “Sorry, I know you’re famished, but we have a bigger problem on our hands. Who will take care of you for the next few days?”

I hiss and shake my head. The picture of Vaughn kicking a ball across the field with my face drawn on it flashes through my mind as I make Archie’s food.

Chapter two

Chapter Two

Vaughn

Two middle-aged men accost me, stopping me in my tracks, hands outstretched and eager to shake mine.

“Vaughn! Great job today!” one of them beams, his grip firm as he pulls me in for an unnecessary pat on the back.

“Thanks,” I mutter, forcing a smile while my eyes scan for an exit.

Just moments ago, when I stepped out of the conference room, a wave of relief washed over me. The shoot was finally over, and all I wanted was to escape the barrage of people. Now, I am standing in front of two men who seem rather overzealous in impressing me with their chatter.

Where is Rachel when you need her?

My eyes move from the entrance and begin wandering again as I search for her in the room. I try to push out the buzz and chatter from my mind. A part of me desperately wants to wave the cane in my hand around and ask everybody to shut up.

I am in a foul mood, thanks to those bloody stairs that have succeeded in setting me back by another two months. I still curse that defender who tackled me on the field two weeks ago. Now, I am missing the entire season and caught up with two old men trying to read all my achievements back at me in an attempt to get my attention.

I spotted her in the corner. Her black hair is packed in a bun. Her green eyes twinkle in excitement as a handsome man with amazing hair towers over her, holding her hand in his. Her head tilts back, the light catching her hair, and for a moment, I forget about the crowd pressing in on me.

Another scene comes rushing back to me—Jessica, two years ago, with my best friend, or rather a former best friend, at that party. This was long before I caught them two nights after my engagement. It is one of the many reasons I am so hostile toward Rachel. She reminds me too much of Jessica.

That flowing black hair, those expressive green eyes that have a perpetual glint of light behind them, and the striking resemblance. They could easily pass for sisters, with Rachel being even prettier than Jessica. Sometimes, I catch myself admiring her as she walks away from me. Those graceful steps make her lithe body sway from side to side.

Something twists in my gut. The way she leans closer and places her hand lightly on his chest. My irritation flares as I watch them, and I feel the heat rise to my cheeks.

“Vaughn! Can we get a photo together?” one of the men speaks, breaking my concentration.

I force myself to nod, but my gaze remains locked on Rachel. She is still laughing, completely oblivious to everything else around her. The cameras begin to click, and I turn my gaze toward the photographer, barely able to force a smile. The men around me are striking poses when my patience runs out.

“Excuse me,” I mutter, my voice clipped, as I push past the man blocking my exit.

“Just one more—”

I ignore the pleading voice behind me as I make my way up to Rachel.

“Rachel, we need to go.” I brush past the man standing in front of her deliberately.

He is not even that tall. I make a mental note of the man standing beside me with a



surprised look on his face.

“Oh, are you done?” The shock on her face is unmistakable, and for a brief second, I feel a flash of guilt because she looks terrified.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:43 am*

“Yes,” I grumbled, “we are leaving.”

“Alright.” Her gaze returns to the man standing beside me. “Bye—”

“I said now!” I snap the word escaping before I can pull it back. Instantly, I regret the edge in my tone as her smile fades. There is confusion mixed with a hint of hurt in her eyes.

I limp to the car with Rachel trailing behind me as we exit the building, the silence between us heavy.

The drive back to the hotel is painfully quiet, filled with unspoken words that hang in the air. I can sense she is on edge, her eyes on the window near her as we speed past buildings and people.

I glance at her, a wave of guilt crashing over me. I clear my throat and begin to speak.

“It’s not you. I just . . .” I trail off, running a hand through my hair. “It’s been a long day. I’m having a hard time adjusting.”

“It’s fine,” she mumbles, her eyes never leaving the window. “I understand the incident with your knee must have contributed.”

“Yes, yes, that.” I rub my forehead, wondering how easy it is to get out of the situation without an apology.

“We are here,” the cab driver announces as we come to a stop. I watch Rachel step

out of the car with her eyes on the ground.

“I’m going for my training later in the afternoon. You can take my card and go shopping for anything you need. Make sure to buy nice things for yourself, too. I insist.”

Even though I’m trying to sound nice and empathetic, the words come out harsh and commanding, but it is the best I can do given the situation earlier. I turn away and walk toward my room.

The second I step into the suite; I feel the tension roll off my shoulders. I toss my jacket onto the couch and sit at the edge of the bed, rubbing a hand over my face. Silence. Finally.

But, of course, that doesn’t last long. Two rapid knocks on my door cause me to sigh heavily.

“Come in!”

Rachel walks in with a tired expression. Her hand stretches out in front of her.

“Your mother is on the phone.”

My mother is the last person I want to speak to right now. The news of my aggravating injury must have reached her, seeing that I am limping around London all day with a stick. Surely, one of those eager journalists has taken a picture. Nothing can stop her priceless gem of a son. How else will she maintain her elite status and brag to her elegant friends?

I clench my jaw and wave my hand at her. “Tell her I’m busy.”

There is a brief pause before Rachel responds. “She said it’s important.”

“Just tell her I’m busy, Rachel. I don’t have time for this.”

“Okay.” Rachel backs away from me involuntarily, placing the phone to her ear and quietly murmuring into it.

“Anything else?” I mutter, still not turning to face her.

“Nothing,” she replies, moving toward the door, but something catches my eye—a tray on the small table near the window. I frown. A plate of food, neatly arranged, sits on the tray.

“Rachel,” I call her name, irritation already prickling at the edges of my voice, “what the hell is that?”

She glances at the tray, then back at me. “Breakfast,” she says, her tone neutral.

“You want me to have breakfast before training, or you simply want me to eat a cold breakfast when I’m back from training?” My voice raises several octaves.

Realization creeps across her face, and she moves toward the tray of food.

“Sorry, sir?” Her voice trembles.

“I don’t eat breakfast before training. You know that. It’s been two years working with me, Rachel.” The words come out sharper than I intend, but I am already too annoyed to care. “Take it away.”

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:43 am*

Rachel nods quickly, grabbing the tray. I watch her, slightly annoyed by how she cowers in my presence, not even putting up defiance. A part of me wants her to fight back to tell me I am being a jerk, but like everyone else, she nods her head in agreement and does as I say.

“Anything else I should know?” I ask, my voice dripping with sarcasm as she moves toward the door. She doesn’t say a word as she shakes her head slightly with the tray balanced carefully in her hands. I lean back against the headboard, pinching the bridge of my nose, trying to stop the pounding in my skull.

“Go on then.”

As she reaches the door, it bursts open, slamming back against the wall with a loud bang. Rachel stumbles backward, the tray flying out of her hands, the dishes crashing to the floor as a group of fans suddenly flood into the room, screaming and rushing forward.

“Rachel!” I shout, bolting up from the bed.

“It’s him!” A group of girls scream as they charge toward me, completely ignoring Rachel on the ground. “Please sign my ball.”

“Everyone, calm down! I’ll sign outside the door to the hallway.”

They all rush out into the hallway the same way they came. I reach down and grab Rachel’s arm.

“What the hell was that?” I growl, my voice dangerously low. “How did they even get in here?”

“I don’t know.” Rachel blinks at me, clearly shaken but still trying to keep that calm exterior.

“Did you not think to ensure the security of the hotel first? What is this?”

“I . . . I’ll talk to management—”

“You should’ve done that before they barged in here!” I snap, running a hand through my hair in frustration. “This is your job, Rachel. To handle things like this. Not to stand there like you’ve got no idea what’s going on.”

Her face is pale, and she opens her mouth to respond, but no words come out.

“Just . . . get it sorted,” I mutter, turning away from her and putting on a bright smile as I step out into the hallway.

Chapter three

Chapter Three

Rachel

I press my finger against my temple as my head threatens to blow up in smithereens from the throbbing headache radiating to the left side of my face. I hear knocking on the door and turn toward the sound.

“Come in!” I yell, expecting it to be Mr. Nicholas, the driver.

“Are you done here?” The driver pokes his head through the door, his cap shielding his perpetually bloodshot eyes. On some days, I have the overwhelming need to do a drug test on him. There is no way he is not on some substance. But Vaughn couldn’t care less.

“Mr. Nick, I’m done packing. I believe you can take this downstairs,” I say, pushing the bag toward him.

He catches the rolling box with his feet and looks up at me.

“I have orders to escort you out of your room,” he says in a grave voice.

“I don’t understand.”

“Mr. Vaughn said not to let you out of my sight. He wants me to make sure you are safe.”

“I am fine, Mr. Nick. Just get the bags to the car.”

“We are all leaving together. Fans are swarming the hostel premises. I parked the car behind the hotel, so we are going that way—and I have to take you with me.”

I move toward the window and draw the curtains back. Looking down, I see hundreds of people surrounding the building. The shut windows and our being on the fifteenth floor mean I can’t hear them.

“Alright, let’s go,” I say to Mr. Nicholas, pulling the hoodie over my head.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:43 am*

We step out into the hallway, which is completely deserted and eerily quiet. The elevator dings open, and we enter. Mr. Nicholas presses the button for the ground floor.

“And Mr. Vaughn—how is he doing?” I ask.

Mr. Nicholas turns to look at me with sad eyes and shrugs. “Not so great, I suppose. He has been in a showdown with management all afternoon.”

I swallow the crushing feeling of despair in my chest. Even though I know none of this is my fault, I know Vaughn well enough to realize that I am not going to go scot-free with this. I had explicitly told the hotel to keep it discreet. Knowing how they operate, it is no surprise they have probably sold the information to some big network company for publicity and a few extra bucks.

Mr. Nicholas did poorly in conveying Vaughn’s state of mind because, even before we step out of the elevator, I hear Vaughn’s voice ringing out loudly. We turn the corner, and there he is, pacing across the hotel suite. His jaw is tight, one hand curling into a fist while the other pushes hair out of his face. I can see the distended green veins along the side of his neck.

“I paid so much more to you to keep my identity here very discreet, and now we have this? And you are telling me that it could have been anyone who leaked it? What, then, did we pay you for?”

He steps dangerously close to the hotel’s manager, seething with rage.



“Mr. Vaughn,” the manager begins, placing a hand on Vaughn’s shoulder, which is quickly shrugged off. “We sincerely apologize for the inconvenience. We’ve increased security, and we’re confident we can control the situation. We strongly advise you to stay here for your safety instead of—”

Vaughn cuts him off, his voice low and steady but filled with the kind of authority that brooks no argument. “We’re leaving. Now.”

The manager’s smile falters. “But, Mr. Vaughn, it’s really not—”

“I expect a refund before the close of business tomorrow—unless, of course, you want me to throw the full weight of my legal team at you.”

“Mr. Vaughn—”

“Is everyone set to go?”

“Yes,” I answer.

Vaughn’s eyes narrowed on me. “You and I have a lot of talking to do, but first, I need to get out of here and be at the training ground.”

As soon as the words leave his lips, he turns and begins to move toward the exit.

The bodyguards follow him swiftly—one overtaking him to lead, another flanking my side, and Mr. Nicholas taking up the rear as we move toward the exit.

The bodyguard presses his finger to his earpiece, his brow furrowing. “The crowd’s pressing in near the exit. We’ll have to go out the back.”

Vaughn turns around and takes one look at me. “Stay close!”

As we step out through the back door, a small iron door that swings outward, the cold morning air hits us. I can hear the noise now, even though we are far away from the main exit. The chanting voices of a hundred, maybe a thousand fans, fill the air.

“Hey, there he is! Mr. Vaughn is right here!” I turn in the direction of the loud voice. It’s a lone boy in his late teens holding out a ball and dashing toward us.

“Hurry to the car now,” the bodyguard beside me hisses, grabbing my arm and starting to propel me toward the car. “Stay back!” he hisses at the boy, who continues advancing toward us regardless. “I said stay back,” he repeats, pulling a gun from his pocket and pointing it at the boy.

I am stunned, a lump forming in my throat. The boy gets the message and immediately falls to the ground with his hands raised to the sky. We all hurry to the black limousine, waiting down the alley. It all happens fast, and soon, Vaughn and I are wedged between the two bodyguards.

As we speed away, I catch sight of the screaming crowd rushing in our direction. For at least a hundred meters, they charge like mindless zombies hunting their first meal. Then, just as suddenly, they all stop and start waving. As they fade into the distance, one thought lingers in my mind: how could they have known where to find us?

“Why did you do that?” I adjust in my seat and turn to the bodyguard who pointed the gun at the boy.

He looks down at me with a raised brow and a smirk.

“Why would you point a gun at him?”

“Would you have preferred that the crowd got to us first?”

“That doesn’t warrant pointing a gun at him. What if it had gone off and shot him?”

“It was a stun gun.” Vaughn places his hand on my knee and squeezes. “It’s fine now. Just relax.”

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:43 am*

I look up at him, shocked by the sudden display of affection. His eyes are a warmer hue, and his characteristic scowl is gone. A strange calm washes over me as my heart slows, but just as that warm side of him jumps out, it vanishes just as quickly. Vaughn removes his hand from my knee, as though a hot pot had singed him, before looking out the window.

The car drops me off at the new hotel before driving off with Vaughn to his training center.

As soon as I put all of Vaughn's items in his room and arrange his clothes in his wardrobe, I rush back to my room and pull the Aspirin tablets from my bag. Without hesitation, I pop two pills into my mouth. My hand is smarting like hell where the door had hit my fingers. I find some ice and place it over the sore area before dropping onto my bed. Finally, some rest.

Grr. Grr.

"No!" I let out a loud cry as I pull my hair and run my palms across my face. The ringing doesn't stop, and I know if it's Mr. Vaughn, he will make my day even more miserable for not being at his beck and call during work hours.

I pick up the phone, and sure enough, My Boss is displayed across the screen.

"Hello," I say in a tired, flat tone, hoping he will catch on to how exhausted I am.

"Are you at the hotel now?"

“Yes, sir.”

“How is it?”

“Up to standards, as you would have loved it,” I say, throwing in an exaggerated yawn in case he hasn’t gotten the clue.

“And the food?”

“I gave them very specific instructions on how it should be prepared.”

“Good then. Meet me at the training ground. Bring my lunch here.”

“Hello?”

“I said meet me at the training ground. I’m sending Nick back to get you.”

“Oh, okay,” I mumble and bury my face in my palm. The line clicks dead, and I let out a loud screech before punching the air with my fist. “God, I just want a bloody nap.”

Mr. Nicholas finds me standing in the same spot he dropped me off before. In my hand is a pack of food.

“Hey, Nick,” I greet him as I get into the front seat with him.

“You look like you have seen a ghost. Have you had any rest today?”

“Not that I know of,” I say as I lean back into the soft leather seat and shut my eyes. That simple act sends me straight into a short nap.

It is Mr. Nicholas shaking me vigorously that rudely interrupts my peaceful napping experience. “We’re here,” he announces.

“Sorry.” I rub my eyes as I step out of the car. We are standing in front of what looks like a normal building with men in black prowling the premises.

We move past the hefty guards at the door after they finish frisking us and swiping their metal detectors. I find myself standing inside what looks like a stadium. No one would have guessed that such beauty is hidden inside such a simple-looking building.

The soccer field stretches out in front of me, a pristine sea of green, with lines neatly marking the boundaries. The air is cool, and the smell of freshly cut grass mixed with the faint scent of new paint hits my nostrils. I look up and see a lone figure sprinting across the field, dribbling a ball past the lined-up cones.

He appears super focused on getting past the cones, and our sudden appearance does not faze him. Just watching him stirs something inside of me. I watch as he moves across the field, fast and precise, his feet controlling the ball like it’s an extension of his body. His muscles ripple with every kick, every pivot, his white shirt clinging to his back, soaked in sweat. My eyes trace the strong lines of his arms and back, and my mouth suddenly feels parched.

Effortlessly, he finds the back of the net, the ball flying into the top corner. That is when he turns to his right and jogs in our direction. There is a limp in his steps, and I can tell that he is straining himself just to train. His hair is damp, sticking to his forehead as he arrives in front of me. I hand him the pack of food.

He doesn’t hesitate to rip the nylon open. I watch him take several bites in succession. The sweat dribbles down his face, and a drop just sits at the top of his nose, threatening to fall into his egg salad and spinach. I want to tell him, but he gets to it before me, wiping it off with the back of his wrist.

“Fans taken care of?” he asks, his tone clipped but his mouth full and moving.

“Yes,” I sigh, hoping that he will not make me stay any longer than I have to.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:43 am*

He picks up the bottle of water sitting by the fence and chugs it while holding his food in one hand. In all of this, he looks rather content and not the vicious boss who seems to scare everyone.

“Are you sure it’s safe to be training with your knee?”

He looks up at me, saying nothing as he continues to chew slowly. I can tell that he thinks I am asking a stupid question. I look down at my fingers and rub them slowly. I can see a swelling beginning to appear around the area where it stings.

“What happened to your fingers?” His gaze shifts down to my hand before I can pull it away.

“It’s nothing,” I mutter, feeling embarrassed. “Got a bit bruised when the door swung open.”

Without a word, Vaughn reaches for my hand, his fingers surprisingly gentle as they close around mine. His touch is warm, and there’s a softness in the way he turns my hand over to inspect the bruise. His thumb brushes over the tender spot, and for a moment, my breath catches.

It’s strange to see him like this, focused but not in that cold, detached way I’m used to. It’s the first time he is paying me any attention outside of work, which is often negative. I look at him as he inspects my hand. What could possibly be going through his mind? Does he like my manicure? Does he find my fingers too thin or my hands too coarse? But then, just as quickly, he drops my hand, just like he had done when he first placed his hand on my knee in the car.



“You’ll be fine,” he says, his voice flat. “You can tell Nick to take you to the hospital to have it checked out if it bothers you so much. Make sure you both get back here in time, though. I’ll be training for the next”—he pauses and flips his wrist to check the time—“three hours. Besides, every day not spent training is a day wasted.”

As he says the last words, he turns and jogs back onto the field.

I stare after him, my hand still tingling where his fingers touched. That’s it? No concern, no acknowledgment of what just happened—just back to business as usual.

I sigh, shaking my head as I watch him call for the ball again. Another man I hadn’t noticed earlier throws a ball at him, and in seconds, his focus is completely back on the game. He dribbles it with that same relentless intensity, his body moving in perfect sync with the ball. Another shot flies into the net, and the sound of the ball hitting the back of the goal echoes across the empty field.

“Mr. Nick?” I turn around to find the driver, who is sitting three rows behind me. There is a wide smile on his face as he watches Vaughn. I feel irritation creep across my skin.

“Yes?”

“Take me home. We have to be back in three hours, and I really need a nap as it is.” There is no way I am going to waste another three hours waiting for him to be done with training.

Chapter four

Chapter Four

Vaughn

“Didn’t I ask you to get this checked yesterday? What were you then doing in the three hours you were gone?” I say, watching her face.

Today, she looks almost breathtaking. At the back of my mind, I always knew she was a beautiful woman, but it’s stark and glaring now, making it hard to look away. The way the lip gloss gives her lips a wet, exciting invite.

“I . . . I was tired. I slept off when I got home.”

“You were supposed to go straight to the hospital,” I carry on scolding her as I finish wrapping her hand. She winces as I wrap the gauze around her hand. I try as gently as I can, but she yelps from time to time, complaining about the tenderness.

We are still at it when Nicholas walks into the room with a bag slung over his shoulder. He smiles in our direction as if experiencing a blissful moment. I became aware of the close distance between Rachel and me. Slowly, I moved away from Rachel and drop her hand.

“What?” I bark at him, irritated by the smile on his face.

“The jet is flying back to New York.”

“Are all the bags loaded?”

“Yes,” he replies, nodding aggressively.

“Alright,” I say, waving my hand and dismissing him.

I turn back to Rachel, who is inspecting her bandaged hand and poking it with a finger.

“Stop doing that. You are going to make it swell even more. Let’s go.”

The morning air bites as we walk toward the jet, the sky just beginning to lighten with streaks of soft pink and orange. My body feels like it’s made of lead. Every muscle screams, and my eyes burn. I am back on my cane, my knees burning. I had hoped that moving them a little would help loosen the taunt muscles and tendons, but now, it is even worse than before.

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:43 am*

Rachel catches up to me, and she eyes me from head to toe, her eyes pausing for a while on my knee.

“You know, a day spent resting isn’t a day wasted.” I can see the glint of mischief in her eyes as she moves past me, walking ahead as if mocking me for moving slowly. A smile creeps up my face. I am not sure why, but I find it funny that she has just insulted me with a single sentence. My heart flutters with that brief interaction, and I suddenly feel giddy.

My eyes rest on her backside as it sways in front of me. She is wearing a rather short gown, and her legs are gleaming. The way her butt bounces with each step makes the blood rush down to my groin. I look away instantly, afraid of having a boner.

Get a hold of yourself, Vaughn.

The cabin is quiet when we step inside. I let out a breath and drop into one of the leather seats, immediately closing my eyes and feeling the weight of exhaustion dragging me down.

The pilot’s voice booms over the speaker, and I secure myself with the seat belt. The plane starts up with a soft hum, which I find rather soothing. I let my head fall back against the seat.

In a few hours, we will be back in New York and back to business. A few hours of sleep is needed. I shut my eyes firmly and recline further into my seat. I’m just starting to drift off when I hear Rachel’s voice—soft but firm, whispering.

“Yes, I’ll need to cancel the meeting for this afternoon. Mr. Vaughn is unavailable today, sorry. We’ll have to reschedule. How about next week?”

I crack one eye open and see Rachel speaking into her phone.

“Who is that, and what are you rescheduling?” I mumble.

Rachel jumps slightly, not expecting me to be awake. She turns toward me, her phone still at her ear. “Mr. Devon was requesting a video conference once we land. Seeing your condition, I’m not sure you need that right now,” she says simply, covering the mouthpiece of the phone for a moment.

I want to say something, to tell her not to make decisions on my behalf, but I blink instead and adjust in my seat. She’s not wrong. I try to shut my eyes again when her phone starts to buzz again.

“Ugh! Shut it down. Who is it?”

“Your mother.”

My eyes fly open, and I look at Rachel, who is staring at the screen, her thumb hovering over the Decline button.

“Wait,” I say, surprising both of us. “I’ll talk to her.”

Rachel hands me the phone, her brows raised in mild surprise, and I swipe to answer.

“Vaughn, darling,” my mother’s voice flows through the line, smooth and controlled as if she’s always on stage. “It’s been too long since we’ve spoken.”

“Yeah, I’ve been busy,” I say, keeping my voice neutral.

“Busy,” she repeats, her tone making the word sound like an accusation. “Too busy for your own family?”

I pinch the bridge of my nose, already feeling the headache forming. “Mom, you know what it’s like. I’m managing the team, handling sponsorship deals, and—”

“And neglecting the people who matter most,” she cuts me off, her voice tightening. “Vaughn, I understand your career is important, but so is your family. When was the last time you visited? When was the last time you called your father?”

I glance at Rachel out of the corner of my eye. She’s pretending not to listen, but I can tell she’s catching every word. Her face is calm, but there’s a flicker of something—judgment, maybe?—in her expression. I grit my teeth, irritated by the entire situation.

“I’ve been busy,” I repeat, my voice harder now. “I’ll call him when I have time.”

“You always say that.” My mother sighs, and I can picture her shaking her head in the disapproving way she does. “It’s always ‘when you have time,’ Vaughn. At some point, you have to make time.”

“Mom, I have to go. Once I get the chance, I’ll give you a ring,” I say abruptly, wanting to end it as I can feel a throbbing headache behind my eyes. “I’m traveling right now and exhausted.”

“You had better. Goodbye, Vaughn,” she says, and the line goes dead.

I hand the phone back to Rachel, my jaw clenched. She takes it without a word, but I catch that look on her face again, the one she’s trying to hide. Her lips press into a thin line, her eyes flicking away from me too quickly.

“What?” I snap more harshly than I intended.

She shakes her head, looking down at her phone. “Nothing.”

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:43 am*

“Yes, what manner of landing was that?”

“Landings can be very tricky. That is why we ask you to—”

“You know what? Never mind. Everybody has an excuse to give.”

He gets up from his seat and grabs a bottle of water from the fridge before storming off. The pilot gives me a curious look. I shrug my shoulders and grab my handbag. Vaughn takes long strides as we cross the tarmac. I scurry after him, trying to keep up. Vaughn’s hands rest casually in his pocket, his sunglasses still perched on his face even though the dim airport lights don’t require them—a small disguise to keep the fans at bay.

I exhale softly, my body relaxing now that the jet ride is over and we’re almost at the car waiting outside. Vaughn turns back and looks at me. I start jogging immediately; he’s most likely about to give me a new set of instructions. I have just closed the gap between us when it happens.

The gentle humming of voices in the airport gives way to loud screaming and a thunder of footsteps. A crowd of fans rush toward us, shouting and waving jerseys, others holding up phones to capture the moment. My heart sinks into my stomach as I realize what’s happening.

“Oh my God! Marry me, Vaughn!” a female voice yells from the crowd.

“Sign my jersey!” another yells, holding up his jersey, eyes wide with excitement.



“Rachel!” Vaughn turns back to look at me, his voice low and tense. “What is the meaning of this?”

My stomach twists into knots. This isn’t right. We are supposed to head straight to the car. No detours, no public appearances. I am clear about that. I look over at Vaughn and open my mouth, but the words do not come out. The crowd has now pooled behind mesh netting, stopping them from spilling onto the tarmac.

Two of the bodyguards who must have been waiting by the car start running toward us.

“Who did this?” His gaze narrows.

“I have no idea.”

“What do you mean you have no idea? You are my assistant. You are meant to be ahead of everything. It is your duty to make sure nothing goes wrong!”

“I made sure everything was in order, but—”

“Then who keeps setting me up for the paparazzi? How can I be sure that you are not selling my location to people?”

“What?” My face burns from his accusation.

The two bodyguards arrive and form a barricade between us and the incoming crowd. Just as we are standing there, a woman appears with a wide grin on her face. She is wearing a jersey, and her hair is tied back in a bun.

“Welcome, Mr. Vaughn. We were expecting you.”

“Expecting me?” Vaughn is taken aback.

“Yes, we are doing a fundraiser, and all the people here are dying to meet you.”

“A fundraiser?” Vaughn quips, turning to look at me. “What is the meaning of this? Who organized this without even asking me first?”

I turn to the young lady and eye her with a look of disgust. “How did you know that Vaughn would be here today?”

“We got the information, and I am so glad that it turned out to be true.” Her eyes twinkle as she stares at Vaughn in awe.

“What information?” I ask, fuming at the possibility that someone has told other people that we are coming. Someone I can safely assume is his greedy agent, who would take any deal just to make himself a profit. A part of me wants to shake the woman vigorously until she tells me how she learned of our arrival. “Who gave you this information?”

She doesn’t respond to me and instead focuses on Vaughn. “We are doing it for the orphaned children. It is nothing serious, just a few signings of shirts and maybe a donation, if you will.” She ends with a smile.

“For the kids, huh?”

“Yes, for the kids. We have a few ill kids at the cancer center, too, who need money for treatment. We raised some money by selling the jerseys after we promised you would sign them.”

Vaughn takes another look at me and then pinches his nose in frustration.

“I guess helping the kids will always come first,” he responds with resignation.

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:43 am*

“Wait, we—” I try to protest, attempting to remind him that we have a meeting scheduled in about two hours.

“Go on, Ms. . . .” Vaughn cocks his head as if trying to remember her name.

“Laurie!” she blurts out enthusiastically.

“Laurie! Beautiful name for a fine lady.” He grins. “Well, I would never turn down a request to do good for the kids. I’ll be right there.”

Laurie’s face turns red, revealing yellow-stained teeth. “Thank you,” she mumbles before turning away.

“We have the meeting with the Campbells. We don’t have any more time to waste as it is.”

He takes a step closer, his voice lowering to a dangerously calm whisper. “You should have thought of that before setting up a fundraiser at an airport.”

“I didn’t—” I start, but he cuts me off again.

“You didn’t what? Do your job? The gross irresponsibility.” He shakes his head, letting out a harsh breath.

His words feel like a punch to the gut. Irresponsibility? I’ve been running myself ragged, managing his schedule, juggling meetings, fan appearances, and his absurdly unpredictable moods for months. I haven’t missed a single detail, but he never misses

the opportunity to undermine my efforts.

I bite my lip, trying to hold back the flood of frustration threatening to spill over. Vaughn turns on his heel and starts marching toward the crowd; the bodyguards follow him, leaving me standing there.

“Vaughn!” I call after him, but he doesn’t stop. My fists clench at my sides as I watch him walk away, his shoulders stiff, his back straight, like I didn’t just call his name. As he approaches the crowd, the fans go wild, pushing and shouting and holding their jerseys. Vaughn forces a smile and waves at them. God, I hate him. For a minute, I think of quitting on the spot, just walking away and hailing a cab home. But looking for a job right now was worse than hell; even if I did find one, it wouldn’t pay me as much as Vaughn pays.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, pulling me out of my thoughts.

“Hello?”

“Rachel! Is Vaughn at the signing yet?” a squeaky voice blasts through the phone.

“What?”

“It’s Raphael.”

“I know it’s you, Raphael. What signing?”

Vaughn’s agent, Raphael, irritates me just as much as Vaughn does, especially this high-pitched voice of his.

“The jersey signing for the orphans at the airport.”

“So it was you, after all!” I hiss.

“Is he—”

I hang up and slide the phone into my back pocket. I have had enough nonsense for one day.

Chapter six

Chapter Six

Vaughn

A feeling of relaxation settles on my chest as Nicholas navigates skillfully through the hills, each minute bringing us closer to my Hudson Valley mansion.

We have driven in total silence from the airport—not that we usually engage in chitchat. Still, even if we did, I wouldn’t have entertained him, as I am utterly exhausted mentally and physically after the encounter with the fans at the airport.

Damn Rachel!

This is all her fault. This is an incident she should have anticipated and prevented, but her dumbass couldn’t even do that. I bet she was the one who sold my location because who else on earth knew I was landing at the airport?

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:43 am*

The car drives over a bump and comes to a jolty stop.

“Welcome home, boss,” Nicholas says, breaking me out of my thoughts, his shadowy face half turned in my direction.

Finally.

Nicholas turns off the ignition, hastily hops out of the car, steps around it, and opens the door for me. I descend and place my hands on my waist as I gaze at my mansion with pride.

My home. My abode. My haven.

I watch as the now-setting sun casts its warm rays on the zinc roofs and glass windows, a smile crossing my face. It's such a mundane and natural thing, but after the hell I have been through during my time away in the UK, just a photo of my house would trigger positive emotions.

Nicholas appears from behind me with two bags in hand.

He walks ahead of me, and I follow closely behind. I specifically told Nicholas to park the car just outside the mansion on our way home. I want to walk through those gates myself. Despite feeling like all my joints will dislocate if I exert myself too much, I know I have to work out as soon as I get in. Walking through the gates to the entrance door is my way of warming up for what is to come.

I murmur replies to the greetings of the security men at the gate and walk straight to

the entrance, where Elena, my maid, is waiting to greet me with a smile.

“Welcome home, Mr. Vaughn. Would you like to—”

“Not now, Elena,” I wave her off.

The soft thud of my cane on the tiled floor annoys me for some reason, and I send it flying across the living room, barely missing the LCD TV by an inch.

I turn to Elena, and her expression strikes a balance between being puzzled and being terrified.

“What is there to look at, Elena? Set me an ice bath!” I bark.

She scurries past me and straight to the bathroom. I limp to my gym and stare at the treadmill longingly, cursing my leg injury. I need some dumbbell lifting, some bench presses, and some leg presses, and then I’ll be done for the day.

Some people may think it’s crazy that I have to do all this despite an injury, but what most don’t understand is that’s what makes Vaughn Graham the greatest soccer player in the United States. Being the best doesn’t fully cut it for me; I want to be the best for many years to come and carve my name in gold in the Soccer Hall of Fame.

I feel a stinging pain in my thigh as I push at the footplate despite setting it to medium intensity. My whole body is already drenched in hot, sticky sweat after going through my dumbbell and bench press workout. I blink away a drop of salty sweat from my eye, and in that instant, I sit up straight, frustrated, my chest heaving.

Now, I feel like I have earned myself an ice bath.

Feeling content, I head to my bedroom to wrap a towel around my waist before



heading to the bathroom. Medium-sized chunks of ice bubble afloat in the tub. I can almost feel their coldness on my skin before I sink in.

I settle into the tub, partially submerging myself in the water. With closed eyes, I exhale deeply, savoring the chill of the water against my skin. I let my thoughts drift freely, and they take me through all the activities of the day and my stay in the UK. It's been a hellish three days, and the feel of the cold water against my skin is all I need to deal with the aftermath.

Perfect.

The feeling is perfect, but not for long. My reality isn't; my life isn't.

Isn't it strange and unbecoming that, despite having a successful career that has spanned over seven years and is still very active, I still struggle to deal with all that comes with my career? The paparazzi, the cameras, the lack of privacy, the lack of peace and quiet, and the expectations weighing heavily on me are all things I should have gotten used to by now. But no—it seems like my aversion to them keeps getting worse and worse.

I realize that my thoughts are taking me in a completely different direction than I intended. I just want to enjoy a nice ice bath and possibly take a nap.

My eyes snap open, and all of a sudden, the ice doesn't feel so good against my skin anymore. Frustrated, I step out of the tub, grab a clean towel from the rack, and wrap it around my waist. I make my way to the bedroom and stand in front of my bed, contemplating calling Rachel to book an appointment with my therapist.

Cold water drips from my body, forming a small puddle at my feet, but I couldn't care less.

I sink into the lush comfort of my bed and exhale in resignation. I pick up my phone and dial Rachel's number.

In the blink of an eye, it connects, and I literally exhale in relief. Rachel and I parted ways shortly after my interaction with the fans at the airport. Now, I'm worried she might have drifted off to a nap, judging from how sunken her eyes had appeared just before we parted ways.

"Hello, Vaughn?"

"Hey, listen. I want you to schedule a meeting with Craig ASAP."

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:43 am*

A brief silence ensues, and from the look on Craig's face as he examines mine, I can tell that something is on his mind. Perhaps he sees that something is on mine, too?

He shifts in his chair, assuming a more upright position. "Well, speaking of soccer playing, how have things been lately regarding your career?"

I have called him specifically to talk about this, but the question still manages to catch me off guard.

I pause briefly before answering. "Yeah, well, about that . . . as you know, I haven't been active on the field due to my injury. I have been more involved in deals and sponsorships, and I spend more time at my charity organization."

"I see. And how would you say that has impacted you?"

I haven't given much thought to this. I have always had a busy schedule, and despite the injury, I still do. So, the injury doesn't make much of a difference in my busy life. But how does it make me feel?

"Well, Doc, I think I feel less pressured since the injury. I get to have a more flexible schedule when it comes to training, and not having the coach breathing down my neck is sort of a relief. I get to spend more time at the charity organization, which I guess is a good thing since it's something impactful." I throw up my hands. "Well, I guess it feels good to take a break."

"Hmm," Craig lets out a thoughtful murmur. It's crazy that even a murmur could be thoughtful. "So, would you say that the injury was a blessing in disguise?"

No. This ain't no blessing in disguise! There's no way being a limping man, even if it's for a short time, can be a blessing in disguise! I can't even train intensely.

A ripple of annoyance flashes through me as I recall how the asshole from the opponent team tackled me roughly. I was with the ball, and I was already within the eighteenth yard from the opponent's goal post and could already see the ball doing cartwheels in the goal net when, all of a sudden, I felt heavy boots crash on my right thigh as I positioned myself to deliver a shot. I immediately collapsed on the floor in agonizing pain. We scored a penalty with the foul, and the player was given a red card, but I was still very injured.

"Maybe." I shrug at the doctor. "I prefer to see it more as a break to do other things than a blessing in disguise. I can't even engage in intense training, and my stamina seems to have declined as well."

"I'm sure you will get it back with time. After all, you're the greatest player in the country."

"That I am."

We go on to talk about my aversion to crowds despite being a celebrity, and I tell him how it is part of the reason I feel stressed out after my trip.

"Well, there's nothing much to do about that, is there, Doc? I have an assistant who should oversee these things, but it seems someone sells information to publicity outlets about my whereabouts. It's annoying."

"I think we should address the root cause of your aversion. Is it something you think you can control?"

I assume my face takes on a contorted look of confusion. "There's no root cause for

why I don't fancy crowds that much. I just like to be left alone in peace. But given the kind of life I lead, I know that's not possible. Even when I try to keep it to the bare minimum, it still doesn't work."

The doctor's blue eyes were fixed on my face, silently urging me to continue.

I inhale deeply. "I love my fans, but I am still human."

His briefcase clicks open, and he brings out a notepad from inside, reaches into his breast pocket, and pulls out a pen. Then, he begins scribbling something.

"I understand" is what he simply says.

He looks up at me again, and then he drops a question I don't think I want to reply to.

"What about your family? When was the last time you spoke with them?"

For some reason, the image of Rachel's judgmental stare when I talked to my mother on the phone in the jet flashes through my mind.

"I talked with my mother earlier today."

Or did I?

I really didn't talk to her. She wanted to talk, so I told her I was busy.

"You said you told her you were busy?"

I jerk my head up toward Craig. "Did I say that out loud?"

"You did."

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:43 am*

I shake my head in embarrassment. At the same time, there is a brief silence.

“Vaughn,” Craig says in a light tone, “I hope you realize that it is important that you always tell the truth during our sessions. I have told you several times and will keep telling you that this is a safe space, free from judgment. I understand why you may not want to talk about certain things, and if such instances arise, you can tell me you don’t want to talk about them. Are we clear?”

I nod in understanding.

“Good. Now, is there anything you would want us to talk about?”

I shake my head negatively.

“Okay then. I better get going. Thank you for the dinner.” He flashes me with his perfect smile and disappears through the front door.

I go back to my room and lie in bed. My eyes are starting to get heavy with sleep, and warmth spreads over my chest. As I said earlier, I am not really a fan of therapy, but with Doctor Craig, even when I don’t gain insight into my issues from our sessions, talking to him makes me feel better.

The swirling fan gets blurry, and my eyes close slowly. I can already feel my consciousness drifting away when, suddenly, my phone shrieks, jolting me back into full wake mode.

Rachel.

What the hell does she want?

I swipe right, and a shaky, apprehensive voice fills my ears.

“Mr. Vaughn, we have a serious problem.”

The tone of her voice sends a chill down my spine.

“Serious problem?” I sit upright, my nerves on edge, my senses tense. “What happened?”

I can literally hear her gulp before she continues, “Remember Novaspire Technologies? The mobile tech company you did a shoot for in the UK? Well, we mistakenly signed a contract with their rival company, Mobilix Solutions, and they are calling for you to fulfill the terms of the contract, or else they are going to sue.”

“What?” I spring up from my bed, my neck hair standing on edge.

“I’m so sorry, Mr. Vaughn.”

Chapter seven

Chapter Seven

Rachel

Archie’s soft fur brushes against my chin, the tingling sensation bringing me back from the land of dreams.

“You didn’t have to do that, Archie. I am work-free today. No alarms!”

Meow.

He placed his front paws on top of my chest, nudging me.

“Oh, I understand now. You’re hungry, aren’t you?”

Meow.

My fingers curl around Archie’s body as I am sitting on my bed.

My bedroom window is wide open, and with the light flooding through my blinds comes the nerve-numbing heat of a hot summer Tuesday afternoon.

I definitely shouldn’t be here.

It’s a Tuesday. I should be at the office working for Vaughn, but I couldn’t bring myself to do so. Vaughn is an asshole—that’s as evident as the sky is blue and the sun is a hot burning ball of fire. But he’s never scared me like he did two days ago when I called him about the mistake I made.



## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:43 am*

He was pissed beyond words, and I could imagine the veins on his forehead bulging in frustration, and that's putting it lightly. If he managed to scare me that much over a phone call, he would probably make me piss my pants off if I went anywhere near him.

So I am avoiding work—for now. But not after calling Carmen to tell Vaughn that I am sick because, of course, I can't bring myself to tell him that, even though Carmen is unbearable. Of course, the Vaughn I know won't buy that lie, and I am surprised he hasn't called me yet to tell me to haul my ass over to work.

Even after two days.

Two whole days!

That's hellu suspicious, and it provokes a level of panic that I would have had if I didn't think to avoid him. With Vaughn Graham, you can never tell what he's planning. Is he waiting patiently to see how far I will go? Is he waiting to give me the ax upon resumption?

Two whole days.

For someone who wouldn't hesitate to call me for help tying his shoelaces, that's an accomplishment. But at the back of my mind, I can't shake the feeling that something is wrong. It also doesn't seem fair to avoid work when the mistake was mine to begin with.

I should call him and apologize. No, I have already done that. I should go to his home

and apologize.

“Should I go to him and apologize?” I ask Archie, who is snuggled in the crook of my arms. His pupils narrow into a slit-like aperture as he gives me a blank look. I stand up from my bed and head to the kitchen to prepare some cat food.

I open the kitchen cupboard and pull the can containing Archie’s food. It is empty!

“Shit!” I mutter. The crunchy bits of the leftover cat food swirl, making sonorous sounds as I wave it in Archie’s face in regret.

“I’m sorry, honey. I had no idea.”

He hops down from my arms onto the tiled kitchen floor and turns to face me, and I think he is disappointed, the corner of his mouth drawn.

I retrieve a bottle of milk from the kitchen counter and pour it into his pan, and after a few sniffs and a little hesitation, he licks it.

“Thanks, honey, for understanding.” I pat him on the head.

The faint sound of my phone ringing drifts into the kitchen, and my chest heaves against my sleeveless tee.

Is it Vaughn?

My throat suddenly goes dry as I rush to my bedroom, where my phone lies on the bed. The name on the screen sends my heart racing, threatening to burst out of my ribcage.

“H-hello?” I stammer. It’s from the rival company with which I signed the contract

on Vaughn's behalf.

"Ms. Rachel, it's been two days since we called you. But it seems Vaughn Graham had yet to turn up. In case what I said escaped your memory, let me repeat it: once you sign a contract, you are under a legal obligation to honor it. If we don't hear from you in three days, we really are going to sue."

"But I already told you guys that it was a mistake. Mistakes like this happen sometimes—"

The phone from the other end clicks dead before I can say anything else.

"No, wait!" I desperately say into the dead phone.

What an asshole!

I toss my phone angrily on the bed and watch it bounce as a sober thought hits me: this isn't about Vaughn being mad at me anymore; this is about his career, his reputation.

I know I have to do something, but what exactly? Call Vaughn's lawyer. That's an option, but I will have to speak with Vaughn about it first.

Without thinking twice, I flip the doors of my wardrobe open and select a chambray shirt and Capri pants. My hair is a mess, but I can't care less. I have to get to Vaughn, even though every muscle in my body doesn't feel like it.

My hand swipes over the bedside table for my purse and keys. I check my purse to confirm that my credit card is still there because I plan to do some grocery shopping and get some cat food on the way. With a quick kiss on Archie's head, I storm out of my apartment and into my car.

“It’s past 4 p.m., so Vaughn should be home by now, probably training,” I think, taking the road that leads to his Hudson Valley mansion instead of the office.

I replay the moment that led up to the contract debacle. It was a silly mistake, one that I hadn’t realized I had even made until they called. I had been granted power of attorney when it comes to signing some minor contracts, as long as they aren’t high profile.

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:43 am*

A day before, I was informed that the shoot for Novaspire Technologies was to be held in the UK, whose contract I had totally forgotten about; some documents were shipped to the office for signing. I proceeded to sign them without thinking much because I had seen “mobile technology,” and I had thought it was from Novaspire. I had been too tired to re-read the terms since Vaughn and the company’s executives had already had a meeting via Zoom.

I turn into the road leading to Vaughn’s sprawling mansion, and I can see it looming ahead of me. Eventually, my car pulls up outside the wrought iron gate of the house, and I honk. The immaculate, well-mowed lawn spreads ahead of me as I ease my way in, but the magnificent view does nothing to calm me.

I knock on the front door, and as I wait for it to open, I notice how the glimmering sunlight reflects off the windows, casting long shadows onto the manicured lawn.

The door clicks open, startling me despite that being what I am waiting for. Vaughn’s maid, Elena, steps out with a flowing flowery dress, a friendly smile etched on her face.

“Good evening, Miss Rachel. Welcome. I didn’t know you were coming in today.”

I smile nervously. “Yeah, I thought I’d surprise you guys. Is Vaughn around?”

“Sure. Please come in.” She steps aside to let me in.

“I’m sure he’s in his study. I heard footsteps toward there when I was in the kitchen.”

I nod my thanks and walk through the foyer, take a turn to my left, where the study is located, and make a few taps on the door.

Silence. A heavy silence that only makes my heartbeat faster greets me, and for a moment, it feels like I am the only one in the mansion.

I tap again, and this time, heavy footsteps sound from the other end, and the door pulls open.

Vaughn stands in the doorway, his hand still on the doorknob as he rests his shoulder against the half-open door.

My breath catches in my throat, and I freeze, my eyes reluctantly drifting from his half-naked body to his expressionless face, which surprises me because I expected him to be pissed. For a moment, he just stands there looking at me, and I think he isn't going to let me in. Eventually, he swings his weight to the other side.

“Come in, Rachel. I'm sure you have a lot of explaining to do, don't you?” he says in an intimidating tone.

He swaggers past me and settles on a desk, picks up a book from his side, and begins toying with it absent-mindedly, his shoulders hunched and his gaze piercing.

“I can't describe how sorry I am about what happened, Mr. Vaughn. It was a faux pas, I admit.”

I pause, gauging his reaction, but none comes except for the disdainful sneer that spread across his face. This only increases my nervousness, and I step closer in an attempt to conceal it.

“I have tried all I can to rectify it, but all have proved futile. However, I will keep

doing all I can to rectify the issue, so please, give me some—”

“And I suppose your proof that you’ve been doing something to ‘rectify’ the issue is the fact that you missed work for the past two days, huh?” he snaps, violently banging the book on the desk. “It took you two days to have the guts to face me for your silly mistake! Two whole days only to do what? Tell me that you haven’t succeeded in rectifying the issue?”

The room is already dim, which emphasizes the darkness that has crept into his eyes. He looks exactly like I have envisaged when I called to inform him the first time. Sweat glistens on his delineated pectorals, and the delicate sprinkling of hair on his chest scatters even around his nipples. I just stand there, frozen, more out of shock than actual fear.

My hoarse voice betrays my emotions when I finally open my mouth. “The managers of the company wouldn’t listen to me when I tried to reason with them. I am thinking we should—”

“We? You did this! You messed everything up just like always!”

Did he really just say that?

Furious, he hops down from the desk and strides toward me until we come to stand face to face.

“You know what I was doing in my study before you came? Sitting back and wondering at how dumb I must have been when I hired a dumbass like you who isn’t good for anything as my secretary!”

His words drive sharp stakes into my heart as he keeps berating me with more hurtful, heartbreaking words that I can’t remember. All that stays with me is the heat of his

anger, his furious breaths brushing against my face as I cringe, my feelings hurt beyond words.

But I said I was sorry. That's the thought I cling to, repeating it over and over in my mind as I stand there, enduring everything he throws at me.

Yes, this was my mistake, but do I really deserve to be treated like this? Is this fair in any way?

While lost in a pool of thoughts, I zone out and can only see his mouth move. I snap out of my thoughts to catch him saying something.

“The other day, you came thirty minutes late to work, leaving me to—”



*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:43 am*

I have had enough. I am his employee, not his slave.

“And when was the last time I came to work late aside from that day, you arrogant, entitled, conceited son of a bitch?”

My eyes sting with tears, and my chest rises and falls with heavy breath. I feel an overpowering urge to slap him hard across the face, and I think I might have if a vase hadn't caught my blurry vision instead. I storm to the table, pick up the vase, and smash it against the floor, shattering it into tiny, irregular shards.

“I slave for you. I almost don't have a life aside from working for you, but where has that gotten me apart from being treated like a subhuman? I am sick of you!”

Vaughn's angry expression slowly takes on a calm and sober form. His lips part like he is about to say something, but then they close again.

What an asshole! He can't even bring himself to apologize.

I march toward the door, angry as ever.

“Wait . . .” He reaches for my shoulder, attempting to stop me.

“Don't you dare touch me!” I bark, pulling my shoulder away from him.

He literally sprints and blocks the exit door before me.

“Get out of my way, Vaughn.”

“You’re crying,” he says, and I have no idea why he said that.

Slightly embarrassed, I wipe my tears with the back of my sleeve. His eyes soften, but he still doesn’t apologize.

“Have a seat. Let’s talk, Rachel. Apparently, there’s a lot for us to talk about.” His voice has a hint of desperation in it, a deep frown carved on his forehead.

“Just let me go, Vaughn.” I motion toward the door, attempting to step around him.

Before I can reach the door, a firm hand grips my arm and spins me around.

“No, we’ve got to talk about this.”

“Let me go!”

Before I can put up a physical resistance, he pulls me into the heat of his naked chest and seals my lips with a kiss.

A knot of shock and fear twists in the pit of my stomach, and I stand there dumbfounded, his lips on mine. He backs away a bit to look at my face, his shocked expression mirroring mine, but in place of fear, I see something else in his eyes.

Desire.

He claims my lips once again, this time with more intensity than the first kiss. This time, I kiss him back. Reasonable Rachel screams for me to back away, but horny Rachel won’t allow me to move a muscle. My earlier outburst left me with a vulnerable feeling, and my biggest wish is for Vaughn to take me right here in his study.

## Chapter eight

### Chapter Eight

Vaughn

Scoring a goal from the halfway line or beyond would have been a much easier feat to accomplish than breaking the first kiss; a dim light of reason has slipped through a crack in my mind. But then, I see the look of desire in her eyes when I pull back, and I instantly know that the deal is sealed.

I ravish her lips with mine as I pull her further into me, and her body melts against mine. The feel of her perky breast against my chest gets me unbelievably hard, and even though my mind is clouded with lust, I can't help but gasp lightly at how she can get me this hard.

Am I that attracted to her?

Rachel is anything but idle. She reciprocates my kiss with the same intensity, matching my energy with each movement and each caress until I can't take it anymore. I wrap my hands around her waist and hoist her upward. She wraps her legs around my waist and her arms around my neck. She doesn't let my lips catch a break, and I love it!

The foot of my injured leg stubs against a chair as I make my way to my big desk. I pull her in closer until my rock-hard member presses against her tightly. Still, I drown out a moan escaping her mouth by kissing her even deeper to suppress a yelp.

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:43 am*

I sweep my hand over the desk, and I slap her ass on the spot. When I pull back, I don't think of catching my breath before unbuttoning her shirt. Besides, who says I can't do both at the same time?

Rachel's cheeks are red, her eyes filled with desire but also with doubt. She reminds me of Jessica again, and a wave of painful nostalgia washes over me. But the bare, perky breasts that shoot in front of me make those thoughts vanish like the wind. I pinch a nipple, and she lets out a stifled moan, making my zipper beg to be unzipped.

"This is wrong, Vaughn. We should be doing this—oh my God . . ." She gasps when I free my cock from its prison.

No better expression in this world would have told me she wanted this as much as I do, and I let her know that by whispering it in her ear.

"So stop pretending."

A look of surrender flashes on her face, and that only fuels me even more. I undo her pant buttons, and in seconds, I am already inside the lush heat of my secretary, fucking her as if my life depends on it!

She writhes, gasps, and moans with each stroke. Her legs wrap tightly around my waist, pulling me into her wetness, urging me on even more as I fuck her even harder.

I feel my orgasm approaching. This feels so damn good that I don't want it to end soon, but I'm not in control. I empty my load into her, letting out a loud groan of pleasure. She pulls me in by the neck, her breath coming in quick gasps, her nipples

digging gently into my chest with each breath.

Post-nut clarity hits hard as soon as I come down my high mountain of bliss, and the realization of what has just transpired hits me like a moving train.

I step back and regard Rachel, who quickly averts her gaze as soon as our eyes meet. But I see enough of her face to notice a crimson blush rise up her cheeks. She hops down from the table, confused and disoriented, and starts dressing up—all the while, avoiding my eyes.

I feel I am not able to utter a single word, and I hate it. But what could I have said to my secretary at that moment?

“Hey, Rachel, this should not have happened, and I am sorry for fucking you?”

“Oh, don’t worry about it. It’s just sex, and everything will just be fine.”

But would it? Would everything truly be fine after this? Shit. I’m done fucked up.

I watch as she storms out of my study, and despite the deep feelings of regret plaguing my mind, an unreasonable urge to follow her swept through me. What we just had felt so normal and so real.

Snap out of it! It’s still wrong! I scold myself, a wave of shame sweeping over me.

And with the last ounce of self-control, I stayed put and just watched.

Chapter nine

Chapter Nine

Rachel

I reach into my purse for my apartment keys, shaking my head in disbelief as the reality of what has transpired in Vaughn's study sinks in even deeper.

How could I have let it go that far?

Just as my door clicks open, my eyes catch my reflection in a nearby glass window. My cheeks are still flushed, and wild hair frames my face. I glance at my bruised lips, and I shudder when I briefly relive the sensation of Vaughn's lips imprinted against mine like a brand. I can still feel the warmth of his body, which feels so real.

I shake my head vigorously, trying to clear my thoughts, and gently push the door. The sight before me—my beloved Archie—made my heart both melt and sink at the same time.

It hadn't even crossed my mind during the drive from Vaughn's to my apartment that I had forgotten to purchase groceries. But as I open my front door and see Archie gazing up at me with his welcoming eyes, guilt washes over me.

Poor cat.

He must have heard my footsteps across the hallway and come to welcome me . . . and demand for his food, which I have utterly forgotten.

But I don't blame myself. How on earth would I have remembered when I just had the best sex of my life with my boss? I guess this is what they mean when they say they had their minds blown away!

I pick up Archie from my doorstep and walk into my apartment. I place him on the couch and head straight for the shower.

Archie is waiting for me outside my room when I step out after throwing on some casuals. He trots behind me as I make my way to the kitchen to prepare some food.

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:43 am*

My mind is clearer after the shower, and I find myself questioning myself.

“This is crazy,” I mutter to myself as I let cold water run over the rice in the strainer. I had just had sex with my boss. On top of that, the event leading up to that point, in hindsight, feels surreal as well.

I’ve gotten so mad and bold in his office, even going as far as calling him a son of a bitch.

This is crazy.

How the hell did I manage to pull that off? Vaughn is someone I’ve always been wary of despite my attraction to him, someone whose tantrums and nagging I’ve always tried to avoid. I would even go further and say that I’ve gotten a little bit scared of him from all the constant fear of not wanting to step on his toes but always managing to do so all the damn time! Sooner or later, I’m going to get tired of stepping on the toes he always puts in my way and blaming me for it.

Has he found my rebellion appealing?

I don’t think so. That’s hardly the case. He kissed me to shut me up and get me to listen to what he had to say, even though that one act morphed into something else. I’d like to believe that he realized he had gone too far with those mean remarks, and he kissed me to shut me up and get me to calm down. I’m sure if it were a guy who had flipped their lid in that manner, he would have been greeted with a punch to the face.



But why couldn't I stop him?

I feel it goes beyond the physical thrill that had come with the kiss; it was a release and outlet for anger and frustration that had built up over the years.

Meow.

Archie gently paws my legs, snapping me out of my reverie.

"I'm sorry, baby. You'll have to do milk again tonight. I promise I will get you your food tomorrow."

I pull out the milk can from the top counter and am about to pour some into his feeder when I realize I haven't washed it earlier.

I groan in frustration and quickly scrub it out before pouring some of the milk into the feeder. Archie licks it, but this time, with less enthusiasm than he did in the morning, and that is my warning that I might wake up missing an eye if I don't get Archie some cat food the next day. What a strange and unusual cat I have! Isn't it strange that the last thing a cat wants is milk, a food a stray cat would sacrifice its kittens to have?

"You've got to learn to be more grateful," I say to Archie, rubbing his fur.

The rice finally comes to boil, and I turn off the heat. I'm about to turn off the heat when my phone rings loudly from my bedroom, managing to startle me despite the distance.

I just want to be left alone for the rest of the day, but I still drag my feet to my bedroom only to see that it is my mother calling.

There's no way in hell I am picking that call! I yell inwardly.

Why is she calling me anyway? To tell me that she's consummated her marriage and is pregnant? Knowing the kind of woman my mother is, I can swear that's something she could definitely do. She calls me for even the slightest, most insignificant reasons. I know she's only doing so in an attempt to reconnect with me. Still, that ship sailed a long time ago when she decided to leave my father, who was struggling with heart issues at the time, to go be with another man.

Worse, she wasn't present at the funeral despite living only a couple of miles away from our house. I called and left a message, telling her that I needed her, only to see a condolence letter addressed to me in the mailbox a week later from my own mother! Even a stranger would likely call than leave me a letter in the mailbox.

I ignore the call like I would a leaf blowing down the street and head back to the kitchen to serve myself some food.

Archie is halfway done with his bowl of milk when I get back, and I feel a wave of relief washing over me. I think he opts to go to sleep hungry instead.

I serve myself some food and pour some orange juice. I go to my bedroom, ready to settle into a simple dinner before bed. As I dig in, I begin to savor the food, finally managing to distract myself from my thoughts—if only for a moment. But just as I start to relax, my phone rings again.

Oh, for God's sake!

Annoyance creeps under my skin, but then annoyance turns into shock when I see the number of the rival company's manager. My spoon makes a clattering sound on my plate as I drop it in frustration.

There's no way in hell I am picking that either.

But as I stare at the ringing phone in defiance, a sinking feeling finds its way into my chest. I had gone to meet Vaughn when I received a call from this same number. I had gone to apologize for my mistake and discuss how to fix it, only to end up making an even bigger mistake—without ever addressing the first one!

I think about the moment we shared and how good it felt at the time. A flicker of embarrassment ignites within me as memories of how I acted wild and let my animalistic desires take over my sanity. Even as I stormed out of his study, I had left a piece of my sanity there as I felt myself wanting more of him all through the drive back home.

A moist spot appears on my bed sheet, and that is when I realize that I have begun shedding a few tears.

My lips spread into a smile as I find the whole situation funny as much as it is emotional. Why am I getting so emotional over this?

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:43 am*

Of course, I still ask myself this despite the answer being that I just fucked my boss and perhaps because the call from my mother had triggered some memories.

But the question whose answer I really need to figure out is, what will happen to my work relationship with Vaughn after I yelled at him, smashed his vase, and also smashed him?

Chapter ten

Chapter Ten

Vaughn

A fresh football season is due in about a month, and what other way is there to prepare for it other than to train, train, and train as Vaughn Graham has always done?

Trust me when I say forget what all these sports doctors say about injured players needing rest to get back on their feet. There's no better therapy for an injury than further exertion. It makes you numb to the pain, and eventually, it's no longer there!

"Why should I trust Vaughn?" you may ask. Well, I am literally just shooting the ball into the net, sending the goalkeeper flying in the opposite direction. Damn! I can't wait to start training fully with my team by next week!

For a July summer morning, it is unusually cold, and I shouldn't be sweating as much as I am. My jersey clings to my sweaty body as I turn to address my fellow players.

“Got to take a break, guys.”

My agent, Raphael, and a couple of guys stand on the sidelines, seemingly engrossed in conversation. I walk in their direction, panting heavily. I’m not really tired; I just need a quick water break.

Coach McLaren, whose arrival at my personal training ground has surprised me, smiles warmly at me as he tosses me a bottle of water.

“You are fit as a horse, Vaughn. You seem to have gotten even better than you were before the injury.”

I catch the bottle midair and smile sheepishly as I unscrew the cap. “Thanks for the compliment, Coach, but that’s only because I am not playing in a match yet.”

I might be a confident man, but I don’t make the mistake of being overconfident, and that’s a character trait that has gotten me this far as this soccer player. Even at thirty years old, I am still in my prime years, and it just keeps getting better.

“Are you saying you aren’t ready for a match, Vaughn?” Coach McLaren asks, his jowls falling to an even lower level.

I chuckle. “Of course not, Coach. What have I been training for all these past weeks? Next season, of course!”

“That’s the spirit, my boy!” He punches the air, and his oversized bomber jacket with “Soccer Samurai” written boldly on it moves gently with the wind. Coach McLaren stands at an amazing height of five-foot-five, but do not let his height deceive you; the old man knows damn well how to do his job. The team owes him a lot for his victories and accolades, and I have the utmost respect for him.

We sit on a bench, and he continues talking. This time, his voice is almost conspiratorial: “I don’t know if you know this yet, but the team’s manager had sold off Mathew.”

I don’t try to mask the shock on my face. “What? You mean the team’s substitute number 7?”

He nods. “So, you’re the only player in the team with the number 7 position, and this is likely to be the case until when the season starts. Although he told me he has plans for new recruits, anything can happen. We can’t just buy any player!”

I nod in understanding. My eyes shift from his face to the ball, flying midair and landing inside the goalpost.

I wear the number 7 jersey, but I couldn’t play in the finals last season due to my injury. However, I went to watch the finals, and sadly, we didn’t win the cup. This circumstance almost makes me shed tears because of how hard we have trained throughout the league. I speculate that is the reason they sold Mathew, but I decided not to ask Coach McLauren about it.

“I will put in my best, coach,” I assure him.

“Not only that—you have got to promise not to get injured again. The team needs you.”

“I will try not to, sir.”

He exhales and shakes his head; then he slaps his hat on his head, a contented twinkle in his eyes. “Okay, Vaughn. I have to get going now. Got to go prepare the rest of the boys and stuff. See you on the field next week for the preseason.”

With that and a smile, he walks to his car, waves, and pauses just as Raphael begins running in his direction.

What's the deal with Raphael?

I shift my attention from Raphael and look to the ground, studying the patterns on the green grass. I am too exhausted to care at that point. It's Raphael, by the way; he is always up to some shenanigans.

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:43 am*

Phew!

Preseason is in a week! It feels like a dream. It has been almost two months since the American Soccer League ended, with New York FC losing the final match to Pride FC of Beverly Hills, California. A forward from their team scored a moment-defining goal at the last minute after a goalless match for up to the fortieth minute into the second half. The crowd erupted into a cacophony of high-pitched cheers and boos—sounds I only became aware of after I almost felt like crying.

No—I think I did cry and even wailed.

The image of that soccer ball doing cartwheels off the top-right corner of our goalpost is still etched vividly in my mind. Even as I think about it now, I can still feel a thousand sharp needles prick my heart. I couldn't play because of the injury I had gotten from the quarter-finals, but it still would have been a challenge with me on the pitch.

Pride FC Beverly Hills has been the arch-rival of New York FC for as long as I can remember—a rivalry that goes far beyond the fact that these are the richest and most famous clubs in the country.

Both teams boast the best players from all over the world, even scouting talent from Brazil, the world capital of football. With the top players vying to prove their supremacy, it's no surprise that the competition between these two clubs is fierce.

Add to that the insanely passionate and strong fan bases they've built over the years and the longstanding rumors that the club owners have been enemies forever, and you



can imagine the intensity of this rivalry.

One thing I will never let repeat itself is Pride FC wiping the floor with our asses again. Come next season, we shall show them that “pride” indeed does come before a fall!

Speaking of pride, I should probably tone down and call my secretary, who I haven’t seen or talked to in three days. I still smell her lavender-scented perfume in the office, indicating that she still comes to work but has been avoiding me. It makes me want to flip my lid, storm into her office, and shout at her for not taking her job seriously, but it seems my injury hurts more when I even think of doing that.

Who am I kidding? It pains me to say this, but ever since our steamy sex in my study, I have been somewhat avoiding her as well.

“Guess what, Vaughn.”

It’s like a smiling face suddenly materializes above me. I don’t even hear his footsteps approaching me. I snap out of my thoughts to see Raphael’s smooth face hovering above me.

“What do you want? Shit, you scared me.”

“My apologies, then,” he says, not looking the least sorry as his silly grin stretches even wider. “You look stressed out. Is it the injury?” His concerned tone is in stark contrast with the silly grin on his face.

“Now, out with it, Raphael. Why do you look like you’ve just won the lottery?”

“Oh, how kind is Coach McLauren, really? While you were training, before taking your break, he was very impressed with the work we’re doing here.”

He points at the videographer and the rest of the camera crew who are videoing my training sessions. Since my injury, I have had my training sessions recorded to assess my performance as I heal for signs of progress, but what I walked into on the training ground this morning was nothing like the usual video sessions.

As soon as I saw a large camera mounted on tripods, I almost called Rachel out of panic to come shoo them away, even though it was an hour after dawn, thinking it was those freaking reporters until Raphael reassured me it was normal sessions.

“Oh, he was?” I say, my brow raised.

“Oh yes, he was. In fact, he says I could shoot the promotional video for the New York FC when they start training in a few weeks.”

He pauses, the stupid grin still on his face. He looks at the videographer, who has an embarrassed look on his face, then examines mine carefully, probably expecting some sort of reaction. Why is he so happy about this, though? It’s just a promotional video.

He seems to have registered the blank look on my face when he says, “You don’t get it, do you?”

I shake my head.

By now, he’s stopped smiling. He dips his hands into his jacket and shrugs. “Well, it’s a steppingstone for me. I have always wanted to work with a renowned coach like McLauren.”

My gaze falls to the ground to hide a grunt. Sneaky bastard. He probably knew the coach would come by to visit and set up a whole VR studio to impress him.

I raise my head. “I see. You’re my manager, after all. I wouldn’t have hired you if you didn’t have what it takes.”

I reassure him with a smile, and without missing a beat, I add, “I am much better now, so why don’t you dial Rachel’s number for me? She could come to help edit and compile the videos we have collected all through those weeks.”

“That would be nice.”

He pulls out my phone, dials Rachel’s number, and hands it to me.

I mentally put on my tough shell as I hear the phone ring at the other end, and as soon as it connects, I speak firmly, “Come to the training field now, Rachel.”

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:43 am*

I am a tad nervous when I speak, but then I become astonished when the voice replies, “I . . . I can’t. I mean . . . it’s going to take some time.”

The voice is hoarse. Freaking hoarse, like I-just-woke-up-from-sleep hoarse.

Are you fucking kidding me?

“Wait, are you just waking up?”

My astonishment turns into anger, and not even the fact that we fucked on my table stops me from being angry. First, she messed up my contracts, potentially making me look bad in the eyes of two rival companies. Then she took a “sick leave” because she didn’t have the guts to face me. And now she stops coming to work?

“Yes, I . . . I—”

“I pay you a good amount of money to be here as early as 7:45 a.m., and you’re just waking up from sleep. Now listen—I am gonna say this once. If you don’t haul your lazy ass over here in the next twenty—no, ten—minutes, you might as well start looking for another job.”

And with that, I cut the call and hand the phone back to Raphael without looking at his face.

Great, Vaughn! There you have it. Nothing really changed! She’s still just a secretary to you.

Awesome.

I feel invigorated by this thought. Yes, that's all she is—a secretary and a one-night stand changes nothing. Jokes on her, if she thinks it does. Fuck me—how did I even let it get this far in the first place? The nerve of her, missing workdays like she owns the freaking place!

A surge of energy courses through me as I tell myself there's absolutely nothing to worry about. I spring up from the bench and sprint back into the training field.

\*\*\*

The goalie throws the ball into the field, and when I jump up to control it, I almost land on the side of my soles.

Rachel's ash-colored Honda comes to a stop, and she steps out as the engine quiets. She looks left and right like she's looking for someone and then starts walking toward the training ground.

I hastily avert my gaze just in time for a player to come with a sweep in an attempt to gain control of the ball. I immediately regain focus and hastily pull the ball backward with my feet. My senses are so on edge that I think for a moment I hear her heels clanking as she approaches, but then I remember it is all grass here, no tiles or concrete.

What the hell is wrong with me?

I get pissed at my focus being all over the place upon Rachel's arrival. Frustration spreads over my chest, and I concentrate a lot of force on my left foot before sending the ball flying toward the goalie. He lunges toward the ball and pushes it outside, making me even more pissed.

My chest heaves, rises, and crashes heavily as I wait for the ball to be retrieved. I pant heavily, and it's not just out of physical exertion.

I sneakily try to steal a glance—you know, when you try to look at someone without making it seem like you are looking at them? Yeah, that's what I did. Guess what? I fail miserably.

As soon as I turn my head in her direction, our eyes meet, and I hastily place my hands on my waist because, for some reason, I think that will make it seem less obvious. It is more of a reflex response.

She lets the gaze linger. Then she slowly turns her head to face Raphael, and they continue discussing whatever it is they are discussing.

The unbothered woman standing to my far right looks nothing like the somewhat scared voice that I had spoken with some minutes ago. She seems to have gotten bolder during the drive here. The way her mouth moves, coupled with the way she is dressed, makes her look very professional without taking away from her sexiness—a pencil skirt that hugs her hourglass figure closely and a blouse with a subtle sheen and ruffled at the edges. My eyes wander to her hips, and I feel something stir in my pants as recollections of our time in my study flood my mind.

The ball flies back into the field, and I am thankful as it is the only thing at that point that can stop me from ogling my secretary. I play some more, but then I wave my hand, indicating that I need a break. I'm not tired at all or even thirsty. It is out of pure curiosity. I want to see how she will react if I come up close. I am curious to see if she will be nervous or fidgety around me. Not that I care if she is—hell, I do care, but in the sense that it might hinder her from doing her job like she's supposed to. It's not like she does it efficiently in the first place, so how much more useless will she be if she's nervous around me?

The videographer and his crew take a snapshot of me as I walk toward the sidelines. At the same time, Rachel continues to engage Raphael in conversation.

I position myself on a spot on the bench that will allow me a good view of her face.

“Toss me a bottle of water,” I say.

Rachel pauses mid-conversation and moves her eyes to me. The green color of her eyes reflects the rays of the 8:00 a.m. sun, and she appears to catch her breath. If you ask me, I will translate the flustered expression on her face as “I am not in the least happy to be here.”

She looks more annoyed than nervous. Is that a good thing or a bad thing? I will sure find out if that’s a good thing or a bad thing in our later interactions.

Without wasting time, Raphael dips his hand into a duffel bag lying aimlessly on the floor and tosses me a water bottle.

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:43 am*

“Here, Vaughn.”

Shifting my eyes from her, I threw a hand in the air, breaking the trajectory of the flying bottle, and begin chugging down its contents.

And that’s when I see it.

Sheesh. She is gesticulating in a manner that seems all too familiar because that’s exactly how I move my hands!

Wait—or am I being delusional?

No, it can’t be. She’s even doing the “corkscrewing” motion I do, especially when being interviewed. How on earth could she not notice these things? Or does she? And she’s just doing it to mess with me?

“Once I get his schedule modified, I will communicate with you—”

She just did it again!

Our eyes met again, and I caught something in her eyes that made me realize she wasn’t messing with me at all. Our encounter is as fresh in her mind as it is in mine, and I know I was in for a tough one. It’s one of those things that are so subtle yet so easy to notice if they are about you.

And I hated it.



## Chapter eleven

### Chapter Eleven

Rachel

It felt like my eardrums were being pierced by sharp needles when my phone shrilled on the bedside table.

I curse softly under my breath, opening my eyes slowly, expecting to be greeted by the sun's blinding rays seeping through my curtain blinds. I raise my eyebrows in surprise when I see that the sun is just coming up—I can't even feel its warmth yet.

Who the hell is waking me up at this time? The sun itself hasn't fully woken up yet!

Before I can notice, Archie jolts awake beside me. He dashes toward my phone, but not even the fast reaction time of a cat could beat my close distance to the bedside table. I pick up my phone just in time before Archie can do any damage. I am sorry, feline friend, for waking you up, but I am not about to let you damage my cell phone.

My heart leaps into my mouth when I see the caller. It's Vaughn!

"H-hello?"

Aside from the fact that I have a sore throat, and my voice already sounds as if a series of heavy-duty chains are being pulled against a rail track from sleep, the nervousness that envelopes me makes it worse—at least to me.

"Wait, are you just waking up?" he says in disbelief.

I clutch at my blanket even tighter. From his tone, I already knew what was coming next, though I wasn't even expecting him to call me in the first place because of you-know-what.

He goes on a tirade about how he pays me a good amount of money to show up at work when I'm supposed to and tells me to "haul my ass over here" right now. Just like that, the automatic panic response one acquires after almost two years of working with Vaughn triggers within me, and I am on my feet within seconds.

Archie, who still seems annoyed, looks at me with a puzzled expression. It's the same look she gives me every time I get ready for work, and it seems to always ask, "Aren't you tired of your shitty job yet?"

Well, my shitty job makes sure you have enough milk in your bowl and enough cat food to last you a decade! I yell in my head before storming off to the bathroom—the first step in readying myself for a showdown with Vaughn.

\*\*\*

Okay, Ray, you can do this. You are going to maintain a professional tone when speaking to him and a professional posture when you see him because that's what you are—a professional.

Shit.

This exercise seems stranger than I thought, but at this point, I could give my next month's paycheck not to give Vaughn even the slightest hint of how I feel about our sexual encounter in his study. I don't want anything to interfere with our work relationship, even though we've practically avoided each other for the past two days.

I look into my eyes through the rearview mirror, trying to make them appear as

determined as possible.

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:43 am*

Okay, Ray, you'll do just fine.

The drive to Vaughn Charity Center doesn't take more than fifteen minutes. Still, to me, it feels longer than that because I struggle to maintain a decent composure despite how tense I feel inside.

I hop out of my car and go straight to the training ground upon arrival, my eyes sneakily scanning the area for Vaughn so as not to be caught off guard. And then, just a few yards away from the soccer pitch, I spotted him.

Good Lawd!

His sweaty body makes his jersey cling to his broad chest as he runs toward the goalpost, kicking the ball as fast as he can while the other players chase him relentlessly. For a fleeting moment, the thought of me running my hands over that chest crosses my mind and—

Come off it, Ray. Think composure, think control, think classy.

I switch my gaze to Raphael, who is standing with a camera crew on the sidelines, recording Vaughn's training sessions. We are discussing something related to making some edits to Vaughn's recorded training sessions when I catch Vaughn approaching us from my peripheral vision.

Shit.

I swallow hard and gesticulate with my hands fiercely to hide that they are slightly

trembling. It takes real strength not to turn my head to look at him.

He sits down on a bench close to where we stand, and the man does not even try to hide that his gaze is fixed directly on me!

I maintain my composure, putting on a straight face as I continue to talk until, I hear: “Toss me a bottle of water.”

Okay, it is already strange enough that he calls me out of the blue at seven in the morning, acting all bossy and threatening to fire me if I don’t come over in ten minutes after what happened in his study—not that I am expecting a kiss on the cheek or a trip to the Eiffel Tower. But telling me to toss him a bottle of water so nonchalantly seems strange to me. I am curious as to how he went from avoiding me to acting as if nothing happened. Perhaps in an attempt to restore our normal work relationship? That’s fine by me!

I pause mid-conversation and meet his gaze. Well, he really is talking to me.

I catch my breath, and just as I think of getting him a bottle of water, Raphael takes a long stride toward a bag lying on the floor and throws him the bottle.

“Here, Vaughn,” he says.

Relief washes over me. Oh, thank God. Then comes the slight anger about being relieved. I scold myself: What’s so special about handing him a bottle of water? I have always been efficient at dealing with Vaughn, but now I can’t even hand him a bottle of water. That sucks!

Then, I feel a wave of panic washing over me. Has Raphael noticed anything? Why did he suddenly step in and toss the bottle of water himself? No, Rachel, it’s just a random gesture. Vaughn might have as well been talking to him since he said “Toss

me” instead of “Hand me.”

Snap out of it, Ray.

I go back to ignoring Vaughn and continue discussing with Raphael and the group. Vaughn stands and goes back onto the pitch to keep playing.

Moments later, Carmen shows up with what I assume to be some food in a plastic bag for the field.

Really? Bringing Vaughn’s meal to the training ground?

But then, I assume that’s okay for someone like Carmen, who has shown several times that she wishes to take my “position,” like that’s something to strive for.

I get it; Vaughn is as attractive as the word goes, and I am sure most girls would rip faces off just to always be in close proximity to him. But Carmen knows how much of a jerk he is, just as much as I do, so the fact that she still wants his attention so badly baffles me.

“Hey, Carmen, you are looking awesome.”

It’s true. I couldn’t care less that she’s wearing a dress so seductive that even Raphael and the camera crew can’t hide the fact they’re eyeing her, trying to get Vaughn’s attention.

She gives me a slight nod and says, “That it is.” She offers a tight smile, but despite her attempt to be polite, I can tell she’s not happy to see me, which is evident from her eyes, now darker with annoyance.

She walks to the bench and sits down, her cleavage dipping a tad lower.

Poor breasts. They are probably gasping for air by now.

Raphael swallows and clears his throat, drawing my attention back to him. The expression on his red face almost makes me burst into uncontrollable laughter. He starts saying something, but then Carmen interrupts.

“Are you sure you’re okay, though? You know, you could stay at home for as long as you want. I’ve got everything covered here.”

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:43 am*

Carmen is as pretty as she is stupid. When you add her arrogance to the mix, it becomes even worse. Oh, the ignorance in what she just said! She's been around for some time, but it seems to me she still doesn't understand that being Vaughn's "secretary" means being his personal assistant, his courier, his maid, his manager, his secretary in the conventional sense, and oh, even his cook sometimes. It goes far beyond being the person to deliver his morning meals!

"Oh, I appreciate the gesture, Carmen. But I can't just leave everything to you. I am sure you've got enough on your plate already, and that wouldn't be very fair, would it?" I reply sassily.

She opens her mouth to say something stupid and annoying, I am sure, when suddenly, a loud bang rattles through my head, right to my brain and my molars.

The inflated ball ricochets off my head. The force behind the kick is so heavy that my bun instantly loosens. My knees give way, and I fall to the ground, my vision blurred.

Raphael and some of the crew members echo in concerned voices: "Are you okay, Rachel?"

"I am fine," I answer, clutching my head.

I lift my throbbing head to see that even some of the players who had been training with Vaughn have rushed over to me. The ones who didn't at least stop playing for a while to acknowledge that someone has just been hit.

Vaughn?



He just stands there staring at a ball under his feet, and the indifferent look he has on makes me feel like he only stopped because the other players stopped.

Hands pull me to my feet as I keep repeating, “I am fine now.” Even Carmen has come over to where we stand, but Vaughn, the asshole, just watches from the center of the soccer pitch, like we are some sort of characters in a TV show or something.

Son of a bitch.

I feel a pang of intense hurt pierce my heart, and then I chastise myself for feeling hurt about a man like Vaughn, who doesn’t give two flips about me. It’s not like he’s ever cared, so why even bother?

As I am escorted to the bench, reality hits hard: Vaughn Graham is an enigma, and I am just a mere secretary in his vast world of fame and glamour. Nothing is going to change that.

\*\*\*

Would it have made much of a difference if I hadn’t taken practically two days off from work a week earlier? I don’t think so at all. The fatigue and stress I have gathered over the week aren’t something a workaholic will be able to adapt to in a short time.

Stressful doesn’t even begin to cut it. There have been a handful of tasks for me to work on aside from the normal “non-strictly secretarial” tasks that come with working with Vaughn Graham.

Preseason starts in a few days, and I have had to work on his schedule. And oh, did I mention that Mobilix Solutions, the rivals of the company that Vaughn has done an ad for, actually sued?

The professional soccer player, his lawyer, and I now have a real case. We have the meeting in an “air-tight chamber”—meaning it is strictly confidential. I am thankful the lawyer’s presence fixes the issue of having to be with Vaughn for an extended period.

Reporters will have a field day with this case if it ever comes out. We have negotiated a settlement with Mobilix Solutions, but they refused and sued instead, so obviously, it’s only a matter of time before the whole situation comes to light. But before then, we have to make sure that Vaughn is not painted in a bad light.

I have just gotten home from the pharmacy to get some painkillers when my phone rings. Yeah, you guessed right—Vaughn.

“Rachel, come over to my place now.”

What?

“Okay.”

The line clicks dead.

That’s strange. What does he need me to come over to his place for? I should have asked him, but my dumb ass reflexively mouthed off an “Okay.” Why? Because it’s always an “Okay” to all of Vaughn’s requests?

Certainly, he isn’t stupid enough to try any funny business with me again, is he?

I shake my head to dispel my thoughts. I head toward my car, but not before grabbing my prescriptions because I know it will only get worse by the time I am done with whatever it is that Vaughn wants me to do.

Shit. The car won't start.

It's high time I asked Vaughn for a raise so I can save up for another car. By the way, I more than deserve it!

Without wasting any time to see what's wrong with it—because Vaughn will kill me if I get left trying to figure that out—I hail a cab.

\*\*\*

Sometimes, I wonder how Elena handles Vaughn's mansion all by herself. From what I see in movies, owners of mansions like this employ the maid, the cook, and the butler as separate people. I would take as many leaves as I could if I were in her place as well.

I hum a tune under my breath as I prepare a dish of Bronx-style chicken Parmesan. It turns out that Vaughn wants me to cook dinner for a family gathering since his people are coming to visit. Elena will be gone for three days—something to do with her mother being sick.

I pause and tug at the overly tight apron strings just before pouring some melted mozzarella over the fried chicken. When everything's all set, I place the food on the tray and take it to the vast dining room.

It appears like a heated conversation is abruptly stopped when I am seen approaching, judging from the not-so-happy faces and the tense atmosphere in the dining room. Without thinking much about it—because, obviously, it's none of my business—I set the tray on the table and begin unpacking.

Vaughn is drumming his fingers repeatedly on a spot on the wide walnut table. It doesn't take long to realize that he is troubled. There's a certain way his right eyelid droops slightly when he's tense.

“Enjoy your meal, Mrs. Graham,” I say, turning to Vaughn's mother. She forces a smile in my direction, making her eyes wrinkle at the edges.

“Thank you very much, Rachel.” She rubs her palms together and inhales deeply. “I am sure this tastes so nice. You can always tell from the aroma.”

I guess that’s her attempt to lighten up the gloomy mood in the dining room.

“Thanks for the compliment, ma’am,” I reply shyly, my eyes glazing over the rest of the faces around the table.

Vaughn doesn’t even acknowledge my presence as his gaze remains fixed on the table. It’s almost as if his secretary hasn’t just walked into the room with the most delicious and mouthwatering chicken Parmesan you will ever taste.

Awkward.

I turn to leave when Vaughn’s mother decides to make the situation even more awkward for me by saying, “Why don’t you sit down at the table with us? I am sure there’s enough for all four of us.”

You’ve got to be kidding me.

I slowly turn back to face her. “Umm, I think it’s fine. I made some for myself back in the kitchen—”

My throat gets dry when my eyes roam over the rest of the people around the table. There is Vaughn’s sister, Michelle, who looks about seventeen, and then there is Steven, whose smooth, young face and huge stature make me unsure of his age.

“No. You eat here. I insist,” Mrs. Graham says with a smile. But even with the smile, her tone is firm enough for me to know that I don’t dare object.

Vaughn is looking at his mom at this point, annoyance etched into all the lines of his

face. “Would you just let her go if she doesn’t want to sit? By the way, this is supposed to be a family lunch, so I don’t get why—”

She waves her hand at him, and he stops abruptly. I swear it takes me a great amount of self-control not to burst into fits of laughter right then and there when I see the look on his face. It is like that of a nine-year-old whose mom won’t buy him his favorite cookies at the store.

“I am hearing nothing of it, Vaughn.” She urges me to sit down, and I deliberately avoid sitting next to Vaughn, walking around the table to sit next to Michelle. She doesn’t even lift her head to acknowledge me and just keeps surfing through Instagram posts on her iPhone.

“Hi, Michelle,” I say.

She doesn’t even answer.

Sheesh, how typical for a seventeen-year-old.

“Put that phone away, Michelle,” Mrs. Graham orders just as Steven pulls a plate of steaming hot food toward himself and begins digging in.

Michelle mumbles something under her breath but eventually puts the phone away. Vaughn also calms down a bit, and we soon start eating in silence.

I occasionally steal a glance at Mrs. Graham and notice how much older she’s become since I last saw her. We met some months ago during a fundraising game for children with cancer, where a lot of parents were in attendance, and Vaughn introduced me as his PA.

“Yo, Vaughn, I heard preseason is starting very soon. Is your leg feeling much

better?” Steven says between mouthfuls. “I can’t wait to see you get back on the field. My buddies are all excited and want autographs signed.”

“I am as good as new. Thanks, Steven. How’s college, by the way?” Vaughn asks.

Steven drops his fork and huffs, a frustrated look on his face. “Don’t even let me get started. There’s been so much going on that I hardly have any time for myself.”

Well, guess what, Steven—it’s either we attend the same college, or we both work for Vaughn because I am you, and you’re me.

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:43 am*

“That doesn’t sound like the fun you made it out to be on the phone the other time,” Vaughn says, forking chicken into his mouth.

“Well, things change, I guess.”

“While still on the topic of things changing, you won’t believe who Mom and I saw last week in the mall,” Michelle says, directing her attention to Vaughn on the other side of the table.

She and her mother exchange a glance, and a frown appears between Mrs. Graham’s eyes. “Michelle, don’t—”

“It was Jessica, Vaughn. I saw Jessica. She seems like a totally different person. She offered to pay for some of our goods. She was nice to Mom and me, and she even dyed her hair purple. She looked amazing.”

The color drains from Vaughn’s face even though he tries not to show it, but the oblivious teenager keeps talking with a smile on her face. The mention of Jessica—whoever that is—clearly does not sit right with Vaughn.

“Will you just shut up!” Vaughn’s mother barks at the young girl, startling both me and Michelle.

“That was dumb, Micky. Really dumb,” Steven says, a disappointed look on his face.

“What’s so wrong with the mention of Jessica? It’s not like they are still together or anything,” Michelle says indignantly. “I think I will just take some fresh air outside. I



am not even hungry anymore.” She pulls her chair back and walks away.

Vaughn’s mom drops her fork and stretches her hand to touch his. “I am sorry about that, Vaughn. I don’t know why she acts that way sometimes. I will talk to her.”

“No, no, it’s fine. She’s just a girl anyway.”

He pulls his hand back and grabs his fork.

This is beyond awkward for me at this point. Might as well just stare at the table’s hardwood until everyone disperses.

“Anyway, is there anyone you’re seeing at the moment, Vaughn? I know you players hardly discuss these things with the media, but you know you can always tell your mom,” she offers.

Steven just shakes his head and continues eating absentmindedly.

“I don’t have time for that, Mom. I am a busy man,” Vaughn replies.

“I can see that. In fact, Michelle counted up to five billboards with your face on them on our way here. But don’t you think having someone in your life would help you get over Jessica?”

At this point, I don’t think I am supposed to be here.

“I am fine, Mom.”

“Are you, though?” Mrs. Graham turns to me and asks. “Don’t you think that’s a great idea, Rachel? You’re his PA. You should advise him.”

The immediate reaction that follows spares me the stress of thinking about how to respond to Mrs. Graham's statement. Vaughn's cutlery clanks on his plate, and he jerks his head upward to face his mother, his eyes glinting with fury.

## Chapter twelve

## Chapter Twelve

### Vaughn

"I am sick and tired of this, Mom! I am sick of you trying to influence my life decisions and all of you acting like you give a damn! I am sick of Michelle acting like a spoiled little brat. And you, Steven, I am sick of you only calling me when you need something from me. I am sick of you, all of you!"

I switch my gaze from Steven to Rachel and spring up from my seat. "Let's get out of here, Rachel!" I demand, storming out of the room, leaving my mother and Steven in the dining room and Rachel trying to catch up with my strides.

This shit fucking hurts, and it sucks. I had been in a relatively good mood all through the week because I wanted to start the season in a good headspace, only for my family members to come and fuck it all up. If only I had remained firm on them not coming or even lied that I traveled or something. I knew at the back of my mind that it wouldn't go well, but then I was hoping that it would, at least for a change.

I am finding it difficult to concentrate on the road as I drive Rachel home—not that I care much about her not bringing her car with her or having to take a cab back home. I am only doing this because I need some of that fresh air to clear my head as I drive, and it irks me that that's not even doing the trick I expect it to do.

Should I drive to Dr. Craig's office after dropping Rachel off?

Fuck no.

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:43 am*

That would be awkward. I haven't booked an appointment and today isn't usually the day we meet. I still need to process some things on my own before even thinking of calling Dr. Craig.

"Are you okay?" the person sitting beside me asks. Her hair catches a beam of sunlight that reflects from a platform we have just passed.

I'm not sure if the look was born out of worry or a feeling of awkwardness. Still, one thing I am sure of is I don't need Rachel sticking—or potentially sticking—her nose in my family business.

"Don't I look okay to you?" I say dismissively, too dismissively.

Well, shit, I am anything but okay at this point, and it frustrates me that Rachel just witnessed all that had transpired back in the dining room—my outburst, my lack of control. That's not a reaction I would like to show to anyone, not even her.

So what do I do? I direct my frustration at her. Maybe she should have shut the fuck up and minded her business in the first place.

I turn into a street and say to her, "I think I should be the one asking if you're okay. You didn't come to work the other day until I called, and you didn't bring me my breakfast for three days straight. You hardly even do your job well, and the meal you prepared today tasted like horse crap! So tell me, are you okay, Rachel? You don't have to move like a sloth. If you want a break, you can just say before deciding not to come to work."

That was harsh, but what was worse was that I didn't feel the slightest hint of remorse after spewing all that. And yeah, I lied about her meal tasting like crap. It was the best I have had in ages, even though my family was there to ruin it all for me.

She falls silent and doesn't say another word, which only makes the air in the car more tense. Moments later, as if finally snapping from her thoughts, she mumbles something.

"I am sorry I didn't catch that. What did you just say?"

It better not be what I think I heard.

I feel a frown forming on my forehead as I angle my head toward her, my eyes still on the road.

She turns and looks at me, making me take my eyes off the road for a moment. "I asked if you have to be so mean to everyone around you. I used to think that I was the only one you behaved that way toward. Seeing what you did back there, I guess I should be relieved that I wasn't special. Instead, I feel ashamed and sad for you."

Her face was surprisingly calm, but her hazel eyes appeared darker, bearing a whole lot of judgment in them. Then I saw something else—defiance.

It was much like what I had seen in her eyes at the time of her outburst in my study.

The memory of that night caused something to stir in my briefs, and I am sure I would have become enraged and yelled at her if it hadn't been so awkward.

Instead, I just calmly switched my attention back to the road. I have had enough for one day, and it's barely 4 p.m. yet. I doubt her stupid ass would get it if I attempted to explain why I acted the way I did back in the dining room. Not that I would ever

discuss my family issues with her. But still, I am just assuming.

She wouldn't understand how it was to have been my sole supporter since the time I used to play college soccer. Growing up in a modest household in the Bronx area of New York was challenging for me during my teenage years. The people who were supposed to support my dreams did everything they could to talk me out of it, going as far as telling the coach of the school's soccer team to kick me off the team. There was this time she almost got into an accident when we were driving to the beach. She jokingly said, "The only thing that would have come out of the accident would be that you wouldn't have to play soccer anymore."

That's even beside the point. My dad is long dead, so I can forgive him for not knowing any better. But my mom? She takes it a step further now, always questioning what I do with my life like I am Michelle's age mate or some young adult who's trying to navigate through life. But I wouldn't even be surprised if she doesn't know my actual age.

Then there's the constant complaint that I don't spend enough time with her. I am as busy as one man can get. I do everything I can for her financially and otherwise, even though, truthfully, I owe her none of that because she never supported my dreams in the first place.

I don't really hate her or resent her in any way. Still, when she guilt-trips me about focusing on my career—an aspect of my life she never really paid much attention to—I can't just control my anger. Why does she feel like she can dictate what I can and can't do with my life?

Shit, telling me I need to find a replacement for Jessica as if I don't have enough on my plate—like the upcoming season or the big game in a month. Hell, I don't even need a replacement for Jessica, even if I am not busy. That bitch betrayed me, and I couldn't care less if she has "changed," as my bratty little sister Michelle put it. She

might as well transform into an angel with long wings and a halo hovering above her head; I couldn't care less. Once bitten, twice shy.

So yeah, I'd rather keep my mouth shut. I am not about to tell my secretary all these things.

The traffic is heavy, and driving takes longer than it should. The traffic light flashes red, and we stop. Rachel is silent and is playing with her black hair as she stares out the window, almost absentmindedly.

When the car finally moves, I drive for some minutes before turning into the street that leads to her apartment. We are just a few yards away from her apartment when I ask a question that makes me almost stop my car in the middle of the road.

She shifts her gaze from staring out the window to my face and says it so casually, like that's the most normal thing in the world to say: "I was thinking you would apologize, but again, you didn't disappoint. Just like you refused to apologize the other day in your study and proceeded to make love to me instead. You are a real jerk, Vaughn."

The fuck. Did she just say, "Make love?"

That's the most ridiculous thing I have heard all week! It made me want to laugh and feel uncomfortable at the same time.

And was I surprised! I was surprised that she would even bring it up when, for the past week, we've been trying hard to prove to ourselves that it's better left undiscussed. But it seems "undiscussed" doesn't translate to "resolved," and the encounter is still fresh in our minds like it was yesterday. I feel my chest tighten with unease, much like how I felt when she was mimicking my mannerisms a week ago at the training ground.

Chapter thirteen



### Chapter Thirteen

Rachel

“Who the hell is that guy? What a perfect corner kick. Just . . . look at that!” Raphael exclaims and turns to the cameraman. “I hope you captured that kick. It’s too perfect not to have been captured.”

The videographer nods with an absent-minded, forced smile as he focuses on his work. I bet he’s had enough of the seemingly unending noises from Raphael—the graduate of the University of Yappahonics—himself.

I hardly blame him, though. Even if he almost never keeps his mouth shut, I, too—who barely have any knowledge of the technicalities of soccer despite having worked for Vaughn for two years—am engrossed.

“He must be a new player,” I offer. “His face doesn’t ring any bells.”

“I figured so.” Raphael walks toward me with quick steps and sits beside me on the bench. “With players like this, the Amaris Cup is as good as ours. Two more players like this, and it is definitely ours,” he adds in a whisper.

I scoff. “I thought they say the more exceptionally good players there are in a team, the less likely they are to get to the finals.”

He gives me a look that says, That’s the most ridiculous thing I have heard all week.

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“I thought so, too. But I guess it has something to do with all the great players thinking they are the best . . . I guess?”

I’m unsure where I heard that, probably from one of Vaughn’s interviews or perhaps on TV.

“That sort of makes sense. But the club has always prided itself on its great team spirit. I am sure that wouldn’t be a problem when it comes to NYFC.”

I shrug and stifle a yawn. I should have no business being at the New York Football Club’s headquarters at three in the afternoon. If anything, I should be in my tiny little apartment watching a Netflix series while gently petting Archie. But what else would one expect working for Vaughn Graham, the most demanding, arrogant, and entitled man on earth?

For me, it’s just another day in my life of being underappreciated at my job—normal.

“Aaaaaaand cut!” I hear the head of the videography crew yell just in time to see the players walking toward the sidelines, all sweaty and out of breath.

“I guess it’s time for a break,” Raphael says as he laboriously gets back to his feet to review the footage of what has been captured by the crew. He is taking this newfound task of his way too seriously, and it’s obvious he wants something out of it.

Raphael would have done better as a politician than a footballer’s agent because he seems more interested in the politics of it all rather than focusing on his job. I mean, he tries, but I am 100 percent sure Vaughn would do just fine without him. We are supposed to meet with the representative of Mobilix Solutions over dinner tomorrow with Vaughn’s lawyer, and he hasn’t brought up the talk with me, even though he

plays a good role as Vaughn's agent.

"No, I think they are done for the day," I say, a warmth of gratefulness spreading over my chest. It ended sooner than I expected.

I turned my head to look at Raphael, only to see a mask of shock and disbelief on his face. I follow his gaze, and then I see it: reporters, about twenty of them, bearing microphones and broadcasting equipment, flock into the stadium. The expression on my face must mimick the one I see on Raphael's as I stare in awe at what just happened.

"Who the hell let them in?" Raphael asks no one in particular. "It's not even the season yet."

But what really gets me is how composed each and every player is. It's almost like they are expecting this to happen. Although some of them manage to get away, most of them stay and professionally answer the questions thrown at them by the news-hungry reporters, even though they are obviously exhausted.

Everyone except for Vaughn.

He appears visibly stressed, his palms on his hips and his eyes darting aimlessly around the pitch as he answers questions. I take that as my cue to go meet him.

I nudge Raphael, and we both stand up from our seats and rush toward Vaughn. Just as we get to him, the stamping of multiple feet follows, and a heavy, sweaty body is thrust onto me.

I gasp for breath. What was that?

The next thing I see answers my questions. About a hundred soccer fans flock into

the stadium, and that's when I also realize their chatter and noise have increased—a change that went below my radar because I thought they were reporters. Amid the tugging and pulling, I panic and look around for any sign of Raphael or Vaughn. Still, all I see are the multiple heads of soccer fans, who are starting to behave like zombies at this point.

I hear a voice in the distance barking, “Security! Security!”

At this point, I am in the middle of a crowd that has formed so quickly that all I can do is stare. Worse, more of them keep gushing through the entrance.

Shit. They must have been waiting all day for the perfect opportunity to come rushing in like a herd of cattle. And where the hell is security when you need them? Don't soccer players have bodyguards or something?

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:43 am*

For whatever reason, the crowd becomes stagnant. The fans keep screaming and cheering, and I can barely make out what they are saying. If it's an autograph they want, I am sure whatever paper they have must be torn by now.

The push of the crowd makes me feel like my ribcage is about to be crushed, and I gasp for air as I struggle futilely to navigate my way.

Just then, a hand grips my wrist. I almost jumped in fright. I don't need someone else to scare me more than I already am. But when I turn to see who it is, I become even more confused. It's the new player whose corner kick Raphael commented on earlier.

Before I can say a word, he gently tugs at my wrist. "This way."

Like Moses parting the Red Sea, a narrow path leading to a room appears before him. He starts walking, pulling me gently behind him, and soon enough, I find myself in what appears to be the male locker room.

I heave a sigh of relief and fall into a nearby chair, struggling to catch my breath.

I hadn't thought about how awkward it would be to be pulled into the male locker room until I raised my head. The players are throwing sideways glances at me, and embarrassment churns within my stomach.

I think of saying hello to them but then figure that my voice would likely sound like that of a toad. That isn't likely to help with the embarrassment I already feel inside. Instead, I turn to my helper.

“Thank you.”

My helper is still standing, his gaze fixed on me, and this is when I study his features. His chiseled jaw curves upward into a smile. “Don’t mention it. It’s hard not to help a beautiful damsel in distress.” He sits down beside me. He says almost in a whisper, “And yes, I know ‘beautiful’ and ‘damsel’ sort of mean the same thing, but I figure that’s the only way to do you justice.”

Corny.

But I still can’t help but smile as his amber eyes beam at me. It must be because of how cute his eyes are.

“What’s your name, beautiful damsel?”

“Rachel,” I introduce, extending my hand. He grabs my hand and shakes it. “Collins.”

Gosh. He has a perfect set of white teeth, too.

“I might have been stomped to death if it wasn’t for your timely intervention.”

He appears to muse for a while. “Seems so. That means we can do ‘knight in shining armor’ instead of Collins, then.”

We share a laugh, and I also catch a smile on one of the players’ faces. He’s as handsome as he’s funny, and judging from the fact that he helped me, he must be kind as well. Is there anything else a woman could want?

“Hey there, Rachel. We’ve been looking everywhere for you. Are you okay?” I hear Raphael’s voice from the entrance, and I turn my head. Standing beside him is Vaughn, his shirt slung over his shoulder. A deep scowl is etched on his face, and his

well-sculpted body is glistening with sweat.

Sweet Jesus.

He looks like a god as he stands there. I gasp lightly before quickly averting my gaze to avoid embarrassing myself.

I force a smile at Raphael. "I am fine, thanks."

I maintain the smile on my face as I look back at Collins, my mind blank. The only dominating thought in my mind at this point is that of time with Vaughn in his study.

Idiot!

I feel my face flush with embarrassment and annoyance. How dare his mere presence have such an effect on me? Is it because he's shirtless? I have seen him shirtless countless times, so why?

Why does he get me feeling this way, even in the presence of a great guy like Collins?

From the look in Collins's eyes, I can tell he senses something is off, as there isn't much warmth in the smile he returns.

Chapter fourteen

Chapter Fourteen

Vaughn

Damn, reporters!

They are always snooping around where they aren't supposed to—talk about getting paid to invade people's privacy!

This is entirely their fault. If they hadn't provided an opening, the stampede by the fans wouldn't have happened in the first place. I literally had to remove my shirt and put it over my head just to prevent the fans from seeing my face; otherwise, I would have been toast.

"Let's move this way, Vaughn," Raphael, who somehow found me amidst the crowd, says.

"Where's Rachel?" I ask. I haven't really seen her since Nicholas drove us here, except for the occasional glances we sneaked at each other while I was on the field.

"I have no idea, Vaughn. But let's get you to the locker room first. I will go back to look for her."

We walk through the narrow path leading to the locker room, and I finally remove the makeshift mask I made with my shirt.

I step into the locker room, and as soon as I do, I stop.

Rachel is talking with this new guy on the team, all smiles and doe eyed. The heat of anger from what happened back on the pitch hasn't died down yet and seeing her with this guy only makes me want to explode.



What the fuck?

Worse, she doesn't even acknowledge my entry. She doesn't turn to look at who just walked in. She is supposed to be catering to me, not flirting with my teammates!

I am about to snap my fingers when Raphael asks Rachel if she's okay. She turns her head, meets my gaze, and lets it linger for a moment. Then she goes right back to smiling and getting doe-eyed with the new player, like I am not even here.

I am already pissed from the chaos outside, and seeing her reaction sends waves of jealousy coursing through my veins. Without thinking twice—or even thinking at all—I storm over to where they are seated, just in time to hear Mathew, the defender, call out to me.

The new player stands up, still smiling that stupid smile of his, and opens his mouth to say something, but I shut him up before he can get the first word out.

“Stay the fuck away from my secretary, man! She's here to work for me and do as she's told, not hang around for men to flirt with.”

Mathew gets to the scene just as the new player's smile fades. I hear the clanking of cleats and lively chatter coming from the hallway, indicating that the rest of the team has found their way back. That does nothing to dissipate the tense atmosphere between the new player, Rachel, and me.

I look down only to see this new player holding out an outstretched hand to me all this while—only now the smile is gone.

Mathew whistles.

The guys in the locker room watch in amazement. Rachel looks down, probably

shocked as well. My anger turns into a hot embarrassment. I storm toward the exit, walking past Raphael, who has a stunned expression. I get to the exit just in time for the rest of the team to come rushing in. The first ones to enter actually quiet down, probably sensing the change in atmosphere.

Security—wherever the hell they were earlier when reporters and fans threatened to eat the players alive—finally litter the place.

The crowd has dispersed, and the only people left are Coach McLauren, the assistant coach, and some other extras.

I sit down on a bench outside and almost punch myself in the gut. What the hell was that? That was so stupid and unprofessional. Not to mention, I acted this way toward a new player on the team. What will he think of me?

But is that even the real issue here?

A voice speaks in my head. Why did I react that way in the first place, especially in the presence of my teammates?

Why am I jealous that she is being friendly with another man?

That's just one point. I have been thinking of Rachel, stealing glances at her every chance I got. There was even a point where I got so distracted that Coach McLauren called me aside to ask if something was wrong.

This is bad.

Perhaps it's because I have come to see more of her—and I am not referring to her breasts—in the past few weeks than I had since she started working for me. She's no longer therobotic, timid, and submissive secretary I used to know, and that annoyed

me. She's revealed a sassy and daring side, which, for the record, also annoys me, but I guess it also . . .

Stop, Vaughn.

I don't care what it is. Whatever it is that's making her the center of my feelings, it must go. After all, she's just a secretary who appears to have developed an attitude. That's all this is.

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:43 am*

Nicholas drives us back home in silence. And I am not talking about Nicholas's silence because he's silent most of the time. I am talking about the thick silence that envelops the car. Even talkative Raphael keeps his mouth shut.

I am sitting next to Nicholas in front, while Rachel and Raphael are seated in the back. I am still in the jersey I played in. I could not bring myself to go back into the locker room and face my teammates.

I can see Rachel through the rearview mirror, staring out the window, seemingly lost in her own thoughts. What is she thinking?

Rachel asks to be dropped off somewhere on the way, saying she has business to attend to. Except for the "thanks" she mutters to Nicholas, she doesn't utter a single word. She doesn't even look at me.

What is she thinking?

She had better not be mad at me because that would be a very big mistake on her part!

Raphael is dropped off shortly after, and Nicholas drives me home.

On our way, my phone rings. It is a message from Rachel.

You have a meeting scheduled for 5 p.m. with the manager of the Kinetikor gym wear brand. I told them you'd show up.

Location: 24 St. John's Avenue.

Playing games with me, huh? Or perhaps she is trying to make her anger known by sending me a text instead of just telling me before she left? Pssst, like I care.

Without thinking much about it, I tell Nicholas to take a detour to the location. After about a ten-minute drive, we arrived at the place.

It is an isolated but sophisticated building at the far end of St. John's Avenue. Thankfully, it has grown darker than when we left headquarters, so all I have to do is pull a hat over my face before stepping out to avoid being noticed.

A woman about the same age as Rachel is seated at the far end of the room I'm ushered into. She has an authoritative air about her, and it doesn't take me long to figure out she is in charge. The two other men at opposite sides of the table nod and stand up to greet me, as does the woman.

The meeting is boring, like most meetings of this sort: some cameras going off in my face, crazy explanations about how great their brand is, crazier explanations about advanced materials science and nanotechnology—whatever the hell that has to do with gym wear. At the end of it all, they offer me a proposal to be the brand face of their product, which I humbly decline.

It seems to me that I have been focusing more on modeling and endorsements than my actual soccer career. As it is now, I am trying to clear out other endorsement contracts I have already signed, not add another to my plate. The new season starts in two weeks, and I am preparing to give it my all.

Chapter fifteen

Chapter Fifteen

Rachel

“What have you done?” I mutter, pacing around in my apartment. I only went to Vaughn’s place to apologize for my mistake. I know it’s my fault that this happened. I know what potential consequences there are, yet what I have ended up doing only presents more consequences!

A crazy thought pops into my head: Quit the job, Rachel Reed.

I pause in my pacing to further consider the thought.

That doesn’t seem like a bad idea at all. After the crazy sex that Vaughn and I had in his study, he has probably lost all respect for me—that’s if he had any for me to begin with. He would probably treat me more poorly as he now sees me as a conquest. Our professional relationship has already been compromised. Vaughn would eventually boot me out if he felt I didn’t do my job well. So why not quit on my own while I still have some of my dignity left?

A knock that I don’t in the least appreciate sounds on my door. I almost didn’t go to check, but it persisted. I open the door to see Vaughn—the man troubling my thoughts.

My heart skips a beat—no, my heart skips two beats—and all my lips do in an attempt to say something is quiver.

He is looking at me intently, but it’s not the usual gaze that makes me feel like I am being pulled in two different directions. It’s a much warmer, tender look in his beautiful blue eyes, and I feel my knees almost give way.

My grip squeezes on my bed sheets, and my clit and his tongue make the perfect duo. I writhe in pleasure as he draws circles around my clit, my palms clutching at the

mop of black hair on his head.

“I can’t take it anymore, Vaughn. Make love to me.”

He pauses and looks up at me, his blood-congested face and a smirk staring at me. He wraps his strong, muscular arms underneath my bare thighs and pulls me roughly—a little too roughly—toward him. He gets on top of me and presses his lips on mine in a hot, searing kiss. “Don’t you mean I should fuck you?”

The sexiness with which he says it makes me wetter even more, and my, did I want him to fuck me! Just like that, I am having sex with Vaughn again, just moments after we’d had sex in his study.

## Page 36

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:43 am*

His rod sinks into me. I gasp for air, my arms clutching around his neck tightly, my legs wrapped around his waist.

“Yes, Vaughn, I want you to fuck me,” I say—no, I more squeaked as that doesn’t even qualify as a voice.

“Say less, baby,” he whispers into my ear, and then he nibbles at my earlobes and sucks in tender flesh on my neck.

This man is about to drive me crazy.

I moan loudly, and just as if that’s what he’s been waiting for, he starts thrusting in and out of me, making me moan even louder.

He fucks me relentlessly, driving me wild with pleasure, fireworks exploding in my head with each stroke. I can already feel an approaching wave of orgasm spreading all over my body. When I finally came, I let out a loud cry, my nails digging into his hard back. He groans as he spits his load into me, and then he collapses on me.

“That’s the best fucking sex I have ever had,” he says, his sculpted chest pressed against my breasts. The contented smile on his face almost makes me believe him, but then I ask, “Better than all the models you rich soccer players have access to?”

He laughs and leans in for a kiss. “They don’t compare, darling.”

Darling?



“Look how red your cheeks are,” he continues, tracing the red patch on my cheek with soft kisses. “I could fuck you all day, you know.”

Hmm, romantic. Almost like it isn't Vaughn.

A wave of unease hits me, and then I pull back. I stare around like I am just being aware of my surroundings for the first time. For some reason, I feel confused and scared.

Something isn't right. A couple of minutes ago, he was at my door. How the heck did we end up on my bed?

He notices.

“What's wrong? Just realizing I am not really in bed with you?”

“What?”

He snickers. “Don't worry, you'll come off it shortly.”

And I did.

My eyes shoot open, and I literally wake up gasping for air.

That's insane! Did I just have a dream about Vaughn? A sex dream, for that matter?

The wetness I suddenly notice in between my legs gives me an answer, and embarrassment churns in my stomach.

It's dreams like these that get you in jail. Wait a minute—had my subconscious secretly wished Vaughn had followed me home on the day we had sex in his study? I

mean . . . the sex wasn't bad, but to the point of imagining—no, dreaming of what happened right after is next-level insane. It felt so real.

My chest tightens with worry as my feet find my shoes. Yes, it's a dream, but not just a dream. Two years of my life have been mostly spent working with Vaughn, and if that ends any time soon, I sure don't want this to be the reason.

\*\*\*

Archie jumps happily as I put on a light shirt and a pair of jeans from my wardrobe. It seems like she's figured out that today is going to be a good day.

I mean, why blame her? Rachel Reed, her human, is the busiest person in New York, slaving her ass off for a soccer player who doesn't seem to care. That is one hell of an improvement!

I drop lipstick on the mirror stand to pick Archie up. "Guess what, baby? We are gonna go out, walk around town and meet new people, buy some snacks for a movie night, and generally have a wonderful time! Guess who's home with you today?"

She gently claws at my hair in response, undoing the perfect bun I had done my hair into.

"Well, I guess I'll just leave it like that then. Bet you like it better this way."

I look at my reflection in the mirror, and a smile crosses my lips. I look . . . beautiful. Carelessly beautiful.

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:43 am*

I always make it a habit to appear as professional as possible on workdays, even though that is not really necessary. It's not like I work for a corporate industry. I always do my hair in a bun and wear professional outfits and shoes. Somehow, it makes me feel more competent, and I think it also keeps me from punching Vaughn in the face anytime he annoys me. I just look at myself and think, You're at work. Be professional.

The streets bustle with activity: people rushing home from work in buses, younger people making their way into bars and clubs, street vendors with merchandise in full display, and yeah, the ever-present street performers looking to charm you into parting with your last couple of bucks.

Archie won't let me appreciate the nice and warm weather as she keeps on walking with quick steps, pulling me with her collar. Archie leads, and I follow.

Gosh! I have almost forgotten what it feels like to have fun outside of work! I think to myself. I know simply walking your cat down the streets might not be many people's idea of fun, but if this is the first real break you've had from work in months, it's the most fun thing on the planet. They say people crave what they don't have: a full day off, in my case.

I couldn't do this when I faked illness just to stay home because, well, I was avoiding Vaughn at the time. My troubled thoughts wouldn't let me think of enjoying myself. And now, I can enjoy myself all I want, knowing that I have gotten all or most of Vaughn's schedules planned and managed to reach a settlement with Mobilix Solutions so that they withdrew their lawsuit. For once, everything seems to be in order.

I stopped at a mall to get some snacks for my movie night. Typically, days like this should be spent with friends, but you don't work all day for Vaughn and expect to have friends. I pick up two bags of Doritos and a bag of Cheetos, pay, and exit the mall.

My phone rang as soon as I stepped out of the mall. Just as I reach into my purse to check who it is, desperately wishing it's not Vaughn, I collide with someone—or they collide with me. I am not sure.

“Oh, I am so sorry,” I say, frantically bending down and gathering some papers that spilled out from the man's bag.

He reaches down and does the same. “Don't worry about it. I bumped into you.” He gives me a reassuring smile that helps make me less tense, and for the first time since the collision, I notice he's wearing a suit.

We finish gathering the papers, and he is still smiling at me. His tailored suit, his well-groomed hair, his shoes, his eyes. He reminds me of Wall Street guys and conmen at the same time, but I guess there isn't much of a difference.

“Nice cat you've got there, young lady. What is its name?”

There's a way with which he asks the question that makes me feel he's genuinely interested rather than looking for a way to start up small talk.

“Archie.”

“Hmm, quite an uncommon name for a cat, don't you think?”

I laugh lightly. “Well, that's one of the things that make him unique, I guess.”

“I see. Well, I just happen to be getting out of the hellhole I call work, and I am heading back home. But could we grab a drink, if you don’t mind? Just my way of apologizing for bumping into you.”

You bump into someone, and the next thing you’re asking is to grab a drink. A little too random if you ask me.

I had misgivings about having a drink with a total stranger, but really, what do I have to lose? It’s a day off, so why not? Sometimes, it takes one stranger to make the rest of your day.

“Sure, sir.”

“Thank you.”

We walk to a nearby café and take our seats.

“Can I pet your cat?” he asks.

“Sure, why not?”

He reaches out to touch Archie on the head, and Archie swishes at the man’s hand.

“Hey! That’s not nice!” I scold.

He simply laughs it off and says it’s okay.

We engage in small talk as we sip our coffee, only for him to steer the conversation in an entirely different direction.

“There’s a matter about Vaughn Graham I would like to talk with you about.”

I'm not surprised at the mention of Vaughn's name. I told him earlier that I worked for Vaughn when he asked where I worked simply because he doesn't strike me as someone who cares for soccer much. I usually don't do that out of fear of some crazy fan pestering me into getting their stuff signed like I even have the power to do that.

Still, it catches me off guard. "Excuse me?"

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:43 am*

He draws a deep breath, looks to his left and to his right, and leans closer. “I have a deal for you, Rachel. I just need you to do me a little favor, and you’d be glad you did it for the rest of your life.”

I can sense the once jovial atmosphere dissolving into a more tense, slightly sinister one. “What deal could you possibly have for me, mister?”

I’m curious at this point. What deal can a total stranger have for me?

He pauses, a thoughtful expression on his face as if he’s trying to figure out how best to say it. “The new season starts in a couple of weeks, and I work for people who want Vaughn out of the league.”

He pauses again, gauging my reaction. I try my best not to react even though I am screaming, “What the fuck!” inwardly.

“Now, here’s where you come in,” he continues. “You’re the best person for this because you’re always around him. I want you to sabotage his career by framing him as a drug user. I’m sure that will be a very difficult task for you if you agree to work with us for a sum of six hundred thousand dollars.”

The mention of the money almost makes my jaw drop, and it’s my turn to look left and right. Archie is roaming around the table, minding her own business, and so is everyone in the café.

“What did you just say?”

“You heard me right. Six hundred thousand dollars.”

I shake my head, fighting the thoughts that are beginning to go crazy in my mind.

He probably thought I was disagreeing because the next thing I hear is, “Seven hundred thousand dollars. You’ll do it for seven hundred K, won’t you?”

The thoughts go even wilder. I swallow hard, my heart thumping against my ribcage. If it weren’t for my composure, I am sure I would have screamed.

Holy Bejesus! Seven hundred thousand dollars! Crazy!

But I can’t do that—not to Vaughn. He pays me enough to live comfortably, but what I am truly worried about is how I will live with myself if I agree to this.

No, Rachel. No.

“No,” I say firmly. “I will not be able to do that.”

“Not even for seven hundred thousand dollars?” he asks, perplexed.

“Not even for a million dollars.”

The indifference with which I say that must have gotten to him, and the polite tone he employed vanishes. “How stupid and ridiculous. You’d throw away almost a million dollars for someone who treats you like crap? Tell me, when was the last time he said as little as a thank you to you for all you do for him?”

He appears mad at this point, and I have had enough. “I don’t see how that is any business of yours or whoever it is that sent you, mister. So, if you don’t mind, I would like to take my leave now.”



I drop some dollar bills on the table, stand up, and tug gently at Archie's noose, leaving "mister" staring after us.

This is nothing new to me at all. Over the period I have worked for Vaughn, I have had bribe offers from various people who had to do with Vaughn. When you're as big and successful as Vaughn, it's only natural for some people to want to bring you down. But this is different.

Seven hundred freaking thousand dollars!

No. This is a whole new level, too tempting to be real. Honestly, at this point, I feel one more attempt at persuasion from the man, and I swear I'd give in. That's enough money to set me up for life!

I get as fast as I can from the café, heading directly home. On my way, I looked at my phone and saw that it was my mom who had called me earlier.

.

Chapter sixteen

Chapter Sixteen

Vaughn

I exhale sharply in frustration as Nicholas brings the car to a staggering halt. Traffic. The traffic is heavy. Now, that's nothing unusual, but you never get used to it.

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:43 am*

Today's training is light, way lighter than the rigorous sessions we have been having in the past week. We hardly even play a match; fitness drills are the order of the day: sprints, shuttle runs, footwork exercises, and some cone drills. Afterward, the fitness coach does some assessments on us, and we are done for the day.

But the fact that I'm very tired physically doesn't mean I am fine.

"Perhaps I should call Dr. Craig," I say to myself. I feel irritable. Perhaps it's because Paul kept throwing side glances my way while I was in a one-on-one drill with Collins.

Yeah, we had a one-on-one drill, which I had initiated. I feel guilty about how I reacted when I saw him with Rachel. He didn't seem bothered by it at all, and I'd like to think we are pretty much on good terms now.

Paul, a midfielder on the team and my former best friend, wouldn't stop stealing glances at me—awkward glances and a stupid half-smile. The fucker had the guts to smile at me after fucking my former girlfriend two years ago!

It wouldn't be hard to guess that ever since that happened, we hadn't been on speaking terms. We had mostly avoided each other until necessary, but the fact that this asshole smiled at me today made me mad. I was pissed, and I swore, if not for Coach McLaren's presence, I would have gone over and given him a smack on the snake face.

What more? Nicholas hasn't taken me home either—a place I desperately want to be at this moment. Instead, he is taking me to the Charity Center to kick Rachel's

ass—she has fucked up my schedule again, and I am beyond pissed at this point. If not for my great lawyer, my name would have been on the news for terrible reasons: Famous soccer player Vaughn Graham signs deals with two rival companies, sparking controversy.

My patience wears thin as we wait for the lights to turn green, my chest heaving. Even Nicholas shifts uncomfortably in his chair from the tension in the car.

When I finally get to the office, I hop down from the car and head straight to the reception.

“Good afternoon, Vaughn. How is your day going?” I hear a voice say from over the table, followed by a smile that makes me even more annoyed. It’s Carmen.

“Is Rachel here?” I ask urgently without replying to her greetings, and I watch the smile disappear from her face.

“Yes. I saw her come in this morning. She’s likely in her office,” she replies unenthusiastically, her thin, painted red lips flattening into a straight line.

I take the elevator and head to the third floor. I never thought there’d be a day when I would be asking if Rachel came to work, but here we are! After having taken days off in the last two weeks on her own, it won’t be surprising if she takes too much liberty in the free day, I gave her yesterday and adds days of her own. Yeah, she’s changed that much! It irks me even more that there’s this feeling that is stopping me from putting her in check.

I flung her office door wide open without taking the trouble to knock. “Oh, so you came to work? That’s cool. Any explanation as to why you didn’t bring me my breakfast?”

She raises a well-plucked eyebrow in surprise, but she still remained graceful. “I didn’t think—”

“You know what, that’s even beside the point.” I close the distance between us in long strides and stand over her. “You fucked up my schedules again. I am not supposed to meet with that client you called me about until next week!”

I see her swallow. “Y-you mean the ‘energy drink for athletes’ company?”

I drag a chair opposite her and sit down. “Oh, are there more of my schedules that you messed up?”

She shakes her head frantically and pauses to wipe a bead of sweat off her forehead. “I am sorry, Vaughn. I . . . it was a mistake. I thought it was scheduled for today.”

She does look sorry . . . and scared. And I love it! Call me a sadist, but I don’t like feeling like I’m losing control over something that should be under my control.

“I’ll fix it,” she says.

Seeing that she does not match my scolding with a confrontational reaction, I calm down a bit. “You don’t have to. It would be a waste of time to abandon the meeting after getting there already, don’t you think? It’s been settled. What you have to do, though, is inform the pilot to get my jet ready. We are going to Australia.”

“What? I thought that was in another two weeks.” Her eyes widen, and her lips slightly part.

“Of course you do,” I grunt. “Might as well be my own secretary.”

You wouldn’t believe the look that she gives me. It’s subtle but obvious enough for

me to notice. She better not ruin my mood further with her newfound sassy attitude—there's no telling how I might react.

She still has a doubtful look in her eyes. I bet she thinks she didn't make a mistake. She rolls her swivel chair backward and leans forward, exposing generous cleavage between two swollen mounds as she pulls at a drawer.

Sweet Jesus.

My eyes wouldn't move an inch from her chest for about ten seconds, and it would have taken even longer if not for the burgeoning erection in my pants. I have just shorts on. I can't risk it.

She slaps a file on her desk, her expression serious as she scans through it, and then she looks back at me in astonishment.

“You are actually right—”

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:43 am*

“Of course I am right, Rachel,” I blurted impatiently. “Time to call my pilot instead of trying to prove a point, don’t you think?”

She inhales, in what seems like frustration and presses the phone to her ear after dialing a number. She talks with the pilot for some time, and as she ends the call, she springs to her feet and says, “I have to get some supplies for both of us. I will be back in like twenty minutes.”

“You better.”

Her heels clank against the tiles as she scurries out of the office, her hips shaking in her quick steps. She disappears, leaving me staring after her.

\*\*\*

The last thing I expected to be involved in was a flight to Australia in the middle of a tiring afternoon. I had taken the time Rachel had gone to get supplies to freshen up and put on some clean clothes, but that did less than I expected it would.

The trip to Australia had gone completely under my radar, and I only found out about it because of the promotional video that involved the whole team—something about keeping the oceans clean or some shit. Great cause, of course, but it’s mostly an excuse to get the entire team in front of the cameras. Everyone loves seeing athletes in action, especially if it’s for something good.

If not for the coach who had reminded us after training, I wouldn’t have thought about it. I wouldn’t have been on my way to Australia now since it had also somehow

flown under Rachel's radar!

Rachel and I settled ourselves in the private jet. Soon, we are speeding down the runway into what I hope will be a smooth flight. I don't even have time to think about anything else. I barely let anyone know where I am or where I am going, and honestly, I don't care. I just want to get to Australia, do this shit—oh, I mean, shoot—and be done with it.

Rachel is sitting across from me, her face pale and drawn into a gloomy mask. She's probably still trying to recover from her earlier mistake, I can tell. I am still angry at her, but I can't bring myself to unleash on her again. She sits there, silent, calmly doing everything to fix it. It's not enough to calm the silent anger raging in my mind, but I stay silent.

The jet surges into the air, and for the first time since I woke up today, I feel a strange calm wash over me. We are finally on track; everything is going to be okay.

About an hour later, in awkward silence, Rachel breaks it: "Would you like anything to eat or drink? There's wine in the cabinet and some snacks if you'd like any."

Sometimes, it takes just a statement from someone about food for one to realize they are hungry. That is the exact case with me. I made it a rule to only eat after training, and I only had a bottle of water down my throat from when I went to run the ad for the energy drink brand.

My stomach grumbles, and I say with a nod, "Sure."

She stands up and heads to the cabinet. I watch her gingerly pour some wine into a glass, place some snack bars on a flat plate, and head back toward me.

I switch my gaze to the leather chair close to me. I won't be caught staring.

I grab the glass of wine from the plate even before she sets it on the table and gulp it all down at a go.

Tastes good. Feels good.

I run the tip of my tongue along my lips in relish. It's been a long time since I restocked the wine cabinet in my jet, as I don't use it much. This wine right here could be up to two years old.

I know Rachel is staring at me, but I couldn't care less. I grab a snack bar from the plate, pull the wraps down, and start munching. I returned her gaze this time. "You know what you could do instead of watching me eat? Get something for you to eat as well. We are in for a long flight."

"Don't worry, I am fine," she says, clutching a small pillow to herself.

"I am not worrying. That's an order. I want you to be maximally efficient. Now, go get something for yourself."

She rolls her eyes and stands up. She had just taken a few steps toward the cabinet when the jet shook—not so violently, but enough to make Rachel collapse back on her sofa.

Then it stops.

The pilot bursts out of the cockpit, worry etched on his face.

"S-sir," he stammers, "we lost an engine."

I can't help but see that my eyes widen in shock despite trying to remain calm. "What do you mean, 'We lost an engine'?"



Rachel's face is a mask of fear, her hazel eyes turning a dark green.

"The left engine isn't responding," the pilot explains quickly. "We are losing altitude fast, and we have to make an emergency landing."

Just when I thought my day couldn't get any worse.

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:43 am*

Rachel almost shoots out of her seat again. “This is my entire fault. If I had started making preparations sooner, and maybe he would have checked—”

“Calm down,” I say in a tone that sounds more like an order than reassurance. I turned back to the pilot. “How much time do we have left?” I ask, growing increasingly aware of the tightening in my chest.

The pilot moves back to the cockpit, and I follow him with Rachel at my heels.

“Honestly, not much,” the pilot says. His face shows a bit of scare, but his voice is confident, and that works for me just fine. “I am going to try to get us closer to the water to reduce the impact when we go down.”

Rachel gasps beside me, her hands covering her mouth. I can see the fear in her eyes as the reality of the situation sets in. Her hands tremble as she grips the headrest of the pilot’s seat.

I find myself telling her that we are going to be fine, even though I’m not sure if I believe that myself. “See? We have got life jackets. We are close to the water. We will be fine.”

Rachel bobs her head, her eyes still filled with doubt. She’s obviously scared, perhaps as scared as I am, but I think there is more to her worried look. Is she still blaming herself for what’s happening, thinking that if she hadn’t messed up the schedule, then the pilot would not have had to hurry and would have had enough time to check the engines? And while a large part of me wants to blame her, too, it doesn’t seem fair.

This is too serious to be anyone's fault.

It's just bad luck. Terrible fucking luck.

In the next few moments that follow, the jet descends faster and appears to be plunging head-first toward ground level. We all hold our breaths. The assistant pilot hands us life jackets, her trembling hands betraying the confidence her voice painted as she says, "Everything will be okay."

I pull the jacket on me, glancing over at Rachel as she fumbles with hers. "You good?" I ask.

She exhales. "I think so."

"Okay, everyone, brace yourselves," the pilot's voice sounds.

The next moments happen very fast. The jet dips sharply, the wind whistling and engines roaring. My grip tightens on the pilot's headrest, my heart hammering against my ribcage. Rachel's knuckles turn white as she clenches her fists tightly. The tension in the plane rises to an all-time high, the scent of salt water becomes more apparent, and fear is choking all parties involved.

And then, impact.

The force with which the plane hit the water almost knocks the living daylight out of me. The sound of shattering glass and tearing metal fills my ears.

This is it. This is how it ends.

The forceful, turbulent rush of water into the plane reminds me of a typhoon, and then I start randomly remembering scenarios of deadly typhoons I have seen in the

news; my heart almost gives away. There's no way any of us will survive this. No, this is how it truly ends for all of us.

"Get out! Get out now!" the pilot screams, and he starts rushing to the emergency exit, with Rachel behind him and the remaining two of us running closely behind.

The cold air hits me like a slap in the face as we all jump out of the sinking jet. The freezing water cruelly tortures my skin like it's been waiting for me its whole life, pulling me mercilessly underneath. I desperately kick to the surface, struggling to catch my breath as I look around.

I see no one, not a single soul. I am the only one I can see as far as my eyes go. Scary thoughts torture my mind. Where's everyone? Where's Rachel?

My mind plays fearful scenarios of what could have happened, and I choke hard in panic. I doubt I would have choked any harder if water had gotten into my airways.

Chapter seventeen

Chapter Seventeen

Rachel

The last thing I remember after the impact is the water closing in around me, cold and persistent. I also remember feeling like I was drowning—not in the water but within myself—my limbs growing heavy, my breath slowly ceasing until I am completely submerged. Just before drifting into unconsciousness, I hear my name being called in a voice that sounds so far away, so familiar—like my father's.

Could it be my father? Am I finally dead?

I let go of the “not now, not like this” mantra I have been repeating silently in my mind. A weak smile crosses my lips as I fall into a deep slumber.

I open my eyes as my consciousness zaps back into attention. Disoriented, I panic but slowly calm down when the strange, blurry face hovering above me takes on a familiar form. I still can't connect the face, but my mind eases, knowing it's someone who will not harm me.

A familiar voice, soaked in worry, speaks: “Rachel! Rachel? Are you okay?”

The image sharpens into focus.

This isn't my dad. This is Vaughn.

“Rachel, wake up, Rachel! Are you okay?” His voice is hoarse and desperate. His blue eyes remind me of the sea. But unlike the sea, with its raging tides and crashing waves, his eyes are calming, reassuring—no, it's more like the clear, blue majestic sky above me than the sea.

“Rachel, come on. Breathe!”

As soon as he says to breathe, I become aware of the tightening in my chest, and I inhale sharply. Instead of exhaling air, I cough violently, sputtering seawater from my mouth and nose. I try again, and this time, I inhale laboriously. For a second, I think everything is some sort of dream, especially since I can't recollect what had just happened.

But then, the memories start to come back: Vaughn's anger about me messing up his schedules, my surprise at how I managed to mess up the schedules, the unexpected announcement of an urgent trip to Australia, the pilot's warning for guilt, and then finally—crash!

It all takes shape in my mind now. I open my mouth to say something, but all that comes out is another violent cough, so forceful that I clutch at something close by—Vaughn's arms. For the first time since I regained consciousness, I realize I am cradled in his arms, lying on wet sand.

His hands caress my cheeks while he looks at me endearingly.

“Oh, thank God,” he mutters, his worried voice giving way to relief. He pulls me closer, bringing his forehead to rest on mine for just a second before pulling away as if he just realized something. I can’t help but be taken aback, even in my fragile state.

“Wh-what happened?” I ask, my voice raspy and barely audible even to my own ears.

“You almost drowned,” he replies softly in a voice I have never heard from him before. “You weren’t breathing when I got to you. I thought . . .” His voice trails off.

Yeah, I don’t even have the slightest shred of doubt about this now. I am definitely dreaming because there’s no way this is Vaughn.

Or maybe we all drowned and died, and this is an alternate universe where Vaughn is a nice, caring, and kind fisherman instead of a rude, arrogant, successful soccer player.

But did we die, though?

I draw in a rich lungful of fresh, salty sea air and hold it for a while, savoring it to its fullest.

I would have said I was in heaven, but I also don’t think people in heaven wake up with pain in their chests. The air is clean, but I still feel pain. So I guess I am alive—barely, but alive, still.

Vaughn saved me, although that is not what I might have imagined him doing. I am sure he doesn’t hate me enough to let me drown if he had the chance to save me. What surprises and terrifies me at the same time is his reaction—his softness, his tenderness, and his genuine concern!

I find it almost unbelievable—no, I find it utterly unbelievable. My frontal lobe would have exploded if I had tried to imagine this version of Vaughn before the plane crash or probably popped out of my head and given me the thumb-in-ear gesture. At the same time, it laughs at me, but here it is happening in real life, and my brain is finding it difficult to process.

It's refreshing to see this side of Vaughn—caring, human feeling.

I guess all it takes is one life-and-death situation to realize you care about someone.

“You scared me, Rachel. I thought you were dead,” he says, his voice raw with honesty, his eyes locked on mine. Despite my condition, I feel warmth spreading over my chest and those things people call butterflies in my stomach.

That statement I made earlier about being in an alternate universe with fisherman Vaughn was meant as a joke. Still, I am starting to believe that's what actually happened, honestly.

It's my turn to reassure him now: “I am fine, Vaughn. I am fine. See?” I slip away from his arms into a sitting position to show him that I can at least sit on my own. And then, for the first time since I regained consciousness, I looked around and saw things aside from the sky and Vaughn's face.

Something seems totally off. We are the only people on this vast island, but we are not the only ones aboard the jet—two people are missing.

A wave of panic courses through me as I ask Vaughn, “Where's the pilot and his assistant? What happened to them?”

Vaughn's face drops, and a water drop trickles down from his hair. “I'd be lying if I said I know. We are the only people who washed up here. We can only hope they got



washed up on another island and are fine.”

He doesn't sound very confident in his last statement, even though he tries to. A series of scenarios plays through my mind—drowning, bodies washed ashore, eaten by some hungry shark or whale. I chastise myself for having these thoughts. If Vaughn and I are alive, why can't I hope that they are alive as well? Not with us, obviously, but somewhere. I promise to remain optimistic that everyone on board is safe.

Vaughn appears to have sensed my doubts. “Hey, all we can do is hope they are out there somewhere. We aren't going to live here forever. For now, let's keep up high hopes.”

I nod and say okay.

There is a long silence as both of us come to terms with our situation. We may be alive for now, but how long will we be able to hold up here without rescue? All our belongings, including my cell phone, are locked up in the bag. Vaughn doesn't care much about a phone. I handle about 98 percent of his calls. He definitely doesn't have his phone with him, so there's no use asking.

“I am coming with you.”

Ridiculous.

“No.”

“What? You surely aren’t thinking of leaving me here all alone.”

“You seemed to have made that decision yourself. Now, you wouldn’t want to get hunted down by a grizzly or a brown bear or even a dinosaur, would you?”

She pauses and comes closer. “There’s no way I am letting you leave me here alone. We’ll fight the bears together if we happen to encounter them.”

I don’t stifle the laughter that follows.

Ridiculous.

This is a person I had to carry, someone still visibly fragile from almost drowning, saying this. From the look in her eyes, she seems to believe what she just said.

“What’s funny?”

“Nothing. It’s just that you haven’t gotten your full strength back. You stay here.”

“No.”

“It’s an order, Rachel,” I scowl. I am certainly not strong enough to carry an unconscious woman in my arms for the second time.

“Oh?” Her brows rise. “It’s an order, huh? And do what exactly? Get you your dinner? Organize your schedules? Call a client to postpone your meeting with them? Well, the last time I checked, we aren’t in Vaughn Charity Center, New York FC headquarters, or Australia. We are in the middle of God-knows-where, so save that for when we get back, if we ever do get back.”

Her eyes flash as she says this, and there’s no mistaking the defiant gleam in them. Wherever she gets this audacity, she should be sure to return it once we’re back in New York. For now, there are more pressing issues to worry about, and I am not about to waste what little energy I have left arguing.

I turn my back to her and shrug. “You can come if you want to,” I say and resume my walk. Without hesitation, she trails behind, trying to catch up to my quick steps.

I part a bunch of leaves and step into the opening, and the sight that presents itself before me is as beautiful as it is terrifying.

Above us, tall canopies shelter the ground below, with beams of sunlight penetrating it in various spots, casting a mosaic pattern of colorful rays on the smaller plants on the ground.

The chirping of what sounds like lorikeets and flowerpeckers graces my ears—sounds I hadn’t heard before.

“This is beautiful,” Rachel, who’s now standing beside me, says, a smile spreading on her face. She closes her eyes, draws a deep breath, and adds, “Hmm, wildflowers.”

Beautiful, yes. Terrifying, also yes. Because this forest stretches as far as the ocean

seems to stretch—no end in sight.

I don't respond to her obvious soliloquy. Instead, I follow a steady path and make my way deeper into the forest, hoping to come across any sign of civilization. Perhaps there is a bay area on the other side of the forest that connects the sea to the land. If that's the case, then it's possible to find someone here.

I hope that's the case.

But then it's too late for that already, I think. I will do more exploration tomorrow. If I don't find any sign of civilization in my intended short walk, we are going back. Ever since Rachel mentioned something about bears, a scenario has occasionally played in my mind.

As we venture deeper, we hear more birds and begin seeing small rodents scurrying around. Two plum trees heavy with fruits and a peach tree come into full view, making us pause.

"Well, I guess our little walk did yield some 'fruits,' after all," Rachel comments, staring hungrily at the trees.

Funny.

She laughs at her joke and then laughs some more, which causes a reluctant smile to spread over my face. I'm not smiling at her joke; I'm smiling at her ability to see humor in desperate situations like the one we have found ourselves in. I guess she won't prove too difficult to live with while we're out here. I hope she won't prove too difficult to live with while we're out here.

"I will climb the peach tree and get some for dinner. You pick them up while I throw them down at you."

She nods. “Okay.”

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:43 am*

A few hops and grips later, I am atop the peach tree, selecting the juiciest fruits and hauling them to the ground. She gathers the fruits into the hem of her dress, creating a makeshift basket. I climb down when I think we have enough, and we start making our way back to the seashore.

As we walk back in silence, she stumbles twice over objects that one wouldn't normally have any problem avoiding. First, a small, almost insignificant stump, and second, a pile of dried leaves.

I suspect it must be from the fruits she is carrying, so I offer to carry them, but she firmly declines.

“Are you okay?” I finally asked after we've walked some more.

She says yes, but her trembling voice causes me to stop and regard her. Her black hair is strewn into a mess, with long, loose strands draping over her forehead and temple, partially obscuring her face.

“Look at me, Rachel.”

She doesn't need to look at me before I notice that she is shivering, but when she eventually does, her face is as white as a ghost, and her eyes dim.

A pang of worry gnaws at my stomach, and I ask again, “Are you okay?”

Obviously, she's not. But still, out of panic, I ask.

She says yes again, and I blurt out, “No, you’re not okay.”

I removed my jacket, which, thankfully, has dried from the sea breeze, and wrap it around her. “I am taking these,” I say as I drop all eight fruits on the floor. I remove my shirt and tie the sleeves together into a knot, making a makeshift sling sack. I put the fruits in it and throw it over my shoulder.

With an arm wrapped around her and the other holding the hem of my shirt, we continue toward the shore. But it seems the more we walk, the sicker she becomes. She misses her steps several times, and I have to quickly grab her to prevent her from falling.

“I am sorry for stressing you out, Vaughn,” she says in a faint voice.

“Shh, conserve your energy. You can apologize when you get better.”

At this point, she’s gasping for breath. I contemplate carrying her in my arms, but then an idea strikes me: since we’ve gotten close enough to the shores, we might as well camp here for thenight. The shore will only get colder as nighttime approaches. That won’t be favorable for a shivering Rachel.

She’s your responsibility as long as you’re stuck here with her,a voice in my head says. But what do I do in such a situation?

I lower her gently onto the grass, and she lies sprawled on the floor. What started as a simple shiver now seems to have transformed into full-blown trembling, exacerbating my panic.

What should I do? What if she dies?

I shake my head to dispel the thoughts. I look up and silently beg the heavens for

intervention. Still, all I see is the sun's radiant beams reduced to a mere twinkle—nighttime is drawing closer.

As if our luck couldn't get worse, rain clouds slowly begin to form, and I swear I almost scream in frustration. I have heard stories of people stranded at sea or abandoned islands, and to think we're going through all this despite not having even spent a full day is terrifying.

What if this is just the beginning of our suffering?

I imagine several of my teammates lodging in the expensive hotels scattered all around Melbourne in preparation for the promotion tomorrow. I imagine that Coach McLauren has called me several times without success and is probably wondering what happened. I curse my luck for turning out this way. If only, if only there was at least a cell phone in hand!

But what am I to do? It's my luck. I might as well make the best out of it.

"Are those . . . clouds?" I hear her faint voice again, snapping me out of my self-pity.

"Yes, but don't worry. We will be fine."

As if fueled by the panic raging inside me, my survival instincts get triggered, and an idea strikes me: There's enough material in the forest to make a not-so-bad makeshift tent. I will have to bank on the possibility that it won't rain heavily, and if it does rain heavily, then I guess we're cooked.

I get back up on my feet and find some medium-sized branches off a nearby hardwood tree. Afterward, I dig four holes using a stump I found lying around and bury one end of four branches in each hole, angling them so that their other ends meet in the center. I obtained some vine from a passionfruit tree and secured the meeting



point to a reasonable stability.

Next, I gather a whole lot of long grasses and palm fronds and layer them onto the framework, creating a tent.

By the time I'm done, more clouds have gathered, so I help Rachel to get into the tent and rest her head on a pile of grass as a pillow.

Rachel falls asleep as soon as her head hits the grass, but she's running a temperature that only doubles my panic. Her epileptic shivering has subsided, replaced with a lighter version.

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:43 am*

Small rain droplets begin to fall, and I know it's only going to get colder for me, but more importantly, for Rachel. So, I do the only thing I think will reduce the effect. I wear the jacket and secure Rachel inside it so she can draw warmth from my body as well as the jacket. Her face is still pale but peaceful, which is strange given the circumstances.

Hunger pangs stab at my stomach, but I can't bring myself to eat the fruits we have collected. My hunger is more than my thirst. But what do I drink, seawater?

What would Rachel drink when she wakes up the next day?

She's my responsibility for as long as we remain on this island for obvious reasons: if it weren't for me, she wouldn't be here.

As I muse on our predicament, I drift into a slow, uncomfortable sleep with the hope that things will work out better the next day than they did today.

Chapter nineteen

Chapter Nineteen

Rachel

The warmth of the morning sun caresses my skin as I slowly open my eyes. My body feels much better than it did the day before—less feverish, less weak, surprisingly warm—and my throat is dry as a desert. The sun seeps through the palm fronds, forming a canopy above me, and I wonder why the treetops appear so close.

Tunnel vision?

But when I look around, I realize I am inside a structure that looks like a tent. I jolt to a sitting position and glance around. Then it hits me: I am alone!

Vaughn's jacket is still wrapped around me. I throw it off and wriggle out of the tent.

Where has he gone? Has he abandoned me?

I glance around, my eyes darting from spot to spot, my heart thumping against my chest—still no sign of Vaughn.

The whiff of salty air and the sound of crashing waves make me run in the direction of the ocean. It is as empty as it was yesterday!

What if he made a raft out of some of the branches he collected yesterday and waited for the perfect time—for me to fall asleep—before leaving? He made a tent; making a raft wouldn't be difficult for him, would it?

"Vaughn!" I scream his name in desperation. I knew it! I knew it was too good to be true. His kindness and concern had all been a ploy to make me feel comfortable so he could get away.

I break down in sobs, feeling betrayed.

I run back into the forest and keep running. I pass the tent and keep running. My bare feet sink into the damp soil from yesterday's rain as I keep on running and running, screaming Vaughn's name repeatedly. How could he even think of doing this to me—all for some stupid contract?

The hem of my dress gets caught in bushes, but I don't care. I keep running, tears

streaming down my face.

“Vaughn!” I scream again. Then, a voice calls out from the distance, making me stop in my tracks.

“Vaughn? Is that you?”

My eyes dart around, trying to figure out where the sound is coming from.

“Rachel!” he calls out again, and I finally pinpoint the location. I run, hopefully, in the right direction and stop at a tree. Looking up, I see Vaughn plucking fruits so casually, like he’s been doing this every day for a long time. He is already eating some, and I can’t help but smile.

A wave of relief and embarrassment washes over me, but I don’t care. I am just glad I am not alone in this godforsaken place. I bend down to pick up a fruit that has fallen, only to be stopped by a sharp pain in my lower back. I try not to yell because I don’t want to bring Vaughn’s attention to it. I wish I had my medicine with me. When I went to get supplies for the trip to Australia after Vaughn dropped the news, I went home to grab some things, including my medicine. I didn’t have to worry about Archie as the next-door neighbor had agreed to babysit her until I got back. Gosh, I already miss her!

Now, I am worried about how much worse the pain will get since we’ve lost all our luggage.

“I heard you screaming my name from afar. Have you lost your way or something?” he asks, making his way down to the ground.

I grunt, “No. I thought you left me all to myself. I got scared.”

He doesn't reply until he's fully come down. Then, his face contorts into an expression of disbelief. "You think I'd do that? You really think I am evil enough to abandon you here all to yourself?"

How do I answer this? A pang of guilt bites at me as I contemplate how to respond.

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:43 am*

His eyes widen further as he comes closer. “What? You’ve got nothing to say? You really think I am that evil, don’t you? No—it is not even about abandoning you. You actually think I might know a secret exit and am keeping it from you.”

There isn’t an atom of hurt in his eyes, but there’s a shit ton of accusation therein. I know, I may have been crazy to think that he’s done that, but gosh, why is he trying so hard to guilt-trip me?

He steps closer, bringing his face just a couple of inches away from mine. “I may be a pain in the ass, but I would never do that to another human being.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what I was thinking. I guess I was just scared.”

There you have it!

A mischievous smile crosses his lips. “It’s alright. Come help me gather these,” he says, pointing at the fruits on the ground.

I have always been cautious when asking Vaughn questions, even when those questions would help me understand work-related issues better. He hates to be questioned about anything and everything, and he always uses this annoyingly rude sentence: “It’s your job to find out. That’s what I pay you for.”

When you have worked for Vaughn as long as I have, you never get too comfortable with him. That’s sad, but it’s the truth. You’re trained from day one to always be self-conscious around Vaughn, the unquestionable god. I have never been one to submit, but working with Vaughn demands you do so. I have become so accustomed to his

annoying side that it comes as a surprise to see his caring side. Believe it or not, my reaction was no exaggeration.

It's been just a day on the island, and the changes are glaring. It's almost like he's morphed into a new person, and at this point, it scares me more than it relieves me.

"Why did you have to come all the way to get the same peach fruit?" I ask.

"Figured it tastes juicier than the ones we got yesterday. Give it a try."

I bite into it and chew. He's not lying.

"How's progress with finding an escape route? Any success with that yet?"

A sad twinkle appears in his eyes. He shakes his head gently. "No, but I did find something."

He motions for me to follow him, and after about ten minutes' walk, we arrive at a waterfall plunging into a gorge, creating a beautiful freshwater lagoon below.

"This is where the forest ends," he says, defeat in his voice. "But on the upside, we could use this for water in the meantime."

I nodded in understanding, and we exchange glances. Something about the way he's handling the situation calmly and making the best out of our misfortune sparks admiration in me. I wonder what would have happened if somehow, I had been the only one alive in the crash—definitely dying the next day for sure.

We head back toward the beach. After storing some food in our tent for later, Vaughn suggests we sit down at the beach. In his words, "Who knows, some ship might come passing by."

We sit down on the warm sand, watching the waves rise and crash as we munch on our simple meal of peach fruit and water drunk from coconut shells—like we have a choice. It is peaceful and simple—talk about making the best out of negative circumstances.

“Look!” Vaughn points at a bag bobbing up and down in the ocean. It’s almost washed up on shore, but Vaughn stands up and immediately sprints toward it.

I follow when I realize it is my bag. I sprint toward him, but he has already gotten there before me. To my utter shock, the bag is wide open like it was never sealed in the first place, and I rush to pull it onto dry land. I zip the bag up in fear and apprehension, hoping he didn’t see what I was trying to hide. But when I lift my head back up to meet his eyes, I realize I’m too late.

Chapter twenty

Chapter Twenty

Vaughn

Inarrow my gaze, watching Rachel practically slam the bag shut, zip it up, and shove it behind her like she’s guarding some life-altering secret. It’s the perfect way to rouse suspicion, if you ask me. I would know something was up even if I hadn’t seen the contents.

“Rachel,” I say in a firm, low voice. “I saw your things.”

She avoids my gaze and starts walking away—not to where we were sitting earlier, eating fruits and drinking water, but somewhere closer to the sea: a high sand dune.

I stand there, watching her briefly before I start following. Something about the



contents of the bag doesn't seem right, and I am determined to know what that is.

"Stop following me," she snaps, but I remain unfazed. I have already promised myself to let it slide anytime she gives me attitude while we're on the beach.

"Not until you tell me what medicine that is and what you're taking it for."

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:43 am*

She falls silent once more; she doesn't look like she will answer that anytime soon. I sit beside her on the sand dunes before adding firmly but gently, "I want you to understand that you have no right to hide anything from me as my secretary. If there's anything you can—"

"What the hell is that even supposed to mean?" she snaps back. "Why would you care about anything that goes on in my personal life? You never cared while we were in New York, you never cared while we were in the UK, and all of a sudden, you want to pretend like you care now? Oh, please!"

She stands up from the dune and slings the bag over her shoulder, heading straight to where we once sat. I don't say another word because there's nothing to say. She isn't wrong at all, and I don't see why that should surprise her either. She wasn't much of my responsibility before we got here, and she will cease to be once we leave. But as long as we're here, she remains my responsibility, and I must find out what the medications are for. Does she have a pill addiction? Or is it something that will help her live a better life while we are here?

For now, there isn't much to do except wait.

For some reason, my thoughts drift to my mother when she said I shouldn't pretend to care. It's the same thing I told her when I had my first ACL injury while playing for a smaller club. She said if only I had listened to her, I wouldn't be in that position, and I blurted that out. But one could argue that my mother had been against me playing soccer because she cared about my physical health and was concerned I might get injured, even though that did nothing to motivate me to pursue my dreams. In Rachel's case, however, can you call it pretending?

Obviously, I wouldn't care as much, even if she told me now, unless it affected her work performance. But is the fact that I care now to be called pretending because it is not sustainable?

Do I even care . . . now? Or am I doing it to make myself feel good about being a good person?

So, she might be right about me pretending to care, but the way I was happy when I found out she was alive didn't feel like a pretense. Neither did when we cuddled together last night. But for now, I choose to say nothing.

We kept to ourselves for the rest of the morning and afternoon, with Rachel in the tent and me back at the shore. The sun is scorching hot, and I think of going back to the tent. I decide against it, reasoning that it is best to leave Rachel to herself.

Or am I avoiding her?

No, I just want to be left alone. I should know if it was avoidance. We've avoided each other before when we had sex in my study—

Wrong timing, bud. Don't even think about that. It's dangerous.

Thinking about Rachel in that way is dangerous, especially now that we are alone. Eventually, we'll get out of here. Mistakes made here could reflect in our relationship when we get back to our normal lives.

I remove my shirt when I see droplets of sweat forming on my chest and find a shade underneath a tree just a few steps from the sand dunes. I lie there, thinking of how things would have turned out differently if this jet engine hadn't malfunctioned. I'd probably have been preparing to get back to New York while yelling at Rachel not to forget a thing!

My heart sinks when I remember that the new season starts in a week. I almost shed a tear. I trained, trained, and trained for this season; it will break me if I end up not playing a match. And depending on how fast we are found, that could be a possibility.

What happened to the pilot and his assistant, by the way? If they died—although I hope to God not—wouldn't their bodies have washed ashore like Rachel's luggage?

A thought flashes through my head, and I hastily sit upright with my back propped against the tree trunk.

Is there a chance Rachel kept her mobile phone in her bag? Maybe not. Wouldn't that be the first thing she thought of when she saw the bag?

There's only one way to find out. I stand on my feet and am just about to head to the tent when I hear the rustling of leaves. Rachel emerges, a phone in her hand, scuttling toward me in quick steps.

Oh, good God! Positive news at last!

My heart almost leaps for joy until I hear her say, "I have tried all I can, but I couldn't get a network signal."

Fuck! Fuck this godforsaken island!

"Let me see." The disappointment on my face must have shown, as the next thing is Rachel giving me a sympathetic look.

"I don't think anything you try would work. This place is . . . deserted." She throws her hands to her sides in defeat. "There's nothing out here, Vaughn."

I collapse onto the sand, and before I know it, I start laughing like a maniac. Rachel's

brows furrow in confusion, and a worried look jumps into her eyes. She probably thinks I have gone crazy or something. As bad as our situation is, it wouldn't be accurate to say we've reached the stage of utter helplessness and dejection to the state of losing our freaking minds. I am laughing at how funny I find all this.

"Why are you laughing?" she asks, sitting beside me.

"It's just funny, you know. It's funny how one minute, I am drinking the most delicious wine I have tasted in a long time, and the next, I'm drinking unfiltered rock water. One minute, I am biting into a snack bar, and the next minute, my tongue is all sore from eating fruits. One minute in a cozy private jet, the next in a large expanse of godforsaken forest-cum-island. Life can be crazy."

She's silent for some time as if processing what I just said. "Cool philosophical insights, but I think it's more sad than funny."

"It can be both. Hopping on trees for all my food like a monkey isn't exactly my idea of a happy life either."

We share a laugh, the tense atmosphere between us dissipating slowly.

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:43 am*

“What I do find funny, though, is that I saw a spinifex mouse hopping around when I was in the tent. Spinifex is only found in Australia.”

“Now that’s a big irony.”

“More like the universe mocking us.”

A brief pause ensues.

“Coach McLauren would be so worried,” she says.

“Sure, he will, but not before getting unbelievably mad at me first. I am sure he’s still mad at me—for now, at least.”

She scoffs. We stare into the ocean, and the tension that dissipated earlier comes back, only this time it’s of a different nature—born from agreeableness rather than the opposite.

A moment’s silence passes. Then, she brings out a small pocket notebook from under her phone. “I found this in my bag. You know, journaling helps in desperate situations like this. One page per day to record your experiences for when you get back home.”

“Hmmm, a journal, huh? I thought that’s only for recording the most important things in one’s life. Had no idea you could use it every day.”

“It’s entirely up to the user. Do you use yours for the most important events of your

life?”

I muse for a while, reminiscing about how I used to keep something similar to a journal during my formative years, which were also the years I began building my career.

Strength column, weakness column, “tips for improvement” column, “new skills acquired” column.

That’s all there was to it. And I recall it really helped me then.

“Well, I guess I do. I mean, I write about things I will never forget. But it’s not really a habit.”

A seagull cries in the distance, and that’s when she decides to ruin the moment.

“Did you write about the time we spent together in your study? Or would you say you forgot that already?”

My heart skips a beat, and I turn sharply to look at her. She doesn’t shy away; she meets my full gaze.

The fuck does she want? Clearly not an answer to that question, or does she?

Chapter twenty-one

Chapter Twenty-One

Rachel

Not even the lines of discomfort carved on his face or his unsure stammers made me

regret bringing up my night together with Vaughn—at that moment, at least.

Now? I am not sure if I regret it either. But I sure feel disappointed, hurt, and stupid.

Jeez!

On second thought, I regret it a bit. I should have known the man wanted nothing to do with that conversation from when he drove me back home after dinner with his mom and siblings. But would you blame me? He seems different in a good way—more caring, more cheerful. The atmosphere is serene, beautiful, and perhaps even romantic?

I should have known.

But here I am, sitting miserably alone facing the ocean, my butt hurting from the hot sand beneath it, still hurt and disappointed by his reaction to my remark despite it being like two hours ago.

“Did you write about our time together in your study? Or would you say you forgot that already?”

Stupid. So stupid.

I got too comfortable, and a crumpled facial expression and a snicker were what I got in response.



*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:43 am*

“A-are you s-seriously bringing this up now?” His brows furrow into an expression of disappointment and disbelief. “I thought we both got the cue never to bring this up again!”

It’s my turn to stammer now. “I . . . I didn’t mean to . . .”

He stood up and disappeared into the bushes right after.

It’s not so much what he said that made me feel hurt, but the tone. Underneath his confused words was a somewhat angry undertone.

I get why he dismissed me the other time when he was driving me home and even laughed it off before asking me to get out, but why is he avoiding it now? Does he see our time together as something he’d rather put behind him, something disgusting and distasteful? Even if that’s what he thinks, why not say so? After all, it isn’t considered very kosher of him to be involved with his secretary in a sexual manner. If that is what he thinks, wouldn’t it be better to discuss it instead and put all of it behind us if that’s what he truly wants?

But why do I even worry? Vaughn has made clear that he doesn’t want to talk about it, so maybe I should get past it and try to forget something that happened that day. Our work relationship has survived just fine since then. I see no reason why it should suffer now.

I keep working for the most miserable, most successful soccer player on earth while breaking my back in the process, then come back home right after to a dinner of pain meds and cold soup while ranting about my day to a fluffy orange cat who’s probably

tired of my rants.

As long as it guarantees a paycheck, why bother, right?

A series of waves crash rhythmically against the shore, accompanied by a soft breeze. Tall shadows of the surrounding trees are cast on the ground, and the sun seems to be sinking into the ocean in the distance.

I look at my phone to check what the time is, only to see that the battery is dead.

Fuck!

Powered by the frustration from Vaughn's reaction, our dire situation, and how generally miserable my life is, I send the phone flying into a small cluster of shrubs to my left. I feel like yelling into the ocean, but that would likely attract Vaughn, whose presence I am actively avoiding; otherwise, I would have gone back to the shelter because it's starting to get cold.

Something falls from my dress as I stand up; it's the pain medication I had hidden from Vaughn. A smile crosses my lips as I figure I might need it soon. After all, the reason I use it all too often is right here with me. Perhaps the universe knows that, and that's why my bag washed ashore.

Nice one, universe.

As soon as I bend down to pick it up, I hear a startling cry in the bushes. My senses instantly tense, my eyes darting in the direction it came from.

"What was that?" I mutter to myself.

It takes a second cry for me to realize that this could mean trouble. It sounds human.

Vaughn and I are the only humans around here, and I could bet the cry definitely isn't from me.

Without thinking twice, I grab the hem of my dress and sprint toward the bushes, my heart pounding. I don't run for more than two minutes before hearing the cry again, and this time, I stop.

On a branch of a white oak tree perch three northern mockingbirds. The shade from the slender twigs and leaves partially conceals them as two of them keep on wailing, much like the cries I heard back at shore. I stifle a laugh as a wave of relief washes through me. The third mockingbird, which I assume is the mother, is pecking gently on one of the other's heads. They would have looked cuter if they hadn't just scared the shit out of me!

"I might as well just go back to the shelter since I have come this far," I say to myself.

The leaves rustle against my tired feet as I walk toward the shelter, and I can feel soft shivers creeping all over my body. Soon, I hear another set of footsteps approaching me, and soon enough, Vaughn stands before me.

"Where the hell have you been?" he demands. "I was just coming back from the shore. I thought you'd tripped into the ocean or something!"

Yeah, that's it. Old Vaughn is back. The tone of voice, the mannerisms, the default irritable expression, he's always had—all back. It is disappointing and kinda heartbreaking. But on the upside, at least I now have my meds to cope with the upcoming stress, so well, yeah.

"What am I, stupid?" I snap back. "Why on earth would I trip into the ocean?"

“Who knows? You obviously can’t just remain in one place!” he scolds in a strong voice, a little too strong of a reaction for thinking I “wandered” off.

I got it now. This has nothing to do with him thinking I wandered off. He’s definitely mad about something. He’s probably mad about me asking what he thought about the time we spent together in his study. But do I blame him? Absolutely not. Instead, I blame my crazy feelings that keep hoping it meant something more to him other than just sex. Besides, am I not the one who brought it up on not one but two separate occasions? I literally set myself up for this sort of reaction! So yeah, I do not blame him at all.

A flame of anger slowly overpowers the hurt I feel, burning steadily in my chest as he keeps mouthing off about how I shouldn’t roam about randomly. My palms clutch tighter on the hem of my dress with each passing second. Just when I feel like I have had enough, I stomp my feet aggressively on the ground and open my mouth to tell him to shut his arrogant mouth and go fuck himself for the time being, only for him to beat me to it.

“Shut up, Rachel!”

What? So he’s figuratively beating me up and stopping me from crying?

Unsurprisingly, this gets me even more incensed, so incensed that it takes me like five seconds—five seconds I will forever be grateful for—to catch the look in his blue eyes, which have now turned dark. His body language is tense, and his demeanor alert.

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:43 am*

I shift my weight to my left leg, unsure of what to make of the sudden shift from angry to tense.

“I said shut up, and don’t move.”

The seriousness in his voice this time makes fear creep up my spine, and I instantly know something is terribly wrong. The low, unmistakable sound of a hiss just behind me makes my blood run cold, and the cold feel of an object against my ankle sends me instinctively lunging toward Vaughn without so much as a thought. Though neither of us is prepared for it, he manages to grab me with his strong arms just in time, swinging me to the side. We almost crash into a tree as the snake lunges at me.

My God! I swear my ribcage would have cracked if my heart had beaten any faster. He lets go of me, but I would rather die than let go of him. Sensing my reluctance, he says, “I need to try and kill it.”

“Hell no!” I bark. My heart is beating louder than my voice, so I’m not even aware I sounded like that. “I am not about to be left alone with that thing. What if it tries to attack me again? Or tries to attack you, for that matter?”

My grip on his sleeve loosens as I witness the reaction that follows. He first raises a thick eyebrow, and then his serious expression morphs into laughter.

I feel a little bit embarrassed, a little bit of anger, and a little bit of confusion. I, for sure, know that none of what I just said was funny. No, none of what is going on here is funny. There’s literally a big-ass snake just a few meters away from us, probably looking for another opportunity to strike!

That sounds funny to you, Vaughn?

He gently removes my hands from his sleeve. “Trust me, it will be fine,” he says. He doesn’t sound reassuring, but his eyes look the part. I reluctantly let go of him, and he gently steps around me to retrieve a branch lying randomly on the forest floor.

“Don’t make a movement,” Vaughn cautions. He moves slowly toward the snake, which has now assumed a striking pose.

A few steps in, the snake strikes. Although I am practically glued to the cottonwood tree behind me at this point, my knees give away. Vaughn appears to have timed the snake’s strike and catches it on the head as he swings the branch. The snake does a swirling movement with its head before collapsing on the leaves.

“Is it . . . dead?” I ask, finally straightening my back.

Vaughn is now standing over the snake, his back turned to me. “Looks pretty dead to me. Wasn’t expecting it to die from just a swing.” He turns his head to me. “It looks a bit different from the common rattlesnakes I have seen.”

Snake knowledge is the last thing I am interested in right now. I am just glad we’re safe. Breathing a sigh of relief, I approach where he’s standing to take a closer look.

My mouth drops instantly. “Jesus Christ! That could have bitten me.” A crawling sensation runs under my skin as the thought of being a snakebite victim runs through my mind. On this deserted island, I would be dead before sunrise.

His gaze lingers on me for a while before he bursts into another fit of laughter.

“Seems like almost getting bitten by a dangerous snake is funny to you,” I say this time.

“Oh, it’s definitely not,” he replies, stepping over the dead snake as he heads toward the shelter, “It’s your reaction. You should have seen your face when you clutched at me desperately.”

“Oh.” A blush of embarrassment heats my cheeks. “Well, I don’t reckon anyone would clap and jump for joy when they encounter a big-ass snake like that.”

He laughs lightly again, and this time, it’s infectious. We share a laugh as we head back to the shelter, and for some weird reason I hadn’t noticed earlier (probably because I was scared), I realize it’s strange hearing him laugh. I have never seen him laugh that much before or even laugh at all. He snickers at most, and it’s usually not for friendly reasons. I can’t decide if I find his laughter adorable and pleasing because of its novelty or because of something else—something else like me getting all warm and fuzzy inside because he’s just protected me from a snake.

“See why you shouldn’t be roaming around aimlessly? Things could have gone—”

“Thank you, Vaughn.”

He slows down in his steps and looks at me, first from the corner of his eyes, then fully. He doesn’t say anything. I’ve already stopped, clutching at my sides against the light cold. We stare at each other in silence for a while, and at that moment, it seems like the Vaughn who rescued me from drowning, the Vaughn who wrapped his strong arms and jacket around me when I was sick, the Vaughn who climbs on trees to get fruit so I don’t starve, is back. I hope he never leaves.

These are the warm blue eyes I first saw when I opened my eyes on this abandoned island, and just staring into them pulls me in like the ocean.

A lump forms in my throat. I clutch a little tighter to my sides, and it has nothing to do with the cold this time. One of those mockingbirds screams as it flaps its wings

above us, giving me the perfect opportunity to shift my gaze.

“Thank you for saving me back there.”

Still, silence.

“I don’t even want to imagine what would have happened if you weren’t there.”

Okay, this is starting to get awkward. I should shut up now.

His lips form into a smile, and without acknowledging that I just thanked him, he says, “We better get going. It’s getting late and cold out here.”



*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:43 am*

A thunderclap echoes in the distance. Rachel's eyes widen with surprise, and she flinches. She clings to me in an instant, her fingers digging into my arm as if it's a lifeline.

I laugh at the sudden change. "You okay there?" I try to lighten up by teasing.

She doesn't answer with words. Instead, she presses closer to me, her warm body against mine and her breath against my neck.

She finally mutters, "Don't laugh at me," with a hint of defiance in her voice, but it's mixed with something a little softer.

Now, I say, "I'm not laughing at you. I'm just . . . surprised you're so jumpy."

Again, Rachel shifts her expression and meets my gaze. She's got that vulnerability in her eyes now, and I can feel the warring within her. She's slipping away from the distance she tries to keep, and the pull between us is increasing.

The rain booms against the ground as it intensifies, and in that moment, everything else disappears. Like a moth to a flame, I lean closer. "You know," I say, my voice low, "we're on an island, and it's just us. Perhaps we should stop pretending."

She gasps, and I see it register. There's a tension in the air, and I can almost taste the anticipation. I don't know who goes first, but we crash into each other's lips, and it's like a dam has broken.

The fire I feel from the kiss is hotter than the flames before us. Rachel's lips are soft,

and I feel her body melting into me. This time, there's no hesitation. We succumb to the lust that's been growing between us, a hunger that needs to be satisfied.

I pull her closer, wrap my arms around her, and deepen the kiss. This moment is all that matters, and the world around us disappears. The rain falls harder, but it's just background noise as my heart pounds and her taste lingers on my lips.

Yes, she eagerly responds, her fingers knotting themselves in my hair and drawing herself a little closer, pressing against me. The heat radiating off her reaches my core, and I want to have her fully, to lose myself in her warmth. The storm outside is a tempest in our relationship, and I savor every moment of it.

Our foreheads touch, and we pull apart for a breath. The flicker of uncertainty in her eyes is interrupted by a spark that I know is a stronger connection than just a physical one. "Are we really doing this?" she asks, her voice a whisper.

I nodded, my heart racing. "Yeah, we are."

She tilts her lips, happiness and fear fighting for resolution on her face. "But what about everything else?"

I brush my thumb along her cheek and can't help but chuckle. "We're just us right now. Later, we'll figure the rest out."

I lean in again, capturing her lips with mine. It is not lust this time—this is more. It's a promise, a vow to explore whatever this is between us. The kiss gets deeper, and I settle into the feel of her body against mine, the feeling of the fire and the sound of the rain coming down around us.

Rachel's moans are like music to my ears. She tastes sweet and sour at the same time, and I don't think I can ever have enough of her.

My hands might be a bit faster now and just a little rough here and there, but that doesn't stop me from being tender and loving. I want every bit of her body and will always remember the taste of her flesh, that tender spot just under her breasts, the way that angle curves from her rib cage to her hip, and the smooth feel of it all under my palm and fingertips.

It feels outrageously erotic as we roll together on the floor in plain sight, and I feel her muscles tense from a mini orgasm.

She buries her face against my throat, fighting to catch her breath. "Vaughn, for God's sake. Now."

"Not yet, not yet, not yet," I say it like a chant.

Desperate, she sinks her teeth into me. "I'll die in a minute."

"Here, now. Here." My mouth claims hers yet again as I slide my hand between her legs, slipping my fingers into the heat of her vagina.

My lips take hers with a fierceness that sends shockwaves of hot, raging desire through her body. Even as her heartbeat quickens, I change the pace, becoming more tender until that raging heat flows slow and thick.

I capture her lips with mine, rub lightly, then go deep.

I kiss her as though I'm starving, and at that moment, I'd spend the rest of my life doing nothing else but this.

My lips touch hers, retreat, and I repeat the motions until her arms lock around me. With an exasperated breath, she locks lips with me, and her tongue wrestles for supremacy with mine.

Taking time for each other adds a new layer to the intimacy we share.

I can hear the low sound of arousal as I play with her belly button. When my lips nibble down her throat, she turns her head away and sighs in wanton bliss.

All the worries and the fatigue that have bothered her are fast melting away. I can feel her surrender to me, to the pleasure I give, and hear her breathing quicken as I take my time.

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:43 am*

She comes like a flood, fast and full, with her body bucking against mine. I swallow her cry of shock and release, absorbing it even as my blood burns for more. Then she falls pliant, leaving me free to feast on her mouth, on her throat, on her breasts.

“Just let me have you for a while.”

The pressure builds again, layer by layer, slick and slippery, until Rachel slides off the edge a second time. My flesh is damp as hers, my heart jumping as high and fast, my body tense and ready.

Once again, Rachel arches against me. Once again, she wraps her legs tight around my waist. Our eyes meet in the shifting light.

“Now,” I murmur as I slip into her waiting pussy, silky and smooth as if we had made love a thousand times before.

My breath trembles in, then out. My hands cover hers, and she places her fingers with mine. We watch each other as we begin to move.

Rising and falling, pleasure met with pleasure. Her eyes are darker now, that dreamy blue going opaque as she loses herself. When she tightens around my turgid rod, when her eyelids fall closed and a moan ripples from her throat, I hold on for dear life.

Then I bury my face in her hair and let myself go.

I smirk and shove hard into her as she starts to lower herself. Rachel whimpers, and

the glorious peak of pleasure takes over my body. She gasps and seizes up, grabbing my shoulders and squeezing her thighs. I let myself come as well just to make her orgasm all that much better. She gasps and flops down on my shoulder, her soft ass shaking with pleasure.

When I begin to come down from my post-orgasmic daze, she pushes herself upright and sighs, “Not enough yet. Hope you’ve got more for me.”

“Oh, baby, do I.” I grin and lift her from my dick. We stand up from the ground, and I turn her around, rubbing my cock against her lower back. I crouch and rise, sliding my thick head up against her needy vagina. She bites her lips and hisses sharply as her love canal is stretched wide open.

At this point, my dick feels as hard and hot as a poker rod, and she instinctively clenches her vaginal muscles. I immediately get the hint and take a few slow thrusts to work my way entirely into her.

“Sweet heavens, Vaughn. You are killing me,” she groans, her body a mixture of pleasure edged with a tinge of pain.

“Oh, it’s going to get better,” I tell her, lifting her legs out from under her. Rachel moans loudly as the last inch of my cock sinks inside. I grab her shaking waist tightly and pull back, thrusting slowly into her as she’s tormented by the ecstasy of my cock pulsating against her pussy.

I fuck her hard, and she screams, letting out constant streams of gibberish as her body is assaulted endlessly with orgasms. After a few minutes of this treatment, I bury myself completely in her and let loose.

Chapter twenty-three

## Chapter Twenty-Three

Rachel

His gaze holds mine as he watches the heat flicker in the depths of my eyes and hears the quick, quiet catch of my breath. Lowering his mouth to mine, he captures that breath and skims his hands up and down my curvy body.

“Well, then, if that’s what you want.” I let my baser emotions take over and wrap my arms around him.

The moment my mouth covers his, the instant my body presses against his, greed swallows him. Vaughn gives in to his inner Neanderthal and sinks his teeth into me.

I let out a muffled cry, expressing equal parts pleasure and shock.

“Come up here.” He releases my hands to take my hips, lifting me so that my legs wrap around his waist. “And kiss me again. I like it.”

I feel his fingers dig into my hips, and I hear his breath quicken like a man who has just finished a fast sprint up a long hill. Deliberately, I arch my hips and press against him.

Cupping my breasts, Vaughn finds himself fascinated by just how sexy they look and feel under his palms.

His hands move faster now and are just a little rough here and there. His mouth is hotter and more impatient than it has been, but it doesn’t stop him from being thorough. He wants every bit of me, and he will always remember the taste of my flesh, that tender spot just under my breast, and the silken feel of it all under his palm and fingertips.

My strength is no small matter, and it is outrageously erotic as we roll on the bed together and he feels my muscles bunch. It's erotic when he makes that strength waver toward weakness, feeling me shudder against him when he finds some new spot that pleases me.

He points his cock in my direction, and a thick musky flavor assails my nostrils, making my pussy twitch in anticipation.

"If you think you can," I tell him, turning my ass to him.

"We'll see just how long you last. You won't be able to form a coherent thought by morning," Vaughn growls, watching my gorgeous ass rise up before him. It's curvy and feminine. He slides his hands slowly around my waist and brushes his cock against my pussy. I'm burning hot, and just a little rub is all it takes to make me moan. He nestles his tip between my folds and watches me push eagerly back against him.



*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:43 am*

I open my mouth to say something, but the only thing that comes out is a loud exhalation and a gasp. His dick bottoms out in my incredibly tight pussy, and he pushes against my womb.

Vaughn holds onto my hips and works back and forth, pushing more of his cock into my pussy until his balls press firmly against my plush thighs.

“Ahhh! I don’t think this is going to be enough,” I moan, desire blazing in my eyes.

“Baby steps, darling. I’m going to have you screaming with pleasure soon enough,” Vaughn says, sliding a hand up my spine.

I moan yet again, and my pussy squeezes tightly, my back arching to his touch. I push myself back into his arms and grab my breasts. I moan again when he thrusts upward.

Vaughn wraps his arms around me and cups his hands against mine, feeling my breasts as well. He squeezes my breasts and runs a finger down them, his cock steadily rubbing my insides. He kisses my neck.

I moan as his cock rubs against a pleasurable spot inside me again, and I let my arms fall. My chest is heaving, and I’m squeezing around him over and over again.

We lose ourselves in each other, the heat of our bodies both cold and warm to the fire. We’re in a moment, two souls, and the world fades away—exhilarating, terrifying.

I feel the raw energy as we move together, our bodies entwined, igniting a fire in my

heart. His hands are all over me, exploring, claiming. I respond with a hunger I didn't know I had. Each touch sends sparks through my veins, and I realize I'm alive in a way I've never experienced before.

It's the adrenaline from the snake encounter, the fear of being stranded, the uncertainty about our future—all those feelings fade under the warmth of our connection. I'm no longer Vaughn's secretary. I'm a woman, a partner, lost in the intensity of this moment.

But when we're finally breathless and spent, collapsing against each other, the reality of where we are begins to creep back in. I see how Vaughn's expression changes, how his body goes tense as if he's about to shut down. My heart sinks at that.

I can't allow him to leave me now—not after all we just shared. I grasp him, my arms around his torso, trying to hold onto this intimacy.

“Hey,” I whisper, my voice thick with emotion. “We can pretend this never happened after we get off this island, okay?”

I turn to him and see the conflict in his eyes as he looks back at me. But there's a flicker of something—fear?—that I don't want to linger. I want to feel this bond, this connection that we formed in the midst of whatever shit has been going around in our lives.

“Rachel . . .” he starts, but I press a finger to his lips, silencing him.

My heart is racing, and I insist, “Let's not think about anything else right now. Just this. Just us.”

He kisses me in response, a soft, gentle press of his lips against mine that sends shivers down my spine. This time, it's different—less urgent, more intimate. I can tell

his breath is warm and mingled with mine, and I remember how vulnerable we are tonight.

I kiss him and draw him deeper, burying my fears and desires behind it. It's strange that we're on this island in each other's arms. I can't help but think: I have been building walls to guard my heart, but I now am literally tearing down those walls without a second thought.

We break apart, and I lean my head against his, trying to catch my breath. Vaughn's eyes are uncertain, and the fire crackles beside us, casting flickering shadows across the ground. I want to make sure he knows it's okay to feel something, and it's okay to acknowledge this connection between us.

"We can take it one step at a time," I say softly, my fingers tracing the contours of his jaw. "And we don't have to put a label on anything. Just . . . let it be."

He nods slowly and stares straight at me, and I can feel his shoulders start to relax. It's a small victory, though, and it's enough to make me hopeful.

The night drags on, and we whisper, tell stories, and laugh, lightening the burden of what we are. Vaughn and I open up about the things in our lives, what we've done, what we've tried to do, and what we've failed at, and it's so good. I like that Vaughn tells me things I've never heard before, and I do the same.

We grow closer with each word, forming a bond of intimacy that seems unbreakable. It rains, and the rain continues to fall, but inside our shelter, it's warm and safe. I lean against him, his heart beating steadily beneath my ear, and I know that I've never felt more at home than I do right now.

Eventually, exhaustion starts to creep in, and I snuggle closer to his side, his warmth a comfort as I fall asleep. I sigh contentedly as Vaughn hugs my shoulders and moves

closer.

What I drift off to sleep with is the thought that tomorrow will bring its own challenges, but for now, I'm comfortable being here with him, and in this moment, all things are right. Whatever is next, we'll be able to face it together and perhaps even learn how to survive beyond this island.

The rain lulled me into a dreamless sleep, the sound of it filling my heart with hope, Vaughn warm beside me.

Chapter twenty-four

Chapter Twenty-Four

Vaughn

The leaves block out most of the morning sun, dappling the ground with patterns as I wake to the sound of water dripping nearby. I blink against the brightness and turn my head, taking in Rachel still sleeping beside me. Her hair is a tangled halo, and her face is relaxed, serene in a way I haven't seen before. It washes over me in a wave of warmth, and I can't help but smile, but I need to clear my head.

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:43 am*

I make my way into the cool morning air and slip out of our makeshift bed, not wanting to wake her. My skin is drenched with humidity, and I seem to be wrapped in a cloud of it. I take a deep breath, trying to inhale the damp air. It feels earthy mixed with saltwater, and I begin walking along the shoreline, looking for anything that might have washed up in the night.

The rocks are uneven, the waves crashing softly against them, and I stumble about. I've been trying to find so little so far, and it's frustrating. I spot each piece of debris as it is, and each piece feels like a reminder of our isolation. I kick a small rock into the surf, the rock sinking beneath the surface.

Images of Rachel fly around in my mind like fleeting shadows. It makes me think about how her laughter has dulled my anger and how her presence has moved something inside me. I think of her, and there is a peace that settles into my chest and an ease I did not think I would find out here. So, what does it mean that I feel this way?

I shake my head to clear those thoughts. Not now. I can't afford to get wrapped up in feelings. But my feet seem to bring me back toward our shelter, to her. I feel the pull, the inexplicable need to be near her.

I can hear water splashing; my heart quickens as I make my way back. I wonder what's making that noise, but I step carefully through the underbrush. When I round a cluster of trees and find her, I can't help but catch my breath.

In a small pool, Rachel splashes playfully in the water. She doesn't notice me at first, and I'm struck by the sight: the water glinting on her skin, the droplets falling from

her arms. I am overwhelmed by my primal urges as the sunlight dances on her curves. I feel my desire rush, and she looks beautiful, wild, and free.

I clear my throat, and she turns at the sound, looking at me. Her gaze has no hesitation. She doesn't shield herself or cower. Instead, she smiles—a kind of playful challenge in her expression.

“Care to join me?” she asks, her voice light and teasing.

I start to process her invitation, and my heart races. The heat is rising in my cheeks, but I want to jump into the water so badly. I dive into the pool, and the cold water wakes me up as much as it shocks me at first. The distance between us closes quickly, and I swim toward her.

She laughs, bubbles of water floating around us. “Didn't think you'd take me up on it.”

“Will I not take a tempting offer?” I respond, my voice quivering from the rush of my pulse. I splash water, and she retaliates and laughs, the sound echoing in the air, filling it with joy.

The water tosses us together in the pool, and I can't help but wonder how easy it is to be here together like this. Yes, the world outside our little paradise fades away. She looks at me, and the laughter fades away to be replaced by something deeper.

She says softly, her voice a whisper above a whisper, “Feels good, doesn't it?”

Unable to say anything, I nod. The moment feels intimate around us, and I know she's close, the water shifting slightly between us.

I look into her eyes and see mischief and vulnerability, and I remember how much I

want her. I can't ignore the hunger building inside of me—all at once thrilling and terrifying.

"Rachel," I say, my voice low, almost hesitant.

"Yeah?" she replies, her eyes locked onto mine, filled with curiosity.

"And do you ever think about what happens after this? After we're off the island?"

As she hesitates and her eyes skip, I can see the contemplation pass over her.

"Honestly? I try not to think about it. I want to focus on now."

"Right now is pretty good," I agree, my heart racing as I inch closer. The water is closing in all around us, becoming a barrier, making the atmosphere even more erotic.

"I think I want to enjoy it while it lasts," she continues, her voice a whisper, and I can feel the weight of her words.

I don't even think about it before I lean in and capture her lips with mine. The air between us rockets with the kiss. I pull her close, feeling the warmth of her body pressed against mine.

The water around us swishes and slaps over the edge of the pool, but I'm underwater, her lips on mine.

This is unfiltered; this is raw. As I become consumed with the kiss, I can only see everything else fade into nothingness. It's everything I want and everything I don't know I need.

I'd wanted to kiss her for hours. I craved the taste of her on my lips, on my tongue, in my blood. And the feel of her—I think as I wrap an arm around her waist and pull her

tightly against me.

Her mouth is so full, so ripe, and much more intoxicating than I'd expected. Her body shivers once against mine, first in shock, then in response. At the moment, it doesn't matter much to me.

I keep whispering sweet nothings in her ear. At the same time, I'm peppering her face, the crook of her neck, and her exposed cleavage with kisses.

She can't take her eyes off my erect member, and she moans as I slide my hands down her thighs and my questing fingers find the wetness between her legs.

Rachel feels my body's instant response, my dick jerking back to life and my mouth feeding off hers. As we make out, my hands begin to take, my fingers digging in to claim her as mine.

She's already wet and ready when she shoves me back. It's amazing how she switches from being unwilling to taking control of the pace of our little romp.



*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:43 am*

She would have straddled me and made quick work of it, but I sense her intentions and flip her over, trapping her body under mine. I sink my teeth into her breast. Her hips jerk, her hands clamp onto mine, and she grinds her pussy against my crotch in frantic, furious demand.

My vision glazes with red as the fierce flame of need tears through my system. I fill my mouth with her perky breasts even as I shove my hand into the space between our bodies, driving my fingers into her wet pussy and fingering her brutally until she shoots over the edge.

She explodes all over my fingers, her body squirming, straining, then rearing up for another leap. Her nails dig into my back, her hips rolling until I'm as wild as she is.

We roll, struggling for more in a slippery, mindless battle that has thrill ramming into thrill. Her mouth is fevered and ravenous, her hands greedy and swift.

With her breath sobbing, she takes my erect prick and inserts it inside her with one hard thrust of her hips, and she begins to ride me like a wild horse.

Fast and hot, she rides me with a ruthless energy that turns her own body into a machine fueled by greed. For speed, for passion. For more.

When she feels my fingers grab her hips, she throws her head back and flies off the end of the world.

It's electrifying and intoxicating, and it lingers, but then it goes deeper. It gets raw. In the water, the world around us fades from sight and sensation and desire as we feel

together. The cool water caresses my skin and the warmth and softness of Rachel's skin. Sometimes, it's just each touch igniting the sparks and shooting all the way through me. I can't help but pull her closer and lose myself in the moment.

With the adrenaline rush from our earlier encounter heightened by our bodies entwining, its urgency is amplified, and the intimacy of this secluded pool enhances every sensation. We're the only two people in the world, separated from everything else. The waves hit the shore softly, a soft rhythm to all this chaos of our emotions.

We float together, the lines between us dissolving, until there is no more than this—heat, water, and this connection that pulses between us. We explore the depths of our desires, one to the other. We drown in each other, and it feels like we let everything we have been holding back finally out.

Our mouths meet again. This time, it's different. Every touch, every taste, every need comes with a sense of belonging. I feel the blood rush back to my dick, and I grab her butt, anchoring her in place as I slide my dick inside her wet pussy.

The first time was frenzied, but this time around, I fuck her with a slow passion that can only be borne out of love.

She holds me tight and matches me beat for beat.

The emotions overtake me, sensations drown me, and all I can see at that moment is Rachel—her dark eyes, her sleek hair, her strong mouth. As I make love to her, I feel her tremble, hear her breath shudder and catch, and then her eyes become beautiful and opaque as she comes.

Her eyes lock with mine, no words spoken as she shifts.

When she straddles me, she takes me in slowly, slowly, deeply, deeply, to spin out

that pleasure, and she watches it conquer me even as it overwhelms her.

Her eyes look into mine, and I can see pleasure in them, as well as power, knowledge, and everything that makes a woman compelling, dangerous, and irresistible.

She moans, a woman embracing her own power, taking her own triumph. And she never stops moving and never stops her slow, steady beat.

I have to grip her hips and hold on to her to stop myself from snatching that control and taking my release when she shakes her hair back and smiles down at me.

No words, still no words.

Watching me, her breath coming in quick little sighs, she runs her hands up her body, gliding them over her breasts until I can taste them.

She shifts, bowing down to take my mouth with hers. I feel her shudder and hear her quick gasp as she rolls over the next wave.

The sound, just that small sound, snaps my restraint.

“I can’t. I need—”

I spin her onto her back and hike up her hips. Undone, simply undone, I drive my cock into her, half-mad with pleasure when those long legs wrap around me.

This time, the force of the tide sweeps us both under.

I cannot keep track of the world outside this moment. Time slips away, and I forget the passing of time. I realize Rachel’s breath against my skin, the way her body reacts to mine, and the soft sounds of pleasure coming from her lips. It’s a melody I don’t

want to end.

At the height of our passion, we create a bubble, and suddenly, there's a noise that breaks through. My heart plunges to the bottom of the ocean as I hear voices above the water, barely there but unmistakable. Reality crashes back into my mind like a wave against the rocks, and my mind races.

"Did you hear that?" My breath comes ragged from gasping, pulling away slightly. Rachel's features are a mixture of surprise and concern, her eyes wide.

"Yeah," she whispers, her voice barely audible over the sound of the water. We turn our heads toward the noise, but we can't hear what is being said. The voices grow louder, and I can't believe what I'm hearing.

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:43 am*

“They found us,” I murmur, a rush of relief flooding through me.

We look at each other, and in that moment, I see the same joy and disbelief in her eyes. We’re still exposed, vulnerable, here in this secluded pool—but the reality of our situation hits me now. I look around for our clothes, abandoned and haphazardly strewn about the rocks.

“Get dressed!” I urge, my voice low but firm. The excitement and panic cause us to scramble and grab our clothes. The fabric of the shorts feels foreign against my skin. After the intimacy of the water, my hands tremble slightly as I tug them on.

I can’t help but steal glances at Rachel, too. She’s hurriedly putting on her clothes, and my heart is racing. It’s hard to focus on the task at hand when her eyes flit open, and she looks flushed and beautiful. The reality of where we are hastens us both into action.

She ties her hair back and asks if they might be looking for us.

“I hope so,” I reply, pulling on my shirt and glancing back toward the shore. The voices are louder and more distinct, as is the sound of footsteps on the sand.

“Let’s go!” I say, my heart beating with the excitement of hope and anticipation. Back at the shelter’s entrance, we step out of the water, the cool breeze catching our damp skin.

Continuing through the foliage, I catch a movement on the beach. I see figures in the distance, framed against the rising sun. Their silhouettes leap across my heart.

“Over there!” I point, and Rachel’s eyes follow. I see wide-eyed smiles exchanged between us, adrenaline coursing through us.

“Could they help us?” she asks, her voice a mix of excitement and doubt.

“They have to,” I reply, feeling a surge of hope. “We’re not going to be stuck here.”

We march together toward the voices, closer to the laughter and shouts getting louder. With each step, it feels like a leap toward freedom, and I can hardly believe rescue is within reach. The weight of the last few days—days of isolation, fear, and uncertainty—begins to lift, and I can feel relief coming.

As we approach the shore, I can’t get this feeling that everything is going to change. We’ve been on the island for days, and our time here has changed us. It’s forged a connection between us that I can’t deny. I look at Rachel, her eyes wide with excitement and fear, and I know that no matter what happens—or doesn’t happen—we can’t pretend that what happened was an accident.

The voices grow louder, and I am able to see the figures now—search and rescue teams with equipment in hand, scanning the area. I feel relief, but I know that the world we’re coming back to has things of its own to deal with.

I take Rachel’s hand in mine and say, “Let’s go.”

Under her skin, the warmth against my palm is a promise and a reminder that whatever is out there, we’ll face it together.

Chapter twenty-five

Chapter Twenty-Five

Rachel

We step onto the beach, and the warmth from the sun feels brighter than I remember. The thrill of rescue fills the air, and I'm still clasping Vaughn's hand. As we approach the group of search and rescue workers, I can hardly contain my excitement.

"Rachel!" One of the rescuers rushes over with a wide grin. "Vaughn!"

I laugh—a sound that feels strange but freeing after days of tension and uncertainty.

Questions fly around us, but I can only feel relief as they surround us. Finally, I'm free from the island. Vaughn is grinning, his eyes sparkling at the thrill of our escape, and I look over at him. It's a simple moment of pure joy, releasing all the fear and worry we've held for what seems like an eternity.

"Can you believe it?" I say, turning to Vaughn, who hasn't let go of my hand. "We're going home!"

His expression is serious but warm. "Yeah, we made it."

I revel in the excitement, but even as I do, a nagging thought comes to mind: what happens next? I look over at the rescue team. They're filled with energy and purpose, and I can't help but think of how this will affect us. I can feel the weight of our shared experiences hanging in the air. We've been through so much together.

Following a moment's celebration, Vaughn turns to one of the rescuers, a rugged man with a weathered face and kind eyes. "We need to get her medical attention as soon as possible."

"Right away," the man replies, nodding.

Vaughn's demeanor shifts, becoming more intense. "I have to get to Australia, and I need to do it now," he says, his voice steady. "I've got work to do."

His words twist my stomach in a strange disappointment. "Wait, what?" Confusion clouds my mind, and I blurt out, "You're leaving already?"



*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:43 am*

Vaughn looks at me, his face serious. “I can’t miss this opportunity, Rachel. The team is counting on me. I need to get back to work.”

“But what about us?” My heart sinks. I thought we were going back together. Suddenly, the joy of our rescue seems overshadowed by the reality of our lives apart.

“I know,” he says, his voice softening. “But you have to take care of yourself first. You’ve been through a lot. You should go back to New York for medical attention and rest.”

I blink, absorbing his words. The logic is sound, but emotionally, it cuts me to the bone. “Are you just going to send me away? Just like that?”

Frustration flashes in his eyes. He shakes his head. “It’s not like that, Rachel. I want you to be safe. This is what’s right for you right now.”

The tension thickens between us, and I can feel my heart racing. I want to tear down the walls he’s trying to build between us. I want to argue. “But what about us?” This time, my voice trembles, and I ask again, “What happens when you get to Australia? What happens to what we have?”

His jaw tightens as though he’s struggling with his own emotions, and he looks away. He finally admits, “I don’t know. I just need to get this done. It’s important.”

The confusion and fear that have been there since we first came to the island settle heavily in my chest, mixed with disappointment. What I want to do is scream, shake him, and make him see that this isn’t just about work. It’s about us, about the

connection we made during those turbulent days.

Before I can say anything, the rescuer steps in and breaks the tension. “We can arrange for a boat to take you both to the mainland,” he says, his voice calm and reassuring. “We’ll have to put her medical needs first, but . . .”

I notice the conflict in Vaughn’s eyes. He nods. He says he’ll arrange for a flight to Australia as soon as he can, and I feel a pang of frustration.

I hold my breath, trying to regain composure. This isn’t how I planned our reunion to go. “Fine,” I reply, my voice cold and distant. “You do what you need to do.”

“Rachel . . .” he starts, but I cut him off.

“Just let me go, Vaughn. You’re right. I have to take care of myself.”

I step away, my heart catching in my chest, and I look away. I don’t want him to see me fall apart, not right now. This sudden separation makes the excitement of being rescued hollow. He’s doing this for my health, I remind myself, but the weight of his decision presses down on my heart.

The rescue team gathers around us, ready for what’s next, and I try to bring my focus to the present. Now, I can’t let my emotions control my actions. I suck in a deep breath to help myself stay strong and face the truth of our situation.

Vaughn steps closer. “Let’s get you taken care of.” His touch warms my hand as it brushes against mine.

“Yeah,” I reply, trying to sound more composed than I feel. “Let’s do that.”

I look back at him. Our eyes meet for a moment, and then I slowly take a step away

to join the rescue team. There's so much more to say and so many questions hanging in the air.

For now, I need to get medical attention and go back to New York.

We make our way back to the mainland, the boat rocking gently with the waves lapping against the hull—a constant reminder that we've just escaped the ocean. I perch on the edge, staring out into the distance where the sky meets the water.

I keep seeing Vaughn's face, serious, as he held me close in that pool. There's a pang in my chest, a longing and confusion. What's going on in his head? Does he wish he never shared what we had on the island? Does he already consider it a moment of weakness, a lapse of judgment?

I shake my head, trying to dispel the thoughts. He's told me time and time again that work is his highest priority, and I can't afford to get caught up in the what-ifs. I remind myself that Vaughn does not want the mess of emotions anymore. The man I knew before we were stranded is still there, just buried under the weight of his responsibilities and career.

As the boat nears the dock, anxiety stirs in my stomach. I'm going back to my old life, which somehow feels alien after all we've been through together. What do I do now that I've lived so close to him? After sharing something so intimate?

As soon as we dock, I step off the boat and take in the fresh air of the mainland, the smell of salt and freedom filling my lungs. As I head to the car, I try to shake the lingering thoughts of Vaughn. The bittersweet ache in my heart for the island behind me remains, but I can't help feeling a little excited that I'm going home.

The drive is dull, and the scenery is blown past me as I concentrate on the road. I replay the moments from the island in my mind—the laughter, the fear, the

connection. Of course, I can't stop thinking that I want to talk to Vaughn and figure out what it all means. I know he's busy. He has responsibilities before anything, and with every passing mile, I remind myself of that.

The relief washes over me as I pull into my driveway and see my home. I immediately call out for my cat, Archie, as I step inside. "Hey, buddy! I'm home!"

Almost instantly, he races out from under the couch and runs toward me. I scoop him up into my arms, bending down. He purrs softly in the space between us, and I smile. "I missed you so much," I murmur, burying my face in his fur.

His little body is warm against mine, and it comforts me after the whirlwind of emotions over the past few days. I sit down on the couch with Archie still in my arms and take a deep breath. I let the routine of home soothe me as I pet him, trying to push thoughts of Vaughn from my mind.

But it's difficult. I remember every moment we spent together, and I cannot stop wondering if something has changed inside me. I don't know—everything seems different now. I can't help but wonder if Vaughn feels the same way, too.

I look out the window, watching the evening sky turn pink and orange as the sun sets.

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:43 am*

“What do you think, Archie?” I ask my feline companion, voicing my inner turmoil. He just blinks up at me. “Do you think he’ll call?”

I know I shouldn’t expect anything. After all, I had made it clear that I was going to focus on my own life. Yet, I still hold onto the hope that this isn’t the end of our story. A part of me wonders: weren’t we real to each other on the island?

I shake my head again, frustrated with myself. “Rachel, stop it,” I whisper, setting Archie down and standing up. “You need to be practical. He’s got a career, and you’ve got your own life to get back to.”

I find it hard to concentrate as I move around the house, unloading my things and trying to settle back into my routine. Even the smallest sound brings my mind back to Vaughn—his laughter, the way he looked at me when we kissed. And it makes me a little mad. I can’t seem to escape the memories.

A while later, I curl up on the couch with Archie at my side, turning on the television to try to drown out the feeling. Even the show’s mindless chatter can’t drown out the thoughts running through my head.

What if I reach out to him? Would that be so wrong? I hope we can work it out. I hope we can navigate whatever it is we feel for each other. I also know that it’s really hard for him to let anyone in.

I lean back against the cushions and close my eyes as the night wears on, finally succumbing to tiredness. Archie curls up next to me, and I start to drift off, hoping that when I wake, I’ll have some clarity. Deep down, however, I know that clarity

may not come easily, especially when it comes to Vaughn. The questions of love, connection, and what it truly means to let someone in, hover in the air. But the real world is waiting, and I need to move forward.

## Chapter twenty-six

## Chapter Twenty-Six

### Vaughn

The engine hums below me, Sydney's bustling streets speeding past as I sit in the back of the car. The sun is out, but it feels a little cold; the weight on my shoulders isn't in the least bit light. Every media outlet and headline is filled with news of our time on the island.

"Vaughn Graham," one headline reads, "A Picture of Resilience."

I can't help but roll my eyes at how truly absurd it all is. Resilience? That word feels hollow—a label that doesn't even come close to defining the insanity of the past few days or the mental anguish I am still in the midst of trying to overcome.

I look out the window, and the city looks blurry. The storm is brewing inside me, but people go about their day, walking along the sidewalks, not giving a damn. They don't know what it is like to be stranded on that island, scared out of your mind as the hours tick away. The polished image of a soccer star does not include the man who lost himself in the chaos of emotion and vulnerability.

And now, I can't think about that. I have a mission to focus on—my "Save the Ocean" campaign. I'm here to stand up for something I care about, and I know I've got to show up with a good front and be who I've always been.

As we pull up at the venue, I exhale, square my shoulders, and shake off the frustrations of the past week. I can see the banners being set up and the atmosphere buzzing with activity. I can feel the energy of it. It's infectious, and my competitive spirit kicks in. That's where I excel—on the field, in the limelight, where I can focus on something bigger than myself.

I step out of the car, and I am immediately bombarded with camera flashes and reporters shouting my name. I feel overwhelmed but put on my game face—the one I've used so many times in public. I smile and wave at the crowd as they want, but inside, I'm fighting the thoughts of Rachel.

Snippets of conversation trickle over me as excitement hums in the air while I make my way inside.

“Did you hear about his time on the island?”

“He's such a hero for keeping it together.”

“What a dedicated athlete!”

I steel myself, not letting their perceptions shake me. I know that public opinion is fickle and how fast things can turn. For now, I lean into it, letting their admiration push me forward.

Once inside, I'm led to the stage and positioned at the podium. The crowd settles, and I can feel the weight of their expectations pressing down on me. I clear my throat and start to talk. The words flow about ocean conservation and what we can do together.

“This mission is about more than just me,” I say, my voice steady and strong. “It's about all of us protecting our planet. We can make a difference.”

I get a rush of adrenaline as the crowd claps.

This moment is where I can channel all of what I'm feeling—pressure, uncertainty, the chaos of the island—into passion and purpose. As I speak, I feel the connection with the audience growing. I will talk about the initiatives we're pushing forward and the partnerships we're forming.

Yet, I can't shake the thought of Rachel. As I glanced out over the sea of faces, I ask myself again, How is she? Has she settled back into her life in New York? What does she think of it all?

Something inside me has shifted. My time on the island unearthed emotions I had buried for so long, and I can't help but feel the loss now that I'm apart from her.

As the event ends, handshakes and congratulations pour in from all angles, but my mind is elsewhere. I wander around the venue, shaking hands and posing for photos, but it feels a bit flat. The cheers and applause turn to a distant hum as I look for something—or someone—familiar.

Finally, I step outside to breathe in some fresh air. The sun has fallen lower in the sky, casting gray shadows across the pavement. I close my eyes, letting the heat wash over me, and lean against a railing.



*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:43 am*

Doubt creeps in as I hover over the Send button. What if she's moved on? What if Collins is really interested in her, and I've missed my one and only chance? I'm frustrated with myself and shake my head. This isn't about competition. It's about telling her the truth and myself the truth.

With an exhale, I hit Send with a surge of determination. The message is simple but loaded with meaning: Hey, Rachel. Just wanted to see how you're doing, I guess.

I watch the message fade away into nothing, and I am relieved and anxious at the same time. Whatever it is, I'm taking a step forward. It's a start. It may not change anything, but it's a start. Maybe that's what I need right now—a chance to close the gap that's formed between us, even if that feels wonky.

Chapter twenty-seven

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Rachel

My life has settled back into my usual routine of work. A week and a few days have passed since I came home—days I've spent buried in emails, meetings, and the never-ending pile of paperwork that multiplies by the hour. I sit at my desk, and I can't help but feel empty, aching for Vaughn, for the way he used to occupy my thoughts, for the space he filled in the room around me.

But I trudge down its path as much as I can, trying to drown out the silence between us. My phone seems to be getting more looks than I'd like to admit, as I hope for a

message that will never come. I replay how we spent our last moments on the island, laughing and being intimate, but now those memories feel so tawdry, so marred by the doubt that followed.

Today is a particularly heavy day as I sort through the everyday stuff that makes up my life. I try to concentrate, to drown out Vaughn and the connection we had, but it's like trying to hold back a tide. There is always this nagging worry—what if he's moved on? Maybe he's forgotten all about me.

My phone buzzes on the desk just as I'm about to lose myself in another spreadsheet. My heart races as I see his name on the screen. I pick it up.

Hey, Rachel. Can you have a car sent to pick me up? I'm back in town.

The message is simple and practical, yet a flood of emotions rushes through me. I feel a mix of relief and disappointment—relief because he's finally reached out, but disappointment because it's so clinical, so cold.

My fingers hover above the Reply button as I stare at the screen. I want to say something witty or clever, but instead, I feel another wave of frustration building.

You don't have to see me.

What does that even mean?

I take a deep breath and tell myself not to overreact. I won't let his indifference bother me. I am not going to let him dictate how I feel. I put my phone down and pace the room, trying to release the emotions swirling inside me.

I relent after a moment and begin organizing a car. I can't pretend I don't want to see him, even if he keeps insisting he's acting professionally. I grab my phone again and

type out a quick response:

Okay, I'll get a car arranged. When should it be there?

The wait feels excruciating, and I hit Send. I can't help but imagine what he's been up to in Australia, if he has thought of us at all. The longer I sit with those thoughts, the more my resolve slips. How can I let myself hope for something more when he's so determined to keep his distance?

The minutes tick by, and then my phone buzzes again.

In about an hour. Thanks.

I let out a frustrated sigh. That's it? No explanation, no small talk? The disappointment sinks into my chest, and I try not to dwell on it. So, instead of that, I force myself to get ready. I straighten my desk, and I clean up my appearance. I grab a blazer, brush my hair, and fight the whirlwind of emotions threatening to make me lose my composure.

I pace the living room as I wait for the car to arrive.

I check the clock, seconds ticking down. What am I even hoping for? A heartfelt reunion? An apology for everything that changed between us?

The doorbell rings, and I jump because I'm lost in thought. I take a deep breath, forcing myself to remain calm as I open the door to let the driver in. "Thank you," I say automatically, trying to sound professional, but my heart is racing in anticipation.

I give the driver the directions from Vaughn and a pass that will grant him access to the VIP section at the airport.

Vaughn, Collins, and another teammate cram into the backseat of the car I sent to the airport to pick them up.

Sports channels are covering Vaughn's return, and I find myself glued to the TV set. They drive out of the airport, and I can see the fans on the streets waving signs and yelling his name. I can't help but envy the adoration he receives. That feeling fades quickly into concern when the car finally grinds to a halt, trapped in the chaos of the crowd.

I can almost picture the tension in his jaw, his eyes darting about like he's searching for a way out.

There's something that feels urgent to me. I have to help them, and quickly.

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:43 am*

I suddenly have an idea. The spot where they're stuck is not far from my apartment, so I text Vaughn to come in with me.

I can get you out of the traffic. Meet me at my place.

I hear the door creak open, and in moments, Vaughn, Collins, and their teammate step in. Vaughn's look of relief is almost comical; I can't help but smirk.

"Thanks for the rescue," he says, his voice tinged with gratitude, but there's an edge of something else—tension, maybe?

"Just doing my part," I reply, trying to keep my tone light. I glance at Collins, who is already settling in my living room, knowing Vaughn's eyes are boring into me, assessing, judging.

When the door closes, the atmosphere changes. The other teammate leans against the wall, chatting about the upcoming game, while Collins lounges on my couch, casually flipping through the channels. Vaughn stands a little at a distance, though his posture is stiff, and he tries to project an air of indifference that he probably can't maintain.

"Nice place you got here," Collins says, glancing around, and I can sense the flirtation in his tone. "You should have us over more often."

I try to smile, but it comes out forced.

Vaughn slightly shifts and tightens his jaw as he watches the interaction. His face

flickers with a touch of jealousy, but it disappears just quickly, and before I can fully process it, the mask he wears comes back.

“It’s cozy,” I say, trying to keep the mood light. Inside, I’m seething. Why is Vaughn doing that? He’s pretending nothing happened on the island, that there’s no way we could have connected in that way.

I feel invisible in my own apartment as the conversation continues. Vaughn’s interaction with Collins and then with that other guy while he avoids eye contact with me is maddening to watch. I want to scream at him—make him see what it was we shared—but I boil down to simmering resentment.

Eventually, the laughter dries up, and the room goes dead quiet. I look at Vaughn; our eyes meet for a moment. He quickly looks away, but there’s a flicker of something there—something of the tension that hangs between us.

“I need to use the bathroom,” Vaughn finally says, his tone slightly clipped. “Where is it?”

I point to the back of the apartment where the bathroom is located, and as I turn to enter my bedroom, he follows me in.

I am flooded with frustration and longing. I can’t let this go on. I can’t allow him to treat me like just another colleague, just another obligation.

“You can’t just pretend nothing happened, Vaughn. I mean it,” I tell him. “You can’t act like I’m just another colleague.”

“What do you want me to say?” he asks, his voice low, almost frustrated. “It was a moment, Rachel. We’re back in the real world now.”

“Is that all it was to you?” I challenge, closing the gap, my heart beating faster. “A moment? It was more to me.”

The space between us is now charged with electricity, and he takes a step toward me. “You know it was more than a moment. But that’s changed.”

He closes the distance between us, and his eyes search mine before I can respond. It’s just the two of us, and the world outside fades away. It’s just us caught in the storm of our emotions.

“Stop pretending,” he demands, his voice barely above a whisper.

It’s gone, and the tension snaps. We are in each other’s arms. The kiss ignites a flame that had been smoldering beneath the surface. It’s desperate and passionate, everything we’ve been holding back, a collision.

Vaughn runs his eyes over my body lasciviously and licks his lips. His antics are silly, and I burst out laughing.

He places his hand on the back of my sweater, anchoring himself before jumping out of his skin. The taste of my mouth, hot and ripe, overwhelms him, even as my tight, sexy body presses and pumps against him.

He yanks the sweater over my head and throws it to the side. His hands are on my breasts before the shirt even hit the floor.

Gasping, I work my hands between our fevered bodies, fighting to keep my mouth on his as I hurry to loosen his shirt. God, I want to feel him against my skin. To feel his body inside mine. My skin feels alive again, the blood running hot under it, my heart pounding in a primal rhythm, so hard and thrilling.

Desperate for more, I push his hand down and hold it firmly between my legs. Overcome with pleasure, I tilt my head back, exposing the line of my throat to his lips, his teeth, my hips moving as I press his hand to my crotch and the heat beneath it.

It is like holding raw nerves. Nerves with edges of jagged glass. They scrape at his own, all but tearing him open.

He pulls the button on my trousers and drags the pants down. Even as I struggle to step clear, he plunges his fingers into the heat of my thighs. He watches the shocked pleasure rush over my face as I pour into his hand.

I'm as wet as a waterfall when Vaughn finally slips his finger out of me, spins me around, and straddles me from behind while I lean against the bedroom wall. He is rough and sweet at the same time, and I love it.



*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:43 am*

“Don’t stop.” My mouth is frantic and fevered under his, and my nails scrape wickedly down his back before digging into his hips.

Vaughn grips my hips tighter, bending me some more and lining his cock against my slit. He groans as he slips inside me. I feel my mind going blank when Vaughn is fully inside me. His cock throbs as he stays in place, catching his breath.

I moan, arching some more and waiting for him to fuck me. Vaughn slaps his cock against my pussy before rubbing it against my ass. The feeling of need coursing through our bodies as he humps my ass is nothing compared to what I need. I move my body backward, rubbing myself against him as well.

Suddenly, he speeds up, his groin slapping against my ass. I gasp, my hands grasping at thin air as he fucks me harder. His cock reaches deeper inside me, brushing against my most sensitive parts and driving me crazy. I turned around to look at him and see his face contorted in pure ecstasy.

He pulls me closer, slipping his cock even deeper than I expected. I bite my bottom lip to keep my moans from spilling out. His hands hold my hips, keeping me slightly bent. Vaughn leans in to kiss my sensitive earlobes before whispering dirty things into them.

I ride that wild whip of sensation that snaps through my mind and body, shuddering and craving more. It burns through me, fueling me until I think I’d go mad from the sheer force of my own greed.

I grind my hips against him, pushing back in urgent demand, and cry out when he

drives hard and deep inside me. And still, it isn't enough. My hips move in a brutal bid for speed as I groan my desire over the sharp sound of flesh striking flesh, striking the wall.

Equally as aroused as I am, Vaughn rides with me in that fast, sweaty race toward release until his vision blurs and his blood screams. Then he drives us both, quivering, to the finish.

I quiver through multiple orgasms and beg him to stop, but he keeps driving me wild until my legs buckle.

My heart is still thundering when I drop my head to his shoulder. I gulp air, feel it catch, then tear into my parched lungs and out again.

I am naked, sweaty, and pinned to the wall inside my small bedroom, just a few meters away from Collins and their other teammates. A mix of conflicting emotions races through me. I feel horrified, yet for some reason, I am not really embarrassed. In fact, I am delighted.

"You okay?" His voice is muffled, and I feel his lips move against my hair.

"I think I'm a lot better than okay. I think I'm still on a cloud somewhere."

"You were. You are." He'd just taken me against the wall. Or I'd taken him. "Can't think yet," he admits, bracing a hand against the wall to remain upright and ease back just enough to watch me laugh.

"Am I still standing?" he asks.

"I thought you wanted to remain professional," I tell him in a teasing tone.

“Well, I lost control of myself.” Vaughn looks at me, his eyes filled with longing and frustration. “Rachel, we can’t keep doing this.”

My heart is racing, and I say, “But I don’t want to stop. Not now, not ever. It’s time to talk about what happened on that island.”

“I know,” he says, running a hand through his hair, the tension palpable. “But it’s complicated.”

I step closer again, feeling the energy between us grow. “Complicated doesn’t have to mean over.”

The world outside forgotten, we are once again caught in the whirlwind of our feelings, and then we are flung back together.

Chapter twenty-eight

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Vaughn

It’s match day, and the stadium’s atmosphere is electric as fans mill around to watch the game. I can think of nothing but Rachel and how she refused to back down from me earlier. I tried to hold things together, but she wouldn’t let me dictate what she did. It really angers me and fuels the jealousy I wasn’t aware of, had been burning all along.

The tension tightens in my chest as I step into the locker room. My teammates are laughing and joking, and I laugh along, but it’s hollow. I can’t get that image of Rachel’s defiance out of my head—her defiance of me. It’s exciting, and frustrating. It scares me because she should be able to make her own choices. With Collins’s

renewed interest in her and someone else trying to get close, it's enough to make my blood boil.

“Hey, Vaughn!” one of my teammates calls out, breaking my train of thought. “You good? You seem a bit off today.”

“I’m fine, yeah,” I answer, smiling but not quite making it to my eyes.

The truth is, I’m not fine. I am a mess, feeling things, I thought I had under control.

I can’t concentrate as we get ready for the game. I start to think of Rachel’s words—her resolve to keep her word no matter what. I respect her power, but I also think it’s a test of my authority. I’m the one who is supposed to be in control, the one who leads, but here I am, fighting to get control of everything.

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:43 am*

Relief meets anger as I nod. “Good luck with that,” I say, rising from my seat. I won’t let her have the last word.

I walk out of the conference room, adrenaline coursing through my veins. It feels empowering. I’ve stood my ground. I will not allow anyone to determine how I live—no one, especially when it comes to Vaughn. This is not about business for me; this is about respect, integrity, and the connections I hold dear.

I take a moment outside to breathe in the fresh air. I think about Vaughn—how our relationship has gotten so complicated, how much I miss him, and how I want to protect him from people like Jenna.

Chapter thirty

Chapter Thirty

Vaughn

The next day comes, and I still feel uneasy. My conversation with my mother is still ringing in my ears; my mind still bears the emotional weight of her visit. I push the thoughts aside as I get ready to begin a busy day.

The morning silence is broken as my phone buzzes on the table just as I settle into my routine. I look down and see an unfamiliar number. I answer uneasily.

“Vaughn Graham,” I say, trying to keep my tone professional.

“John from the league’s disciplinary office, Mr. Graham,” the voice on the other end says. My heart starts to pound. “I want to let you know that we’re calling you in for a disciplinary meeting because we just received a report accusing you of illicit drug use and distribution.”

The words hit me like an actual punch to the gut, and I have a hard time processing how serious it actually is. “What are you talking about?” I demand, my voice sharper than I intended. “There must be some mistake.”

“There’s no mistake, I assure you. Thursday at ten a.m. is the scheduled meeting,” he replies, speaking clinically with no empathy. “It goes without saying that your presence is mandatory.”

I hang up, and my mind begins to spin. Accusations of drug use? This is outrageous! My reputation has been built up—I can’t let it be tarnished like this. I remember the rumors that have gone around the league, the whispers of a doping scandal, but I never thought it would involve me.

I pace the room, my thoughts racing, my heart pounding, the world around me spinning as panic sets in. I’ve gotta figure this shit out real quick. Rachel. She would know what to do. She’s kept everything organized. She’s been my anchor. I dial her number, hoping she’ll answer.

But it rings and rings. No answer. Frustration builds as I try again, but still no response.

“Come on, Rachel,” I mutter under my breath, feeling a mix of anxiety and anger. I know she has been working hard, but I need her to be there for me right now more than ever.

The rising tide of panic pushes up my throat. I can’t afford to lose my cool because

everything is on the line. Before this meeting, I need to collect my thoughts and formulate a plan. The harder I try to concentrate, the more I think about Rachel. I keep thinking I've lost her—that I pushed her away.

Maybe I'm the reason she's ignoring my calls. I am frustrated as the thought gnaws at me. I need her, and I can't let my pride get in the way.

I wait a bit before trying to call once more. I open my laptop. A new email is waiting for me containing the official summons and other documentation from the disciplinary committee.

I sigh deeply and start going through the papers for my upcoming meeting. The hours pass, and the anxiety in my chest builds. Each minute feels like a lifetime, and I can't stop feeling like I'm getting trapped. This is a situation I have no control over.

I can't take it anymore. Finally, I shoot off a quick text to Rachel: I need to talk. It's urgent.

Frustration boils over as I stare at the screen waiting for her response. I know she is off duty now and has her own life to manage, but right now, I need her. She's the one who helps me—with her insight, her organizational skills, and her talent for making something out of the chaos that is my life.

I push my phone aside with a deep breath and attempt to refocus. There is no time to dwell on that. I have to get ready for this meeting. I have to gather evidence and statements to clear my name. I check my emails to see if there are any that might be used as a shield for my case.

The more I dig, the more I feel it crushing me with the weight of the situation. I don't get how this could be. There's got to be more to it. For months, the whispers of drug use have been circulating. I had never paid any attention to them. Vicious rumors like

that are part of the price that elite professional athletes like me have to pay, and I was immune to those rumors—or so I thought.

Throughout the rest of the morning, I push, trying to keep my mind where it needs to be, but I can't shake the tension that is always just under the skin. I'm exhausted and on edge, and I'm being eaten up by the uncertainty.

But I refuse to succumb to despair. I will prepare for this meeting, gather my evidence, and confront these accusations with everything I have. I may feel isolated, but I'm not out of options.

Tomorrow, I'll reach out to my lawyer and gather my team. I'll make sure I'm ready for whatever lies ahead. I can't let this define me. I won't let them take away everything I've worked so hard for.

Hours go by, and I check my phone for a message from Rachel. Nothing. I feel a pang of disappointment, but I can't wait for her forever.

After another long hour filled with anxiety about the upcoming meeting, I find myself staring at my phone, willing Rachel to pick up. I've tried calling her countless times, but each ring only deepens my frustration. I need her support, and the silence feels like a wall between us. The weight of the accusations looms heavily over me, and I can't face them alone.

Finally, I decide that enough is enough. I need to see her. I grab my keys and head out the door, my heart racing with a mix of hope and desperation. I drive to her apartment, the streets blurring past me in a haze. What if she's avoiding me? What if Collins's flirtation has pushed her away? The thought gnaws at me, and I shake my head to clear it.



*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:44 am*

When I arrive, I park and head toward her building, my stomach churning with anxiety.

I pause, noticing a coffee shop across the street as I'm about to knock on her front door.

I spot a familiar figure, and I walk over to the café, glance inside, and freeze. Oddly enough, there's Rachel sitting at a table with Collins. They're discussing something seriously while leaning in close. I hate how cozy they look, and I feel my irritation building.

What is he doing with her?

My fingers hover over the screen as I pull out my phone. Seeing them together twists something dark in my stomach. I steady myself with a deep breath. I know I shouldn't let jealousy rule my head, but I'm losing her all over again, watching them like this.

I call her number again, but it just rings to voicemail. I am annoyed, and the heat in my cheeks is growing. I keep calling and calling, but still no answer. I cannot sit here and do nothing. It's not just business anymore; it feels personal.

Finally, she seems to be leaving, I call her again, and she picks up then. I can hear the relief in her voice. "Vaughn? What's going on?"

"Meet me at my place," I speak firmly, my voice steady now. "We need to talk."

"Is this about work?" she asks, hesitation creeping into her tone.

“It’s about everything.” I cut off any more questions and just say, “Just get over here.”

I hang up before she can protest. I get back in my car and drive home.

I can’t unsee her with Collins and the way they are so engrossed with each other. I know I have to face these feelings so that she knows how serious this is. With all that’s happening, I can’t afford to lose her.

My thoughts spin as I drive home. What if she’s fallen for him? What if she’s tired of waiting for me to sort my life out? The jealousy festers, the insecurity grows, and a part of me knows I’m being irrational. I have to get her to understand that I’m sincere with her about wanting her in my life and that I care more than I’ve shown.

When I get home, there’s nothing to do but pace the living room with my heart hammering in my chest. I must take control of this and get everything out on the table. I can’t bear the uncertainty for a moment longer; it’s gnawing at me.

The doorbell pulls me out of my thoughts, and I run to answer it. Rachel is in front of me when I open the door—confused and concerned.

“You sounded urgent on the phone,” she says, stepping inside, her eyes darting around as she assesses the situation. “What’s wrong?”

Chapter thirty-one

Chapter Thirty-One

Rachel

As I walk into the quaint neighborhood café, the air smells of freshly brewed coffee,

and it feels warm, like a hug wrapping around me. This has been a busy week, and I'm just looking forward to a few minutes of quiet and the chance to relax. I look over the menu as I stand in line, but as I do, I can feel someone behind me—and it's a presence I've felt before. I turn, and Collins is there, grinning as he always does.

“Rachel!” he says, a bit brightly, a bit friendly. “Fancy seeing you here.”

“Hey, Collins,” I reply, forcing a smile. I don't want to be near you after the last time we interacted, but it seems like fate has other plans.

He points at the counter. “Would it be alright if I sat and had coffee with you? I could use a break.”

I hesitate but nod. “Sure, why not?”

After ordering our drinks, we find a small table by the window. I can't get rid of this feeling that this might not actually be a casual catch-up. I'm not sure I'm ready for it, but there's some undercurrent in the air.

“So, how have you been?” Collins asks as he takes a sip of his coffee and leans back in his chair.

“I've been good,” I answer, trying to keep it lighthearted.

He nods - “I've been thinking a lot about setting up my own sports business. Could you help me with it? I could really use your expertise. Could you work with me on it?”

I blink in surprise at his suggestion. “I don't think that's a good idea, Collins. I'm Vaughn's secretary, and I don't want to mix things up.”

He looks earnest as he leans forward. “But, Rachel, I’m serious. Someone like you—I really could use your help. I know how Vaughn works, and I think we would be a great team.”

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:44 am*

I shake my head, irritation simmering within. “I’m not interested in the offer, thank you. I like my job, and I like Vaughn.”

I see Collins’s demeanor soften slightly, and I can see the disappointment across his face. He presses, with an air of defensiveness in his tone, “Are you sure it’s not because of Vaughn? Doesn’t he treat you that well?”

The words hit me with the force of a slap, and my irritation burns to anger. “What do you mean by that?” I ask, my voice sharp. “There’s a lot going on for Vaughn right now. You don’t know what he’s dealing with.”

Collins raises his hands in mock surrender. “You could do better, is all I’m saying. You deserve someone who appreciates you.”

“Stop,” I say, my patience fraying. “You don’t get to decide what I deserve. You don’t know me or my relationship with Vaughn.”

He crosses his arms defensively and leans back in his chair. “I’m just worried about you,” he says. “It feels like you’re always stuck in his shadow.”

I snort, and my anger boils over. “Stuck in his shadow? He’s a person, not a shadow I get cast over me. I have my own life, my own goals, and I’m not going to let someone—let alone you—tell me otherwise.”

Collins’s expression changes, and for a moment, I see him realize his mistake. “Okay, okay, I get it. I didn’t mean to offend you.”

I try to calm the anger bubbling within me, but a deep breath doesn't help. I just want to be respected on my own merits.

"Collins, I don't need you to come in and play savior," I say.

He nods, and we just sit for a moment, the tension in the air so thick you could cut it with a knife. My heart is racing, a mix of frustration and some other feeling I can't quite put my finger on.

My phone buzzes on the table. I look down and see an onslaught of missed calls and texts from Vaughn. My heart skips a beat as I swipe to check the texts.

Rachel, where are you?

I need to talk to you. It's urgent.

Please pick up.

The urgency in his messages twists my stomach. How did I get so absorbed in this conversation with Collins that I missed his calls? I can't believe it.

"I have to go," I say abruptly, standing up. I pick up my bag and think about what Vaughn might need to talk about.

"Wait," Collins says, standing as well. "I'm sorry for pushing. I just—"

"Not now, Collins," I cut him off, my voice firm. "I need to get to Vaughn."

As I rush out of the café, I can feel Collins's eyes on my back, but I don't turn around. I'm listening—listening to Vaughn, to the urgency in his words. It must be important; whatever it is he needs to discuss.

Once I'm outside, I pull up my phone and I see an incoming call from Vaughn. He wants to see me immediately.

I shake off the remnants of frustration as I make my way to my car. I don't want to let that get in the way of what's important. I need to be there for him, and he needs me.

The busy streets blur as I drive, my heart pounding in my chest. Anxious thoughts swirl in my mind. What could have happened? Why was he so insistent?

I can't help but partially rush toward Vaughn's mansion. I can't move any faster. Every step feels heavy, the urgency of his messages propelling me forward. What could have happened to make him so frantic in the world? Something is terribly wrong, and I can't shake the feeling.

I pull into the driveway, and there's Vaughn, pacing up and down in front of the door, his fury a full storm. When I get out of the car, I can feel the tension radiating from him, the tangible energy sending a chill up my spine.

"Rachel!" he barks as I approach, his voice slicing through the air. "What took you so long?"

"I came as fast as I could!" I say, trying to keep panic from rising in me. "What's going on?"

He takes a step closer, his eyes narrowing, his voice filled with anger. "You're lazy. You're too busy playing the field with my team and not doing your job!"

He accuses me, and I blink, taken aback. "Flirting? What are you talking about, Vaughn?" The words get caught in my throat. I can feel anger bubbling beneath the surface. I don't deserve this.

“Collins,” he snaps, the name sounding like a curse. “You two are always together. You’re my secretary, not his plaything!”



*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:44 am*

“Are you serious?” The hurt in my voice is evident as I shoot back. “Collins and I were just having coffee. I can’t help it if he’s friendly!”

Vaughn is clearly agitated. He runs a hand through his hair. “That’s not the point! It’s the work, not socializing with my teammates, that you’re supposed to be focused on.”

I breathe deeply, trying to hold it together. “Hey, Vaughn, I’m not thinking about anything else. What’s got you so worked up? Did something happen?”

I can see the frustration building beneath the surface as he hesitates. “I was just on the phone with the league. They are accusing me of using drugs, and now I find out you’re too busy with Collins to help me!”

The accusation hits me like a slap in the face. “What? That’s ridiculous! I know you didn’t do anything wrong!”

“I need you in my corner, Rachel,” he says, his voice rising. “You’re out there acting like a fool instead. You should be taking this seriously!”

Anger surges inside me, but I suppress it. “You think this isn’t serious to me? I’m here now, aren’t I? I dropped everything to come help you.”

“Is that what you call it?” he retorts. “It’s like you’re more interested in dating my teammates than supporting me.”

A swirl of anger and offense fills my chest, and I feel it sink. “I am not dating anyone! I’m here to help, and I’ve been busy making sure everything is going

smoothly. You need to trust that.”

He shakes his head, his expression darkening. “Trust? You want me to trust you after everything? The guy who tried to bribe you—you didn’t even tell me about that!”

The words shock me, and I catch my breath. “Bribe? What are you talking about?”

“The guy who approached you about sabotaging my reputation,” he snaps, his frustration boiling over. “Now you let that slide, and it’s coming back to haunt us. If you’re keeping things from me, how can I trust you?”

“I didn’t think it was that important!” I protest, my voice rising. “I was handling it. I was going to tell you, but I didn’t want to make your stress any worse. I could deal with it myself,” I say.

I can sense the distance between us growing as his eyes blaze with anger. “If you had, you should have told me from the beginning. This is serious, Rachel. Do you know how damaging that could be?”

His words land heavily on my shoulders, and I take a step back. “I’m trying to protect you, Vaughn! It didn’t seem urgent at the time, and I didn’t want to burden you.”

“Protect me?” he scoffs, the bitterness in his voice cutting deep. “You think keeping secrets is protecting me? Rachel, I don’t know if I can trust you. Or maybe you took that bribe after all.”

My anger is on the edge of bubbling over. I feel it, like a knife in my gut. “How dare you! Never in a million years would I do something like that. You know me better than that,” I say.

“I thought I did, but you’re making it difficult to believe,” he snaps.

The tension is suffocating, and I can hear my heart pounding as I try to process it all. Right now, it feels like Vaughn is pushing me away. I'm not his enemy—I'm trying to help him.

"You're accusing me of this?" I ask, my voice quivering. "You deserve my trust, and I'm here for you. If you can't see that, then maybe I should just go."

"Maybe you should," he replies, his tone cold and cutting.

The words hit me like a blow, and tears threaten to spill from the corners of my eyes. I won't let him see me cry. I swallow the hurt and straighten my back. "Fine, I'll leave. And don't think for a second that I'm the problem here."

I turn to walk away, but I feel his gaze on my back. I'm hurt, and I'm furious—a storm of emotions. I thought we were in this together, but the distance between us feels insurmountable.

The cool air hits my face as I step outside, and I take a deep breath, trying to calm the storm within me. But I won't let his anger define my worth. I can't let Vaughn make me feel like something I know I am not.

My heart is heavy with a mix of anger and disappointment as I climb into my car. The drive home feels long and lonely, but I know one thing for sure: this won't be the end of my fight—for my integrity, for my career, for my relationship with Vaughn. I'll show him. I'll show myself that I deserve better.

Chapter thirty-two

Chapter Thirty-Two

Vaughn

The pressure has been mounting ever since the accusations about the drug first surfaced two grueling weeks ago. It's been a battle every day, and the league hasn't relented in their scrutiny. I've been tested, searched, and questioned more times than I can count, and today I'm just done.

I step onstage for the press conference, and the bright lights and sea of cameras make my heart race. Reporters fill the room with their skeptical, curious faces. I adjust the microphone and clear my throat.

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:44 am*

“Thank you for being here,” I begin, my voice steady. “I wish to address the latest charges leveled against me regarding drug use and drug distribution. Let me be clear: these accusations are false. I have been tested and gone through intense scrutiny, and I have nothing to hide.”

The crowd murmurs, growing louder as the cameras flash, capturing every word. My confidence rises with every sentence, and I continue, “I have dedicated my life to this sport, and I will not let baseless claims tarnish my reputation or the integrity of the game I love.”

I look out at the sea of reporters and take a deep breath. “Rumors can often fly around at the speed of sound, but I’m here to tell you that I’m committed to proving my innocence. I’ve always played by the rules, and I will always do so.”

The questions start flying as I finish my statement. With a calm expression, I respond to each one, but inside, I feel the frustration bubbling under the surface. These accusations have worn me down, and I’m tired of constantly defending myself.

After the press conference concludes, I head back to the training facility. I need to find some productive way to channel this energy. The gym is like a sanctuary—I can focus on improving myself physically and mentally there. I change into my training gear and get on the field, surrounded by the familiar scent of sweat, sport, and determination.

I start my warm-up, and out of the corner of my eye, I see Collins approaching. My stomach twists at the sight of him. Lately, he’s been a constant presence, and I can’t shake the irritation that I feel whenever I think about what I saw between him and

Rachel at the coffee shop.

“Hey, Vaughn!” Collins calls out, jogging over. “Good work at that press conference. They’re saying you handled the questions really well.”

“Thanks,” I reply tersely, not wanting to engage more than necessary.

He stops for a second, and I can see the worry on his face. “Things have been rough, but Rachel has nothing to do with any of this,” he says. “She’s on your side.”

His words make my jaw clench. “Don’t tell me how to feel, Collins,” I snap. “You don’t know what I saw.”

“What do you mean?” he asks, his brow furrowing as if he genuinely doesn’t understand.

“I didn’t appreciate seeing you two together at that coffee shop. And now you’re telling me to trust her?” I say, my frustration boiling over. “I don’t know what’s happening between you two, but I don’t want you anywhere near her.”

Collins’s eyes widen; he looks taken aback. “Vaughn, that’s not fair. I had a conversation with Rachel. You’re reading way too much into this. Plus, you were okay with me asking her out, remember!”

“Reading too much into it?” I scoff. “She’s my secretary, not your personal confidante. You’re getting too close, Collins.” I didn’t want him to know that things have changed now.

Exasperation creeps onto his expression as he runs a hand through his hair.

“I’m just trying to be a friend, man. You have to let go of the jealousy. She’s a

professional, and she's been through a lot too."

"I don't know what you know about what she's been through," I shoot back, my voice rising. "Just stop coming in to try to save the day, and let me handle all this shit, alright? You don't need to defend her, either. I have to concentrate on my training and this coming game."

"Then do that," he replies, his tone firm. "But don't take your anger out on Rachel. She's been in your corner this whole time. You'll lose her if you keep pushing her away."

The words slam into me, and I don't know what to say for a moment. Collins cares about Rachel—I know—but I don't want to lose her. I need her support more than ever right now.

Finally, I say, "I'm not pushing her away. I just need to figure this out."

"Focus on what's important," Collins says. "But don't shut her out. You both deserve better than that."

Frustration and uncertainty churn inside me as he turns to walk away. But I can't help but wonder if Rachel is truly on my side. The doubts linger, shadows in the back of my mind. The thought of her getting too close to Collins only amplifies the feeling that I'm losing control.

I push myself harder in training than ever before. For some reason, the physical exertion clears my mind of the chaos; it feels cathartic. I concentrate on every movement and every kick, pouring my emotions into the game. No matter how hard I try to shake it off, though, I can't shake the feeling that something is . . . wrong.

When I finish, I'm drenched in sweat and adrenaline. I grab my phone to check for

messages and notice a missed call. There's nothing from Rachel, and disappointment washes over me. I know I need to reach out, to close the gap between us, but I can't bring myself to do it.

The tension from my talk with Collins lingers as I leave the training facility. Yet I hate to admit he's right. I've got Rachel, and I shouldn't let jealousy control my actions. That knot of frustration tightens my chest when I think about the coffee shop.

Just as I step out into the parking lot, Collins catches up to me. "Vaughn, come on!" he says, irritation in his voice. "I'm just trying to look out for you. You're pushing everyone away, even Rachel. You need to get your head straight before this big game."

"Watch out for me? I don't need looking after." My voice is sharper than I mean it. I shoot back, "I can handle my own life."

"Obviously, you can't," says Collins, furrowing his brow. "You're making it harder on yourself. Just talk to Rachel. Work things out."

I turn on my heel and storm away. "I said I don't need your advice," I snap. Trying to tell Collins not to poke his nose into my life or Rachel's.

His eyes are on my back, and I can feel them, but I don't want to deal with him right now. I need space to breathe, to think.



*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:44 am*

I drive to a nearby restaurant, one I frequent often, and the afternoon seems like a very long and drawn-out affair. Even just for a moment, it's somewhere that I can get away from the chaos of my life. I settle into the parking lot and look at the familiar faces of the staff, their friendly smiles easing the tension of earlier.

Inside, the atmosphere is warm and inviting as I step inside. As I make my way to the bar, the air is mixed with the aroma of grilled meats and spices. I order a drink. I'm trying to shake off the frustration that's been building in me. The lady from the gym wear brand sits next to me, but as I sip my whiskey, I feel a presence beside me.

"Vaughn!" she exclaims, her smile bright and welcoming. "So good to see you again. I was thinking of you."

Just as I recognized her from the selfie with Rachel, the thought of her, my gut twists, and I force a smile. "Hey, Jenna. What brings you here?"

"I was hoping we could talk more about the campaign," she says, leaning closer. "I think you'd be a perfect fit for our brand, and I'd love to hear your thoughts."

I shake my head politely but firmly. "Thanks for the offer, but I'm not interested. With the upcoming match, I've got a lot on my plate right now."

She narrows her eyes a little, and I can see the tone in her change. "Come on, Vaughn. It's really something you should consider. We can do great things together. Can you think about the exposure, the opportunity to be the face of a brand that supports athletes?"

“I’m not interested,” I tell her, losing my patience. “I can introduce you to my teammates if you want, and there’s a party for the match. They might be more receptive.”

Jenna’s smile fades. I can see the frustration in her eyes. “Vaughn, I don’t want to meet your teammates. I want you. You’re the one I’m interested in.”

Her words linger in the air, leaving me both confused and irritated. I shake my head dismissively and say, “That’s not really how this works, Jenna. I’m focused on my career right now, and I don’t have time for distractions.”

She leans closer, and her voice drops to a conspiratorial whisper. “This can be more than just business. You can have something special with me.”

She is insinuating something, and my stomach twists at the notion. “I don’t think you understand. Look—I don’t want anything right now. I’m not here to make things complicated.”

“Complicated?” She scoffs, crossing her arms. “So you mean like the complications with Rachel, your secretary? I saw you two at the training facility together. You looked pretty heated.”

The mention of Rachel sends my simmering anger to a boil, and my body tenses. I tilt my head, my voice low and dangerous. “You don’t know what you’re talking about. This isn’t about her.”

She narrows her eyes. “Isn’t it? You seem to still be hung up on her. Why would you be so defensive otherwise?”

I took a deep breath, trying to stifle my frustration. “I don’t think this is the conversation I want to have, Jenna. I don’t want your advances, and I’m definitely

not going to start something with someone who doesn't respect my boundaries."

She goes from frustrated to disappointed, and for a second, I feel a twinge of guilt. But I quickly push it aside. I need to be firm. I can't be distracted—not right now.

"Fine," she says, straightening up. "If that's how you feel, then I won't push it. But you're making a mistake."

"Maybe," I reply, my tone clipped. "It's my mistake to make."

I can't help but feel relief and uncertainty as she walks away. The encounter left me unsettled—I didn't want to lead her on. It's time to refocus on my career, the game coming up, and the tangled emotions I still have for Rachel.

I finish my drink and head home after a while. I have the weight of the day hanging heavy on my shoulders, and I know I need to clear my head. I replay the conversation in my head as I drive. I can't ignore Rachel. She is such a big part of my life, but I can't let my feelings get in the way of my judgment.

I feel a combination of determination and exhaustion when I pull up my driveway. It's one more day tomorrow, and I have to be prepared for the next one. I can't afford anything to take me off the game ahead.

I step inside and shut the door on the outside, but I can't help but feel that I'm at a crossroads. The choices I make over the next few days will affect not only my career but also the relationships I hold so dear.

I need to figure out what Rachel's true feelings for me are, and I won't let anything, or anyone get in the way of that.

Chapter thirty-three

## Chapter Thirty-Three

Rachel

I'm sitting on my couch, and a mix of emotions swirls within me. I can still see Vaughn in my mind—the fight lingers because everything happened so fast. He was hurt and angry, and I get why he's frustrated, but I can't help feeling I should contact him. I don't want our connection to fall apart due to misunderstandings and jealousy.

I take a deep breath, trying to still the storm inside. I pull out my iPad and try to work or, at the very least, catch up on emails. I scroll through my inbox, but all I can think about is Vaughn and the accusations he's facing. I feel guilty for not being there for him when he needed me. The pressure he's under is immense.

After a few minutes of trying in vain to focus, I know I need to be the bigger person. My pride can't come before us. I grab my iPad again and begin typing out a text to Vaughn, my fingers hovering over the screen, thinking about what to say.

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:44 am*

Hey, Vaughn. I wanted to apologize for the way it went down. I never intended to keep anything from you. I'm here for you.

I hit Send, my heart racing.

I can only hope he'll respond. I understand it's a risk, but I can't allow our relationship to fall apart based on misunderstandings. He must know that I care.

Waiting for a reply, I decided to stop thinking about the heavy stuff for a second. I scroll through social media, hoping that something will lift my mood, and that's when I find Collins's Instagram. He's been posting more often these days, and I feel an urge to peek.

I click his profile to scroll through recent posts. Most are lighthearted, featuring him training with his team and going on trips. But then I see it—a picture that makes my heart drop.

It's a picture of Collins in a bar, and in the background is Jenna, the woman from the gym wear brand. She is having drinks with Vaughn, and her laughter is spilling over the edge of the frame as she leans into Vaughn, who has a drink in his hand. He looks disheveled and clearly intoxicated. Seeing him like that makes me uneasy.

"Is this what Vaughn is doing?" My heart sinks as I murmur to myself. Vaughn wouldn't even get involved in something like this, especially with everything else he's going through.

I swipe through the photos, and my stomach turns as I see more of the same. In one,

Jenna is practically draped over Vaughn with her hand on his arm and her eyes all flirtatious. Another shows her whispering in his ear while Vaughn's face shows a mixture of drunken amusement.

Betrayal, frustration, and anger surge through me. How could he let this happen? Doesn't he understand that he can't be seen wasted like this with the accusations hanging over him? I didn't think he was as bad as this.

My heart is beating like mad. I tossed my iPad onto the couch. I feel a wave of emotions hit me—hurt, anger, but also an emotion of protectiveness for Vaughn. I can't help but wonder where I could have stood by him, only for him to get tangled up in this mess now.

I try to take a breath and calm the anger seething inside me. I don't have the right to tell him what to do. He's a grown man; he can make his own choices. It's a slap in the face to see him with Jenna after everything we went through.

I pick up my phone once more, about to text Vaughn and ask what the hell I just saw. But then I hesitated. Shouldn't I wait to hear his side before jumping to conclusions? He may not even remember what went down. Maybe his judgment had been clouded by the alcohol, and I know how quickly things can get out of hand.

I take a deep breath and tell myself to be calm about this. I can't let my emotions rule me; I have to be rational. Rather than sending him a message, I chose to wait for him to respond to my earlier one. Because if he's really in trouble, I need to be there for him, not alienate him.

I sit on the couch, and my mind runs with thoughts. I can't get the image of Vaughn laughing with Jenna out of my head. It stings with jealousy, but I know I must put my emotions under control. I want to talk to him about the bribery incident and how he's dealing with all of this, but I also need to let him come to me.

An hour later—and still no response. I scroll through the comments on the post, going back to Collins's Instagram. Fans are speculating about the dynamics between Collins, Jenna, and Vaughn, and I see a mix of admiration and confusion. My heart sinks further.

Jealousy doesn't take long to rear its ugly head, and I can feel the anger rising anew. Seeing him with Jenna cuts in a different way. It's one thing for Vaughn to flirt with other women.

I decided to just throw caution to the wind and tackle him physically. I quickly get dressed, grab my car keys, and exit the house.

The emotions inside me are just too much as I drive to Vaughn's house. The idea of being the bigger person and the concern to begin with has escalated into simmering jealousy that I can't shake. I can't erase from my mind the image of him laughing with Jenna—how she leaned into him. It's consuming me.

The further I move toward his mansion, the faster my heart beats, but not with excitement. Anger and hurt are about to bubble over. How could he get into that? How could he throw away everything we've made together? I was convinced he cared about our connection, but now, I'm beginning to wonder if I am simply a convenience, a role to fill until something or someone better comes along.

I pull into his driveway and steady myself for what's going to happen. I've had enough tiptoeing around my feelings. But if he wants to act like it doesn't matter, he'll have to face me. No more playing nice. I need answers, and I need to know where I am with him.

I got out of the car and walked right up to the front door, heart pounding. I knock hard, and it seems to echo through the quiet. In moments, Vaughn opens the door, and I watch the surprise flicker across his face. He looks a little disheveled, with his

hair slightly messy, and I can smell the faint scent of alcohol on him.

“Rachel,” he says, his voice a mix of confusion and something else—maybe guilt?  
“What are you doing here?”

“I came to talk,” I say, my tone sharper than I intended. “What we need to talk about is what’s going on between us.”

He pauses, and I can read his contemplation. He responds cautiously, but I can’t be sure he heard me. “I’m not sure this is a good time,” he says.

“Not a good time?” I step inside without an invitation, scoffing. “While I’m being accused of something I didn’t do, you’re out drinking with Jenna. Now would be the time to talk if there ever was one.”

His expression shifts, irritation appearing in his eyes. “You don’t have the full picture, Rachel. You don’t need to come in here making assumptions.”

“Assumptions?” My frustration is boiling over. “I saw the pictures, Vaughn. You looked cozy with her, and now, you’re telling me you’ve got everything in hand? Why do you push me away? It feels like you’re pushing me away, and I want to know why.”

He runs his hand through his hair to process my words, and then he takes a step back. “It’s complicated,” he finally says, but I can see the defensiveness creeping into the way he stands.

“Complicated?” The jealousy makes my anger burn, and I laugh bitterly. “Is that what you call it? I’m out here trying to support you, and you’re letting yourself be seen with her? Do you even care how that looks?”



He snaps, frustrated: “I care about what’s happening with the team and this stupid investigation. I have no time for this right now.”

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:44 am*

“Time for what? For me? For us?” I demand, my voice rising. “Do you think I’ll just sit here and watch you drown while you flirt with other women? You’re making it more difficult than it should be!”

“Flirt?” he retorts, his voice sharp. “It was a casual drink! You’re the one who’s reading too much into it, not me.”

“If you weren’t so secretive, I wouldn’t have to read into it!” My anger overflows, and I fire back. “All I’m trying to do is help you!”

His eyes burn with intensity as he steps closer. “I’m not going to let you make me feel guilty for wanting to keep my distance. Let’s deal with this situation without dragging you into it.”

“Drag me into it?” I scoff, my heart pounding. “You already have. Does it mean nothing to you that I’m here because I care about you?”

I see the conflict flicker in his eyes as he opens his mouth to respond, but I’m done dancing around his feelings and letting him push me away while letting someone else in. My voice shakes with emotion. “I can’t keep doing this. Perhaps I don’t belong here if you want to shut me out.”

They’re heavy words. They’re charged. I see a flash of something in his eyes—a little regret, a little frustration. Yet it disappears just as fast in favor of that familiar hardness.

“You don’t understand. You don’t understand what’s at stake,” he says.

“Maybe I don’t understand because you won’t let me!” I can feel the anger spilling over. “I’m not some distraction when I’m here for you!”

Vaughn backs away and puts some distance between us. “Rachel, I need to focus on my career right now. I can’t get caught up in whatever this is. I don’t have the time or money to do that.”

“Whatever this is?” I repeat incredulously. “It’s you who is making this complicated! Now, I’m starting to think I was wrong. I thought we had something real.”

His expression becomes hard. He crosses his arms defensively. “Maybe you should rethink what you’re fighting for. Right now, I can’t promise you anything.”

His words hurt more than I thought. My anger is replaced by hurt, then disappointment. “I’m not going to let you push me away while you have drinks with someone else, Vaughn,” I say. “I deserve better than that.”

I turn to leave, feeling a rush of determination and heartache all at once. He will not dictate my worth. I deserve someone who sees me as something more than just a secretary or an easy convenience.

I stop before I can get to the door, glancing back at him. “I hope you get your act together, Vaughn. I won’t be here waiting for you to decide what you want.”

I step outside, and the cool air slaps me in the face. As I walk away, I feel a mixture of sadness and resolve, and I somehow know that I am going to have to be strong for myself. No more jealousy and frustration ruining my life. I am tired of making excuses for not taking charge of my own life.

Chapter thirty-four

## Chapter Thirty-Four

Vaughn

The day after dawns heavy with tension, and I can feel it in the air as I pace about my mansion. I can't get the confrontation with Rachel from yesterday out of my head. Her words slice deep. I don't even want to admit it, but that's what they do, and I'm left battling the chaos of my thoughts. I've never been overly self-assured, but lately, it feels like I'm trying to control everything, and everything is slipping away from me.

I hear a knock on the door just as I'm about to pour myself a cup of coffee. My heart sinks. I know exactly who it is before I even opened it. I swing the door open, and there she is—Rachel—with a set expression on her face.

"Rachel," I say, an edge of annoyance creeping into my voice. "What are you doing here?"

"Surprised to see me?" she snaps, stepping inside without waiting for an invitation. "I wanted to talk."

I lean against the doorframe and fold my arms. "You only want to talk when it is convenient for you. What do you want, Rachel? Haven't we already said enough?"

I can see the fire in her eyes, and her expression hardens. "Do you think you can just brush me off like that after everything I've done for you?"

I step closer, softly, firmly. "What exactly have you done for me? I see that you've been too busy socializing with my teammates to even pay attention to your job."

Her eyes widened, and for a split second, I see the anger on her face. "Excuse me? I

have no right to talk to you like that? I'm not the one out there flirting and pretending to care about my career."

The accusation stings, and my temper flares. "Rachel, you need to watch your tongue. This isn't about me. This is about you doing your job."

"Oh, please," she retorts, stepping closer until she's inches from my face, her gaze unyielding. "You think I will let you intimidate me? You're nothing, but a disappointment as of late. You act like I'm the enemy," I say. "I'm trying to support you."

I feel the tension between us building, thick and electric. "Yeah, well, I'm not the one who's been out flirting instead of working," I say lowly, dangerously.

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:44 am*

She snapped, her voice rising. “You’re a hypocrite. You’re doing the same thing with Jenna! What in the hell are you accusing me of when you’re the one who’s so busy letting her hang all over you?”

For a moment, I saw her eyes start to burn with anger. The tension in the room is palpable. “I never asked for Jenna to be around,” I say, my voice strained. “You’re making it harder for me to deal with this mess.”

“Harder?” She laughs, but the sound is bitter. “If it weren’t for me, you’d be nothing. You’ve made me loyal, Vaughn, and now you want to pretend like it’s all my fault.”

The words smack me in the face, and I blink. “Because you think I’ve taken you for granted?” I say, incredulous. “I’ve done a lot to keep this team together, and I’m under more pressure than you know. All I’m asking is, please stay focused.”

“Focused?” she repeats, her voice rising. “Because you’ve been so focused on problems that you created, you forgot about the people who actually give a shit about you. I’m more than just your secretary, Vaughn. I’m your partner. But you refuse to see it.”

I can feel the tension in the air crackling as we both glower at each other, and I wonder for a second if this is how it all ends—an abrupt explosion in which it all becomes clear. But I can’t back down. “Listen, I can’t afford distractions right now.”

“Distractions?” She scoffs, her anger palpable. “You mean like Jenna? You’re the one that’s allowing yourself to fall into this mess. Don’t you see how you were sabotaging everything?”

“No, I’m not sabotaging anything,” I say, the frustration boiling over. “I don’t need you to dictate how I deal with my life or my career or anything else.”

The fire in her eyes doesn’t waver. She shakes her head. “You don’t get to decide how I feel about this. I’m sick of feeling like I’m not important. You’re just gonna stand there while I make a fool of myself?”

“Maybe you should think about how your actions reflect on me,” I say, my voice low and dangerous. “I don’t want you out there with my teammates, and then you come back to me as if nothing happened.”

Rachel looks pained and angry; she steps back. “I’m not a scapegoat, Vaughn. I’m trying to support you, but you’re making it impossible.”

Her words weigh down on me, and for a moment, I can’t think. “Then what do you want from me?” I ask, my voice softer now.

“I want you to stop pushing me away,” she replies, her voice trembling. “It’s hard, and I want you to know I’m in this with you, no matter how hard it gets. But you must let me in instead of shutting me out.”

The air between us crackles, and I can see the pain in her eyes. I feel angry, I feel frustrated, and I feel I want to connect with her so badly. I can’t help the feeling that I’m standing on unsafe ground, not knowing in which direction to go.

“Rachel, I . . .” I start, but she cuts me off.

“Just think about it, Vaughn. I can’t keep being treated like I’m disposable. I won’t stand for it.”

With that, she turns and storms out, leaving me standing there, more alone than I’ve

ever been. Everything has been exposed, but nothing is resolved. I know my feelings. I feel them, and I have done what I've done.

The room falls into a heavy silence as Rachel storms out. Each beat of my heart feels like a loud thud, the weight of our confrontation reverberating in every pulse. Somewhere deep down, I know I can't keep pushing her away, but I never wanted it to come to this.

I just need to process everything, but I can't get her anger out of my mind. Then, out of nowhere, I have a thought and call after her.

"Wait!"

I see her shoulders tense as Rachel pauses at the door, her back to me. "What?" she snaps, her voice sharp.

"Are you jealous?" The question slips out before I can stop myself. I can't believe I just said that, but the air is charged with unsaid things, and I need to challenge her.

Her eyes are wide with disbelief. She spins around. "Jealous? Of what? You and Jenna?"

"Yeah, of what you saw on Collins's Instagram," I clarify, coming closer. "Is that what this is about?"

She looks at me for a second, a flicker of uncertainty on her face, but it's gone in a second and is replaced with anger. "I'm not jealous, Vaughn. I just don't want to be treated like I'm disposable."

I can't let her go like this. "So you are jealous!" I press, speaking a little louder. "How come you care about who I'm with?"



“Let me leave,” she says, her tone firm, but I’m not ready to back down.

I block her path to the door as I step forward. “No, we won’t talk about this until we do.”

“Vaughn,” she warns, her voice strained, “I don’t want to argue.”

“Then what do you want?” I ask, my frustration spilling over. “Because I can’t keep pretending that this doesn’t bother you.”

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:44 am*

“Let’s start then, right now.”

My lips take hers with a fierce hunger that sends shock waves of hot, raging desire through her body. Even as her heart races, I change the pace, becoming more tender until that raging heat goes slow and thick.

She floats back on the memories of our varied lovemaking over the past few months—the passion and intensity of it. Then, her thoughts shift to the present moment—a new level of passion and tenderness.

Helpless to resist either and craving the now-familiar sensations, she wraps herself around my muscled frame.

Rachel slowly runs her hands all over my body, tracing every length of my long, broad shoulders, caressing my hips. I can’t admit this out loud, but I’ve missed this intimate understanding of another and the rush of love that comes from the pleasure of being loved by another.

She slides into the old rhythm of our lovemaking. I ease my back and just look at her, wanting nothing but to be pleased by her.

“What? What is it?”

“I just want to look at you.” I unbutton her shirt, taking my time about it, running the tip of my fingers over her exposed skin, all the while never taking my eyes off hers. “I want you to look at me. Stare into my eyes as I pleasure you.”

Still watching her face, I trail my fingers over the white lace of her bra.

She shivers as my lazy fingers brush her nipples. I drew her up and slip her shirt off. “Such a lovely body. Just one more thing about you that drives me crazy.”

As my hands stroke her back, she links her arms around my neck. “You’re awfully patient tonight, Vaughn.”

I open the clasp of her bra and then move my fingers over her shoulders to nudge the bra straps down.

My lips touch hers as her arms lock around me. With an exasperated breath, she locks lips with me, and her tongue wrestles for supremacy with mine.

That’s what I’m looking for—that quick flash of need. I don’t want her to think but only to feel what we can bring to each other—here and now and for the rest of our lives.

My fingers tangle in her hair. Then my hands rest there, pulling her head back so that I can plunder her mouth and her throat.

I could have devoured her in one reckless bite, but that would be too fast, too easy, and this feels too special to be rushed. Instead, I let the flames rage on, building up till it threatens to consume us both.

I feast on her soft body, sampling and drinking my fill of her. My hands rush over her, then slow and linger at her erogenous zones.

Her body has always been a source of pleasure to me. Not just the shape but its lushness and eagerness to enjoy, her openness to sexual adventures. The racing of her heart under my lips arouses me as much as her ripe breasts.

All that lovely silk skin shivering under the feel of my wet tongue is only more of a thrill when she urges me to take her.

Her hands rush over me, pulling at my shirt. And her slutty purr of approval as her nails scrape my skin sends my blood boiling, so I have to fight back my primal desire to hurry.

I've got no idea where my newfound patience comes from, but one thing's certain: I would drive her crazy with it. My muscles quiver under her hands, and she knows me well enough to exploit my wants and weaknesses. Even as I meet her demands as I push her to the trembling edge, I hold back and leave her shaking with pleasure.

I feast on her, then sample her supple flesh with my lips. From the nape of her neck to her soft and inviting breasts, my lips suck and feast with reckless abandon, and she keeps moaning out in pleasure as I explore her erogenous zones.

The soft, smooth skin that trembles under the caress of my tongue and the gentle scrape of my teeth only intensifies the thrill as she urges me to take more.

“For God’s sake, Vaughn, just fuck me already.”

“You’re not aroused enough yet,” I respond, chuckling as I pin her arms down and continue to fan the flames with my mouth. “Neither am I.”

There is so much of her, and like *Oliver Twist*, I crave more—I need it all. Her sumptuous body, the questing mind—I need more than her desire and heat.

I release her hands to embrace her, to hold her tight as we roll over the bed.

Her skin feels slick with sweat, and she’s hot and wet and ready. I have only to cup her pussy to send her over the edge. She cries out my name as her body erupts in

orgasmic bliss. And I know when she goes limp beneath my body that she's just given me something I hadn't known I craved.

Her total surrender.

"Rachel," I moan her name over and over as my lips rush over her face. When her eyes, so dark and heavy, open and look into mine, I fist my cock and slide inside her waiting pussy.

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:44 am*

It feels so warm and inviting that I lay there for a minute or two, allowing her to adjust to the length of my erect cock in her. I link my fingers with hers, grip tight, and start thrusting in and out, slowly again and again.

Accepting my thrusts, she arches her back, lifts her lips to find mine, and joins them. The sweetness of it brings an ache to her throat as pleasure builds on top of pleasure. We match, beat for beat, thrust for thrust, as sweetness becomes desperation.

We're still joined—lips, hands, loins—when we fall.

I pulled away for a moment, looking into her eyes, and I see the fire of our connection burning within her still. “I don’t want to lose you,” I tell her, my voice thicker than rosewater.

Her breaths shallow gasps, she says, “But you need to stop shutting me out.”

The weight of her words sinks in, and I nodded. I just know I need to find a way to make this work, to rebuild the trust that’s been broken.

“I promise I’ll try,” I say firmly.

She pulls me back in to kiss me again before I can say anything else, and I lose myself in her warmth, the world outside vanishing entirely. It doesn’t matter what else is happening right now. We are two entwined souls, ready to go into the rest of this life together.

Chapter thirty-five

## Chapter Thirty-Five

Rachel

That heated moment with Vaughn hasn't been that long ago—a few days at most—and I'm so ready to find some semblance of normalcy. For over a week now, I have been running every day, channeling my emotions through the rhythm of my feet hitting the pavement, trying to clear my brain and find clarity. Today, however, after I return home from my morning run, I feel off.

The front door is slightly ajar, and my heart drops as I call out, "Archie!" Usually, my beloved cat is waiting for me with his soft purring and eager love. However, there's no answer today.

Dread pools in my stomach, and I push the door open. The moment I walk in, the sight that meets my eyes makes my breath hitch. The place is ransacked. Cushions are thrown about, and furniture is overturned. It looks like someone searched through every drawer and cabinet. My heart races as I call out again, panic setting in, "Archie!"

My heart pounds in my chest as I rush through the living room. Every instinct in me screams that something is very wrong. "Archie, where are you?" Desperation creeps into my voice. The eerie silence of my home is the only response.

I leap into the kitchen, looking under the table, in the pantry—anywhere I can think to find him. But he's nowhere to be found. Reality hits me, and tears prick at the corners of my eyes. Someone violated my home, my sanctuary, and now my little companion is missing. A wave of helplessness washes over me, and tears stream down my cheeks.

"Please, no," I whisper, my voice trembling. This can't happen. I need Archie back.

The thought of him being out there alone fills me with dread. He's my comfort, my joy.

With shaky hands, I pull out my phone and dial Vaughn's number. Right now, he's the only person I feel I can turn to. I wipe away my tears, trying to pull myself together. When he finally answers, my voice shakes as I speak.

"Rachel?" His voice is immediately concerned. "What's wrong?"

"I . . . I got home, and everything's a mess. Archie is missing. Someone's been here!" The words rush from my lips in a choked sob.

"What do you mean, missing?" he asks, urgency lacing his voice.

"He's gone, and my apartment is ransacked. I mean . . . I don't know what to do!" My breathing grows uneven, and panic rises again, making my heart race.

"Stay calm. I'm going to the stadium now," he says, his tone firm and reassuring. "Meet me there. We'll figure this out."

"Okay," I reply, sniffing and trying to steady my breathing. "I'll be there as quickly as I can."

I wipe my tears quickly and hang up the phone, throwing on a hoodie. My mind races. This can't happen. I have no idea who would do this or why, but I can only think about getting Archie back.

I look back into the chaos of my apartment as I dash out. I'm angry, I'm afraid, and I know I cannot let that pull me under. I need to get stronger for Archie.

My heart pounds as I drive to the stadium. It seems to take forever. I can't shake the



dread that has settled in the pit of my stomach. What if something has happened to him? What if he's scared and alone?

I finally pulled into the stadium's parking lot, jump out of the car, and run toward the entrance. I see Vaughn standing near the entrance, looking half concerned, half determined.

"Rachel!" he calls out, rushing to meet me. "Are you okay?"

"I'm scared, Vaughn," I say, looking into his eyes, my voice trembling. "I don't know what I should do."

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:44 am*

He nods, looking over me. “We’ll figure it out. Let’s call the police and report this first. They can help track down Archie.”

“Right,” I say, grateful for his calm demeanor. Together, we go inside, his presence grounding me amid the madness.

We have a short walk to the team’s office. I take out my phone to dial the police, and Vaughn stands silently by my side. I tell them my cat is missing, and my house was broken into.

After I hang up, Vaughn looks at me. “They will send someone out to do a report. In the meantime, let’s think—who could have done this? Who would want to hurt you or Archie? Anyone come to mind?”

I shake my head, and tears well up again. “I don’t know. I can’t think straight. It feels so personal, as if someone wanted to hurt me.”

Vaughn steps closer, his expression softening. “Rachel, you’re not alone in this. We will figure it out together. I promise.”

His words soothe some of the tension in my chest, washing over me like a balm. I nod gratefully. I’ll hold onto that promise for now.

I sit in the stadium office, waiting for the police to arrive, an eerie feeling filling me. It’s quiet here, with muffled sounds of cheers from practice filtering through the walls. Tension lingers in the air as Vaughn speaks on the phone, trying to gather information about Archie or the break-in.

I look through the small window facing out to the locker room area. When Collins comes in, I see him, and my heart skips a beat. There's something that's not quite right. I can't shake it. Recently, he's been acting weird, and I wonder if it's because of all the chaos surrounding Vaughn.

Curiosity gets the better of me, and I lean closer to the window. What is he doing here? I'm nervous about the way he's looking around. Then I watch him reach into his bag and take out something small—a packet. I know what it is, and my stomach drops.

“No, no, no,” I whisper to myself, disbelief flooding through me. I grab my phone quickly, hitting record, the camera recording the scene unfolding in front of me.

One final time, Collins looks around to make sure no one is watching before he slips the packet into Vaughn's locker. I watch the betrayal happening right in front of me, and my heart races. I can't let this happen. Collins is destroying everything Vaughn has worked for, and I won't let it be on my conscience.

As I'm about to step out and face him, Collins suddenly turns, and our eyes meet. He goes from being surprised to angry, and I feel panic welling up.

“Rachel!” he barks, his voice low and threatening. “What are you doing here?”

I quickly rush away from the window, my heart pounding as I sprint toward the exit. I can't let him catch me. I need to get out of here and warn Vaughn.

“Stop!” Collins yells, his footsteps pounding behind me. I can hear him right behind me, adrenaline launching through my veins and making me run as fast as I can. He's making me fly.

With my heart pounding in my chest, I run through the hallways toward the exit.

Collins's footsteps get louder in the narrow corridor. I can hear him gaining on me. Desperately, I burst through the main doors and out into the parking lot.

"Rachel, wait!" he calls, but I don't stop. I can't let him catch me. I fumble with my phone, trying to dial Vaughn's number.

"Come on, come on," I mutter under my breath as I run toward my car. In the distance, I can see my vehicle, but the thought of Collins closing in on me sends a fresh wave of panic through my body.

I fumble for my keys, my heart pounding in my chest, adrenaline surging. Collins's footsteps are behind me, and I know I have to get away.

I jumped into my car, slamming the door shut and locking it just as Collins shouts in frustration. "You think you can escape?" he growls, his voice low and menacing. "You're making a huge mistake!"

The engine roars to life as I turn the key in the ignition. Collins is already at my window, his face is a dark storm cloud. He yells angrily, his eyes filled with fury. "You can't just run from this!"

"Get away from me!" I back out of the parking spot, screaming, my voice shaking.

Just as I press the gear into Drive, I see Collins shoot off to the side, his movements almost too quick. I can feel my heart racing, and I realize he's trying to prevent me from leaving. I slam my foot on the accelerator, and the tires screech as I speed out of the lot.

"Rachel, no!" he shouts. I hear it, but I can't stop now. I have to get away from Collins.

I drive through traffic, heart pounding in my ears, looking through the rearview mirror. His car weaves in and out of lanes, trying to catch up. Panic grips me, and I have to focus on the road in front of me.

I accelerate, and the streets blur past, trying to get as much distance as I can between us. I can see Collins's car inching closer with every passing second. He is gaining ground. Adrenaline courses through my veins, a combination of fear and determination.

"Come on, come on," I mutter to myself, gripping the steering wheel tightly. I need to think of a plan. I can't let him catch me.

I turn down a side street, going as sharply as possible, hoping to lose him in the maze. With the tires screeching and my heart pounding, I glance in the mirror once more. Somehow, Collins is still behind me, relentless and determined.

I press down on the accelerator, and in response, the engine roars. The world outside goes blurry as I concentrate on the road, but I can sense Collins's pursuit like a shadow behind me.

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:44 am*

“Think, Rachel, think!” I tell myself, looking for an escape route. Ahead, I spot a parking garage and get an idea. I slam the car into the entrance, steering into the winding structure, praying I could lose him.

I drive into the garage, the echo of my engine off the concrete walls growing louder and louder. I spin right, left, right, my heartbeat picking up as I wait to hear the sound of Collins’s car. I’ve got to think of somewhere he won’t think to find me.

I finally see an empty spot at the far end of the garage. I shut off the engine and listen as I pull in quickly, holding my breath. I hear tires screeching to a halt in the garage and see Collins’s headlights flash as he enters, searching for me.

I crouch down in my seat, my heart racing as he drives by. I feel the tension in my body, waiting for what feels like forever for him to pass.

I watch him speed out of the garage, frustration etched across his face as he drives away. A shaky breath leaves my lips, and relief floods me.

I get out of the parking garage, looking around to make sure nobody is behind me before heading to my apartment. I still have adrenaline pumping through my veins, but I’m not going to let fear do the talking for me. It’s time for me to take control, not just for me but for Vaughn.

I lock my doors and think about what I just saw in the locker room. I need to warn Vaughn about Collins; this isn’t over. I can feel determination starting to build. Collins’s threats won’t tear us apart, and I won’t let them. We are stronger together, and I am willing to fight for that.

Then, a car slows in front of my doorstep, cutting short my relief. I look out and realize it's Collins. He must have known I was going home and tracked me here.

"Rachel!" he shouts, pounding on the window. "You can't just run away from this."

I quickly dial Vaughn's number and hold my breath as the phone rings, praying he picks up.

"Come on, Vaughn," I whisper, glancing up to see Collins pacing outside, his expression a mix of anger and frustration.

Finally, Vaughn answers. "Rachel, what's going on?"

"Vaughn!" I say, trying not to let my fear take over. "You need to listen to me. I just saw Collins planting drugs in your locker!"

"What?" His voice is sharp, alarmed. "Are you sure?"

"Where are you? I'll come to you," he says, and I can hear the worry in his voice.

"Vaughn, he's right outside my apartment!" I look nervously at the window. "I don't know what he'll do if he catches me." Collins is pacing like a predator waiting for his prey.

"Just stay hidden and lock the doors," Vaughn instructs, his voice calm but firm. "I'll get there as quick as I can."

I hung up the phone, my heart pounding, staring at Collins, who is looking around, his frustration turning to suspicion. I locked the doors earlier, and I am hiding behind a couch, where I can feel the weight of my fear pressing down on me.

“Rachel!” he calls again, his voice rising. “You can’t keep hiding. This is serious!”

“Stay away from me, Collins!” I shout back, my voice trembling with anger and fear.

I hide as he steps closer to the window, and I can see the menace in his eyes. “You have no idea what you’re up against, just waltzing in and ruining everything,” he growls.

“I’m protecting Vaughn!” I retort, my heart pounding. “You’re the one trying to sabotage him. You won’t get away with it!”

“Smart move, Rachel,” he sneers. “If you believe you can out me, you’re wrong.”

As he leans closer to the window, his expression darkens, and I feel a chill run down my spine. “You don’t know what I’m capable of.”

Chapter thirty-six

Chapter Thirty-Six

Vaughn

I’m too worried to focus on the road as I drive toward Rachel’s apartment. The traffic is worse than I thought, and with each red light comes an eternity of my mind spinning with thoughts of her safety. Maybe Collins has done something to her already. I can’t get Rachel’s face from our last confrontation out of my mind—the look of complete terror. And though I want more than anything to protect her, I know it won’t matter.

“Come on, come on,” I mutter as I inch forward in the gridlock. I can see my knuckles whitening around the steering wheel and feel my heart pounding in my



chest. I have to get to her, and I have to do it quickly.

I spot a commotion up ahead just when I think I can't take it anymore. There's a group of people on the side of the road, their voices raised in concern. I slow down and pull over. My heart races at the thought that maybe something is wrong.

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:44 am*

I get out of the car and run toward the crowd, pressing my way through the observers. “What’s going on?” I try to get a peek at what everyone is looking at.

“There’s a cat stuck in the gutter!” one of the bystanders exclaims, their eyes wide with worry. I look at where they’re pointing, and my heart drops.

I peer down into the narrow gutter at a small, frightened face that looks up at me. I know with a jolt it’s Archie. Instead of panic for Rachel, I feel a rush of determination.

“Hold on!” I drop to my knees and reach down. “I’ve got him!”

I carefully direct my hands around the scared cat, feeling his soft fur under my fingers as the crowd parts. I murmur, “Come on, buddy. I’ve got you,” as I pull him free from the gutter.

Archie scurries for a moment, but when he sees me, his eyes widen with relief. I cradle him against my chest and feel the warmth of his tiny body. I pet his head and say, “You’re okay now. Let’s get you home.”

I clutch Archie tightly as I dash back to my car, ignoring the crowd staring at me. Once more, the urge to get to Rachel surges in me. I place Archie on my lap, jump into the driver’s seat, and turn the key in the ignition. The sound of the engine roaring to life pumps my determination back to life.

“Hang on, buddy,” I say, glancing down at him as we pull away. “We’re going to see Rachel.”

The traffic is still heavy, but I weave through the streets as fast as I can. My heart pounds in relief at having Archie back, but my worry for Rachel remains. I can't believe I actually found him. I'm going to get them both to safety.

I finally park, hastily throwing the car into park and shutting off the engine. Archie is cradled securely in my arms as I dash out of the car. Thoughts of Collins and all the trouble he could still cause race through my mind as I sprint toward the entrance.

With my heart pounding in my chest, I burst through the door and race up the stairs. I bang on the door to her apartment, yelling, "Rachel! Open up!"

"Vaughn?" she replies, her voice sounding surprised. The door swings open a moment later, and relief floods over me as I see her standing there, staring at me with wide eyes.

"I got Archie!" I exclaim, showing her the cat, and her face lights up.

"Oh, thank God!" she breathes, rushing forward to take him from my arms. Tears well in her eyes as she cradles him in her arms, stroking his fur. "You found him!"

The adrenaline kicks in, and I can feel it. "Where is he?" I demand, scanning the room for any sign of Collins.

"He left a little while ago," she says, her brow furrowing. "I didn't want to provoke him further. He was angry."

"But I think I'm done letting him intimidate us," I say. "I'm not going to let him get away with whatever it is he's planning."

Just then, I hear a noise from outside, and my instincts take over. I shoot to the window, my breath catching in my throat. Collins is leaning against his car, looking

up at the building with a sinister smile.

I'm so pissed off that I storm out of the apartment. He won't threaten Rachel or Archie anymore. I'm not going to let him. Determination leads me to the door, and I stride outside.

"Vaughn, wait!" she calls after me, but I can't stop now. I have to face him so he knows I'm no longer afraid.

I step outside and push through the door, locking eyes with Collins, who stands up with a look of surprise on his face.

"What's the matter, Vaughn?" he taunts. "Do you miss me?" His voice drips with mockery.

"I'm going to enjoy watching you regret messing with us, Collins," I say, keeping my tone steady but laced with anger. Adrenaline courses through me as I step closer to confront him.

"Is that right?" he replies, a smirk playing on his lips. "And what are you going to do about it?"

He lunges at me, swinging at my jaw before I can respond. I barely react in time, instinctively sidestepping as his fist grazes my cheek.

I retaliate immediately, throwing a punch of my own that lands solidly on his gut. He grunts, doubling over, and I shove him back against my car, grabbing him by the collar.

"You think you can just mess with us and get away with it?" I growl, my voice low and dangerous.

His eyes narrow, and Collins pushes off the car. “You’re going to regret this, Vaughn.”

He comes at me again, swinging wildly. I duck underneath it and jab him in the ribs, the satisfaction of impact filling me. He winces but isn’t done yet. This time, he throws another punch. I catch his wrist and twist it, forcing him to his knees.

“Stop it! Just stop!” I hear Rachel’s voice. Memories of her fear and the violation of her home make my anger boil over. I won’t allow him to get away with this.

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:44 am*

I reach up to tuck a strand of hair behind Rachel's ear, and she wipes away her tears. The moment is intimate, and warmth rushes through me. I lean closer, my heart is racing.

"This doesn't have to be something you experience alone. Stay with me until everything is cleared up."

Her eyes widen in surprise. "Stay with you? But . . . what about the match?"

"Exactly," I say, my tone firm. "I don't want you at risk after everything that's happened. I want you safe, and I can't imagine a better place for you to be than with me. I want to keep you close until we deal with Collins."

Her wheels turn for a moment, and I can see they are turning. "Are you sure? I don't want to complicate things anymore. I don't want to impose."

"Rachel," I say, taking her hands in mine, feeling the warmth radiate from her touch. "It's not an imposition. I want you to be safe, and I care about you. I can figure everything out with you. You know that."

I can hear the sincerity in my voice, and she relaxes her shoulders. "Okay," she finally says, a hint of a smile breaking through the tears. "I'd like that."

I feel the weight of the world lifting only a bit, but her agreement is a relief. "Great. Let's get you settled, then. When the police get here, we can talk to them, and I'll take care of everything."

I lead her back to my car and can't help but look back at Collins, who is still on the ground, nursing his wounds. I can't help but feel a little gratified at having gotten one over on him, but it's Rachel I think about as I push myself onward. I have to keep her safe no matter what it requires.

When we get to my car, I open the door for her, and she gets in. Finally, her body starts to slacken. I get into the driver's seat, and the engine starts. I look over at her. "You okay?"

Softly smiling, she nods. "Yeah, I think I just need to breathe for a minute."

"Take your time," I say, pulling out of the parking lot and onto the road. It's still heavy but having her there lightens the day.

On the drive to my place, I can't help but look at her. She's been through so much, and I don't want her to feel unsafe or scared again. I want her to know that she never has to worry about me.

"Vaughn," she says suddenly, breaking the silence. "I really appreciate everything you've done. I've been a bit . . . difficult lately, I know."

I respond reassuringly, "Don't worry about it. You're going through a lot. I just want to be here for you."

Looking out the window, she admits, "I didn't expect you to react the way you did with Collins. It was kind of amazing."

The corners of my mouth rise, and I chuckle softly. "No one can mess with you or your cat. Not now, not ever."

I turn off the engine and pull up to my mansion. Again, I look at her, and I see

gratitude in her eyes and something deeper. It makes my heart race. I try to keep my voice light as I say, “Let’s get inside and work out our next steps.”

I feel the tension in the air transform as we step out of the car. Now we’re in this together. I intend to make sure she understands she’s safe with me. I open the door and wave her in first.

I lead her into the living room, where the warmth I’m used to fills the space. “Make yourself comfortable,” I say, watching as she sinks into the couch, her expression finally starting to relax.

I get a couple of bottles of water out of the fridge and sit down on the couch next to her, giving her one. I suggest, “Let’s talk about what we need to do next.”

She looks at me, a little relieved and fiercely determined. “I want to help, Vaughn. What I don’t want to do is sit here and wait for something to happen.”

I reply, “Then we will act.”

“What are we going to do about Collins and Archie?”

“We’ll figure that out together. Rachel, you’re not the only one in this boat. I promise.”

I’ve fought to keep her, our bond, and I’ll fight for her, no matter what it takes. No one is getting between us, least of all Collins.

Chapter thirty-seven

Chapter Thirty-Seven



Rachel

The police leave, and I finally catch my breath. Then Vaughn and I head out to take Archie to the vet. The ride feels like it takes forever, every second weighed down by the events of the day. Collins's threats still echo in my mind, but I need to shake them off and focus on making sure my cat is okay. I can't believe he's been through so much—scared and alone.

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:44 am*

“No, let me finish,” I urge, squeezing his hand tighter. “I get your behavior so much better now. I thought you were just this mean and evil bastard—you’re not. I see now you’re dealing with so much. I can see you’re working so hard to protect yourself and everyone around you.”

He relaxes, and the tension in the air shifts. “Thanks for that, but where is this all coming from?”

I take a deep breath, the moment stretching miserably between us, heavy with so many unspoken words. “I’ve been angry and confused about everything that’s happened. The truth is, I care about you, Vaughn. I don’t want to lose you to this mess with Collins. I want to be here for you.”

His eyes search mine. “Rachel, what’s the point of this? Where are you going with it?”

I pause, mulling over my words. “I know you’re afraid of what might happen to your career and what that’ll do to us. I get it. I don’t want to just walk away because of that. Just one more night with you—that is all I want. Before all of this pulls us apart. Please, I need to know you’re close. I need to know we can be us, even after all of this.”

“Rachel . . .” he starts, but I cut him off again, my heart pounding.

“But in return, I need you to use your ability to help me get proof that Collins is the one planting those drugs,” I say. “I’m not letting him get away with this when it could ruin everything for you. There must be a way we can work together, expose him, and

clear your name.”

Vaughn’s expression changes, uncertainty flickering in his eyes. “You want to spend the night with me when we’re on shaky ground? What if Collins tries to retaliate?”

I shake my head, my resolve hardening. “I’m not afraid of Collins. I’ve already run into him once today, and I’m not backing down now. Together, we can take him on. I just need to know that we’re on the same page.”

I see the conflict in his eyes as he watches me. “You’re serious about this?”

“Yes, I am. I want to fight for us, for what we have. No more fear controlling my actions—I don’t want that.”

Vaughn moves closer, and I can feel the heat through his thoughts. “You’re putting a lot on the line. Are you sure you’re ready for that?”

“I am,” I insist, my voice steady. “Never have I been more sure of anything.”

He takes a deep breath, and I can see him working through his thoughts. “Okay. We’ll do this together. I just need you to promise me you’ll be careful. I don’t want to see you hurt.”

“I promise,” I say, feeling a sense of relief wash over me. “We’ll figure it out together.”

He nods slowly, and I see hope in his eyes. The uncertainty still lingers, though, as he admits, “I feel attached to you on a level I’ve never touched before.” He speaks low and forcefully. “Let’s make this count.”

The tension starts to dissipate. We stand there, knowing we’re on the brink of

something new. I lift my hands to cup his face, and our lips meet in a soft kiss that deepens quickly, like a lit match igniting kindling. The heat that had been simmering rises.

“Well, guess what,” I tease him, pulling back slightly.

“Not now, Rachel. What’s that?” he groans.

“I have video proof of Collins planting the drugs in your locker. I recorded him in action.”

Vaughn can’t believe his ears. He spins me around and kisses me like a man savoring his last meal. His lips press against mine with an insistence I can’t ignore, even if I wanted to. His tongue teases the edges of my lips, just dipping inside before pulling back, never quite giving in to what I want.

I find myself pressed against the wall just inside the room as Vaughn peels off my clothing, taking his time to savor each sliver of skin he reveals.

My shirt is the first to go. The blue silk shirt peels away from my skin and makes no noise on the hardwood floor when he tosses it aside. Underneath, I’m wearing a pale pink bra that’s nearly transparent. My nipples are hard points from my arousal, and Vaughn ducks his head and sucks one into his mouth. His perfect lips and that silver tongue work on my nipple before switching sides to give the other equal attention. I shiver at the sensations rolling through me.

He unbuttons my pants with one-handed ease that speaks of large amounts of practice, skating his hands over my flat belly. His fingers dip inside the V of my open fly to lightly tease the edge of my panties before investigating further. When his fingertips touch my flesh, my knees almost buckle, and when two of those searching fingers part my lips and breach the wet inferno of my entrance, it’s only the wall that

keeps me upright.

Vaughn plays my body like an instrument. He's fucking me with his long, slender fingers with maddening slowness, ignoring my clit and concentrating on stroking me from the inside while his lips and tongue trace the contours of my neck.

I give a muffled cry, expressing equal parts pleasure and shock. Hungry for more, I tug at his jacket, pulling until it's in a heap on the floor. His mouth ravages mine, my hands pulling at his tie as we stumble to the bed.

His muscled frame covers and pushes me deep into the covers, like sinking into a mound of soft clouds; then he takes my breast in his mouth, and I stop thinking entirely.

Before I can regain my thoughts enough to reach for his belt, Vaughn slips his fingers from me and drops to his knees in one fluid motion, dragging my jeans and panties to the floor with him. Standing bare from the waist down, I feel the usual twinges, but they're quickly forgotten when Vaughn's mouth finds its way between my legs, and he gives my pussy an open-mouthed kiss that has me gasping for breath.

Vaughn's tongue is everywhere. The internal topography that he'd been mapping moments ago with his fingers is now the territory of his tongue. Like a serpent, it slides inside me before withdrawing to trace circles around my inner lips before finally homing in on my clitoris.

At his first touch on that swollen nub, I dig my fingers into his shoulder, my nails leaving marks even through the layers of damp fabric. Vaughn flattens his tongue and presses it hard against my clit, and I see stars. Two of those fantastic fingers press into my slit, adding that perfect feeling of fullness that throws me over the edge as Vaughn laps at my clit.

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:44 am*

Vaughn stands up and presses his mouth against mine, giving me another one of those soul-searing kisses. I can taste my juices on his lips, and my only thoughts are Naked. Bed. Now.

We fall back onto the bed, and I crawl down Vaughn's body, licking and sucking the skin in my path, determined to give him the same pleasure he just gave me.

My first tentative lick across the head makes his hips jerk. Encouraged, I open my mouth and take him in, sucking on the head like it's my favorite lollipop flavor.

I settle down and start licking my way down his shaft, following the line of the vein. I pepper little teasing bites along his length, soothing the pressure of my teeth with a kiss. He tastes salty and manly, and I'm completely happy to keep my face buried between his legs for the rest of my life.

Vaughn's moans grow louder with each passing moment, a litany of filth pouring from his mouth.

"Rachel!" he yells as his hips buck upward. Impossibly, the grip on my hair tightens, and he starts to fuck my face in earnest.

Hearing this incredibly sexy man coming undone from what I'm doing to him sends a lightning bolt straight to my pussy. As much as I want to swallow him down and feel him flood my mouth with his come, I want to feel that cock inside me, stretching and filling me much more.

It's rough and dirty and everything I had dreamed of. Despite having experienced an

orgasm so intense I almost blacked out only a few minutes before, I'm achingly aroused again. I start to move my hand downward, ready to take care of myself, when I feel an iron grip encircle my wrist.

"That's my job," he growls.

I kiss my way back up his body and straddle his hips. The thick head of his cock presses against my entrance. I shift my hips, and he slips inside. That moment a lover enters you, everything stops. I freeze above Vaughn, just relishing the sensation of him breaching my body before I lower myself down onto him, taking every inch of his length into my wet heat.

Vaughn reaches up and pulls me down to lay flush against him, thrusting his hips upward and controlling the rhythm even from underneath me. His eyes slip shut, and the look on his face is pure ecstasy.

"I think your pussy must be the gateway to heaven," he breathes into my ear.

From anyone else, it would have sounded like a cheesy line, but somehow, Vaughn makes these profane words sound like a prayer to the Greek god of pleasure.

Every rock of my hips sends shockwaves of pleasure through me. Riding Vaughn with my skin pressing against his has me heading toward another peak already when Vaughn hooks his leg around mine and rolls us over, pinning me beneath him.

"Easier to kiss you this way," he says mischievously, tangling his hands in my long hair and tugging me upward to plunder my mouth with his while his hips piston that delicious cock into me.

"So hot," Vaughn purrs, following the curve of my neck with his tongue. "So tight." Small nips on my shoulder that he then soothes with kisses. "So wet." Impressing me

with his flexibility, Vaughn leans down further and sucks one of my hard nipples into his mouth, biting just enough to send a shiver of pleasure and pain down my spine. “I could fuck you all day.”

“Is . . . is that a challenge?”

Vaughn’s lips curl into a smile that says it most definitely is a challenge, and he sits back on his heels, pulling me upward with him, his cock still buried in me. I wrap my legs around his back for leverage, acutely aware that this position puts every aspect of my body on display.

I glance at Vaughn’s face and see that his eyes are locked on the spot where our bodies connect. I can’t blame him. The sight of his cock disappearing into my pussy with every thrust is mesmerizing.

“Touch yourself for me,” Vaughn whispers, his voice sounding ragged. “I want to see it.”

Something about Vaughn strips away every bit of silly self-consciousness I’ve ever felt. I dip my hand between my legs and find my clit. I circle it with my fingers, finding a rhythm that matches Vaughn’s thrusts. My orgasm takes me by surprise, and Vaughn moans loudly as my inner muscles contract around his cock, squeezing him like a wet fist, driving him to his peak as well.

Then it’s all movement, a frantic mating driven by hot blood. Flesh against flesh, the ragged strain of quickened breath, the low cry of a woman at her peak. Bodies plunging together in a slick and sensuous dance.

I come again, and as my hands slide limply onto the rumpled covers, I feel him continue to thrust. In. Out. In. Out. Repeating the motions until I am close to passing out from pleasure.



I lay still, wrecked, wonderfully wrecked, with his face in my hair and his long, lovely body pressing mine into the bed. His heart still hammers; I can feel it knocking against mine.

Heat floods me as Vaughn comes inside me, and we both collapse back on the bed, boneless and satiated and joined in the most intimate of ways.

The world outside dies down, and it's just us now, together, ready to take on whatever the world throws at us. Vaughn has become my anchor, and I don't care what happens; I'm not letting anything come between us.

Chapter thirty-eight

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Vaughn

It's match day again, and as I set my feet on the field for the big game, the electricity in the stadium is palpable. The crowd buzzes with excitement. Adrenaline courses through my veins. This is what I live for: competition, the roar of the fans, and proving myself to the world once again.

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:44 am*

With the whistle blown and the game underway, my focus sharpens. Today, I'm not just playing for myself—I'm playing for my team, for the fans, and for Rachel, who is in the stands supporting me. She's a bright spot in the crowd, and her presence fills me with determination.

The game unfolds like a perfectly choreographed play. We move the ball with precision and speed, working seamlessly together. Every tackle, every shot, every pass brings us closer to victory. The moments of celebration blur together as skill and teamwork merge into a beautiful rhythm. I lose myself in the tempo of the game.

On the final whistle, the crowd is screaming so loud you can't hear. New York City FC has won. We've done it. I can hardly believe it. Everyone's cheering, and I feel like I'm part of a celebration. Triumph fills me.

I turn my head and see my family in the stands. Their faces show both shock and joy at seeing this side of me, the side hidden under layers and layers of pressure and expectations. The barrier between us closes quickly as I run toward them.

"Mom! Dad!" I call out as I throw my arms around them, pulling them into a tight embrace. "I'm so glad you're here!"

"I can't believe it!" my mom exclaims. "You played amazing!"

My voice is thick with emotion, I apologize. "I say sorry for everything. I've been so centered on my career that I've neglected to realize how much I need you two. I was wrong to push you away. I've always done everything you've asked, and I took that for granted."

My dad slaps me on the back, his face full of understanding. “You were always our guy, Vaughn. That’s all we’re happy to see.”

I see the surprise on their faces as I pull back. Here, I can feel it—this shift, this moment I’ve been waiting for in our relationship. I know there is a long way to mend the gaps I’ve created, but today feels like the beginning.

I turn to the stands again, searching for Rachel in the crowd. I see her, and my heart jumps. Her smile brightens the entire stadium. She’s beaming. In the past few days we’ve forged a connection that’s solidified, and I want to share this moment with her.

Adrenaline still rushing through me, I push my way through the throng of teammates and fans. In the background, I can hear cheers and music blaring, but all I can focus on is getting to Rachel.

I don’t hesitate when I finally get to her. Joy fills my heart, and I sweep her off the floor into my arms.

“We did it!” I exclaim, looking into her eyes, the warmth of her presence grounding me in the chaos.

“You were incredible!” she replies, laughter bubbling up as I set her down. “I’m so proud of you!”

But I can’t wait any longer. I lean in and kiss her right in front of the world—in a bold move. It is a passionate kiss full of relief and a promise to face whatever comes together. The crowd around us cheers, and I feel their warmth surrounding us.

I pull apart and see her cheeks flushed with happiness. “You just kissed me in front of everyone.” She laughs, a sparkle in her eyes.

“I would do it a thousand times over,” I reply, my heart swelling with love for her. “Through all this chaos, you have been my rock. I want you to know how much I love you.”

I feel the happiness radiating from her as she smiles wider. Our ears and eyes fade into the distance as we stand—two souls united in joy.

Pulling her toward the celebration area, I tell her, “Let’s celebrate.” I turn back to my family, smiling at them.

This is a day of change for me. I’m more than a player. I’m a son and a partner, and I’m ready to embrace all the love and support that’s there. I commit to repairing my relationships and facing the challenges ahead with Rachel by my side.

As the cheers and laughter mix into a big, loud, happy noise all around us, I cannot help but feel like the luckiest man alive. I look down at Rachel’s face. She is glowing with happiness, and my heart swells. This feels surreal, like a dream I never want to wake up from.

“Rachel,” I say, my voice rising above the noise. “Will you be mine?”

It’s a loaded question, and I can see a surprise flash across her features. She doesn’t answer for a moment, her eyes wide in disbelief.

“Are you serious?” she finally asks, her voice barely above a whisper.

I nod, this moment weighing on us. “I am. I want you to be my partner for the sake of the word itself.”

She blinks, trying to process my words, and I know that I can see joy, confusion, and something deeper in her eyes. “Do you . . . do you really like me?” she asks

tentatively, as if testing the waters.

I can't help but smile when I shake my head. "No, Rachel. I don't just like you. I love you."

As the words leave my lips, they feel powerful, and her expression changes. As she smiles, her eyes light up, and for a split second, I believe she might explode with the happiness radiating from her. Her breath always catches in her throat when she takes a step closer.

"You love me?" she repeats, disbelief and joy mingling in her voice.

"Yeah," I say, my heart racing. "For a while, I've loved you. I just can't imagine my life without you."

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:44 am*

I can't help but laugh at how the purest joy pours from Rachel's face as it breaks into the most beautiful smile. "You're serious! Oh my God, Vaughn!" Her excitement bubbles over, and she jumps up and down, and I can't help but laugh with her.

"I'm serious!" I say, pulling her into a tight embrace again. Her body, pressed to mine, feels warm. It is like home, and I never want to let her go.

"Okay, okay," I say, pulling back slightly, my eyes sparkling with mischief. "Now you have to go with me to the locker room. I want to show you off to as many people as possible!"

With a half-amused, half-skeptical look, Rachel raises an eyebrow. "You want to show me off? Isn't that a bit much?"

"Please!" I beg. "I want them to know that you're mine and that you love me! It's a big deal!"

My enthusiasm is too much for her to resist. "Alright, you win. Let's go."

Her hand grips mine tightly as we push through the crowd toward the locker room. The atmosphere is still electric—the energy of victory, the sweet perfume of it all lingering in the air.

I'm nervous and excited as we get closer to the locker room. I'm about to share this moment with my teammates—to tell them that Rachel and I are together. It's like a new chapter, one full of promise and love.

Rachel stops at the door to the locker room and looks up at me, her face serious for a moment. “Are you ready for this?” she asks softly.

I nod and squeeze her hand reassuringly. “Absolutely. I wouldn’t rather be anywhere else.”

With that, I open the door, and we are hit by celebratory sights and sounds like a wave. The moment they see us, the room goes quiet. My teammates, still buzzing from the win, are high-fiving and cheering, but all eyes are now on us.

I can feel their gazes, and I take a deep breath. “Hey, everyone!” I call out, breaking the silence. “I want you all to meet my girlfriend, Rachel!”

The cheers around the room fade for a moment, replaced by surprise on everyone’s faces. But it quickly shifts to excitement. Rachel waves to the group, her smile radiant. Pride swells in me as I see how effortlessly she fits into my world, as though she’s always belonged here.

One of my teammates shouts out, “Vaughn’s in love!” The room erupts into howls and playful teasing.

Rachel is beaming, and I can’t stop smiling as I pull her closer to me. I laugh along with my teammates. It’s the camaraderie and joy of the moment, and for the first time in a long while, I feel like everything is finally coming together.

“Congratulations, man!” another teammate calls out, slapping me on the back. “You’ve got yourself a great one.”

Their acceptance and excitement fill me with even more confidence in my decision. I glance down at Rachel. Her eyes light up with joy, and I know this is just the beginning.

Together, we celebrate, and I can't shake the contentment coursing through me. In the past few weeks, I've faced chaos and uncertainty, but now, I feel more grounded than ever. With Rachel by my side, I know I can face anything.

Nothing Collins tries next will stop me from protecting what we have. I'll fight for her. We'll fight together, and our love will shine bright against any darkness that dares to come our way.

Tonight, we're not just celebrating a victory in the game but a victory in our relationship. I can't wait to see what's next in this journey.

## Chapter thirty-nine

## Epilogue

### Rachel

The soft glow of twinkling lights fills our cozy living room, wrapping the space in a warm hug. It's Christmas morning. The scent of fresh pine from our tree mixes with the aroma of cinnamon and baked goods wafting from the kitchen, where Vaughn is busy preparing our holiday breakfast. The clatter of pots and pans and the cheerful hum of holiday music playing in the background surrounded me, filling me with childlike joy.

I walk out of the bedroom cheerfully, marveling at our new winter home. The tree stands tall, adorned with ornaments, each telling a story from our past. I smile as I recall our trip to the Christmas market, where we carefully selected the beautiful glass baubles now hanging from the branches.

"Rachel! Come help me!" Vaughn calls from the kitchen, snapping me out of my reverie. The soft carpet under my feet adds to the cozy atmosphere as I make my way



toward him.

When I step into the kitchen, I find him in an apron, his hair slightly disheveled, and a playful glint in his eyes. “I need a taste tester for these pancakes,” he says, holding up a fluffy stack topped with berries and a drizzle of maple syrup.

“Is that a job or a demand?” I tease, moving closer to him.

He laughs, a sound that’s rich and warm, and my heart skips a beat.

He winks at me. “I’d say it’s more of a demand, but I’ll take whatever I can get.”

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:44 am*

I lean in to steal a bite from the edge of the stack. The taste explodes in my mouth, and I give Vaughn an approving nod. “These are amazing! You’ve outdone yourself,” I exclaim.

“Of course they are. I’ve got a great coach,” he says with a grin, referring to the time we’ve spent cooking together since he proposed a few months ago.

The memory of Vaughn down on one knee, asking me to be his forever rushes through me with a wave of love for it. I couldn’t have known that one simple question would change everything.

We sit together to share breakfast, and as the warmth of the moment envelops us, I’m overflowing with gratitude for this life we are building. The presents, the decorations, the love—love fills every corner of our home.

After breakfast, Vaughn and I exchange gifts. When he hands me a small box, I can’t contain my excitement as I unwrap it. Inside is a delicate silver necklace with a tree charm adorned with little ornaments.

“It symbolizes our growing family,” he explains, a soft smile on his lips. “Each ornament represents another memory we will make together.”

I fasten the necklace around my neck, tears pricking at the corners of my eyes. “It’s perfect, Vaughn,” I whisper as I lean in to kiss him softly. “I love it.”

As we finish exchanging gifts, Vaughn glances at the clock. “We should get ready for the family gathering,” he reminds me, and I nod, feeling a flutter of excitement.

We're hosting both of our families this year, and I'm thrilled to open up our home to everyone. It feels amazing to bring them together, building new traditions and memories that will last forever.

To our surprise, a few inches of snow blanket the ground outside. Stepping out onto the street, we breathe in the crisp, cold air, our breath forming clouds in front of our faces. It feels like a magical world, and I can't help but laugh as I turn to Vaughn. "Look at this! It's like a scene from a movie."

Wrapping his arm around my waist, he chuckles, his warmth anchoring me in this perfect moment.

As we head back inside, my eyes catch a glimpse of our decorated tree and the twinkling lights above. I know today will be filled with laughter, love, and the spirit of Christmas that we've come to love and cherish.

The doorbell rings, and my heart races with excitement. Vaughn and I exchange a quick glance before he hurries to open the door. Our families pour in, filling the house with laughter and chatter. A deep sense of belonging washes over me as I embrace my parents and then his.

Family life quickly takes over children darting around, parents catching up, and the delicious aroma of holiday dishes filling the air. I pause to take it all in: the warmth, the love, and the community. Everything feels perfect.

After dinner, we gather in the living room for dessert. I catch Vaughn looking at me, his eyes soft and full of love. He leans in and whispers, "I'm so glad you're mine."

I rest my head on his shoulder, my heart fluttering at his words. "I'm so glad you're mine, too," I reply.

As the evening winds down, we circle around the tree to give one final gift—the gift

of memories. I set the camera on a timer and captured a picture of us all huddled together, smiling and laughing. This is what Christmas is all about: family, love, and new beginnings.