



Pretending I'm Yours

Author: *Lili Valente*

Category: Romance, Billionaire Romance, Adult

Description: What to do when the male “escort” you hired to take your virginity turns out to be a jaded billionaire playing games with your body...and your heart?

As a card-carrying Good Girl, I'm the last person anyone would expect to end up in a “Reverse Pretty Woman” situation...

I'm the sweet, shy one, not the type to hire an escort to show her the ropes in the bedroom. I'm also not the type to lie to my family, sneak away to New York City for a week of no-holds-barred pleasure, or enjoy being told what a “good girl” I am when I get down on my knees for a gorgeous, commanding older man.

All I know for certain is that every night with Anthony, the man I hired to be my first everything, is better than the last. He isn't just a sex god who brings my every fantasy wildly to life, he's smart, romantic, protective, and seemingly as affected by the chemistry between us as I am.

In just a few days, I'm falling hard for my fake boyfriend.

Even crazier? Anthony says he wants more, too.

More of my time, more of my body—and he's willing to quit the escort business to give the connection growing between us a real shot.

Soon, we're making plans for a future beyond our steamy week between the sheets.

But what happens when I realize the man I've been falling for isn't a sex worker, at all, but a jaded billionaire who's been lying to me from the start?

Can our love survive learning our time together truly has been one giant game of pretend?

Total Pages (Source): 87

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:58 am

prologue

She's perfect...

She's perfect...

So fucking perfect I can't imagine letting her go in a hundred days, let alone just a few more nights.

I have to tell her who I really am, and hope like hell she can find it in her big heart to forgive me.

But not now, not when she's asked for a blow job lesson and is proving to be a magnificent student...

"Perfect," I manage, my voice tight and every muscle in my body straining to stay still as my girl strokes my cock, knowing this "lesson" will end with her bent over the bed and me taking her hard from behind if I don't remain in control.

She destroys me, this woman.

Destroys me and heals me and makes me want things I thought were beyond my reach before she blew into my life.

"And now I come down on my knees?" she asks, already dropping down in front of me, the feel of her breath warm on my thigh enough to make my cock leak faster. "And explore this way?" She leans in, brushing her lips back and forth across

the sticky head of my cock before licking the pre-cum away, making me gasp. “Okay?” she asks.

“Brilliant,” I murmur, my voice thick. “You’re a fucking natural.”

“What’s next?” she asks.

“Take your time, and keep following your instincts,” I encourage, my fingers tangling in her hair as she presses another kiss to me, then another, her confidence growing with each one.

She swirls her tongue over my sensitive tip again, bolder, more insistent, and I shudder. “Now I take you inside my mouth?” she asks, her voice trembling but eager.

“Fuck, yes. God, Maya,” I say, my voice rough and my fingers tightening in her hair as she takes the first inch of me into the heat of her mouth. “God, you’re incredible. You’re driving me crazy.”

Her cheeks flush, but she doesn’t stop. Her movements become more assured as she takes more of me into her mouth, her tongue sliding against the underside of my cock in a way that makes my vision blur.

“Now use your hand,” I grit out. “Wrap it around the base to reach the part you can’t get with your mouth.”

She does, wrapping her fingers around the lowest part of my shaft, her strokes in sync with the movements of her mouth. The combination is almost too much, and again, I have to fight to keep my hips still.

She glances up at me, her eyes wide and hungry, clearly enjoying giving pleasure every bit as much as she enjoys receiving it. The sight of her like this—beautiful,

eager, and completely focused on owning me with her mouth—nearly undoes me.

“Fuck,” I murmur, my thumb brushing against her cheek. “You’re so good, baby. You’re so fucking good. Just slow down a little, beautiful. If you don’t, I’m going to finish way too fast.”

She follows my guidance, her movements slowing but still sexy, deliberate. Her tongue swirling against me as she works my cock with her mouth, her innocent enthusiasm for the task is a turn-on like no other. She moans softly, the vibration sending a jolt of pleasure through me, and I can’t help fisting my hand tighter in her hair.

“God, Maya,” I rasp, taking control of her head as I thrust a little deeper. “Can you take me like this? Is that too much? Can you relax your throat for me, baby?”

She moans and obliges, making my head spin.

“Perfect, so perfect,” I chant, thrusting into her faster, unable to hold back any longer. The pleasure builds, hot and insistent, and I know I’m not going to last much longer. “Maya,” I murmur, my voice tight. “I’m close. If you don’t want me to come in your mouth, pull back now.”

She doesn’t pull back; she simply moans and sucks me more insistently as I piston between her lips and her hand strokes me in perfect sync. The sight of her, the feel of her, the soft, muffled sounds she makes as she takes as much of me as she can manage and then more—everything pushes me closer to the edge until I shatter with a guttural cry.

My release crashes through me in sticky waves of pleasure as I come down her throat, something primal in me celebrating the sight of her swallowing me down.

Finally, long seconds later, as I'm spiraling down from the high, she pulls back, her cheeks flushed as she lets my cock slip from her lips.

"B plus?" she asks softly, her voice uncertain despite the smile tugging at her lips.

I reach for her, pulling her into my arms and kissing her deeply, pouring everything I can't put into words into the kiss.

"A plus," I murmur against her lips. "You're a sex goddess. I just wish I were still hard so I could give you the fucking you deserve."

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:58 am

“I can wait,” she whispers as she leans into me, her arms wrapping around my neck. “But I want you to fuck me. That made me so wet, Anthony. I had no idea it would turn me on so much. I want you so much right now, it’s crazy.”

I reach between her legs, groaning as her slickness coats my fingers. “That is crazy. The only thing crazier is you thinking I’m going to make you wait. Lay back on the bed and spread your legs, angel. I’m going to fuck you with my mouth before I fuck you with my cock.”

“Anthony,” she says, the way she says my name—like a prayer and a promise—making it the best word I’ve ever heard.

I’ve never been a big fan of my name, but with Maya...

“I would sell my soul to hear you say my name like that every day,” I say as I kiss my way down her stomach. “Like you can’t wait for me to take you. Like you can’t get enough.”

“I can’t,” she says, moaning as I slide two fingers into her hot pussy. “I’ll never get enough.”

And neither will I.

Which is why I have to put an end to the fucking lies.

You’ll tell her tomorrow, I promise myself as I suck her clit into my mouth.

But for tonight, I let myself get lost in the pretend one more time.

This pretend that feels more real with every passing second...

one

Four days earlier...

Anthony Pissarro

A man discovering his perfect life

isn't so perfect anymore...

I turnright on William Street, heading uptown, the sticky snow slapping me in the face as if to say—wake up, man! Wake the fuck up and turn around before you destroy everything you've worked forty years to build.

The voice is right.

This isn't me. I don't make impulsive, life-altering decisions. I don't make impulsive decisions—period.

I'm a logical man with a good head on my shoulders.

Most would say agreathhead...

As a former math prodigy who graduated high school at thirteen and earned two masters' degrees—in finance and behavioral economics—by twenty, I had offers to work at the top investment firms in New York City before I was old enough to order a beer at my uncle's dive bar. By twenty-five, I'd been scooped up by an up-and-

coming private equity firm. By thirty-two, I was leading that firm to brave new heights, proving my predecessor wasn't a fool for hiring someone half his age to steer Baxter and Halloway onward into an increasingly complex financial landscape.

For as long as I can remember, I've been able to see the patterns other people miss, to cut through the noise and make the tough calls needed to keep my life—and my career—on course.

So...what the hell just happened back there?

I curse beneath my breath as I pick up speed out of the Financial District, heading into Chinatown. I drag a hand through my snow-dusted hair, wondering where I left my hat.

It's probably back in my office along with all the rest of the personal belongings I asked my assistant to box up on my way out.

Out...

I'm out.

And there's no going back...

One hour earlier...

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:58 am

“As you can see from the projections, our Q4 earnings will exceed expectations by seventeen percent.” I click to the next slide, my voice steady and calm despite the strange sense of being in the wrong place at the wrong time that’s haunted me for the past week.

The holidays are always hard.

I lost my grandmother on Christmas Day when I was seven. And though my uncle Chris and aunt Tina took me in and loved me like one of their own, Christmas was never the same. Erica left me in December, too, though her exit was far less expected than Gran’s. My brilliant, kind, hard-loving grandmother had been sick for as long as I’d known her. Even as a young child, a part of me had known that my time with her was limited.

But Erica...

My ex gave no sign that she was unhappy in our marriage, not until the evening I arrived home early on Christmas Eve with surprise tickets to Tahiti to find her in bed with the doorman.

She calmly asked me for a divorce. I just as calmly gave her that divorce—and the penthouse we once called home—and moved on with my signature logic, speed, and efficiency. Still, come the holiday season, my nerves get raw and my feet start to itch.

I begin to dream of exotic places and wild escapes...

Two years ago, I took that trip to Tahiti alone. Last year, I spent December working

remotely from a ski chalet in Switzerland.

This year, I thought I was far enough removed from the divorce to stomach the city in all its manic merriment, but for the past three days I've felt two steps ahead of disaster.

What kind of disaster?

I'm not sure.

I'm not the kind of man who has breakdowns, but I'm not the kind of man who trails off in the middle of a presentation, either.

And yet...here we are.

"Anthony?" Gerald, a nearly seventy-five-year-old former banker, who can't seem to quit the finance biz, no matter how many times he's tried, peers at me over wire-rimmed glasses. "Everything all right, son?"

I blink and take a breath to assure him I'm fine—and so are the emerging market returns—but my mouth refuses to obey.

I shake my head slowly back and forth as I study the dozen faces around the mahogany conference table. The board members—all men and women I've known for over a decade, many of whom I consider friends—are waiting for me to continue. Some are smiling, some look worried. Some are taking notes. Others are already mentally spending their bonuses.

I'll be getting a large bonus this year, too, but I'm already a billionaire. Even after Erica took her share in the divorce, I want for nothing. I will never have to worry about money again. Neither will my aunt or uncle or any of my cousins. If this job

were just about a paycheck, I would have quit years ago.

But for me, this business has always been about the puzzle of it all, the thrill of studying the moving pieces and putting the competition in check before they realize the game is underway. I never thought I'd get tired of the hunt, the chase, the kill. I'm not a violent man in any sense of the word, but I'd be lying if I said I didn't enjoy crushing my competition.

Or, at least I did...

But lately, I haven't enjoyed much of anything outside of long runs in the park before work, during which I binge history podcasts and do my best not to think about work.

And suddenly, with the clarity of a man waking from a long dream, I realize this isn't just my usual holiday blues.

This is it, the moment I make a massive, possibly mad, but much-needed change.

With a soft exhalation, I close my laptop. "Actually, no, Gerald. Everything isn't all right. I need to go."

Miranda from Acquisitions tilts her head sharply to the right. "Go where? We still have the comparative analysis to review and only two hours before the holiday weekend."

"You can go over the analysis without me. It's all there in the email. You don't need me." I laugh, surprised by the hope in the sound. "You really don't. The company's going to be fine. There are half a dozen people who can fill my shoes, with ease."

"Of course there aren't, don't be ridiculous." Gerald says, concern in his tone. "I think we should take a break and?—"

“I don’t need a break. I need to leave.” I glance around the table at the now uniformly stunned-looking faces of the board. “I’ll send you a list of candidates I think will do an outstanding job in this position by the end of the year.” I stand, straightening my tie, as if a crooked tie matters at this juncture.

But it’s habit.

So much of my life is habit, routines based on choices I made decades ago, and suddenly it seems insane that I haven’t stopped to question them long before now. Maybe even more insane than quitting my job in the middle of the end-of-year board meeting.

“I’m stepping down, effective immediately,” I continue. “My shares will be placed in a blind trust until the board approves a successor.”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:58 am

“But the Milton acquisition—” someone starts.

“Will be in excellent hands with Sarah.” I nod to my second on the project, who sits up straighter in her chair. “She’s been ready to take point on this for months. I’ve just been too controlling to let go.”

“This is very sudden, Anthony,” Gerald says, a frown knitting his brow.

“For me, too.” I slip my laptop into my briefcase, my movements calm, deliberate, even as a soft voice in my head wonders if I might be having a stroke. “But it’s right. I can feel it. It’s time I moved on. Past time.” I offer the board what I hope is a reassuring smile. “I’ll have my official resignation submitted by tomorrow. For now... Merry Christmas, everyone.”

And then, I walked out and kept walking.

The memory fades as I glance up, a little stunned to find myself standing in front of an unmarked door in the East Village. The entryway is massive, engraved with scenes of men and women in carnal embrace, and painted a deep ebony that gleams in the lights from the bars farther down the street. Beside it, a simple brass plate like the kind used to mark historic buildings reads: “The Garden of Earthly Delights – Members Only.”

It’s Twyla's place.

My best friend from Columbia Business School shocked everyone by turning down Wall Street to open what she called a “private social club for discriminating adults”

AKA a sex club. A very private, very discreet, wildly successful sex club she's turned into the hottest membership in the city. The rumors of the things that go on inside are shocking, even to a relatively jaded man like me.

I grew up in a bad part of Brooklyn, playing in the yard behind my uncle's bar until way too late most nights. I can't remember a time when I didn't know what a prostitute was or feel sorry for the women who roamed the streets in our neighborhood. Once, I accidentally interrupted a coupling in a back alley on my way to pick up a keg with my oldest cousin, Nick.

I was thirteen and will never forget the way the woman tried to pull away and cover herself when she saw two teenagers trundling down the alley with a keg in a little red wagon or the way the man slammed her against the side of the brick building and brutally finished his business.

The interaction cemented my hunch that I never wanted to pay for sex. Intimate access to someone else's body isn't something that should be up for sale. Sex should be consensual, pleasurable, and most of all, private.

That's why, though Twyla's invited me to come check out the club dozens of times over the years, I've always found an excuse to stay away.

Sure, The Garden is a place where sex is safe and consensual—no one's inside who doesn't desperately want to be there, who didn't undergo extensive vetting and spend years on a waitlist for the privilege—but the lack of privacy was a dealbreaker for me.

I'm not that kind of man. I'm too controlled to take a walk on the wild side, especially in public.

Or so I've always told myself.

But tonight...

Maybe tonight is for new beginnings, for exploring the world beyond boardrooms and balance sheets.

What's the worst that can happen? I take a look around, don't like what I see, and leave. It's not like I care if anyone I know sees me at the club. My family still lives in the same neighborhood where I grew up, albeit in much better accommodations, and couldn't care less what's happening on the posh side of Manhattan. I have a few business associates who might be shocked, but they aren't my associates any longer, and my friends aren't the kind to judge.

Hell, Weaver used to be a member of The Garden back before he fell madly, wildly in love with Sully his girlfriend. He doesn't realize I knew about his membership, but Twyla likes to talk, and I make it my business to know everything about my senior staff.

Weaver is incredible at his job, and already on my shortlist as a candidate to replace me in the new year.

Making a mental note to shoot him an email, giving him a heads-up that he's in line for a promotion if he decides to go after it, I mount the steps leading to the imposing entrance to the otherwise unassuming brownstone.

I've just blown up my entire life. The smart thing would be to go home, pour a scotch, and start compiling my list of replacement candidates for the board.

Or at least make an appointment with a therapist.

But I'm tired of being smart.

It's time to find out what happens when a logical man steps outside his comfort zone, when he stops trying to stay five steps ahead of the game and welcomes a little chaos into his life.

Lifting a surprisingly steady hand, I press the buzzer.

two

Maya Swallows

A good girl about to do

something very bad.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:58 am

Or something very brave?

Maybe both...

What the heckam I doing?

I've clearly lost my mind.

Or maybe I've entered an alternate reality, where good girls from rural Maine visit fancy, New York City sex clubs on Christmas Eve all the time.

Or maybe this is a dream, and I'm about to wake up in my cozy bed in Sea Breeze, where I've slept alone every night for the past twenty-four years.

Only, I don't want to wake up.

I'm a lobster out of water in a place like this, and more than a little scared, but also...fascinated.

I've never been anywhere like The Garden of Earthly Delights.

It's nothing like I imagined. Thanks to my friend Sydney and her billionaire boyfriend I know a little bit about the preferences of posh Manhattanites. On the cab ride here from my dingy, Midtown hotel, I was picturing gleaming hardwood floors, sky-high ceilings, tasteful modern art, and those heavy velvet drapes I've only ever seen in museums and Sydney's fancy Union Square penthouse.

The only thing I nailed was the drapes.

There are deep blue, velvet drapes everywhere, cloaking the entryway in shadows, muffling the sounds from deeper inside the club. The only thing I can hear is faint jazz music and the occasional tinkling of glass.

Thank God...

If they'd thrown me straight into a room filled with half-dressed people moaning while they did intimate things in public, I might have lost my nerve and run for the door.

Nope. No running, no matter what, the inner voice pipes up as I fidget on the thickly-padded bench where the bouncer instructed me to wait for a hostess. Not even if Weaver's friend can't help with your "special request," and tells you to learn what you can from lurking in corners and be out by one, before the really kinky stuff starts.

You will lurk.

You will learn.

Heck, maybe you'll even meet someone you like enough to experiment a little...

My cheeks burn at the thought while my stomach churns with a mixture of terror and something I can't quite name.

But it feels a little like excitement.

Or food poisoning.

Or a tumor about to explode in my upper intestine.

I'm not entirely sure.

But it's okay that my insides are in knots. Normal, even! Until tonight, the spiciest event in my personal history was the time Sully, Elaina, and I went to a male strip club during our senior trip to Atlantic City. I spent the entire show giggling my head off, until the sexy firefighter knelt down to waggle his "hose" inches from my face, and I blushed so hard I almost passed out.

Sully had to haul me out to the lobby for a breath of fresh air. There, Elaina put my head between my knees and rubbed my back until I stopped hyperventilating and insisted they go back inside and enjoy themselves.

I spent the rest of the show in the lobby with the cranky-looking bouncer, leaning against the wall, listening to the happy shrieks and music from inside, torn between feeling sad that I was missing out and relieved that there were no thinly-covered penises in my vicinity.

At eighteen, I was not ready for sex or anything sex adjacent. I was way too shy, and I'd seen firsthand how badly teenage romances could go awry. My cousin's long-term boyfriend dumped her at seventeen, just in time for her to give birth to their child alone, and my older sister Mallory had dated every abusive loser in a seventy-mile radius.

Only they didn't seem like losers at first...

Watching Mallory's boyfriends go from sweet and attentive to screaming at her in the driveway at midnight taught me a healthy respect for the changeable nature of men. And with a course load chocked full of AP classes designed to ensure I graduated with both my high school diploma and my associate's degree in business management by the end of my senior year, I didn't have time for stressful or unpredictable things. I was happy to stick to hanging out with my girlfriends and

binge-watching episodes of House Hunters on nights when Sully and Elaina were out with their men of the moment.

I didn't start thinking seriously about kissing until I was twenty, and for the first year of my "awakening," I was content to read steamy romance novels and enjoy quality alone time with my vibrator.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:58 am

I was twenty-one by the time I finally started flirting with men at the pub. I was twenty-one and a half when I realized no one in Sea Breeze wanted anything to do with sweet little Maya Swallows in that way. Boys my age want to be my friend, and older guys want to protect me like a sister. Even the tourists seemed to find it easy to steer clear of more than a kiss or two on the beach after the Friday night lobster boil.

In three years of dedicated effort, I've barely made it to third base.

Which is why I'm here. I'm twenty-four years old, for goodness sakes. I'm tired of waiting for Fate to throw me a bone. It's high time I took matters into my own hands and tracked down the bone myself.

The thought makes me think of boners, which makes me snort with nervous laughter, which makes me cough, ensuring I'm red-faced and wiping tears from the corners of my eyes when the hostess materializes from the velvet curtains like a supermodel genie emerging from a lamp.

"Are you all right?" she asks, her big brown eyes soft with concern.

I nod and press a hand to my chest, fighting to regain control. "Yes. Thank you, I just—" I cough again before sucking in a breath and holding it for a beat. When I'm certain the storm has passed, I exhale and offer a sheepish, "Sorry about that."

The insanely beautiful woman smiles warmly, her teeth as bright as the shimmery fabric of her gauzy white dress. "No need to apologize. I'll get you a glass of water when we get to Ms. Kincaid's office." She motions toward the deep V in the curtains to our right, where another beautifully carved door is tucked into the shadows. "Shall

we?”

“Oh. Yes. Thank you. Sure.” I gulp and stand, my hands fluttering nervously at my sides, two virginal birds certain they’re headed to the slaughter.

The hostess rests a slim hand on my shoulder, her touch cool through the black spandex of my borrowed gown. “Don’t worry,” she assures me softly. “We’ll be going through the bar to the back stairs. There’s a mandatory orientation before guests visit the garden level. We’ll make sure you’re comfortable and prepared before you join the fun.” She bobs an easy shoulder. “And if you’d prefer to spend the night in the bar or in the library with a good book, that’s fine, too. We have an incredible collection of novels and a fantastic little fireplace. It’s especially nice this time of year, with all the evergreen boughs hung around the mantle. I’m Raven, by the way.”

I nod, grateful for her kindness. “Thank you. That sounds wonderful.”

And it does sound wonderful. I love a night snuggled up with a good book beside a cozy fire.

But I’m not here to stay in my comfort zone.

I’m here to be a brave new Maya.

With that in mind, I follow Raven through the heavy door, into a room that smells of mulling spices and expensive whiskey. As my eyes adjust to the brighter light, I take in what has to be the most beautiful bar I’ve ever seen.

Soaring ceilings painted with clouds and cherubs float above walls covered in gleaming gold leaf and mirrors cut into geometric art deco patterns. A massive curved bar dominates one wall, its dark mahogany surface polished to a mirror shine and backed by shelves of glittering bottles that stretch all the way to the ceiling.

Crystal decanters catch the light from several chandeliers, sending rainbow prisms dancing across the black marble floor. Men and women in effortlessly chic evening wear lounge on velvet banquettes or perch on brass bar stools, their quiet conversation creating a low, intimate hum that makes my skin tingle.

The library we pass through next is even more impressive. Floor-to-ceiling bookshelves line every wall, filled with leather-bound volumes in muted jewel tones. A spiral staircase made of wrought iron curves up to a second-level gallery, where more books and intimate seating areas wait in shadowy alcoves. Here, the air smells of leather, old paper, and something spicy and sensual.

Maybe incense?

Or maybe it's the cologne the gorgeous older man beside the fire is wearing...

I gape at him as we near his table, my mouth falling open as I take in his tousled brown hair with the hint of gray at the temples, broad shoulders, and perfectly tailored suit. He looks like a movie star from a bygone age. and I'm possessed by the certainty that I'd like to sit close to him.

Very close.

So close I'd know for sure if that delicious sweet-tobacco, clove, and leather scent was coming from him or the bowls of herbs on the mantel...

As we pass by, his gaze locks with mine for a split second, but that's all it takes to electrify me from head to toe. My pulse jumps in my throat, my breath catches, and suddenly I'm positive he feels it too, this instant, powerful curiosity.

He wants to know me as much as I want to know him.

And he wouldn't mind if I pulled up the chair across from his and joined him for a drink...or something more.

A beat later, Raven turns left, and the gorgeous man is behind us, but I swear, I can feel his eyes on me, burning between my shoulder blades, making me keenly aware of my dress's low back and every inch of bare skin along the hollow of my spine.

Wow...

I never expected anything like that to happen tonight. Nothing like that has ever happened to me, not in my entire life. I was beginning to think I wasn't an "instant chemistry" kind of girl.

But maybe I am.

And maybe sticking around the club after my meeting would be okay, after all...

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:58 am

My plan was to speak to Twyla about my special request, hopefully get confirmation that I've been approved for one of her "top-secret" services, and head back to my hotel to recover from the trauma of doing hard new things.

But this isn't nearly as scary as I thought it would be.

Most of the patrons seem older than I am by a good ten or fifteen years, but I've always been more comfortable with older people. According to my parents, I was born an old soul, always more at ease in the kitchen chatting with my adult relatives at family gatherings than outside running wild with my cousins.

And these people seem nice. Their smiles as they chat are genuine, their laughter is warm. They seem like lovely, ordinary people enjoying a festive Christmas Eve with friends...or reading alone in sexy solitude like a hero ripped straight from my romantic fantasies.

Suddenly, I feel silly for assuming The Garden's patrons would be sex-crazed deviants desperate for a carnal fix.

After all, Weaver isn't a deviant.

I mean, he probably is in the bedroom—the look in his eyes when he watches Sully cross a room can get pretty predatory at times—but that's only part of his personality. There's a lot more to Weaver.

Maybe there's more to me, too. Maybe I can be the good, dutiful, responsible girl my parents raised me to be and a wild child who approaches gorgeous older men at sex

clubs...

Sex club.

I'm really inside a sex club.

The bizarre reality hits all over again, making my heart beat faster as Raven presses a code into a keypad hidden behind a fold in yet another heavy velvet curtain, opening a door concealed in the wall's wooden panel. With a bracing breath, I follow her up the stairs, doing my best not to hyperventilate.

This is really happening. I'm about to ask a complete stranger to help me hire a prostitute, which is not only scandalous but completely illegal.

If I'm caught, I could go to jail for this.

Or prison. Maybe for years.

And yes, Weaver is probably right—the police likely have more important things to do than prosecute a shy, twenty-something woman looking for a safe way to learn about sex from a respectful, vetted, disease-free older man—but still!

This is not like me! Not at all.

"Ms. Kincaid will be with you shortly." Raven gestures to a plush leather chair in what appears to be a normal office, albeit with some very provocative art on the walls. I don't think a single person in those paintings is wearing clothes, and I'm pretty sure one of the women is making out with a minotaur. "Would you like something to drink while you wait? Water? Tea? Glass of wine? Bourbon on ice?"

"No, thank you." My voice is a strangled squeak, but I force a smile and try to appear

chill as Raven closes the door.

The second she's gone, I sink into the chair and drop my head into my hands, pulling in deep breaths, struggling to remember everything Weaver told me about how to handle myself tonight...

One month earlier....

It's Thanksgiving at the Swallows' compound and all my best friends are here to share the end of the day with my family, the way they have every year since we were kids. Elaina and Sully do an early afternoon meal with their families, then head over to my place for our traditional evening meal, dessert buffet, and game night.

As usual, the chardonnay is flowing freely and the turkey is running late. But unlike seasons past, I've spent the past two hours watching my girlfriends canoodle with their sexy boyfriends and feeling increasingly alone.

This is it.

I'm about to be left behind.

If I don't find a way to grow up, glow up, and find a relationship of my own, I'm going to be the odd person out for the rest of my life. Which would be fine if I didn't want a sexy boyfriend, but I do.

I really, really do.

Watching Gideon's big hand curve around the small of Sydney's back as they stand chatting with my cousins in the living room is enough to make my entire body ache with longing. And when Weaver kisses Sully's forehead before gathering their appetizer plates and heading into the kitchen, I'm seized with the powerful certainty

that I have to do something.

Now.

Right now.

Following Weaver into the kitchen, I'm relieved to find my mom and aunts still in the sitting room, killing time playing bridge until it's time to put the finishing touches on the side dishes.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:58 am

If I hurry, there will be no one to overhear the madness about to come out of my mouth.

“I need your help,” I blurt out, my pulse already racing. “With something...kind of crazy.”

Weaver glances up from where he’s just finished sliding the dirty dishes into the already overflowing machine. “Crazy, huh?” His lips hook up on one side as he closes the washer. “Is this going to get me in trouble with Sully?”

“No.” I shake my head, blinking as the room spins a little.

Wow. I have had alotof chardonnay.

But that’s okay. That’s what had to happen to give me the courage to say the crazy stuff out loud.

“But you have to promise not to tellherthat I toldyouthat she toldmewhat she told me,” I babble, words coming fast with a mixture of nerves and fear that we’ll be interrupted before I get to the big ask. “I promised I wouldn’t tell, but Ihaveto tell. I would usually never break a promise, but I’m desperate and afraid I’ll never get another chance at something like this if I don’t ask this favor now.”

His smile fades, his expression growing serious as he nods. “All right. Shoot. I’m happy to help if I can.”

He’s telling the truth.

He loves Sully so much that her friends are his friends now. Weaver cares about Elaina, Sydney, and me, and wants our dreams to come true, I truly believe that.

The knowledge helps keep me from blushing hard enough to catch fire as I explain what Sully told me about the sex club they visited in New York.

And about his friend, who she was pretty sure ran a high-class escort service on the side, although Weaver refused to confirm or deny her hunch the night they were there doing wicked things to each other in a secret room...

“So, if that’s true,” I exhale in a rush as Weaver continues to stand staring at me with his inscrutable gray eyes. “Well, then I would like to...you know.”

His brows lift the slightest bit. “No, I don’t know.”

I swallow around the anxiety knot in my throat. “Well, if it is true, and the people she employs are safe and nice and trustworthy—and not too terribly expensive—then I would...” I take a fortifying gulp of my chardonnay, blurting out as I swallow, “I’d like to hire someone to show me things. Sexual things.”

His expression shifts only the tiniest bit, but Weaver is a master of the stone face. That twitch around his eyes was the equivalent of a jaw drop from anyone else.

I hurry to assure him, “I’ve thought about this, I promise. I know what I’m asking.” The wine makes the words tumble out faster. “I’m twenty-four years old, with no prospects on the horizon, and I’m dying to know what I’m missing. But I can’t find out here. Everyone knows everyone, and everyone thinks I’m a boring little mouse with the sex vibe of a bag of animal crackers.”

“Animal crackers?” he echoes dryly. “I doubt that. You’re an attractive young woman, Maya. Not to mention kind and a wonderful friend.”

I fight the urge to roll my eyes, the way I do every time some well-meaning member of my family says the same sort of thing. “Thank you, but no one around here shares your opinion, and I’m too much of a scaredy cat to try to pick up a stranger in Boston or New York City or anywhere else. Men are dangerous, Weaver. I’ve listened to all the murder podcasts. I know the statistics. In the U.S., men are the leading killer of women under the age of forty-four. Killer, Weaver. I could be killed trying to find a boyfriend or by my boyfriend if he turns out to be as awful as my sister’s ex-husband. And I’m not ready to roll the dice on that. I just want to satisfy my curiosity with someone professional and...safe.”

A darkness moves behind his eyes, but I know I’m not the thing that’s made him angry. “I’m sorry you have to consider things like that when looking for a partner. Men should be fucking better.”

“I know, but a lot of them aren’t, so...” I trail off with a shrug. “So maybe it’s not totally crazy to do something like this?” I glance toward the front room, ensuring we’re still alone before adding in a soft hiss, “Even though it’s technically illegal, and I guess I could go to jail if I get caught?”

“I’m sure the police have better things to do than prosecute a young woman looking for a safe way to engage with a man on her own terms,” he says, sending a flutter of hope through my chest even though he still looks decidedly less-than-thrilled by our conversation. “Does Sully know about this plan?”

“No.” I shake my head. “Like I said, I wasn’t supposed to tell you that I knew about the club or your friend. And I don’t want her to know. I don’t really want you to know, either, but you’re the only person who might be able to connect me with this woman so...”

He sighs as he runs a hand through his hair. “I’m probably going to regret this, but...all right. I’ll set up a meeting.”

I bite my lip and stand up straighter. “Really? You will?”

“I will. When are you available?”

“Christmas Eve through New Year’s Day,” I say, hurrying on at his surprised look. “It’s the only time I can get away from the rental business. I’ll be in New York City for the entire week. I told my mom I’m cat sitting for a friend of Sydney’s. She wasn’t happy about me missing the holidays with the family, but she knows how much I love cats. And I told her I’d take Pudge with me so she wouldn’t have to cat-sit my cat while I was cat sitting someone else’s cat so...”

He sighs again. “All right. Fine. I’ll make a call and text you the details.”

I set my wine on the island, threading my fingers together in a single grateful fist. “Oh, thank you, Weaver. Thank you so much. You won’t regret it, I promise.”

Now...

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:58 am

But will I regret it, I wonder as the office door opens, startling me out of the memory and banishing worries about how Pudge, my orange tabby, is doing back at the hotel with the clanging pipes.

Twyla Kincaid ambles in, the picture of leonine grace in a perfectly tailored beige suit. Her golden hair falls in shiny waves down to the middle of her back and her makeup is applied with a light touch that leaves her looking natural and effortlessly pulled together.

She's nothing like what I expected, either.

She looks more like the CEO of a luxury brand than a madam.

She studies me for a moment before offering a crooked grin. "Well, well, I wasn't sure you'd show, Weaver's friend. But you did. I'm proud of you. It isn't easy, taking your destiny into your own hands as a woman, especially when you're only twenty-three."

"Twenty-four," I wheeze, having trouble drawing a full breath. "And my name is Maya."

Twyla's smile widens and her hazel eyes dance. "Twenty-four. Wonderful. Twenty-four is the perfect age for a woman to realize she's the only one who's going to make her dreams come true." She clasps her hands together. "Now, let's see what we can do to take care of you, Maya. Tell me exactly what you're looking for. I want to know all your hopes, dreams, and fantasies. Don't hold anything back and don't be embarrassed. This is a safe space, and I promise you, I've heard it all before."

I swallow hard and gather my courage, pushing aside the last of my nerves and doubt.

I've come this far.

No turning back now...

three

ANTHONY

From what I've seen thus far, it's no wonder The Garden is the hottest ticket in town. It's not just the top-secret, salacious, borderline-unattainable nature of membership that has the Who's Who of New York dying to step through those big ebony doors.

The club is simply...perfect.

It somehow manages to be both grand and cozy at the same time. From the jaw-dropping period luxury of the bar to a library fit for a lord's manor in the Scottish Highlands, I see how it could become a place you would never want to leave.

And I haven't even been downstairs yet...

Twyla insisted on giving me the full tour herself later this evening, as soon as she finishes an intake appointment with a potential client.

The clientele is as impressive as the club itself. Wall Street movers and shakers mingle with elites from the theater and fashion world, international businessmen and businesswomen, and a handful of socialites. There's a fair amount of diversity, but all of Twyla's members have one thing in common—they're offensively wealthy.

Maybe it isn't offensive to most people, but for a man raised in Red Hook, Brooklyn,

who never knew if there would be money for fruit or a school field trip on a given week, the amount of wealth most of these people have is obscene. The amount of wealth I have is obscene, but I do my best to spread my good fortune around.

I've worked incredibly hard for everything I have, but I'm not naïve enough to think that hard work is the only reason I achieved success.

I also got very lucky.

I won the genetic lottery in the brains department, had a loving family who stepped in to care for me when my drug addict mother left me on my grandmother's doorstep, and joined the banking world in between financial crises. I had time to solidify my position when so many other young geniuses were scapegoated when the housing market tanked a few years later.

I'm very aware of my privilege, a thing that sets me apart from many of the people sipping hundred-dollar-per-shot whiskey in oversized tumblers or ordering appetizers off a menu where a fifty-dollar Caesar salad is the most affordable option.

Still, I'm not a fish out of water.

I've been a millionaire for a long time and a billionaire for three mind-boggling years, my net worth ballooning as the longest bull market in recent memory lifted the tech stocks in my portfolio to new heights.

As strange as it seems to the struggling kid still alive inside me, I belong here.

But this girl...

This young woman, with the glossy brown hair partially tied back in a black velvet bow, plush, bow-tie lips, and big blue eyes that dart around the club like she's

looking for snipers hidden in the bookcases...

I have no idea what she's doing here. Her lightly scuffed shoes and worn vintage dress make it clear she doesn't have the financial means to be swimming in these waters, but it's her expression that makes me ache to get her out of here. She looks like a five-year-old on her first day of kindergarten—intimidated, terrified, and certain the older kids are going to eat her for lunch.

I'm making a mental note to ask Twyla to make sure someone looks out for this kid while she's here, when her wide-eyed gaze shifts my way.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:58 am

Our eyes lock for a brief, electric moment—a moment during which the woman's perfect mouth parts and heat flashes in her eyes. Instantly, she's transformed from a fish out of water to a siren, luring men to their deaths on the sharp rocks at the edge of the sea.

She bites her lip, arches her full brow the slightest bit, and I'm suddenly certain that she's thinking of all the ways she'd like to devour me.

All the ways she'd like to be devoured...

And then, the moment's over.

She turns to follow one of the hostesses through the secret door to Twyla's inner sanctum, and I'm left staring at the wooden panel through which she disappeared, thinking more unexpected thoughts.

I hadn't planned to engage in anything salacious tonight. In my head, I thought maybe I'd end up watching. Or more likely, spending the evening with Twyla in the library, catching up.

But I'm here and already way outside my comfort zone...

Maybe it would be okay to approach the girl with the ocean eyes, to ask her why she's at The Garden tonight, and see if I can't be the man to fulfill every one of her carnal fantasies.

I turn my attention back to the book I pulled off the shelves, but Great Expectations

has lost its appeal.

The only expectations I'm concerned with are the ones the woman in black velvet is detailing to Twyla right now.

What I would give to be a fly on the wall of my old friend's office right now...

I finish my scotch, keeping one eye on the panel, but when it opens again, it isn't my girl on the other side, it's Twyla. She spots me and crooks a finger my way, playfully beckoning me to follow her.

I rise with a smile and cross the room.

"Beautiful, as always," I murmur as we cheek kiss, a custom from Twyla's native France that's stuck with her long after her accent faded away.

"Thank you," she says, pulling back with a wink. "And you look like you've been through the wringer. Come, tell Auntie T all your troubles."

She turns and I follow her up the stairs. Her Italian leather pumps click lightly on the marble, their supple brown perfectly completing an outfit my ex-wife would have killed for.

Erica had a fashion addiction equaled only by her addiction to cheating with people I unknowingly passed on the street every day. After the debacle with the doorman, I hired a private investigator to see what else my wife had been up to while I was working too hard. Turns out she was also involved with the UPS man, one of her trainers at the gym, and the kid who cut deli meat at the upscale grocery store down the street.

When I told Twyla as much, she insisted I have my "meat" tested for diseases, refusing

to tolerate the idea of me giving Erica everything she wanted in the divorce if my soon-to-be ex had saddled me with some exotic STD.

Luckily, my “meat” got the all-clear, and I emerged from my marriage without any lasting physical damage.

Emotionally, I’m not sure I can say the same.

I’ve told myself I’ve just been too busy at the office to get involved with anyone since my divorce, but deep down, I know fear is part of it, too. I’m afraid to open my heart, afraid of being deceived and betrayed all over again.

But I’m suddenly not afraid of running my hands over a woman’s velvet-covered curves in a dark corner...

As we step into Twyla’s office, I glance around, disappointed to find that we’re alone.

Where has Velvet gone and how can I ask without sounding like a creepy old man? The woman had to be at least fifteen years my junior, maybe more, but that look she shot my way makes me think she wasn’t bothered by our age difference.

“Another scotch?” Twyla asks as she crosses to the wet bar.

“No, thank you,” I say, taking a closer look at the décor now that it’s clear we’re alone. The office is what I’d expect from my old friend—elegant but provocative, with leather-bound books lining one wall and erotic art adorning another. The view of the East Village through the window behind her large desk reveals that the snow is still falling outside, swiftly covering the trail I left on my way here.

New York is a city that excels at keeping secrets in all seasons, but especially in

winter. In the early darkness amid softly drifted snow, New York seems to whisper that it's okay to loosen your hold on your self-control, to ease into the shadows and indulge the longings you've kept hidden through the glaring summer and wholesome fall.

"Just for me then," Twyla says, settling behind her desk with a glass of amber liquid sloshing around one giant round piece of ice. "The great and prudish Anthony Pissarro finally graces my naughty establishment with his presence." She swirls her drink with a grin. "Should I mark the occasion by naming a playroom after you? Perhaps commission a plaque for the men's room?"

"Very funny." I sink into the chair across from hers, the leather butter-soft against my back. "This is actually the least unexpected thing I've done in the past two hours." I pull in a breath as I loosen my tie, my pulse picking up again as I speak the words aloud for the first time, "I quit my job."

Her eyes widen. "What?"

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:58 am

“I quit, effective immediately,” I repeat. “To be specific, I walked out in the middle of a board meeting and told my assistant to pack up my office because I wouldn’t be back.”

“Holy shit.” Twyla leans forward, drink abandoned as her perfectly manicured nails drum against her desk. “You finally lost it. I knew you would, sooner or later. You’re too tightly wound for things to end any other way.”

I exhale a tight laugh. “I’m not tightly wound, and I didn’t lose it.”

She arches a challenging brow.

I drag a hand through my hair. “I mean, I don’t think I did. The what-the-fuck-did-I-do is setting in now, but at the time...I was calm. It suddenly became clear to me that I was done with it. All of it. With private equity and board meetings and maximizing profits at all costs.” I sigh. “The game doesn’t feel worth playing anymore. That part of my life is over.” As I say the words, a certainty deep in my bones assures me they’re true. “Now, it’s time to figure out what comes next.”

Twyla nods, her gaze sharpening with interest. “Hell, yes, my friend. This is how we level up! This is how we evolve and become the people we’re meant to be. Tell me everything.”

So, I do. I tell her about the hollowness that’s been growing inside me, a numbness that crept in so slowly I didn’t realize how pervasive it had become until I looked into the mirror in my private bathroom this afternoon and was shocked by the flat, empty look in my own eyes. I tell her how the moment sent me down a rabbit hole,

struggling to remember the lasttime I felt truly excited about anything aside from my morning run, deepening the suspicion that this was more than my usual winter blues.

“I tried to power through the meeting, but I couldn’t,” I finish. “I had to go. Right then. At the time, it felt like there was no other choice. But now...” I huff out a tight laugh. “I should have stayed, given at least six weeks’ notice,” I admit. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I have everything I ever wanted—a challenging job, the money to take care of my people, power, safety, the ability to change the world for the better, but I’m still...”

“Bored out of your brilliant mind,” Twyla finishes for me. She rises gracefully and moves back to the bar cart beside the bookshelves. “You need that second scotch. Don’t fight me, just tell me if you want it on the rocks or straight up.”

“Rocks, please.” I watch as she pours a generous measure of the peat-and-woodsmoke scented liquid into the glass. “I kept thinking it was just the holidays. It’s two years to the day since I walked in on Erica with the doorman.”

“Don’t blame this on Erica.” Twyla hands me a crystal tumbler and perches on the edge of her desk, crossing her arms. “Catching her in the act was a gift from the gods. Fate was looking out for you that day, my friend. You were bored to tears in that marriage long before she started sleeping with the doorman.”

I wince. “I wasn’t bored.”

“Youwere,” she doubles down, as allergic to bullshit and lies as she’s always been. “A part of you realized you’d been tricked into marrying someone who wasn’t nearly as ‘perfect for you’ as she seemed.”

I frown, hating that she’s right. Erica played me from the beginning, but I was too naïve, too new to being a very wealthyman to realize I was being hunted like a

trophy, not pursued by someone who truly cared for the person I am.

“I never liked what being with her did to you,” Twyla continues. “She took the shine out of your eyes. You were living a lie with her, Anthony. A posh, high society lie, but a lie all the same.” She takes a sip of her scotch. “And that’s not acceptable for someone like you. You need more than that. You’re like me. You need authenticity and truth and challenges that keep you on your toes.”

“So, what’s your prescription, oh wise one?” I gesture around her office. “Should I open a rival sex club across town? Give you a run for your money?”

“You could try, but I’d have to kill you.” She adds with a grin, “And you wouldn’t be good at running a club, anyway. You’re too American. You have to have at least a little French in you to excel at running a business based in hedonistic pleasure. That’s why all the best restaurants in the city are French.” She winks. “But I do have an idea for you. Your timing is perfect actually. It’s like Fate arranged for you to be here tonight. Maybe Fate loves you on Christmas Eve.”

My brows lift. “Oh yeah?”

“Yes.” Her expression grows thoughtful—and a little wicked—as she studies me over the rim of her glass. “I just had a rather fascinating meeting with a brave young woman looking for something...specific.”

My heart squeezes in my chest.

Velvet...

I’m not one to believe in fate or signs from the universe, but the fact that Twyla brought the girl up without any prompt from me has my latent superstitious side perking up and taking notice. Still, I have to play it cool. I don’t want to let on that

I'm interested until I'm sure what Twyla's getting at. "Oh yeah? And that concerns me because..."

"Because you need a project," she says without missing a beat. "Something meaningful to keep you busy while you meditate on what comes next. Something that will prove to you that your brilliant mind excels at things aside from numbers and raising a bloodthirsty private equity firm's bottom line."

"You were a fan of that bloodthirsty firm when it helped you open a second location in London," I remind her.

"Don't change the subject." She sets her glass down with a decisive click. "This is perfect. For both of you. You need a distraction and some fun in your dreary, all-work-no-play life, and she needs someone experienced. Someone safe. Someone who can show her pleasure without taking advantage." She bites the edge of her lip, her eyes dancing. "And you happen to be exactly what she asked for."

"What did she ask for?" The words are out—swift and eager—before I can remind myself to exercise caution.

Twyla exhales a victorious sound. "I knew it! I knew you would have noticed her on her way in. She's a diamond in the rough, isn't she? A stunning, unspoiled beauty, just waiting for the right circumstances to help her step into her power. Her passion..." Twyla leans closer, adding in a softer voice, "but she didn't come here looking for a club membership. She came as one of my more...discreet clients."

My brows shoot up. "She wants to hire a prostitute?"

Twyla lets out a hissing sound and swats lightly at my shoulder. "Escort, my friend! I work with escorts. Very high-class, accomplished, well-vetted escorts."

“Escorts who sleep with their clients,” I shoot back.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:58 am

I'm no prude, but I've never been entirely comfortable with this part of Twyla's business. I know the state and federal governments both tend to look the other way when it comes to the misdemeanors of the very wealthy, but all it would take is a morality-minded law enforcement agency on a mission and Twyla could be headed to prison.

I trust that she's done an excellent job of shielding herself from prosecution, but no plan is foolproof when it comes to evading the long arm of the law.

"But I do have a vacancy in my roster of impressive companions that I didn't grasp until this evening," she continues, ignoring my fears as she always does. "I have several beautiful, kind, talented men on offer, but no one over the age of thirty-five. And my client specifically asked for an older man." She arches a pointed brow my way. "Someone close to forty with a strong, steady way about him. Someone smart, compassionate, and patient, who won't make her feel embarrassed when she asks too many questions or doesn't know exactly what to do."

"Is that right?" Heat threads through my core. I tell myself it's the scotch, but I know better.

I would never make Velvet feel embarrassed, and I can't imagine anything sexier than helping a beautiful young woman feel empowered to ask for whatever gives her pleasure. She already knows what she wants, that look we shared left no doubt about that in my mind.

She just needs to trust her instincts, her desire...

“Her name’s Maya,” Twyla continues in a soft, seductive voice, luring me like a hunter dropping bait along a woodland trail. “She’s twenty-four. A successful real estate manager with an eye to build an empire of her own. Beautiful. Smart as a whip. Sweet. Stronger than she knows, and...completely inexperienced. And I do mean completely.”

“She’s a virgin?” I ask, a little embarrassed by the way my cock stirs at the thought. I’m not one of those guys who gets off on the thought of “deflowering” young women.

Or so I thought...

But the idea of being Velvet’s first, Maya’s first...

It does something to me. Something that could get embarrassing if I don’t get control of the way my blood is suddenly rushing south.

“She is. Just a shy babe in the woods starting to wonder if she’ll ever learn the ropes in the bedroom.” Twyla’s smile turns wicked. “Sound like anyone you know?”

I arch a brow. “I wasn’t a virgin at twenty-four.”

“But you were at twenty.” She laughs. “I still remember the look on your face when Jane dragged you into her bedroom at that Halloween party. You looked like you were about to be eaten alive.”

“I don’t remember things that way.”

“Well, I do. And I have a much better memory than you do.” She stands and moves back behind the desk, glancing out at the snowfall growing thicker outside the window. “You were a lot like her once. The child prodigy with a dozen degrees, who

didn't know how to talk to girls. Who thought physical pleasure was a distraction from his intellectual pursuits."

"I remember," I admit. "But I didn't think physical pleasure was a distraction. I just didn't know how to make the transition from being in my head to being in my body. It took practice."

"Exactly, but now you're on the other side," Twyla says. "Now, you're the kind of man who can dampen panties with a look."

I choke on my scotch, while Twyla laughs.

Once I've cleared my sinuses, I laugh with her, shaking my head as she eases back into her big chair. "You've taken things too far. As usual."

She grins her typical, shameless grin. "Never. I take things just far enough. You're a lightly silvered fox, my friend, and exactly what Maya needs. You can show her that pleasure and control aren't mutually exclusive. That it's possible to have both."

I nod. "Perhaps, but I'm not an escort."

"Not yet. But all you have to do is say the word and you're hired." She pushes on as I start to protest, "She's still here. I asked Raven to give her a tour of the playrooms, so she could see what else we have on offer while I looked for an escort to meet her unique needs." She reaches for her cell. "I can message Raven now, ask her to show Maya to a private room for a meeting with a potential match."

My jaw falls open, but the "no" on the tip of my tongue goes unspoken.

I could see her again. Right now.

Not just see her, but talk to her, maybe even touch her...

“Just take the meeting,” Twyla cajoles. “In private. We could even have you both go in masked, if you’d like, for extra anonymity. Then, if there’s no chemistry, there’s no risk of exposure on either side. But if there is...”

“This is insane,” I say, but I don’t sound outraged or reluctant. I sound like I’m looking for a reason to forget all the reasons I shouldn’t consider this. In an effort to make sure I don’t forget, I add, “She’s half my age, and I’m not the professional she came here for. I don’t like lying to people.”

“What are a few white lies for the good of two people in need?” Twyla asks, brushing aside my worries with a wave of her hand. “And yes, she’s young, but she’s a grown woman who knows what she wants. And she wants you.” Twyla cocks her head, her expression serious for once. “Think about it, Anthony. When was the last time you did something purely because it felt good or would make someone else feel good? When was the last time you made a real connection?”

“It wouldn’t be real. It would be a performance,” I insist. “Pretend.”

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:58 am

“But beautiful pretend,” she whispers. “Life-changing, life-giving, dreams-can-come-true pretend. I, for one, think you both deserve that.”

I pull in a breath, holding it as my conscience does battle with the wild curiosity pumping through my veins.

In the end, curiosity wins.

I’m dying to know more about this girl, and agreeing to a meeting doesn’t mean I have to agree to the rest of the job.

Though I should probably know what that “job” would entail, just in case.

“A week of playing the attentive, passionate boyfriend, that’s it,” Twyla says when I ask, a smug grin on her face that makes it clear she thinks she’s already won this game. “She’s from Maine and is only in the city for a week, specifically to learn about romance and pleasure from someone patient and trustworthy whom she’ll never have to see again.”

“Never is a long time. I do have a public presence, Twyla. She might see pictures of me online at some point, and learn who I really am.”

Twyla shrugs. “Perhaps. But I doubt she’ll be upset to learn that her sexy older escort was more than he appeared to be at the time. Hell, she’d probably be thrilled. Either way, she can’t expose you without exposing herself. You’d be safe.”

“Right,” I mutter with a roll of my eyes, but my thoughts are already racing ahead.

One week. No strings.

No expectations beyond teaching a beautiful young woman about pleasure, making her feel good, sexy, worshipped between the sheets...

Fuck me, but I want that.

I want her, and it looks like my logical mind is once again on the losing side of the table.

"I'll take the meeting," I say, adding in a firm voice as Twyla exhales a soft sound of victory, "but I can't promise anything beyond that. Not until I've talked to her."

"Of course," she stands, pausing before she adds, "but don't be afraid to do more than talk. That's what she's here for and you look gorgeous tonight."

"I thought you said I looked like hell?" I challenge.

She shrugs. "Even hell looks good on a man like you, darling." She motions to her left, where another hidden panel is slowly opening, revealing a friendly-looking young man in an elegant black suit. "Theo will show you to the dressing room and help fit you for a comfortable mask." To Theo she adds, "Anything he needs, make it happen. Anthony isn't just any new hire, he's a dear friend."

"I haven't said I'll take the job yet," I remind her as I rise from my chair. "And even if I do, I don't want to be paid. I'll take the job pro bono."

Twyla rolls her eyes. "You're not a lawyer, and this isn't Wall Street. Go. Have fun. Forget to be bossy and in control for once in your life." She bites her lip before adding with a husky laugh, "Or be bossy and in control in a different way. I think Maya might like that. You might, too. There are worse things than a beautiful woman

telling you ‘yes, sir’ when you ask her to unbutton her blouse.”

I pause at the exit, turning back to point a warning finger at my friend, “Stop.”

“Why?” she asks, still grinning. “Don’t like it when I give you delicious new ideas.”

“I don’t like making private things public,” I say. “If I decide to spend the week with Maya, what we do behind closed doors will be between her and me.”

Sobering, Twyla nods. “Of course. I understand. And I respect that.”

“Good,” I say, unable to resist adding as I grip the door handle, “and I’m not as tightly wound as you think. I know how to take control when control is what’s called for.”

“I knew it,” Twyla hisses. “I knew you had a bossy daddy side. You should embrace it. Women love that kind of thing. I can give you a few tips for establishing guidelines and safe words, if you’d like.”

I shut the door on her offer.

I don’t need that kind of advice.

More importantly, I don’t have time for it.

I have a meeting to prepare for, and a beautiful, intriguing young woman I don’t want to keep waiting...

chapter 4

MAYA

Twyla found someone.

A man.

A man who might betheman.

The man I'm going to pay ten-thousand dollars to have sex with me...

"Holy shit," I wheeze as I pace the private suite two floors beneath the city street, shaking my hands at my sides as my heart does it's best to punch a hole through my sternum. "This is fine. It's fine! You decided it was fine in Maine and on the train into Manhattan and while you were getting dressed tonight. If it was fine then; it's fine now."

Itisfine.

For six years, I've pinched every penny, squirreling away a nest egg to use to buy my first rental property. Now, I have enough for the down payment on the apartment building I'll be closing on next weekanda high-class prostitute.

"Oh my God, you're hiring a prostitute. Who are you and what have you done with the real Maya?" I sag onto the soft yellow couch on one side of the suite and drop my head between my knees, fighting to pull myself together as the reality of what I've done hits me full force.

It's not about the money.

It was never about the money.

The problem is that I'm light-years out of my comfort zone and likely careening toward the worst decision I've made in my entire life. I've always been the good one, the dependable one, the friend you can count on to remember when the term paper is due, where the lifeguard stands are, and who in the group is allergic to shellfish.

I'm a good girl and good girls don't hire prostitutes.

They also don't lie to their parents or their friends or make secret plans to move to New York if everything goes well with their new rental property. But I've done all of those things, and now I'm here, on the verge of seeing who I might become if I stop worrying so much about being "good" and see what being brave can do for me for once.

It might lead me into a wild, wonderful new life as a self-made millionaire before the age of thirty. At the very least, it has a high likelihood of getting me laid, and I'm pretty interested in that.

Heck, I was very interested in that less than an hour ago, when I locked eyes with that gorgeous man by the fire.

I've never felt desire like that before, such an instant, overwhelming attraction that my heart instantly beat faster and my nipples pulled tight inside my bra. Just the memory of him sitting there, reading in that big leather chair, with his perfectly mussed hair and intelligent gaze makes heat throb between my thighs.

Thinking of the man—and hoping whoever Twyla found is as effortlessly sexy—I pull in a honeysuckle-and-thyme scented breath and exhale for a count of seven as I

sit up. I smooth my hair and fold my hands in my lap to keep them from shaking and focus on my beautiful surroundings, willing the Zen of the space to soak into my wobbly bones.

The suite is beautiful, like everything else in The Garden. Soft lighting from art deco sconces bathes the small sitting room in golden warmth. On the far wall, a rolling brass bar cart holds crystal decanters and glasses.

And then there are the French doors...

I can't tell for sure, but I think there's a bed on the other side of those doors—a bed that makes this meeting feel charged with exhilarating, terrifying possibilities.

But surely, we're not going to do anything in that bed tonight. This meeting is just to see if the man Twyla selected feels like a good match. If the vibes aren't right, we won't even see each other's faces.

I touch soft fingers to the black silk mask covering the top half of my face, the reminder that I'm partially hidden bolstering my resolve. I'm in disguise, in costume. I don't have to be shy Maya from Maine during this meeting. I can be a confidant, sophisticated woman who knows exactly what she wants.

Or at least pretend to be one...

Suddenly, the door handle dips and the door swings open, sending my blood pressure skyrocketing all over again.

I start to stand, to extend a hand and murmur the appropriate pleasantries—even if I feel about ten seconds from passing out—but then steps inside, and my knees turn to Jell-O.

It's him.

The man by the fire.

Even with a black mask obscuring the upper half of his face, I know those broad shoulders and perfectly tailored suit on sight.

I gulp and try to think of something to say other than—"God, you're like something straight out of my dirtiest, sexiest dreams."—while he eases into the room with the grace of a man completely at home in his own skin.

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:58 am

But of course, he's confident.

He's gorgeous and tall and built like a Greek god. And he probably makes high six figures a year pleasuring women out of their minds. Thanks to Weaver, I'm getting a fifty-percent "friend of The Garden" discount. This beautiful, sex-panther of a man usually earns twenty thousand dollars a week.

But he's agreed to devour me at a discount.

Devour...

He looks like he might gobble me up in one bite. His dark eyes are still intelligent, captivating, behind that mask, but they're also...hungry.

He looks like he wants to strip me bare and carry me through the French doors to the bed lurking in the shadows.

Or maybe ravage me right here on the couch...

Before I can decide if the thought is daunting or delicious, he trips over the edge of the Persian rug, nearly falling before he pulls his big hands from the pockets of his suit pants and braces a palm on the wall.

"Damn," he mutters with a soft laugh. "Well, that's my two left feet for you. Hope you don't want to go dancing."

I grin, relief flooding through my chest. His voice is every bit as rumbly and perfect

as I'd hoped it would be, and the self-effacing smile beneath his mask is...charming.

And sweet. And sexy.

And I think I just fell in love at first sight all over again.

"Don't worry about it," I assure him, standing with a nervous grin. "I'm a total klutz and haven't danced since my friend's bar mitzvah in junior high when I tripped on a chair and fell into the punch bowl."

He laughs, warmth and compassion in the sound. "Poor pre-teen you."

"Poor punch bowl," I joke as I extend a hand, proud to see that my fingers are only trembling a little bit. "I'm Maya from Sea Breeze, Maine."

"Anthony from New York City, New York." His big hand closes around mine, making me feel small and electrified and alive in a way I never have before. By the time he gives my palm a gentle squeeze and releases it with a husky, "Pleasure to meet you, Maya," my panties are damp.

If a simple handshake with this man is capable of arousing that kind of response, I'm a little scared to know what kissing him might do.

I'm also intrigued and eager and already certain that he's the one. I'd tell Twyla to sign my name on the dotted line right now, but there's no rush.

We have an entire half hour to get to know each other.

I already know it won't be long enough. I'm ridiculously thirsty for more of his voice, his words, his touch...

He nods toward the bar cart. “Can I get you a drink? A glass of wine, maybe?”

I shake my head. “No, thank you. I can’t always be trusted with wine. It makes me say embarrassing things.”

He tilts his head to one side, making his thick hair fall deliciously over his forehead. “What sort of embarrassing things?”

I pull in a breath and exhale in a rush, “Well, last month I drank three glasses of chardonnay and asked my best friend’s boyfriend to help me hire a male escort. So...that was pretty embarrassing.”

He laughs again and the heat curling between my thighs burns a little brighter. “I don’t know. I don’t think that’s embarrassing. Sounds pretty brave to me. Especially for someone your age.”

I bite my lip, hoping my age isn’t going to be a problem. “Thank you. I’m twenty-four, by the way. I know I look younger, but that’s just the chubby cheeks.” I motion toward my face with a nervous laugh. “Not sure if you can see them beneath the mask. I inherited them from my mom. But she got carded until she was forty, so I guess they aren’t all bad.”

He shakes his head slowly. “Your cheeks aren’t chubby. They’re beautiful. And I um...” He glances down at the thick carpet before lifting a slightly sheepish gaze to mine. “I remember you. From the library. When you walked through the room, I...couldn’t look away.”

My heart is trampolining in my chest now, but I do my best to play it cool as I say, “I noticed you, too. You were reading *Great Expectations*, one of my favorites.”

He nods. “Mine, too. It’s a master class in character development.”

“And one of the best books about finding yourself and your place in the world that I’ve ever read,” I say, before adding in a softer voice, “the romance is pretty good, too.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:58 am

“It is,” he says with a smile. “I like romance.” He takes a step closer and then another, sending his clove and leather smell through my head. “I think a lot of men do. They’re just too indoctrinated to admit it. But love stories are important.” He lifts a shoulder and lets it fall. “I think we all want to live one. Even if we’re not brave enough to admit it.”

I fight the sigh rising in my chest.

God, this man is perfect. Almost...too perfect.

There has to be something wrong with him. If there isn’t, I’m not sure a mere mortal like myself is fit to be in his company, even if I am paying for the privilege.

“Tell me something embarrassing? About you?” I hear myself blurt out. I wince and smile as I explain, “Because so far, you seem like you have it all way too together.”

“Even after tripping on the way in?”

“But you recovered beautifully,” I counter. “It was very smooth.”

He inclines his head. “Well, thank you.” He exhales. “All right, something embarrassing...” His smile fades as he studies me with an intensity that further imperils my panties. “I can’t think of something offhand, but I want you to know... You don’t have to take this path if you don’t want to. You’re beautiful and intelligent and completely charming, Maya. I’m sure there are a hundred good men in this city who would be thrilled to take you on as many dates as you want, free of charge.”

I tell myself it's a line he uses with all his clients.

I warn myself not to fall for it.

But in the end, I can't help it. I believe him.

He just seems so sincere.

"But I don't want a hundred other men," I whisper. "I want you."

It's bold and ballsy and not at all like me, but I don't regret the words for a second.

Especially when his gaze darkens and his voice comes out husky as he asks, "Are you sure?"

I nod, heart galloping as he eases even closer, until his body heat warms me through my dress and the look in his eyes makes my throat go tight.

"Don't you think we should talk some more first?" He lifts a hand, brushing the hair from my forehead before letting his warm fingertips linger on my cheek, setting off tiny explosions of pleasure that make it even harder to breathe. "Or maybe something more than talk? I could be a terrible kisser."

"You aren't a terrible kisser," I shoot back, not a trace of doubt in my tone.

His lips quirk as his arm slides around my waist. "I don't think I am, but like so many things in life, kissing is subjective," he murmurs, drawing me slowly closer.

Closer, closer, until the feel of my breasts flattening against his solid chest ignites a longing unlike anything I've felt in my entire life. I'm suddenly simmering, tingling, on fire from the soles of my feet to the tip of my nose, and so dizzy I'm pretty sure I

would sag to the floor if his arm weren't tight around me.

But it is, tight and strong, pinning me close as his mouth finds mine.

And then he kisses me, slow and easy, as his free hand glides up my bare back to fist in the hair at the nape of my neck. I cling to the front of his suit coat, meeting each stroke of his tongue with what I hope isn't ridiculous enthusiasm, trying not to gasp as his other hand slips down to cup my ass.

He squeezes my curves as he pulls me closer, until I can feel the long hard length of him behind his fly.

He wants me. He really does!

This isn't just a business arrangement. Or, if it is, it's one it seems he's going to enjoy.

Though I doubt he'll enjoy it as much as I already am...

A small, hungry sound escapes my lips as I rock against his erection, my panties soaked. And then he growls low in his throat and lifts me into his arms, guiding my legs around his waist, and the integrity of my underwear is a thing of the past.

He presses me against the empty wall near the bar cart, angling his head as the kiss grows harder, deeper, causing the edges of our masks to press together. The reminder of how strange and forbidden all this is should bring me back to my senses, but it doesn't.

I continue to cling to him like the last port in a storm as his lips blaze a path down my throat and his big hand cups my breast through my dress. His fingers tighten around my E cup, the curves that have always felt like too much fitting perfectly in his big

hand, and the last of my doubt evaporates in the heat building between us.

I don't care if this is wrong or crazy or the wildest thing I'll ever do.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:58 am

I want this man. I want him tonight and tomorrow night and every night I can get between now and when we go our separate ways.

“I think chemistry’s covered,” he murmurs when he finally pulls his lips from mine.

As he sets me back on my feet, we’re both breathing hard. He steadies me with a hand on my hip. I lean against the wall behind me, but keep my palms on his chest, marveling at the feel of his heart racing as fast as mine.

“I think so,” I murmur, meeting his hungry gaze. The look in his eyes promises he’s desperate to finish what we started, too, but I have to make sure. If we decide to do this, I have to know being with me is something he’s choosing because he wants it, not because he has to. “But if you need money for rent or food or a gambling debt or something, I could just loan it to you. Interest free. You don’t have to...you know. If you don’t want to.” My cheeks begin to burn, but I force myself to keep my eyes on his as I add, “I would never want to be in bed with someone who didn’t truly want to be there.”

His gaze softens with what almost looks like affection and his voice is gentle as he says, “You’re beautiful.”

“Thank you, but I’m serious, I—” I break off, my jaw dropping open as his fingers circle my wrist, guiding my hand to the front of his pants. I gulp at the feel of him still rock hard and hot beneath my palm, my cheeks blazing as he says, “I want you, Maya. I’ve wanted you since the moment I saw you walk across the library. I want you so much, it’s going to be hell to wait until tomorrow night to have you under me.”

Under him...

The words evoke a torrent of X-rated images that flood through my brain.

Holy hell, I want to be under him. I want it so much that my voice trembles and my knees threaten to return to their gelatin state as I whisper, “We don’t have to wait. If you...don’t want to.”

“You don’t know how tempting that is.” He releases my wrist with a ragged exhalation. “But I want you to be sure, too. Take the night, think about it, and if you still want this, want me...”

I pull my palm away from his long, thick length, curling my fingers into a fist in an effort to keep my hands to myself. “Then we’ll meet at the top of the Empire State Building?”

His lips curve. “I’m pretty sure it’s closed on Christmas Day, but I have a few tricks up my sleeve. Once you’re sure this is right for you, Twyla will give me your number, and I’ll text you to arrange a time and place to meet.” He pauses, that affectionate look in his eyes again as he adds, “I’ll be looking forward to it. You’ve saved me from spending the holidays alone.”

And he’s slowly saving me from the belief that I’m destined to die a lonely, untouched cat lady, surrounded by baskets of half-finished crochet projects, books, and furballs.

Don’t get me wrong, I’m perfectly happy to be a cat lady living my best cottage core life, but I’d like to believe that someday I’ll share that life with a sexy boy who loves cats and staying cozy on a Friday night as much as I do.

Or maybe amanwho loves those things...

Anthony can never be that man, of course, but for the next week, he'll be the closest thing I've ever had to a boyfriend.

I'm so excited, I can barely contain myself until he's out of the room.

The second the door closes behind him, I let out a silent squeal of excitement and do a happy dance around the sofa, thrusting my arms and prancing like a quarterback who just scored a touchdown.

And no, I haven't scored yet.

But with Anthony's help, I'm pretty sure I'm going to...

chapter 5

ANTHONY

Hunter isn't my most compassionate friend, but he's the most honest.

He's also a twice-divorced, confirmed bachelor whose extended family doesn't make a big deal about Christmas, just like mine.

Which means he'll likely be free for a heart-to-heart on Christmas morning.

Uncle Chris and Aunt Tina throw a giant New Year's Day party every year that I wouldn't miss for the world, but growing up, Christmas was never a big deal around our house. Maybe because there was never enough money for presents for five kids, maybe because Aunt Tina was raised fundamentalist Christian and so scarred by the experience that she steers clear of anything remotely religious.

Maybe both.

But Tina is the kindest, wisest woman I know, proving you don't need religion to be an incredible human being. If I'd called her to talk this through, she would have dropped whatever she's doing this morning to give me her best advice.

But she would also have been scandalized that I'm considering becoming a male prostitute, even if it is a "one and done" situation. My aunt is an open-minded woman, but she wants the best for her family and "the best" doesn't include anything that might land one of them in jail, no matter how minor the risk of that actually happening.

"So let me get this straight," Hunter says once we've exchanged holiday pleasantries, and I've explained the strange and unexpected situation I've found myself in. "You quit your job, wandered into a sex club, and agreed to pretend to be an escort for a week? Is that the situation or am I still high from the gummy I took last night?"

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:58 am

“No, that’s about the size of it.” I pace my penthouse living room, coffee growing cold in my hand.

Snow falls silently beyond the floor-to-ceiling windows, softening the hard edges of Manhattan’s skyline. From forty stories up, the city looks tranquil, almost dreamlike. Even the constant construction across the street is quiet today, the cranes frozen like sleeping, long-necked dinosaurs.

I usually love my home—the peace of it, the distance from the frenetic city below—but today the space feels too big, too luxurious. Maya would take one look at the Italian marble floors and museum-quality art and know I’m not what I’m pretending to be.

Which is why I can’t stay here, not if I really intend to go through with this.

“So, I booked an Airbnb,” I tell Hunter. “A walk-up in the East Village. It’s nice enough, but not so nice it’ll raise questions about how I pay my bills if my client decides she’d like to come back to my place tonight.”

“Your client,” he echoes, amusement in his voice. “I think you have bigger problems at the moment than location, but that’s a good call. I’ve heard some of the high-end escorts do well, but not well enough for a multimillion-dollar penthouse in the Financial District. But back to the real question here—are you insane? Is this just a midlife crisis or should I look for a rehab facility?”

“I’m not on drugs and it doesn’t feel like a crisis,” I say.

“What does it feel like, then?”

“I don’t know. It feels...intriguing. Exciting.” I resume pacing, my footsteps echoing in the cavernous space.

I’ve been intending to put more than a couch and a single large chair in the living room, but there never seems to be time to prioritize decorating. I’m always too busy at work. Though...I suppose that’s a problem I won’t have anymore.

Once this week with Maya is over, I’ll have plenty of time to go shopping.

I push the thought aside, refusing to think about the end before we’ve begun. “She’s beautiful, fascinating... I’m actually looking forward to spending the week with her.”

“Well, then go for it, man. Life’s too short to turn your back on a beautiful woman.”

“But maybe tonight is too soon to ask her to come back to my place?” I ask, uncertain about how fast is too fast. “Twyla said she’s completely inexperienced. So maybe it would be better to take things slow?”

“Taking things slow with the woman who’s paying you to fuck her,” he says dryly. “I’m sure she’ll love that.”

I pace back toward the kitchen island, exhaling with a rush of breath. “When you say it like that, it sounds insane, but you?—”

“Oh, it is absolutely insane. Totally off the rails,” he cuts in. “It’s also the most interesting thing you’ve done in the decade plus that I’ve known you. Tell me more about her, this innocent young woman who’s got you tied up in knots.”

I lean against the counter, flashing back to the warmth in Maya’s big blue eyes, the

feel of her curves soft against me, the hungry little sounds she made when I pulled her against me. The ghost of her perfume still clings to my suit jacket in my closet, and I already know I won't be sending it to the cleaners come Monday morning.

"She's smart. And funny," I murmur. "And so damned sweet. She offered to give me an interest-free loan if I was in trouble and only escorting because I was in dire financial straits. She didn't want me to feel forced into doing something I didn't truly want to do."

Hunter makes a cooing sound that has me grinning as I turn back to the windows. "Shut up," I say, fighting a laugh. "That's sweet."

"It is," he agrees. "She sounds like a doll. Just a sweet, innocent kid adrift in the big city, primed for some gigolo to take advantage. You have to fuck her, now. If you don't, some far less scrupulous man is going to take her for a ride in more ways than one."

My smile fades, a frown pulling at my forehead. "Twyla doesn't employ those kinds of men."

"She also doesn't employ old guys," Hunter counters. "That's why you ended up in the room with Little Red Riding Hood, right? Because Twyla didn't have anyone who matched what she was looking for?" I murmur my confirmation and he adds, "So, if you pass on the job, she'll have to go looking elsewhere for her first time."

"Or I could just tell her I'd like to see what develops between us organically, outside of a business relationship," I say, voicing the thought that was knocking around in my head as I lay awake last night.

He grunts. "She came all the way to New York to hire a prostitute for a reason,

Anthony. If she'd wanted sex the normal way, she could have found it in Maine. You said she's attractive, right?"

"Stunning," I counter. "But shy."

"Doesn't matter," Hunter says. "Shy or not, a beautiful woman never has trouble getting laid if that's what she really wants. Sounds like she's looking for more than that. She's looking for control, a way to manage her fear and anxiety about this major life event. If you suggest a modification to the arrangement, you risk taking that away from her."

"True." I move to my leather sofa, sinking into it as I stare at the city below. "But lying bothers me. I'm not a liar."

"Stop." Hunter's voice turns serious. "You're also not an asshole. There is no better guy for this job. She came to the club looking for someone safe and experienced to show her pleasure. That's exactly what you'll be doing. And you're both consenting adults. I'm sure she understands there's a certain amount of fantasy fulfillment in a situation like this. She knows you're a professional providing a professional experience, and absolute truth isn't a part of something like that."

"Maybe." I run a hand through my hair, catching my reflection in the window.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:58 am

I look different somehow. Less controlled, a wilder man than I was twenty-four hours ago on my way into what I didn't know would be my last day at the office.

"No maybes about it," he presses. "I'm right. Just do it and enjoy yourself. You deserve a beautiful distraction this holiday season."

I don't know about "deserving," but I'm certainly going to enjoy spending a week with a woman who tastes like heaven and looks at me like she can't wait to devour me whole.

And I'm not sure I could say "no" to this if I tried, not even if Hunter thought that was the best course of action.

"So, where do I take her for our first date?" I ask, excitement for the night ahead taking over. "I looked for dinner reservations, but all my favorites are closed for Christmas, and theater tickets wouldn't give us much time to talk before the end of the night."

"I've got you covered, brother." I can hear his grin in the words. "Remember Edwin? My friend who quit his investment banker job to apprentice with a master gardener up in the Bronx? He works at the Brooklyn Botanic Garden now and owes me a favor. I bet I can get you private access to the gardens tonight. The holiday lights are up, and I'm sure it'll be romantic as hell. All you'll have to do is pack a picnic."

It's an awfully romantic gesture, but the offer is too perfect to pass up. "That would be amazing. Thanks, man."

“My pleasure. I’ll text you the details once everything is set up.” He pauses. “And Anthony?”

“Yeah?”

“Stop wrestling with your morals and go for it, okay? Fate can be a bitch, but sometimes she hands out unexpected gifts, too. When that happens, our job is to enjoy them.”

I thank him and end the call.

Afterwards, I stand at my window watching the snow fall, anticipation rising inside me. It’s the second time someone’s insisted Fate is on my side in less than twelve hours.

I’m still not sure about that, but come this evening, I’ll be walking through a winter wonderland with a gorgeous, compelling woman who can’t wait to have me in her bed.

It might not be Fate, but my luck could be worse.

A whole hell of a lot worse...

chapter 6

MAYA

Tonight’s the night.

Thenight, the one I wasn’t sure would ever come, and I couldn’t be more excited if Santa had left a pile of presents and a bag of jewels under the rickety table in my

shabby hotel room.

I throw a kiss to Pudge, whispering for my sleeping kitty to be good while I'm gone, and then practically dance out the door and down to the closest subway.

Forty minutes later, I emerge from the station near Prospect Park just as the sun is sinking behind the bare trees to find a handful of people lingering outside a nearby movie theater, getting tickets for an evening show. But all in all, this part of the city is peaceful at Christmas. I wander across the street, past the imposing façade of the Brooklyn Public Library without encountering another soul, feeling like the only patron in a museum after hours.

I love my hometown and hope to spend at least part of the summer there for as long as I'm lucky enough to be alive, but this city...

I could get used to pillars and art and public transportation and restaurants featuring food from every part of the world. For breakfast, I had a delicious Chai-spiced porridge at an Iraniancafé around the corner from my hotel. For lunch, I grabbed a bowl of noodles from a vendor in Bryant Park and found a chair near the ice rink, fantasizing about the evening to come, while I watched the skaters spin beneath the skyscrapers of Midtown Manhattan.

But I wasn't thinking about what I was going to have for dinner, the way I usually would on a trip to the city...

I'm a foodie for life, but tonight, other appetites are top of mind.

All day, I've done my best to talk myself down from the ridiculously giddy state Anthony left me in last night.

There has to be something wrong with the man.

No one can be that perfect, that sexy and clever and gracious and insanely gorgeous. He was probably putting on a show for a new client, or I'm simply projecting my dreamy fantasies of a thrilling first lover onto an ordinary man.

Brains do things like that. They're unpredictable. Dangerous. When they really want something, they have a habit of seeing what they want to see, not what's actually standing in front of them.

I learned that firsthand, watching my sister fall hard for loser after loser, no matter how many times we all told her that the guy she'd brought home to "meet the family" had fallen short of our dreams for her. But she wanted to be in love so badly, she refused to listen.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:58 am

She had to learn all her love lessons the hard way.

The thought makes me pause on the wide, paved path leading toward the employee entrance to the Brooklyn Botanic Garden.

I'm sure there are lessons I'll have to learn the hard way, too, but in order to do that, I have to stay alive long enough to learn them.

Is this really safe?

Meeting a man I barely know down a dark path beside the closed garden on a night when there's no one around to hear me scream?

"He's been thoroughly vetted," I whisper, curling my fingers into fists inside my mittens. It's a relatively warm winter evening, but I'm glad I brought my wool mittens and matching scarf. Wandering around a garden is bound to get chilly after a while. "Background check and routine physical and...everything else."

Everything else, including an STD test Twyla emailed me this morning along with the other paperwork and my receipt for payment...

It was six months old, but the results were all negative and Twyla assured me that Anthony had taken some time off and hasn't had a "client" since last summer.

Of course, that doesn't mean he hasn't been with a woman since then, during his "off the clock" time.

Or a man...

Maybe it's the rural Maine girl in me, but it's hard to imagine a man like Anthony being completely straight. He's too polished, too fit and toned and perfectly pulled together. His suit was clearly a bespoke, custom fit creation and his shoes probably cost more than every item in my wardrobe, a fact I'm aware of only because my friend, Elaina, has a thing for clothes. Without her, I would be too backwoods to recognize Italian leather or the fact that normal suits don't hug a set of broad shoulders like that.

The only men who dress like Anthony back home are Ken, the hairdresser my cousins trust with their highlights, who has a boyfriend in Portland, and Larry and Fritz, two insanely hot lobstermen who have been denying their love while drunkenly making out behind the pub every other Friday night for years. But the rest of the dock workers turn a blind eye to it, as long as Larry and Fritz are back to pretending to be "just good friends" come Monday morning.

Even in this modern age, being gay or bisexual isn't something the people of my hometown are comfortable with. They aren't actively judgmental, but it's obvious most prefer a "don't ask, don't tell, and please don't be too gay in public, okey dokey?" policy in Sea Breeze

It's just another reason that I'm starting to feel like I belong somewhere else. I hate that my two gay friends from high school didn't feel safe or welcome in our town. And I hate that so many people, especially in the older generation, see change as something to be fought, tooth and nail.

As far as I can tell, change is the only thing you can count on in the world. Change is inevitable. You can either accept that, and lean into the excitement of transformation, or resist it and be dragged, kicking and screaming, into whatever the future holds.

“No kicking and screaming,” I say, starting back down the dimly lit path, mentally adding, unless Anthony actually is a serial killer, and then I’ll kick and scream like a champ.

But he’s not a serial killer.

And he’s even more gorgeous than I remember...

As soon as I turn the corner to see my drop-dead sexy date standing in the warm glow of a gas lantern by the slightly ajar back gate, wearing a tailored gray wool coat and red scarf the same deep crimson as my own, my fears melt away in a rush of warmth and excitement.

It’s the way he smiles that does it—like he’s thrilled, and a little bit relieved, to see me. He seems every bit as excited about our date as I am.

Besides, there’s a folded blanket and a picnic basket sitting by his feet, and I’m pretty sure serial killers don’t feed you dinner first.

“You should have told me we were doing a picnic,” I say, my face heating as he rests a hand lightly at the small of my back and leans in to kiss my cheek. My eyes slide closed, my heart beating faster as his spicy smell floods through my head, and my nerve endings sizzle to life the way they did last night in our private room. “I could have brought wine or fancy Italian soda or s-something,” I stammer as he pulls back, gazing down at me with an intensity that makes me feel beautiful and desired and...nervous.

Very nervous.

Tonight, I’m finally going to learn what it’s like to be naked with a man. Heck, with another person, period. I wasn’t an athlete like my friend, Sully, and I’m not

comfortable prancing around the beach in tiny bikinis like Elaina. I've never changed in a locker room, and all my swimsuits are one-pieces.

If Anthony gets me out of my fleece-lined jeans and white cashmere sweater, I will be the most naked I've ever been with anyone besides myself.

And Pudge, but he doesn't count. Cats are notoriously unfazed by nudity and Pudge is unfazed by just about everything except the weird sound that was coming from the hotel's ancient radiator this morning.

But that's the reason I'm here, after all, and so far, Anthony doesn't seem bothered by the fact that I'm probably twenty pounds over my fighting weight and can't remember the last time I hit the gym. I've been too busy working to make time for more than a long walk after work, but the way his fingers curl lightly into my hip through my coat, lingering for a long beat before he steps back, makes me feel like I might have a sex vibe, after all.

At least with him.

"I've got it all covered," he says, reaching for the basket and blanket. "Both alcoholic and non-alcoholic options, and a few things in case you're a vegetarian. I was already at the store by the time I realized I forgot to ask."

"No, I'm not a vegetarian," I say, following him toward the cracked gate. "That's not allowed in my part of Maine. Meat eating is expected, and seafood is on the table just about every night. My uncle and half my cousins work on fishing boats, so..."

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:58 am

“Same where I grew up,” he says. “Well, the meat part, not the fishing. Though we couldn’t always afford quality meat. Spam sandwiches for dinner were a fairly common occurrence.”

I fight to conceal my surprise. So, he wasn’t always this posh-looking person in designer clothes with an expensive-looking haircut that makes his shaggy brown hair fall in a perfect wave over his forehead.

It makes him even more interesting, someone I’m even more eager to get to know. As foolish as it probably is, I find myself desperate to know everything about this man, even if we will be parting ways in just a week.

He nods over my shoulder. “Just close the gate behind you and hit that red button on the panel on the left. That should rearm the security system on the outer gate. My contact turned off the video streams and alarms inside the garden, but in the past they’ve had kids climb the outer gate and cause trouble, so he wants to be sure the electric fence is fully functional while we’re here.”

“Got it, sure thing,” I say, following his directions, flinching slightly at the sharp buzz that sounds after I arm the system.

“Sorry,” Anthony says with a soft laugh. “He didn’t say it would be that loud.”

I turn back with a rush of breath. “No, it’s fine. It wasn’t that loud. I’m just...a little jumpy, I guess.” I shrug and wave an awkward mitten in the air between us. “First dates are kind of scary, even when they’re normal first dates.”

He arches a wry brow.

“I didn’t mean that in a bad way,” I hurry to assure him, cursing myself for making things even more awkward.

“Don’t worry about it.” He smiles, seemingly unfazed. But then, he has way more experience with “dating” strangers than I do. “And who wants to be normal anyway? Normal is boring.”

“It is,” I agree, anticipation fluttering in my stomach as I glance past him at the lights twinkling in the trees ahead. “Normal people don’t get to eat Christmas dinner in an enchanted garden.”

“No, they don’t,” he agrees as we start down the path, where thousands of tiny white lights wrap every tree trunk and branch, creating a canopy of stars beneath the darkening sky. “This is beautiful.”

“Magical,” I breathe, taking in the pristine snow covering the flower beds behind the trees, the crystalline silence. If it weren’t for the faint buzz of traffic from the street, I wouldn’t believe we were in the city. It feels like we’re the only people at the edge of the world, alone together in a fairy realm full of lights. “How did you make this happen?”

“I know people who know people,” he says. “One of the benefits of being born and raised in a giant family that’s been in the city forever. If I don’t know someone, I usually know someone who does.”

The opening to ask him more about his past is too perfect to resist. “Did you always live in Manhattan?”

He shakes his head. “No, I lived with my grandmother in Queens until I was seven.

When she passed, I moved in with my uncle and his family in Red Hook, Brooklyn. I didn't move to Manhattan until much later."

I stop dead, my jaw dropping. "No way. Red Hook? The apartment building I'm buying is in Red Hook!"

He turns to me, his eyes widening. "Really? You're buying an apartment building?"

I nod. "Yeah. I've been saving up for years for my first property and when this one came on the market, it ticked all my boxes."

"Tell me about these boxes," he says as we start to walk again.

"Oh, I don't want to bore you," I demure, knowing I can be obnoxious when it comes to talking real estate. Elaina finally had to tell me I was boring her to tears and was only allowed to talk property stuff for half an hour every other Sunday morning, after she's had her coffee.

"You won't," he insists. "I love this kind of stuff, and I helped a friend find a condo down there a few years ago. I might know your place."

"That would be cool," I say, ridiculously excited that we have this in common, though I know loads of people follow their local property listings. I give him the cross streets before adding, "It's a pre-war building that needs some work, but it has great bones. It's three stories, six units, all with dependable, long-term renters, so there's a decent profit margin to finance the repairs. I think it will be a great investment, assuming there aren't any surprises during the walk-through with the inspector Wednesday morning."

"Who's your inspector?" he asks, a sharpness in his gaze that wasn't there before. "You want to make sure you have someone good. A lot of those old apartment

buildings are riddled with asbestos or other issues that could tank your return. I have a few contacts in that world. I could call in a favor, if you'd like, make sure you have someone you can trust."

I smile, touched by the offer, and his concern. He really does seem like a good man, the kind who wants to make sure people are treated fairly, even if that person is a woman paying him to show her a good time in the bedroom.

"I'm using Greer and Mackey," I say. "They have great reviews, but if you don't think they're?—"

"Oh no, they're great. Mackey's lived and worked in Red Hook for decades," he says, relief softening his features. We turn right, leaving the canopy of lighted trees, following a snow-dusted sign pointing toward the Japanese Hill-and-Pond Garden. "They'll take good care of you. But watch your back on your way there. Parts of Red Hook are still dangerous."

"I will, thank you," I say, nibbling at my bottom lip. "I haven't actually been to the property yet. I couldn't get away from work long enough to come down and see it in person before I made the offer. I did a virtual tour with my realtor, and she said it's on an up-and-coming street, but I won't see for myself until the final walk-through."

"That's a decent area," he says, "but head five blocks east and you're in a neighborhood with barbed wire over the windows and a heavy police presence that still can't get a handle on the gang violence. I don't like the thought of you anywhere near there. I'll text you a list of subway stations to avoid."

"Thank you," I say. "That would be great."

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:58 am

“Or I could...” he trails off as we round the corner. The view opens up, revealing a carefully manicured, Asian-inspired section of the garden. We pause at a wider place in the path, soaking in the wooden bridges arching gracefully over the frozen pond, their railings draped in lights that glow a warm orange. Stone lanterns peek through the snow like ancient sentinels and the dormant cherry and willow trees arch graceful limbs over the cold ground, protective of the sleeping plants beneath the snow.

“Or you could,” I prompt after a moment, glancing up at him from the corner of my eyes.

He turns, fixing me with another one of those breath-stealing looks of his. “I was going to say that I could come with you, but that could get complicated and I... Well, playing the protective big brother isn’t really why I’m here.”

My cheeks heat again, but I hold his gaze as I say, “No, it’s not. And I’d rather you not think of me as a little sister. If that’s okay with you.”

“I don’t,” he says, his voice deeper, with that husky edge that makes me shiver. “Though I probably should. I’m old enough to be your father, let alone your brother.”

I arch a brow. “Fifteen is awfully young to be making babies.”

“But possible,” he counters, even as he shifts closer. “I had a serious girlfriend at fifteen.”

“I hadn’t even kissed a boy at fifteen. Not even close,” I find myself confessing. But he already knows I’m a virgin. I doubt he’s surprised to hear that I wasn’t out

exploring my sexuality in my sophomore year of high school. I lift my chin, breath coming faster as he angles his head to one side. “And I like that you’re older,” I say, pulse throbbing in my throat as his lips move closer to mine.

“Why?” he murmurs.

“You’ll know exactly what to do with me,” I whisper, my nipples tightening against the silk of my bra at the hungry sound that vibrates from the back of his throat.

“I’m not so sure about that,” he murmurs as his free arm goes around my waist, drawing me against him.

Before I can ask what he means, his lips are on mine, and he’s kissing me with that slow, easy confidence that turns my bones to wax.

Hot, molten wax, melting into a puddle at his feet...

His tongue glides against mine, stroking, exploring, and I press closer, craving more of his heat, his touch.

By the time he finally pulls back from the kiss, I’m buzzing all over, warm despite the chill in the air.

Still, I shiver, but it’s not the cold to blame.

It’s the certainty that, sooner or later, Anthony is going to touch all the tingling, aching places beneath my clothes that has me trembling as he takes my hand in his. “The pagoda has heat lamps on the ceiling,” he says, clearly mistaking the reason for my shiver. “Let’s get you warmed up and fed. I don’t know about you, but I’m starving.”

I nod, enjoying the feel of his gloved hand in mine as we cross the bridge to the elegant structure poised on a small hill above the garden. “I’m always hungry in New York. Too many good smells around every corner.”

“Best place to eat in the world,” he agrees as we climb the steps to the pagoda and move inside the cozy haven. Inside, the ceiling is strung with lights interspersed between the heat lamps, making it feel like we’re spreading our blanket under the stars.

Paper lanterns sway gently in the winter breeze, casting soft shadows across the wooden floor, but the lamps keep the chill away. Soon, I’m out of my mittens and my coat, the cold-induced tension easing from my muscles as Anthony unpacks a veritable treasure trove of fancy deli food.

There are meats and cheeses and artisanal pickles and a loaf of bread that smells like heaven as I tear off a chunk to dip in the olive oil Anthony drizzles onto a small plate he brought for the purpose. There are also two salads—one a traditional Greek with feta and vinegar dressing, the other a grain salad with almonds and cranberries—apples, pears, and champagne that dances lightly on my tongue before fizzing down my throat without a hint of sourness.

I told him last night that wine makes me say embarrassing things, but champagne is even worse.

Champagne goes straight to my head, a fact I prove by sighing halfway through our meal, “Can we live here? Right here? In this pagoda, with this food. Forever?”

“Yes,” he says without a beat of hesitation. “Though we might have to have more food delivered. And add a bathroom onto the pagoda on one side. It would be a long walk to the visitors’ center in the middle of the night.”

“And I like a hot bath before bed,” I agree.

“I’m more of a shower man myself.” His gaze darkens as it sweeps up and down where I sit curled on the blanket across from him, the remains of our meal between us. “But I could learn to enjoy a bath. With the right company.”

I bite my bottom lip, that hot, hungry-for-things-besides-food feeling swirling between my thighs again at the thought of Anthony in the bath with me. “It would have to be a big bathtub.”

“Not so big. You’re tiny,” he says, moving the olive oil plate and the last of our charcuterie platter to one side.

I shake my head. “I’m not. I’m short, not tiny. There’s a difference.”

“You’re perfect,” he says, continuing to clear the blanket between us, intensifying the ache low in my body.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:58 am

“I’m chubby,” I insist, some perverse part of me insisting on telling the whole truth and nothing but the truth with this man. As strange as it probably is, I want him to see me, the real me, even the parts that aren’t anywhere close to perfect. “But I love food too much to care.”

“And I love your curves,” he says, shifting closer and reaching for me, sending my nervous system into another minor meltdown as he pulls me into his lap like I weigh less than the picnic basket. His hands skim over my ass to my waist, before coming to rest on my ribs as he adds, “Since last night, your body is pretty much all I’ve been able to think about.”

“Really?” I ask, breath catching as he brings one hand to cup my breast through my sweater. Even with the thick fabric between his skin and mine, the touch makes me burn.

“Really,” he assures me, holding my gaze as his hand tightens around my breast, sending a jolt of arousal from my nipple to coil between my legs.

“Don’t lie,” I whisper, hating that I have to say it, but I want this to be authentic. Or as authentic as it can be considering the fact that he’s basically my employee. “You don’t have to say things you don’t mean. I’d rather you don’t, actually.”

“I never say things I don’t mean,” he says, his eyes blazing into mine. “I’ve been dreaming about your nipples in my mouth since the moment I saw you.”

I gulp, but before I can reply he adds, “Last night, I thought about it so much, I had to take care of myself after. I jerked off to thoughts of you rocking on top of me, telling

me how good I felt inside you, Maya. That's the truth."

Blood rushes fast and hot, flooding into my core, making my head spin as I whisper, "I touched myself, too. Thinking of you."

He curses softly as he pulls me closer, his hands shifting on my aching body until one cool palm is under my sweater, teasing my nipple through just the thin silk of my bra. "Fuck, Maya," he rasps as he kisses me, hard and deep, making me moan as he continues to pluck at my nipple with his fingers.

"God," I gasp, clinging to his shoulders as desire unlike anything I've ever felt floods through me. "God, Anthony..."

"Tell me if you want me to stop," he rumbles against my lips.

"No, don't stop," I beg, shifting on his lap, spreading my legs to straddle him on the blanket, sighing in relief as my aching core makes contact with where he's hard beneath his jeans. "Don't ever stop. Touch me everywhere."

I'm past caring that we're technically in public.

The garden is closed, we're alone, and I want this more than I've ever wanted anything.

"You're so sexy, so sweet," he says as he draws the fabric of my bra down below my breast, baring my skin to his touch. "I want to touch you, beautiful. Can I lay you down on this blanket and make you come for me?"

"Yes," I say, a startled, but hungry sound bursting from my chest as he rolls me swiftly beneath him. Suddenly, my sweater is being whipped off over my head, making my hair crackle with static electricity that is nothing compared to the

electrical storm that devastates my body as Anthony kisses my breasts.

As he licks and sucks and drags his teeth lightly over my nipples, making me squirm and then writhe and then beg him to touch me.

To take me.

“Please, I need you,” I say, so wet I’m sure I’ve soaked through my panties and am on course to ruin my jeans. “I need you inside me.”

“Not yet, beautiful, not here,” he says, his voice as rough as mine. “But I’m going to take the edge off, I promise.” He thumbs open the button at the top of my jeans and jerks the zipper down.

A beat later, his hand is slipping down the front of my jeans, into my panties, down until his fingers glide into where I’m embarrassingly turned on.

But he doesn’t seem to mind. In fact, the sound he makes as he kisses me breathless all over again makes me think he likes me like this...so wild and desperate for his touch that all I can do is whimper and cling to his sweater as his fingers work magic between my legs.

He strokes and teases, the pressure perfect, the friction delicious.

And then he glides two thick fingers inside of me as the heel of his hand grinds into the top of my sex and all my worry, all my fear, all my inhibitions are washed away by a tidal wave of need.

I gasp his name and he groans and works me harder, deeper with his talented hand. “Fuck, yes, Maya. Let go for me, sweetheart. I want to see you fall apart. I want to feel you come all over my fingers.”

I shatter with a ragged cry that echoes in the still winter air, clinging to his shoulders as pleasure rocks through me, turning my world upside down. I've never felt anything like this—this passion so fierce and all-consuming it would be scary if I were alone.

But I'm not. Anthony holds me through it, murmuring praise, telling me how beautiful and perfect I am when I come for him, his touch gentling but not stopping until the last tremor subsides.

"Good?" he asks as he slowly pulls his hand away, sending a pang of disappointment through me at the loss of his fingers. Of the intimacy of feeling him touch me in a way no one ever has.

"Perfect," I confess. I tug my bra back into place and reach for my sweater, feeling the chill in the air for the first time since he kissed me. I pull my sweater on, smoothing my hair as I add in a softer voice, "Completely, one-hundred percent perfect."

"Not quite. Next time, I need my mouth on you," he says, bringing the fingers that were just inside me to his mouth and slipping them inside, groaning as the taste of me hits his tongue.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:58 am

The sight makes something primal inside me wake up and roar. Before I know it, I'm demanding, "I'll taste you, too. I want you in my mouth. I want to make you feel as crazy as you make me feel."

"You do, beautiful," he says, his jaw tight. "I'm so hard right now, I have no idea how I'm going to make it to the exit without doing damage to myself."

"Then let me...take care of you," I say, only the slightest hesitation in my voice. I reach for his jeans, hoping I can figure out what to do—or better yet, that he'll tell me exactly how to please him.

But he captures my wrist lightly in his fingers, holding my hand at a distance. "No," he says, with a wince. "It's okay. I actually. I um..." His breath rushes out with a soft laugh. "I like to suffer a little."

My brows slide up my forehead.

"It's going to make the moment I finally get to be with you even more incredible," he says, his thumb rubbing in gentle circles at my wrist.

Just that tender touch is enough to make me ache for him all over again.

Even a couple days ago, I wouldn't have understood what he meant, but now...I do. Waiting the entire forty-minute subway ride back to my motel to touch him again is going to be hell, but in a good way.

The longer we wait, the more the anticipation builds, the hotter it's going to be when

there's finally nothing between his skin and mine.

Wow...this is really happening.

I'm about to step through a door into a whole new world, and my anxiety is finally gone. I'm not nervous at all, just excited.

And ready to head toward the exit. The garden is magical, but being with Anthony is going to be more magical, even in my dingy hotel room.

"Should we eat dessert while we head for the subway?" I ask.

He nods. "We absolutely should. Dark chocolate cherry mousse is the only thing that might possibly keep my mind off getting you naked again for five minutes."

"Yum," I say, my mouth watering. "I love dark chocolate and cherries together."

"Me, too. It's my favorite," he says, the enthusiasm in his voice making me think he might be a foodie, too. "I'll have to take you for ice cream later this week at my favorite place in Williamsburg. They have a dark chocolate and cherry chunk custard that will blow your mind. And there's a Greek place not far away that has the best kabobs I've had anywhere outside of Athens. We could make an evening of it."

"Sounds amazing." I say. "I'm glad you like food, too. It would be hard to spend a week going out with someone who only eats salad."

He huffs. "No way, woman. I'm a food snob from way back. Besides, we're going to need fuel to keep our energy up. I have a feeling we're not going to be getting much sleep."

"I hope not," I whisper, grinning as he leans over to press a quick kiss to my lips.

But even when our teeth bump together, it isn't awkward. It's fun and easy and...sexy.

Everything about this man is sexy, from the way he smiles to the way he talks about food to the protective hand he cups under my arm as we descend the icy steps on the opposite side of the pagoda.

Once we're back on the trail, I'm in charge of feeding us both spoonfuls of mousse as Anthony navigates toward the front gate. We take time to admire the light displays we haven't seen yet, including a glowing tunnel through a dormant lilac arbor that makes me feel like I'm in a 90s rom-com, but we don't dawdle, either. In just fifteen minutes, we're outside the front gate, and Anthony's punching in the code to lock it behind us.

"That was amazing," I say, feeding him the last bite of mousse before dropping the recyclable cup in a blue bin on our way toward the main street. "I think we're closer to the subway here. I'm a little turned around, but?—"

"We're not taking the subway," he says. I glance back to see him typing something into his cell. "I'll get a car. We'll be in the East Village at least fifteen minutes faster without waiting for the train."

I blink. "But my hotel is in Midtown."

He glances up from the glowing screen. "Oh, I... I thought we could go back to my place." He studies my expression, pushing on before I can fully decide what I think about that idea. "But if you're more comfortable at your hotel, that's fine. I want you to feel safe."

"I do feel safe with you," I hurry to assure him. "I just...I think I'd rather go to my hotel tonight, if that's okay. All my toiletries and things are there, and I should check

on my cat. He's still getting used to the big city noise. He might need another catnip chew to calm him down."

His lips curve in a bemused grin. "You brought your cat with you?"

"I did. I couldn't find anyone to watch him while I was gone and..." I shrug. "And we're buddies. Pudge is my moral support. I've never been alone in New York before."

"You're not alone," he says, nudging my shoulder gently with his. "I've got your back, kid."

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:58 am

“Thanks,” I say, wrinkling my nose.

“What?” he asks, arching an amused brow. “Not a fan of ‘kid?’ Compared to the old geezer you’re with, youarea kid, you know.”

“You’re not a geezer. And if you’re worried about a possible power imbalance, don’t be,” I say, lifting my chin. “Our age difference is balanced out by the fact that I’m basically your boss.”

He laughs, looking delighted by my chutzpah. “You’re right. Youaremy boss.” He makes a sexy, growling noise low in his throat as he squeezes my hip. “And what a tyrant you are. So demanding and hard to please.”

I roll my eyes, blushing as I grin. “Right. So hard. I think it took...what? Five minutes?”

“Maybe six, but yeah, you’re pretty incredible.” He exhales with a shake of his head. “But let’s not talk about that now, or I’mgoing to get hard again.” He leans down, kissing my forehead, making my entire being glow—body and soul—before motioning toward the street with his cell. “Just tell me where we’re going. I’ll call the car. Looks like there are a few drivers in the area. I’ll tell them to pick us up in front of the museum.”

I give him the name of my hotel and he types it in. A beat later, the ride is accepted. We reach the front of the Brooklyn Museum, with its façade illuminated in red and green in honor of the holiday, just as our driver pulls up.

Casting one last glance over my shoulder at the scene, not wanting to forget a single thing about this night, I slide into the door Anthony's opens for me, ready for whatever comes next.

chapter 7

ANTHONY

The city slides past the windows in a blur of holiday lights and gently falling snow, the roads uniquely traffic-free on this chilly Christmas night. But inside the cab, we're toasty warm. The driver blasts the heat while a jazz station plays softly from the speakers, making the back seat feel cozy, intimate.

Maya's head rests against my shoulder, her fingers laced through mine, making me think about how perfectly she fits against me. About the way she gasped my name in the garden.

About how badly I want to hear that sound again, this time while my mouth is between her legs, devouring her sweetness.

I'm thinking about all that, but I'm also thinking about...Dave Mackey.

Dave, who gave me my first real job in construction when I was sixteen and desperate to earn extra money for college. Dave, who taught me everything I know about building codes and load-bearing walls. Dave, who helped me flip my first property while I was still an undergraduate at Columbia.

Dave, who knows exactly who I am and exactly how much money I have and who might be the man inspecting Maya's building on Wednesday. He has employees, of course, but he still does a lot of the on-site work himself.

What if I'd volunteered to join her at the inspection without checking who she was working with first? I would have some seriously uncomfortable explaining to do, and Maya would have felt like a fool.

Or worse, betrayed.

The last thing I want to do is be on the dealing side of betrayal.

The closeness of the call sits like lead in my stomach. I haven't been a regular visitor in Red Hook in years—I'm too busy for more than a quick dinner with my family every other week or so—but the old neighborhood operates on an unchanging code. Everyone knows everyone. Everyone looks out for their own.

And everyone talks.

Anthony Pissarro showing up with a girl half his age, who's looking to buy an apartment building in the neighborhood, would be gossip fit for spreading all the way from my uncle's bar down to the pier by IKEA, where my friends and I used to gorge ourselves on cheap Swedish meatballs from the snack bar back in high school.

"Everything okay?" Maya asks, lifting her head. Her breath is warm against my neck, tempting, dangerous now that I know our paths might very well cross again outside our week of pleasure.

I hum and force a smile. "Great," I lie. "Why?"

"You're quiet," she murmurs. "You're usually pretty chatty for a guy."

My smile is real this time as I curl my hand around her thigh and squeeze. "Yeah? For a guy? Is that good? Or should I work on being the strong, silent type?"

“It’s good. Great. It’s so much easier to get to know someone when they’re chatty.”

The reminder that I can’t let her know me, at least not all of me, makes my stomach twist. What the hell have I gotten myself into?

“Thanks for coming back to my hotel,” she says. “I know it’s a longer drive and probably not nearly as nice as your place.”

“Not a problem,” I say, kissing the top of her head, relishing the lightly floral scent of her shampoo.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:58 am

And it's not a problem.

Most likely.

I doubt I'll know anyone hanging out at her economy brand hotel on Christmas, but I spend my fair share of time in Midtown. Before I left the firm, I had meetings in the area at least once a week. The chances that we could run into someone I know while we're out grabbing breakfast this week or wandering through one of the neighborhoods that I'd love to show her are better than decent. New York is a big city with a huge population, but I've lived here for forty years and have the network to show for it.

A network that loves brunch in Chelsea and Greek food in Williamsburg as much as I do...

I don't know what the fuck I was thinking. There's no way I'm going to be able to keep my real identity a secret.

I should end this now. Walk away before Maya discovers that I'm not who I'm pretending to be. Before her moment of independence and empowerment is ruined by learning that her "escort" is a jaded billionaire who's abused her trust.

Before I get in any deeper with this woman who makes me feel things I haven't felt in years...

But when Maya shifts closer, pressing a soft kiss to my jaw as she whispers, "Still. Thank you. I appreciate it," I don't even think about pulling away.

I can't walk away from this sweet, sexy woman.

She deserves to have all her erotic dreams come true and, selfishly, I can't stomach the thought of another man touching her. I want to be the man making her come, the one to make her feel safe enough to ask for everything she wants, everything she needs. I want to indulge her in every fantasy and then teach her a few things she might not have gotten around to fantasizing about yet.

I want to be her first.

You want to be her only, a possessive voice whispers in my head, but I ignore it. That kind of thinking has no place here. This is temporary. A week of pleasure, nothing more.

But it's a week I'm going to make the most of, no matter how much smarter it would be to bail first thing tomorrow morning.

The driver turns onto Fortieth and slows far too close to Penn Station for my comfort. I look up, shocked to see the neon sign for The Traveler's Rest glowing above a building with boarded up windows covered in graffiti. "This is where you're staying?"

"It's not that bad," Maya says with a laugh. "I mean, yes, it's a little scary from the outside, but the room is really clean. And this was one of the only places that accepted pets around here. And it's only for a week." She reaches for the door, stepping out onto the trash-littered curb.

After thanking the driver, I follow her with a dubious grunt.

"I promise the room isn't bad," she continues, leading the way toward the steps, fishing her key from her purse. "And it's a nice size for New York. My mom and I

came to the city to see a musical for her birthday a few years ago and we could barely get both our suitcases inside the room. We kept bumping into each other and left covered in bruises.”

“Older hotels do tend to have tiny rooms,” I agree, doing my best to keep an open mind as she taps the keycard to a sensor that lets us into the lobby.

The lobby, which smells like feet and stale coffee with a top note of aggressive cologne thanks to the exhausted looking man at the front desk who barely manages a mumbled, “Welcome back,” as we start toward the stairs...

“The elevator is broken,” Maya whispers as we climb. “But it’s only four flights up and you’re in way better shape than I am.”

I grunt again, fighting the urge to tell her that I’m moving her to a boutique hotel in the heart of safe, bougie Chelsea right fucking now. I’ll find one that accepts cats or bribe them with a large enough deposit that they’ll make an exception for her.

But I’m not supposed to be a billionaire who can afford five-star hotels. I’m supposed to be an escort who lives in a modest apartment in the East Village.

Still, the higher we climb, the tighter my jaw clenches. The stairs smell even more like feet and despair than the lobby, and the peeling wallpaper and water stains on the ceiling are doing nothing to change my low opinion of this dump.

Maya’s breathing harder by the time we reach the fourth floor, but when a loud yowl sounds from down the hall, she breaks into a jog, rushing past the doors of three other rooms before coming to a stop in front of the last door on the left and urgently tapping her key to the sensor.

I don’t believe in bad omens, but if I did, the crooked “13” on the battered wood

would be a solid one.

“Pudge?” Maya’s voice rises with concern as she taps the key again and again, while the device continues to buzz and flash a red light. “What’s wrong, baby? I’m coming. Hold on!”

Finally, the sensor recognizes the key card, and she throws open the door.

Inside, the room is smaller than she let on and boiling hot, with more peeling wallpaper and a window that doesn’t quite close. The smell of lemon-scented cleaner is strong, but it can’t overcome that damp, foot smell that I’m beginning to think is due to some kind of mold.

Probably a mold that would make a person sick if they stuck around this hellhole for too long. Maybe that’s why the man at the front desk had puffy eyes and a red nose.

“Pudge? Pudge, where are you?” Maya asks, raising her voice to be heard over the radiator in the corner. It makes an ungodly sound, like a garbage disposal gargling a handful of spoons. “Pudge?”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:58 am

A tortured *yeowwwwl* sounds over the racket, and Maya and I both lean down to see a massive orange cat crouched under the sagging bed, his tail puffed to twice its size as he hisses at the offending fixture. He casts an agonized look Maya's way, as if pleading for his mom to make the madness stop.

"Oh no, honey. You poor thing. I'm here, it's okay. You're safe." Maya drops to her knees beside the bed. To me, she adds, "He hates the radiator."

"I also hate the radiator," I agree.

She casts a quick glance over her shoulder, a half-smile quirking at her lips. "I know, it's awful, but it doesn't make that noise all the time, only when?—"

A crack like gunfire sounds from the street below, rattling the thin walls. Maya screams and launches herself into my arms. Before I can assure her that we're okay, Pudge follows, scaling my leg and wool coat to drape himself over my shoulder like a furry gargoyle.

A very large, heavy gargoyle who makes me gulp as he wraps his paws around my neck and digs his claws into my scarf...

Thank God I haven't had the chance to take it off yet or I'd be bleeding.

"It was just a car backfiring," I say, hugging Maya close as I reach up to rest what I hope is a calming hand on the cat's back. Thankfully, Pudge relaxes his claws, but the soft, miserable meow he offers in response is flat out pitiful.

The need to protect Maya—and her traumatized fur baby—hits me like a punch in the gut, eliminating my concerns about blowing my cover. “Pack your things.”

“What?”

“You're not staying here.” I release her long enough to gently gather Pudge off my shoulder. Proving he's a sweet beast, he goes quietly, but continues to tremble as I guide him into Maya's waiting arms. “Neither of you are. I'll get you another hotel room, my treat. Or I have a spare bedroom if you're okay with staying with me. Either way, I'm getting you both out of here.”

“I can't, Anthony. I don't want to?—”

“Please.” I cup her face in my hand, struck by how familiar she feels, how precious. It's like I've known her for so much longer than a day, and I'd like to keep knowing her. Which means getting her out of this sketchy hotel and even sketchier neighborhood. “I need to know you're safe.”

She studies me for a long moment, worrying her bottom lip between her teeth as Pudge rubs his head against my sleeve. “Are you sure? I don't want to impose...”

“You're not imposing. I'm insisting.” I glance down to where the cat is still butting his large head into my arm. “And Pudge obviously agrees with me.”

As if to prove my point, Pudge starts purring like a motorboat, before straining his neck up to lick my hand and then Maya's chin.

Maya laughs, tension easing from her shoulders. “He does seem to like you. Which is kind of weird. He usually hates men.”

“Smart. A lot of men are trash,” I say, agreeing with Pudge again. “But I'm not, and I

promise I'll do whatever it takes to make sure you're comfortable and safe tonight."

"Okay." Her lips stretch into a slow smile. "Thank you. Again."

"My pleasure, beautiful," I say, and it is. Especially when she says she's happy to come to my place, as long as it's okay to have pets in my building.

I have no idea if pets are okay, but if there's a problem, I'll pay the Airbnb host whatever it takes to make it go away. That's one of the best parts of having an obscenely large amount of capital at one's disposal. Money can take care of a lot of life's many problems.

But not all of them...

As I watch Maya gather her things, Pudge now in my arms, still purring like the cat who won the war against his evil radiator nemesis, I know money can't help me out of my current predicament.

I'm starting to have feelings for this girl.

Already.

After one night.

God only knows what a fucking mess I'll be after a week in her sweet company, but a demented part of me can't wait to find out. Playing house with this woman will probably end in disaster, but until that happens, I like the idea of knowing she's going to be sleeping right down the hall.

Or even better, in my bed.

chapter 8

MAYA

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:58 am

I'm not Cinderella.Or Rapunzel. Or Sleeping Beauty.

I'm an independent woman who stands on her own two feet. I make my own money and solve my own problems, all while looking out for my family and friends.

I've never needed a prince to swoop in and save me, which is a good thing since, thus far, princes have been in very short supply in my life.

But as Anthony and I are whisked south toward the East Village in another cozy cab he didn't hesitate to pay for and he singlehandedly wrestles the picnic basket and blanket, my suitcase, and my backpack up the stairs to his fifth story walk-up, leaving me with nothing to worry about except Pudge in his carrier, I can't deny that it feels good to be taken care of.

It feels great actually.

Stepping into Anthony's adorable apartment with its brightly colored décor and cinnamon-scented air feels even better.

Though I have to confess his home isn't anything like I imagined it would be on the way over.

Anthony's personal style is the height of classic luxury—all cashmere, leather, and tailored wool—while his East Village walk-up exudes bohemian charm. Exposed brick walls hold mismatched floating shelves filled with well-worn books, their spines cracked and loved. A Moroccan rug in deep jewel tones covers weathered hardwood floors, and fairy lights twinkle along the exposed beams of the ceiling. The whole

space feels like somewhere you'd find by accident and never want to leave.

Like a hobbit cottage, but big enough for two humans and an extra-large cat.

"I love your place," I breathe, taking in the eclectic mix of vintage furniture as I wander through the small kitchen into the living area. A leather armchair that's seen better days sits beside a pristine mid-century modern coffee table. Art prints—everything from Monet to abstract pieces I don't recognize—create a gallery wall that somehow works despite its randomness.

"Thank you," he says with a slightly uncomfortable laugh. "It's kind of a hodge podge of everything."

"It's great," I assure him, understanding how awkward it can be to show your home to someone new. I put Pudge's carrier on the ground, setting him free to explore, while I set up his portable litter box in the far corner by a vintage record player stand my friend, Elaina, would kill for.

Pudge inches slowly from his cozy cave, visibly relaxing once he's glanced around to find no menacing radiators or other looming threats. He does a circle of the room, sniffing until he seems confident that he's the only furry creature nearby before leaping up to investigate a burgundy velvet armchair near the sealed-up fireplace.

He circles three times, testing the fabric with gentle flexes of his claws, before settling in like he owns it.

"He won't damage the fabric, don't worry," I say, smiling as Pudge begins to purr. My anxiety-prone cat looks more at home here than he has since we left Maine. "He's very good about things like that. Leave anything halfway edible in the trash, and he'll find a way to get into it and leave a path of destruction all over the kitchen, but he's never shredded the furniture."

“I’m not worried,” Anthony says, glancing Pudge’s way. “It’s just nice to see him so relaxed. Poor guy. That radiator was a nightmare, wasn’t it, buddy?”

Pudge makes a grumbling sound of agreement before closing his eyes, making us both laugh.

“Now, how about we get the people something to help us relax?” Anthony asks, arching a brow. “I don’t know about you, but I could use a drink after all the excitement.”

I exhale a sigh of relief. “Yes, that sounds good, thank you. I know it was just a car backfiring, but my nervous system is positive we barely avoided violent and certain death.”

Anthony nods seriously. “And the only thing worse than a violent death is a violent and certain one.”

I fight a smile. “Are you making fun of me?”

“Never,” he says, his lips hooking up on one side. “I find you completely charming. Even the fact that your backpack weighs nearly as much as your suitcase intrigues me. What do you have in there? Your entire rock collection?”

“Gold bars,” I riff as he moves into the kitchen. “Gold bars and pirate treasure from off the coast of Maine. I don’t have a local bank in New York, so I figured I’d pay the rest of my deposit on the apartment in gold and jewels.”

He makes a considering sound as he opens one cabinet before closing it and opening another. “Decent plan. But I doubt you’ll get a good exchange rate from the bankers around here. They’re a soulless lot.”

“I think all bankers are.” I run my fingers along a shelf of leather-bound classics on the mantel, recognizing some of my favorites. I grin as I come across a well-loved copy of *Pride and Prejudice*. “You like Jane Austen?”

“Hmm?” He turns, blinking for a moment before his gaze flicks from my face to the bookshelf and back again. “Oh. Yes. I um...I mean, I haven’t read any fiction for a while, unfortunately, but back in school I burned through all the classics. I read a few grade levels ahead of the rest of my classmates and had a great English teacher who kept me stocked with reading material.”

I amble over to join him in the kitchen as he pulls a bottle of red wine from a storage nook below the cabinets. “Really? You were a book nerd?”

He smiles. “Huge book nerd and teased relentlessly for it. Even the fact that I was good at soccer couldn’t keep the other kids from calling me four eyes.”

My brows lift. “You wore glasses as a kid, too? Mine were an inch thick before I got contacts.”

He shakes his head with a laugh. “No, actually. I’ve never worn glasses.” He shrugs. “But kids, you know. They don’t make a lot of sense. I never understood them. Even when I was one.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:58 am

I nod as I lean against the island, watching him work the corkscrew into the top of the wine bottle. “I get that. I mean, I had a few really close friends when I was growing up, but in general, I was always more comfortable with adults than other kids my age.”

“Because you’re smart,” he says.

I shrug. “I mean, yes, I did well in school, but I wasn’t reading a few grade levels ahead of the rest of my class. Sounds like you’re the smartest smarty pants in this room.”

He laughs as he pours the wine, again seeming a little self-conscious, which...I like. Unexpectedly, I find this vulnerable, slightly unsure of himself Anthony as compelling as the confident charmer from the garden earlier tonight. “Well, my grandmother always said a high IQ is only useful if you have the street smarts to know what to do with it.”

I frown. “And you don’t think being a male escort is the best thing you could have done with your high IQ?”

He bites his bottom lip, looking troubled as he places his hands palm-down on the island on either side of the two glasses of wine he’s poured.

Instantly, I know I’ve said the wrong thing.

“I’m sorry,” I hurry to add. “I didn’t mean to upset you. I was just curious. Personally, I think a male escort is a great thing to be! Any job that helps people and

makes you feel like you're doing good work in the world is wonderful in my book. No judgement here. At all. I mean, I'm so grateful for the time we've spent together so far. It's been...really special."

He looks up, an expression on his face I can't quite read. "You're..."

"A jerk?" I supply after a beat, my shoulders inching closer to my ears.

"No." He shakes his head as a slow smile lilts across his face. "Not at all. You're lovely. Inside and out. Not many people would look at an escorting job that way. And I'm grateful for the time we've spent together, too. You're special."

Now it's my turn to feel self-conscious. I shrug awkwardly. "Well, thank you, I just... I just want the world to be a kinder place. If we could all stop judging each other, and lead with compassion, that would be a lot easier."

"Agreed," he says, sliding one wineglass across the island toward me. He then lifts his own. "To a kinder, gentler world."

I lift my glass, clinking it against his. "To a kinder, gentler world."

I hold his gaze as I take a sip of the wine, tingles flooding through my entire body as the lightly fruity, oaky red slides smoothly over my tongue. The wine is excellent, but it's the eye contact that makes me keenly aware of the way my lips caress the edge of the glass.

Suddenly the fact that we're in a place where no one is going to bother us hits full force, making my stomach flutter. We may have gotten off track with the drama at my terrible hotel, but now we're safe and cozy and...alone.

Aside from a very tired cat who is already snoozing like his life depends on it...

“Good?” he asks.

I nod. “Very good. You have excellent taste in wine. And food. And dessert.”

He smiles. “Thank you.”

“And I love your decorating style.” I nod over my shoulder as my brows glide up my forehead. “Up for a tour? I’d love to see the rest of your home.”

And your bedroom...I silently add, feeling a little bit wicked. But it’s okay to be thinking about his bed. Anthony knows I’m attracted to him, and he doesn’t seem to mind.

In fact, he seems to like it when I’m turned on and begging for him to take me.

The memory makes my skin heat as he circles around the island.

“Of course,” he says. “I’ll show you your room first. I put your suitcase in the corner, but feel free to unpack as much or as little as you want. Until recently, I had a friend staying with me for a little while, so the closet and drawers should be empty. Please make yourself, and Pudge, at home.”

“Thank you so much,” I say, following him down the narrow hallway. “I know I said I was fine with the hotel from hell, but this is so much better.”

He casts a smug grin over his shoulder as we pass a cute bathroom with a yellow cast iron tub and a shower curtain showcasing a black-and-white picture of the city skyline. “I mean, I hate to say I told you so, but...”

“Nah, I think you like it,” I tease, my nerve endings humming as he pauses in the doorway to the small bedroom. Just the feel of the sleeve of my sweater brushing

against his chest as I stop beside him is enough to make things low in my body pulse.

I pause, glancing up, breath catching when I see him watching me with a mixture of hunger and affection that seems so real.

Geez... I'm going to have to watch myself with this man. He's so charming, so exactly the kind of man I've always hoped I'd meet, and it would be so easy to forget that this is all pretend.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:58 am

“I do enjoy an ‘I told you so’ moment every now and then,” he murmurs. “It’s a character flaw. I’m bossy, and I like being right.”

“And you’re smart, so you probably are right most of the time,” I say, my voice growing breathy as his Anthony smell fills my head, making me want him even more.

It isn’t his cologne or shampoo, though, it’s just...him.

I want to bottle the scent that lingers at the warm curve of his neck and uncork it every time I want to remember the time I took a wild chance and ended up meeting an incredible man.

He inclines his head in humble acceptance. “I am. But it’s easy to be right when you stay in your comfort zone.”

I hum in agreement and force my gaze from his, taking another sip of my wine as I survey the tiny space. Even with just a full bed draped in a blue comforter on one side and a small desk and bureau on the other, it feels crowded. But it’s more than enough space for Pudge and me. “This is perfect. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Want to see upstairs?”

“I’d love to,” I say, following him back down the hall.

The apartment isn’t large, but it’s perfectly arranged. In addition to the kitchen and living room in the main part of the space, there’s an office nook tucked under the stairs that holds a vintage desk and more books. I’m completely charmed by the space,

even before we reach the top of the steep stairs and open the door to a lofted bedroom that takes my breath away.

“Wow, this is amazing.” My eyes widen as I take in the king-sized bed covered in plush white bedding opposite a wall made completely of hazy vintage glass.

“And there’s a balcony. Sort of,” Anthony says, motioning toward a slightly rusty glass door that leads out onto an iron-worked platform about as big as our picnic blanket in the garden. He sets his wineglass on the bureau before reaching for the door handle. I do the same, crossing my arms over my chest and huddling against the chill as I follow him outside.

There’s a thin railing around the platform, but it would be easy to climb over it and jump down onto the roof of the building next door.

Or fall between the buildings and break your neck on the pavement in the alley below...

“It’s probably not entirely up to code,” Anthony adds, likely noticing my caution as I inch closer to the railing to peer over the edge. “But the view...”

I glance up, my concern vanishing with a wistful sigh. “The view,” I agree, gazing across the snow-dusted city, now glowing in the light of a nearly full moon. String lights from another balcony a few streets over cast a warm glow across the rooftops and puffs of white rise from several of the chimneys, carrying the scent of woodsmoke into the night air.

It’s like every romance novel about falling in love in New York at Christmastime rolled into one perfect moment.

And then, as if on cue, a saxophone begins to play “We Wish You a Merry

Christmas” from somewhere below.

“Talk about perfect timing,” I whisper, moving closer to Anthony, my blood fizzing as he wraps an arm around me, drawing me against his side. We listen to the musician play for along moment before he asks in a hushed voice, “Is it weird that this is the best Christmas I’ve had in a long time?” he murmurs. “I mean, I love my family, but this...”

“This has been magic.” I turn to him, skimming my palms up his chest as his arms tighten around me. “Just...perfect.” I gather my courage, my pulse speeding faster as I add in softer voice, “I can only think of one thing that could possibly make it better.”

His fingers dig into the fabric of my jeans, just above where the small of my back becomes something more intimate. “Are you sure? We can wait. I don’t want to rush you.”

“Please,” I whisper, my heart now pounding in my chest. “Rush me. Take me to your bed and rush me. I don’t want to wait, I want?—”

He cuts me off with a kiss, a deep, wild kiss that assures me he’s as eager to finish what we started in the garden as I am. He backs me toward the door, our tongues dancing as his hands roam over my body with a mixture of confidence and reverence that makes me feel safer than I ever have with a man. I feel simultaneously safe and wild, in control and deliciously reckless, and I know this is going to change everything.

I’m not just losing my virginity tonight.

I’m losing my virginity to my dream man, a fantasy come to life who gets more irresistible with every passing minute. I love that Anthony is smart and kind as much

as I love his gorgeous body and gifted hands. I love his laugh and his smile and how bossy he gets when he's worried about me. And I really love that he was worried, that he truly seemed to care about keeping me safe.

If he's even half as good as I think he is, this man is one in a million.

And yes, a crazy part of me is starting to wish he could be anyone in a million. For keeps.

Falling for a man I've paid to make love to me would be ridiculous, of course, but as he closes the door behind us and cups my breast through my sweater with a soft groan of desire, I know fighting it is pointless.

I'm catching feelings for this man, and I don't want to stop.

I'm not sure I could stop, even if I tried.

I may have zero experience when it comes to love, but I know this feeling snatching me up and spinning me around isn't something that will be easy to ignore or control.

Page 31

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:58 am

So, right then and there, as Anthony murmurs, “I can’t wait to make you come for me again, beautiful,” I let go.

I give myself over to the physical sensations making me burn and the warm ache spreading through my chest, determined to enjoy every minute of this wild ride.

Even if it ends with a broken heart.

chapter 9

ANTHONY

She’s so perfect.

So sweet, and so fucking sexy.

So trusting and shameless, as I rid us both of our sweaters before sliding the straps of her bra down her shoulders. She holds my gaze with a hunger that destroys me as I tug the fabric down and cup her full, heavy breasts in my hands, teasing my thumbs lightly across her nipples.

Her breath shudders out and one word—my name—escapes her lips, and I know I’m never going to be the same.

This beautiful woman is ruining me, one sexy sigh at a time.

I claim her lips again, loving the way her eager hands skim over my skin, exploring

me as I guide her back onto the bed, still giving her sensitive breasts all the attention they deserve. I work open her jeans and guide the denim over her hips as we kiss, only pulling away for a second to rip them down her thighs before lengthening myself on top of her again.

I can't stand to be away from her softness, her heat for longer than that. "Spread your legs, baby," I murmur against her mouth as I kiss her again. She obeys, her next breath becoming a gasp as I slide my hand down the front of her panties, making the most of the extra room to maneuver now that her jeans are out of the way.

"So wet," I say, groaning as I tease my fingers through her hot, slick skin. She's petal soft and I already know she's going to taste like heaven. "I need to kiss you here, beautiful. Is that okay?"

"Yes, but can I take off your pants first?" she pants against my lips, arching into my touch with a whimper that makes my balls throb. "I want to be naked with you. Naked together."

"I want that, too," I assure her, teasing two fingers into her with slow deliberation as she clings to my shoulders, fighting for breath. "But I'm afraid if my pants come off now, I'm going to move too fast. I want you so much, I'm already about to lose my fucking mind." I bite my lip, brain flooding with desire as her pussy gushes fresh heat over my hand. "Fuck Maya, your body... I want to devour every inch of you."

"Yes, please," she says, squirming against me, making it obvious she needs this release as much as I need to give it to her. "Devour me."

She doesn't have to ask twice.

I kiss a searing path down her neck and collarbone, before I cradle her breasts in my hands, pressing them closer together so I can glide my tongue back and forth between

her nipples. I tease each perfect pink tip until she's pebble hard before closing my mouth around her sensitive skin and sucking her deep.

"Oh God," she gasps, her fingers in my hair now, spasming and clutching. "Oh God, Anthony, I can't take it. It's too good. It's too much. I want you too much."

I suck her harder, until she arches off the bed with a wild cry. She's so sensitive, I'm fairly certain I could make her come with just nipple play, but I'm too desperate to fuck her with my mouth to test that hypothesis at the moment.

I resume my path down her body, savoring the taste of her skin as I go, laving my tongue into her belly button, nipping at the fullness of her hip with my teeth, loving every gasp and sigh I summon from her throat before I settle between her thighs.

She's trembling slightly, but she doesn't offer a hint of resistance as I hook my hands behind her knees and guide her open wider, until every inch of her slick pussy is bare to me.

And fuck, she's beautiful, all swollen and wet, her small, perfectly round clit standing at attention, begging for me to give it the love it deserves.

Love...

I know that's not what either of us is here for. And even if it were, love isn't something that happens this fast. Butdamn, the feeling swelling in my chest as I spread her open with my fingers and tease my tongue gently through her sex for the first time isn't just desire.

It's closer to worship.

I worship this beautiful girl with my mouth, teasing and tasting, sucking her clit into

my mouth as I fuck her with my fingers, every whimper and groan music to my ears as she grows increasingly wild beneath me. By the time she comes, she's gripping my head in both hands, holding me captive as she grinds into my face, and I couldn't be happier.

As she shatters on my tongue, flooding my mouth with more of her salty, primal taste, I'm pretty sure I've discovered my purpose here on earth. I was made to fuck this girl, to make her scream my name and lie panting beneath me as I pull back, shedding my pants and boxer briefs in record time.

"Yes, oh God, yes," Maya says, her eyes widening as I kneel between her legs once more, stroking my cock with one hand as I soak in the sight of her spread wide for me.

But she doesn't look nervous. She looks like she can't wait to feel every inch of me inside her, even though I have at least twainches on the average man and my cock is thick enough to have caused lovers discomfort in the past.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:58 am

“Inside me,” she begs. “Please. I have an IUD. We don’t need a condom.”

“Yes, we do.” My voice is steady, but my hands shake as I reach for the box of condoms I tucked behind the lamp on the bedside table when I checked in this afternoon, wanting to be prepared for what might happen tonight.

I didn’t want to assume, but...damn if I wasn’t hoping for this, dreaming of it, offer.

She’s been under my skin since the moment our eyes locked across the library at the club, and I already know making love to her is going to be more intense, more special than anything I’ve done in bed in a long time.

Maya watches me rip open the foil, her chest rising and falling in shallow breaths, her lips parted and swollen from my kisses. She’s radiant, glowing from her orgasm, every flushed inch of her body an invitation to pleasure. I’m so hard, it’s almost painful to roll the condom down my swollen length, so desperate to be inside her that my hands tremble as I skim my palms down her thighs, but I refuse to rush this.

“We’ll go slow. And if anything doesn’t feel good, you tell me,” I murmur, my gaze locking with hers as I lengthen myself over her again, settling between her thighs. “Promise me?”

She nods, exhaling a nervous breath even as her blue eyes blaze with anticipation. “I promise.” She loops her hands around my neck, threading her fingers into my hair as she adds in a whisper, “I’m ready.”

I guide the head of my cock to her swollen sex, pausing as the weight of the moment

sinks in.

This isn't just another night. Not for her. And not for me. No matter what happens after this, I will always be the first man inside her, the first man to make love to her, and I'm determined to be worthy of the trust she's placed in me.

I push forward, gently, slowly, groaning as her body grips the first inch of my cock like a vice. Her lips part on a gasp, her nails digging into the back of my neck.

"Okay?" I ask, pulsing lightly back and forth, keeping my thrusts shallow.

"Yes," she breathes. "So much better than okay. Oh God, Anthony, it's so good."

"So good," I agree as I sink deeper, her tight heat a temptation I can't resist.

"Oh, yes. More? Please?" She lifts into me with a tentative innocence that slays me.

With a soft moan, I push to the end of her, giving her every inch of my aching length, my heart lurching as she cries out in response.

Before I can ask if she's all right again, she wraps her legs around my waist, sighing, "Yes, oh, yes. That's what I need. All of you. All of you, all the time."

"All the time," I groan, pressing my forehead to hers as I fight to keep my next thrust under control. "God, baby, you feel...incredible."

"Magical," she whispers, her voice trembling. "It's so magical."

And it is.

There's magic in the air between us as I start to move, slow at first, but gaining speed

as she urges me on with her sighs, her moans, the way her nails drag down my back as she arches closer to my cock.

“Oh, Anthony,” she pants as our pace grows faster, nearly frantic. “Yes, please. Don’t stop. Don’t stop.” Her heat tightens around me, drawing me closer to the edge with every stroke.

“I’m almost there, sweetheart,” I whisper, my voice rough, raw. “I’m so close.”

Her only response is a ragged cry as she bucks into my thrusts, chasing her pleasure with a shamelessness that makes me fall even deeper under her spell. She’s incredible, this woman, fearless, and there’s no way I’m letting this end without making her come again.

I slip a hand between us, finding her swollen clit with my thumb, circling it in time with my thrusts as I fight to hold back the heavy wave gathering low in my body.

Thank God, she’s right there with me. Just a few seconds later, she stiffens, her head falling back against the pillows as she cries out, her pussy locking around me in a way that knocks the wind from my chest.

The sight of her flushed skin, the sound of her calling my name as she comes, the feel of her molten heat pulsing on my cock—it’s too much.

“Maya. God, Maya!” I follow her over the edge, burying myself deep in her sweetness as my release crashes through me in long, aching waves that leave me trembling, breathless.

I collapse on top of her, shaken by pleasure, by the beauty of this girl and the magic we make together.

For a long moment, the only sounds in the room are our rapid breaths and the clicking of the much less aggressive radiator as it warms to life in the corner. Finally, knowing the condom can't wait much longer, I pull back, disposing of it in the small bin beside the bed before returning to her side and drawing her warm body close to mine.

She rolls to face me, her cheeks still flushed and a shine in her eyes I'm damned proud to have put there.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:58 am

“Hi, there,” she murmurs, a smile tugging at her lips.

“Hi, there,” I reply, brushing a strand of hair from her pretty face, loving her like this, with her makeup kissed away and her natural beauty on full display. “Orgasms look good on you.”

Her smile widens. “Thanks, they feel good on me.” She makes a soft, considering sound. “So...that’s sex.”

My lips quirk and that increasingly familiar warmth spreads through my chest. “Yep. That was sex, all right. So...what do you think? Did it live up to your expectations?”

“God, yes,” she says, with a happy sigh. “It was so good. So much better than I even imagined. And so much...”

“So much?” I prompt after a beat.

“So much more,” she whispers, pressing a kiss to my shoulder.

I don’t respond with words. I don’t trust myself not to say something too intimate, too real for the game of pretend we’re supposed to be playing. But the truth is there in the way I cradle her close, kissing her forehead, the tip of her nose, and then her lips, soft and sweet.

And the truth is that she’s right, this is so much more.

More than I bargained for.

More than my betrayal-scarred heart had dared to hope was possible.

Probably more than I deserve...

And I'm not sure I'll ever be the same.

chapter 10

MAYA

I wake slowly, deliciously sore in all the right places.

Sunlight streams through the hazy, tinted glass, bathing the room in pale blue light. Outside, birds chirp, someone shouts obscenities from the street below, and a garbage truck rumbles around the corner, vibrating the brick wall behind me. The sounds are so signature New York, they make me smile as I stretch my arms over my head.

God, I love it here. It's so different than Maine, so busy and vibrant and alive. It makes me feel more alive, just existing in the Big Apple.

Still, I've never woken up quite this happy to be in the city.

But then, I've never woken up freshly bedded by a gorgeous man to the smell of something delicious cooking downstairs, either.

My man isn't simply gorgeous and the best at sex, he apparently also gets up early to make breakfast.

Be still my heart...

For a moment, I lie in Anthony's cozy bed, savoring the memories of last night. All

the things we did, all the things I know we'll do again, all the things I have yet to discover...the possibilities are dizzying. And wonderful, and I've never been so glad to know I still have six whole nights to spend with someone as I am right now.

A soft, fretful voice in my head warns that I'll be equally devastated come New Year's Eve, when we head to bed together for the last time, but I push it aside.

For once in my life, I'm determined to stay in the moment. I'll go back to keeping an eye to the future when my time with Anthony is through. Until then, I intend to relish every second with the world's best fake boyfriend.

Though I should probably go feed the cat before I ask Anthony to pretty-please kiss me senseless while he fingers me against the refrigerator.

Pudge is probably?—

“Oh no.” I bolt upright, shame flooding my chest as I realize I forgot to feed Pudge last night. In the midst of all the scary drama at the hotel, and the much more enjoyable drama once we arrived at Anthony's, it completely slipped my mind.

Gah, I'm the worst!

My poor fur baby must be starved to death.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:58 am

“See, sexisdangerous,” I mutter as I scramble into my clothes from last night—jeans, sweater, but no bra because I can’t find it immediately, and I refuse to make Pudge wait a second longer than necessary for his breakfast. “One night with a penis, and you’ve become a deadbeat cat parent.”

I hurry down the steep staircase, nearly tripping over my own feet as I move faster than my recently awakened muscles are prepared for, only to stop dead at the base of the stairs.

I expected to find Pudge sprawled on his back in front of the fridge, dramatically playing dead the way he does when I work late and don’t get back to feed him until seven. Instead, my big orange love is happily munching from a ceramic bowl on the floor, decorated with tiny blue paws around the edge. Next to it sits a matching water dish.

And there, at the kitchen counter, wearing nothing but a pair of gray-and-white striped pajama pants and looking unfairly delicious for a man with his hair sticking up in ten different directions, Anthony is cracking eggs into a small white bowl.

When he sees me, his face lights up, banishing any concern that he won’t be as happy to see me as I am to see him. “Good morning, gorgeous,” he murmurs. “How’d you sleep?”

“Good,” I mumble as I amble across the room, magic fizzing through my veins all over again, just because he’s there, smiling at me like he means it. I am in so much trouble, but I can’t bring myself to worry about drowning in the deep end of the emotion pool when he’s looking at me like that.

“Great, actually,” I add. “Your bed is so comfortable. I think I could...” I trail off as I get close enough to see the chunky, fancy-looking food in Pudge’s bowl. “That isn’t the canned food I brought.”

“I didn’t want to go through your things,” he says, whisking the eggs with a fork. “And the pet store is only two blocks away.”

My brows shoot up. “You went to the pet store?”

“Of course not, woman,” he says with a playful scoff. “What do you take me for? A barbarian? I ordered groceries and pet food delivered, like a civilized human being.” He sets his fork in the sink before crossing to me. “The better not to leave my sexy houseguest alone and unguarded.”

“Unguarded?” I murmur, melting into his strong arms as he draws me close. “Your neighborhood doesn’t seem dangerous.”

“It’s not, but still,” he says, giving my ass a squeeze as he kisses the top of my head. “Better safe than sorry. Especially when I have such a delicious woman naked in my bed.” He pulls back, arching a brow. “How are you feeling?”

“Amazing,” I say, a shy smile creeping across my face. “A little sore, but...good sore.”

“Good,” he says, warmth in his voice. “I dreamt about you last night.”

I bite my lip. “Yeah? A good dream, I hope.”

“Very good,” he says, a wicked light in his eyes. “I had you tied to my bed with silk scarves, while I did bad things to you with my tongue.”

I shiver and my sore places begin to ache for him all over again. That's all it takes, apparently. One word from this sexy man, and I'm ready and willing. "Doesn't sound bad to me," I whisper. "It actually sounds...intriguing."

"I was hoping you'd say that." He leans down, his lips angling for mine, but I turn my head at the last second.

"I can't," I demure, bringing a hand to hover over my mouth. "I have to brush my teeth first."

"Never," he teases, his fingers dancing up and down my ribs as I try to pull away, making me laugh. "I love morning breath kisses. They're my favorite. The funkier the better."

"Not happening, mister," I say, pinching his bare stomach playfully before twisting away and hurrying toward the bathroom. "I'll be right back. And I'll send you money for the cat food and groceries while we eat. Do you have the Pay Your Friends app?"

"Don't worry about it, my treat," he says, waving a breezy hand as he returns to his bowl of eggs. "I'm making veggie omelets by the way. I've already sautéed the onions, peppers, and sweet potatoes, all I have to do is mix in the egg. But I wanted to wait until you woke up to see if you like goat cheese."

"I love goat cheese." I pause in the doorway to the bathroom, soaking in the domestic scene as Pudge finishes his meal and moves to wind around Anthony's legs, already begging for more food.

"Then goat cheese you shall have," he says, carefully toeing Pudge out of the way as he turns to the stove, treating me to a stunning view of his muscled shoulders.

Idolove goat cheese.

I could learn to love mornings like this, too.

At sleepovers with my friends, I'm always the first person up, the one who preps breakfast and has coffee waiting long before the others roll out of bed. I enjoy being the caretaker, but I confess having the shoe on the other foot is nice.

Especially when the person pampering me with food and delicious-smelling coffee in a glass carafe looks as good cooking half-naked as Anthony does.

Thinking about how little fat I was able to pinch on his washboard abs, I dart into the bathroom to brush my teeth, surprised by the rosy-cheeked girl in the mirror. My hair is a mess, but my lips and cheeks are pink from a hint of whisker burn, and my eyes are shining like I have the best secret ever.

And, maybe I do.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:58 am

Though it's not going to remain a secret for long...

I have to tell someone what I've done. I thought I could pull off a top-secret sex mission to New York, but now that I've actually done the deed, I need to spill my guts—and hopefully get a little practical advice—from someone I can trust.

And there's no one I trust more than Elaina.

Which is good, since she's probably the only one of my friends who won't be annoyed with me for paying for a hotel instead of asking to stay at their place in the city. Sully and Sydney might not understand why I wanted to keep this close to the vest, but I think Elaina will. Elaina is as independent as I am and even more determined to forge her own way in the world, which sometimes means keeping secrets from the ones you love.

She didn't tell us she was buying her café until the deed was in hand, and I'm sure if she ever sells, it will be a similar situation. Elaina knows her own mind and doesn't invite commentary on her decisions idly, even from her best friends.

I'm betting she's also going to be the only one who understands why I've kept my big apartment purchase and plans to move to New York to myself, too.

Though she'll probably be sad.

Once I leave, Elaina will be the last of our crew left in Sea Breeze.

In the guest room, I dig through my suitcase for clean clothes to change into, then

pull out my phone to shoot Elaina a text.

Maya:Hey. How was your Christmas? I hope you had a great time with your family. Just wanted to let you know that I'm safe in the city...and that I may have lost my virginity and might be wondering how a person keeps from falling for a guy when the chemistry is off the charts?

Elaina:WHAT? OMG WHHHAAAAAT? You MIGHT have lost your virginity? My friend, you either lost it or you didn't. Give it up. What happened last night?!

Maya:I did it. I lost it. As of sometime around nine p.m. last night, I am no longer the oldest member of the Never Been Boinked club!

Elaina:CONGRATULATIONS!! OMG, that's amazing! At least, I hope it was amazing. You said the chemistry was off the charts, so I'm guessing your mystery man got the job done?

Maya:And then some. Elaina, he's incredible. He's smart and sexy and kind, but says filthy things when we're naked and knows exactly how to touch me and it was just...the best night ever. Sex is not overrated, and I can't flipping wait to do it again. He's in the kitchen making breakfast for us now, but when we're done eating, I'm going to drag him back upstairs and have my way with him.

Elaina:Oh, honey, good for you! This is fantastic news! You deserved a perfect, sexy, filthy-talking first time. So, tell me everything. Who is this guy? What does he do? And most importantly, what is his name, address, and social security number in case he decides to murder you?

Maya:He's not going to murder me.

Elaina:I hope not, but it never hurts to be prepared. Just sneak his ID from his wallet

when you get a chance, take a picture, and shoot it my way. That way I have all the info I need to report his ass if you go missing.

Maya:I'm not going to go missing. I trust him, Elaina. I'm actually staying at his place. He insisted on moving Pudge and me to his apartment in the East Village when he saw my sketchy hotel. But yes, I will send you his name and address later. But not his driver's license. That would be weird.

Elaina:So? Weird is better than dead.

But you've always been good at reading people. If you say he's a good egg, he's probably a good egg. Though if he's actually a keeper and not a serial killer, one part of this doesn't make sense...

Maya:What's that?

Elaina:Why are you worried about falling for him? Falling is good! I'd fall in love every week if I could. Even when it ends badly, being in love is the best feeling.

Maya:Says the woman who loves roller coasters. I prefer to keep my feet on the ground, thank you very much. I think we'll have a great week together, but that's all this is. Just a temporary thing.

Elaina:Why?!

Maya:It just is. Our lives are going in different directions and more isn't possible right now. For either of us. I knew that going in, and I thought I was fine with it. But now...

Elaina:But now his magical penis has ensorcelled your heart along with your vagina, and you're rethinking things?

Maya:I would have said 'enchanted' not ensorcelled, but...yes. That's about the size of it.

Elaina:Speaking of size, how was that? Big, but not too big, I hope. When it comes to first times, sometimes less is more.

Maya:I obviously haven't encountered many up close and personal, but from what I've seen in movies, it was bigger than average. But it was fine. Nothing I couldn't handle.

Elaina:That's my girl! You can handle any dick that swings your way. Assuming you want to handle it, of course. And you can handle the feelings, too. Just stay in the moment, enjoy every second, and try not to dwell on the future or lack thereof.

Page 36

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:58 am

Maya: That's what I was thinking.

Elaina: Of course you were. You've got a good head on your shoulders. And half the things we worry about never happen, anyway. Fretting about the future is a waste of life force. He could completely turn you off in a few days and then all that worrying about falling in love with him would have been a big waste of time.

Maya: I can't imagine that happening, but you're right. I'm just going to enjoy the time we have and let myself feel whatever I need to feel. And when it's over, I'll say goodbye and be grateful for the memories.

Elaina: Sounds like a plan. But text me if you need more advice or a shoulder to cry on when he turns out to be married or in the mob or married AND in the mob or secretly addicted to trimming his toenails with his teeth.

Maya: Gross. That's disgusting, and Anthony is not disgusting.

Elaina: Oh, Anthony, is it? That's a nice name. Very classic. Very Italian. Is he Italian? I love a dark-eyed Italian man. All that olive skin and boundless testosterone. But be warned, he could still be gross. Men are mostly gross. That's why I'm becoming a lesbian...as soon as I can convince myself that I like girls as more than friends. I've been reading some really hot girl-on-girl romance, but so far, it's just making me want to grab Griffin from the pub and ride him all night. Even though he's clingy as hell and the neediest one-night-stand ever.

Maya: Maybe because you keep going back for more than one night? Don't mess with Griffin. He's already half in love with you. You're going to break his squishy little

heart.

Elaina:Ugh. Fine. But there are literally no other decent, unattached men around here. Maybe I need to make a sex run to the city... Does Anthony have any hot friends?

Maya:I'm not sure. But if he does, I doubt I'm going to meet them. We're kind of keeping things between us. Making the most of the time we have alone.

Elaina:Aw, that's so romantic! Mark my words, woman, this is going to end up being more than a fling. I feel it in my bones. He's going to need more Maya in his life and show up on your doorstep in Sea Breeze, hungry for fresh lobster and your incomparable pussy.

Maya:I doubt it, but that's okay. Like you said, I'm going to live in the now and let the future take care of itself.

Elaina:All right. But if you decide you want more, don't be afraid to ask for it, woman. You're a keeper and a half and it's time everyone—including YOU—realized it. From what you've said, it sounds like Anthony might be the first man you've dated who doesn't have his head completely up his ass.

I stare at her words, torn between feeling touched and...depressed.

Anthony doesn't have his head up his ass, but he didn't choose me, either. Not really.

Twyla made it clear that her escorts have the right to refuse a match without even giving a reason why, and that they're never penalized for refusing a date, but still...

Anthony is getting paid to be with me. Even his generosity in feeding me and Pudge has to be viewed through that lens. After all, even after Twyla's cut and whatever he's spending on groceries, he's going to make at least seven thousand dollars from

having me in his bed for a week.

I'm sure the "friend" who stayed in this guest room before me didn't pay nearly that much.

Or maybe that "friend" was another client...

The thought makes my stomach turn and the warm, giddy feelings seep from my body. I don't want to think about Anthony with another woman, and I really don't want to think about that woman sleeping in the bed where I lost my virginity last night.

So, I won't.

"Present moment, present moment," I chant as I text Elaina a quick goodbye and head back into the kitchen, refusing to let jealousy ruin a single second of our day.

Anthony's an escort. Being with other women is his job. I can't get upset about that. It wouldn't be fair.

Besides, I'm not sharing him with anyone else right now. This week is mine—ours—and I mean to relish the heck out of it.

"Food's ready, just waiting on the toast," he says, motioning to the two place settings on the other side of the island, where two leather stools are tucked beneath the overhang. "You good with eating here? Or do you want to take plates into the living room?"

"Here is good, thanks," I say, walking past the delicious-smelling omelets to meet Anthony by the toaster.

He smiles as I approach. “You changed.”

“I did,” I say, pausing in front of him and tipping my head back to hold his gaze.

“You look good in pink, but I confess I was hoping to get you out of your clothes again before you put new ones on.”

“You can still get me out of my clothes,” I say. “Maybe in the shower after breakfast? I could use a shower. I was a very dirty girl last night.”

“You were the sexiest girl last night,” he says, looping his arm around my waist and drawing me against him. “What did I do to deserve a week with you, Maya Swallows?”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:58 am

Before I can respond, he bends down, kissing me with a thoroughness that sends warmth pulsing through all my well-loved places. He tastes like coffee, a hint of sugar, and sweet possibilities.

As I curl my fingers into his bare chest, loving the feel of his strength, I decide that multiple things can be true at once. Anthony can be getting paid to be with me and think I'm something special. One doesn't eliminate the possibility of the other.

I have to believe that. The way he gazes down at me after we pull apart is too genuine to be faked. This man likes me, I like him, and we're going to have an amazing week together.

And maybe we won't have to say goodbye forever...

Maybe we'll see each other again someday, even if I have to save up money to pay for his time. Or if that feels too weird and yucky to be an ongoing thing, we can be friends.

Stranger things have happened...probably.

Though as Anthony and I hit the shower after our delicious breakfast, it's hard to imagine being just friends. "Friends" isn't a word that comes to mind when a man is pinning me against cool tile as he takes me from behind, all while murmuring how much he loves being inside me into my damp hair.

I'm so turned on, so lost in the wild pleasure he makes me feel as I come for him again, I don't realize we forgot to use a condom until he pulls out, coming on my

back in hot jets even warmer than the water pouring from the shower.

“Shit, condom,” he says, still catching his breath. “I’m so sorry, Maya. I completely forgot.”

I turn in his arms, wiping the water from his cheeks before cupping his stricken face in my hands. “It’s okay. I told you; I have an IUD. And we’ve both been tested so...it’s fine.”

He frowns harder. “No, it isn’t. This isn’t something that happens. Not unless I’m in a serious, committed relationship. I want you to know that. I take unprotected sex seriously, and I’m so sorry.”

Trying not to let myself read too much into the words, I calmly assure him again that it’s okay. But on the inside, I’m bouncing up and down on the world’s largest hope trampoline.

Maybe I really am special.

And maybe I’m not the only one thinking this is too good to be over in six more days.

chapter 11

ANTHONY

As a native New Yorker, it’s easy to adopt a “been there, did that when I was ten, spare me the crowds, thank you,” attitude toward our city’s tourist attractions. Sure, I enjoy a Broadway show or a trip to Governors Island for a killer view of the Statue of Liberty from time to time, but for the most part, I avoid touristy shit like the plague.

I’m a cultural snob and far too fast a walker to have any patience with the gaping,

ambling Midwesterners filling Times Square on any given afternoon. I rarely step foot in Midtown unless I have a meeting that can't be rescheduled to my firm's posh conference room in the Financial District.

But now, I'm so glad I braved the holiday hordes.

The look on Maya's face as we're slowly elevated three stories into the air above the observation deck atop Rockefeller Center is worth every second of the cramped subway ride from the Village and the battle through the crowds waiting their turn at the tiny ice rink below.

"Oh my God." She steps forward, pressing her mittened hands against the glass, her lips parted in awe. "This is the coolest thing ever."

"Not too shabby," I murmur as I discreetly snap a picture of her with my phone. She's too beautiful, with her cheeks flushed pink and her eyes filled with wonder to resist.

And a part of me knows I'm going to need photographic evidence of my week with her. Otherwise, it would be too easy to believe this wild, impulsive deviation from my status quo was a sexy dream I had on the way to a full-blown midlife crisis.

But when I'm with her, I don't feel on the verge of a midlife crisis. Since we met at the botanic garden last night, I haven't thought about what I left behind or what comes next for a moment. All I've thought about is her. And her body. And her smile. And her sweetness.

And her cat, who I've grown weirdly attached to since I met him in that dingy hotel room.

When she suggested we could bring Pudge on our outing if my surprise didn't

involve places that are off-limits to cats, I briefly considered revising my game plan for the afternoon. Partly because I wanted to see him dressed up in a sweater and riding in the backpack Maya brought along to facilitate cat-accompanied sightseeing, and partly because I thought it would make her happier than leaving her fur baby behind.

But now, I'm glad I promised we'd plan a Pudge-friendly outing for later in the week. Her gasp of excitement as we reach the top of our ride and the glass platform begins to spin in a slow circle is worth triple the price I paid for the VIP tickets.

The city spreads out before us, a snow-dusted landscape of architectural wonder beneath a light blue December sky. The One World Trade Center pierces the heavens to our south, while Central Park stretches north like a white blanket, dotted with bare trees and winding paths. From this height, even the yellow taxis look like toys scattered across a playmat.

"I thought the view from the Empire State Building was amazing, but this is..." She exhales with a reverent shake of her head. "This is next level. Thank you so much for bringing me."

"Of course. I'm enjoying it, too," I say wrapping my arms around her from behind. The warmth of her curvy body against mine contrasts perfectly with the winter chill. "We came here for a field trip when I was in fifth grade, but they didn't have the Skyline back then. It's nice to see everything above the crowds."

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:58 am

“So nice,” she agrees. “Everything looks so different up here. More impressive, but also...more manageable somehow. Like a girl from Maine could really move to the big city, buy a piece of the action, and make something of herself.”

“You’re already something. Something pretty great,” I say, another prickle of misgiving itching across my skin as she leans back against me with a soft, “Aw, thanks. You, too.”

I did some research on the building she’s buying this morning before she woke up. It wasn’t hard to find. I know the neighborhood and there was only one building that matched her description.

One crumbling, likely asbestos-and-rodent-infested building that might very well bleed her reserves dry before she gets everything up to code and ready to actually make a profit...

Reading between the lines, it’s pretty clear she’s putting everything she’s saved into the down-payment. That won’t leave much for repairs, especially if they’re substantial.

I push aside my worries for now, not wanting to ruin the afternoon, but I’m going to make damned sure she touches base with me between her final walk-through on Wednesday and the closing on Friday. And if she’s about to make a potentially ruinous mistake, I’ll do whatever it takes to get through to her...even if I have to tell her the truth about who I am and just how much I know about buying property in Red Hook.

I own two warehouses in the area and a building I donated to a non-profit that offers emergency housing for victims of domestic violence, not to mention the three single-family homes my family inhabits not far from the waterfront. They're all on the same block, making that section of the neighborhood feel like a Pissarro-family compound. My cousins' kids ride bikes up and down the street at all hours of the day and night, especially in the summer, and getting enough signatures to close the street for a block party is never a problem.

The June crawfish boil has become such a hot ticket that my uncle had to start selling tickets on Eventbrite to make sure he had enough food for everyone, and they always sell out within twenty-four hours.

I bet Maya would love that, I think, as the platform begins its slow descent back toward the top level of the observation deck. Especially if she's a member of the Red Hook community by then. She didn't mention anything about moving into the apartment building she's buying, but I doubt she'll have enough money left over to afford to live anywhere else.

As much as I hate the idea of her in a sketchy area, I like the thought of her being a part of the close-knit community that always watched out for me as a kid.

But, of course, I can't connect her to that community or promise her a ticket to the crawfish boil without giving myself away. Without letting her know that I'm a liar who's been abusing her trust from the moment I gave her a fake last name in the club Friday night.

But maybe she would forgive you, my inner voice whispers. If the rest of the week is as perfect as last night and today have been, you'd both be stupid to let a little bump in the road derail something with this kind of potential.

I roll the thought over in my head.

Is lying about being a male prostitute a “little” bump in the road, though? Before I can decide, we’re back on the 70th floor and the attendant is opening the glass door for us to exit.

“Want to walk around a little more? I’d like to take a few pictures of the skyline,” she says as we move past the next group waiting in line, adding with a laugh, “I was so excited on the ride, I forgot.”

“Of course,” I say, letting her lead the way to the railing, where a gentle winter wind nips at our skin without being too brutal. “We can stay as long as you like.”

“Thanks,” she says, pulling her phone from her coat pocket and lining up a shot. “I love how clearly you can see all the different styles of architecture from up here. An art deco masterpiece next to a glass tower from the 80’s next to something brand new...but it’s all still cohesive somehow.”

“You’re an architecture fan,” I say, noting the passion in her voice and the way her eyes flash as she lines up each shot. I glance over her shoulder at the screen, impressed. “And one hell of a photographer.”

She laughs self-consciously. “Oh, no. I’m just an amateur. My friend Sully is the photographer in our group. She’s insanely talented. I like taking pictures, but I mostly use them as references for sketching and watercolor.”

“A photographer and an artist,” I say, refusing to let her talk me out of being impressed by her. “I’d love to see your sketches sometime.”

Her cheeks flush as she bobs a shoulder. “Maybe I’ll make you one before I leave. As a thank you for letting me stay at your place. I always do a little watercolor for my Gram when she sells a house. She gives them to her clients along with the keys at closing as a personal touch.”

“Add stellar granddaughter to the list, but I’m not surprised,” I say, loving that we both make family a priority. We come from such different worlds, but we have more in common than I would have imagined that first night at the club.

Tucking her phone back into her pocket, she turns to me with a playful arch of her brow. “Yeah? So, I’ve got you fooled, huh?”

I smile, enjoying her sassy side as much as her sweet one. “Yeah, you’ve got me, all right. I think you’re pretty great, Miss Swallows.” I pull a face. “I mean, aside from how loudly you snore, obviously.”

Her jaw drops, but she laughs as she says, “I do not snore!”

“Oh, but you do. Loud enough to rattle the pictures above the bed,” I lie. “Why do you think I was up so early this morning?”

Her eyes narrow. “Nope. I don’t believe you. I may not have slept over at a man’s house before, but I still have sleepover parties with my girlfriends all the time. They would have told me if I snore, so I could do something to stop it. They believe in tough love.”

“Good. Tough love is the best kind of love.”

“Agreed,” she says, her expression growing serious. “Truth feels way more like love to me than pretty lies. Truth means you really care.” Before I can recover from that direct blow to the conscience, she adds, “But I do have flaws, for sure. I don’t snore, but sometimes...I’m super bad.”

I frown, falling in beside her as we wander to the other side of the observation deck. “Oh yeah? Example of this badness, please?”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:58 am

“Well, I...” She glances around, ensuring there’s no one too close before she adds in a whisper, “I hired a male prostitute. In a secret sex club. That’s pretty bad.”

I snort, making it clear I’m unimpressed. “Please, I’m a consenting adult. You’re a consenting adult. We’re both having a good time together. Nothing bad to see here, let alone ‘super bad.’ You’re going to have to come up with something better than that, Swallows.”

She wrinkles her nose, lifting her chin in that stubborn way I’m coming to love as she adds, “Fine. I break into buildings. Lots of them. I learned to pick locks one summer as a kid, after watching too much *Harriet the Spy*, and now I break into people’s vacation homes while they’re out of town. I do it all the time, in fact.”

My brows lift. I’m surprised, but also...intrigued.

Is it wrong that I find her deviant side as adorable as her sweet one? I don’t know, but I’m not sure I can help myself if it is.

“Okay,” I say, nodding as I consider this latest revelation. “We might have something here. So, what do you do after you’ve broken in? Drink their booze? Use their pool and leave wet towels in the pool house? Throw wild parties for your friends?”

She gives a self-conscious roll of her eyes. “No, I just...walk around, looking at the architecture and getting design inspiration, but still...” She points a finger at my chest. “That’s bad. And illegal. I could get in big trouble if I were caught, which I almost was one time when I didn’t realize the new owners had installed cameras when they bought the property.”

I grin. “Wow. You wicked thing, you. Just walking around, looking at things, without touching anything or causing any chaos or destruction. How do you sleep at night?”

She gives my arm a playful slap. “Oh, hush. It is wicked. And I’ve never told anyone about it before, not even my best friends.”

I sober, my smile fading as I assure her, “Your secret is safe with me. Thanks for sharing it. I appreciate the trust.”

“You’re welcome,” she mutters. “I just think it’s a shame no one ever gets to see the inside of those old mansions except rich out-of-towners who don’t even live there most of the year.”

An idea forms, so perfect I know the ice-skating I had planned can wait for another day. “Have you been to The Met?”

She nods. “Yeah, I love it. The impressionist paintings are my favorite.”

“So, you’ve been to the period rooms?”

Her brow furrows. “Period rooms?”

“There’s an entire section near the American wing, where they’ve recreated historic interiors, from the bedrooms of kings and queens to old hotel lobbies and fancy French drawing rooms.”

Her eyes light up like she’s just found buried treasure. “No, way! How could I have missed those? That sounds amazing.”

“It’s an enormous museum. It’s easy to miss things. But I’ve been a member for years and know all The Met’s secrets. Want to head up there?” I glance at my phone.

“We’ll only have a couple hours before they close, but that should be enough to see the period rooms and grab tea in the Patrons Lounge. I can text the concierge and ask them to reserve a table for us at four if you like tiny sandwiches and even tinier desserts.”

“Yes, let’s!” She practically bounces through the crowd toward the elevators. “I love tiny sandwiches and even tinier desserts. And tea! And museums.” She grabs my hand, squeezing it tight. “This is seriously the best day ever. No other day will ever be able to compare.”

Not if I have anything to say about it, I think as we slide into the elevator, taking advantage of the fact that we’re the only ones in the car to make out in the corner as we rocket toward street level.

Yes, today has been wonderful, but I haven’t begun to woo this woman. I have dozens of tricks still up my sleeve, cards waiting to be played when I want to make her jaw drop and her pretty blue eyes dance.

And yes, I probably shouldn’t be thinking about “wooing” a woman I’m supposed to say goodbye to in a week, but fuck that. I can’t bring myself to care about “should” when Maya’s cuddled against me in a car whizzing uptown, grinning from ear to ear.

She’s beautiful when she’s happy.

And I’m happier than I can remember being in years when she’s happy.

And that’s enough to push all my worries aside as we emerge from the cab and start up the grand steps to the museum, hand in hand.

chapter 12

MAYA

Best day ever.

Best. Day. Ever!

The words dance through my head as Anthony and I make our way through security and into the museum, which is every bit as jaw-droppingly beautiful as I remember from my last visit.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:58 am

Like the observation deck, the museum is busy but not packed—I suspect a lot of the tourists are still sleeping off their Christmas festivities—and I’m grateful for the space to breath as we make our way through the lobby. The Great Hall echoes with footsteps and voices as Anthony flashes his membership card and we enter the Egyptian Wing.

A part of me wants to linger by the giant ebony sarcophagus and the ancient temple in the glass-walled room we pass through on our way to the Sculpture Patio. But I settle for a quick picture of the peaceful pool of water surrounding the temple, with the monument fuzzy in the background, before letting Anthony lead me onward.

We don’t have time for a lengthy visit today, but I promise myself I’ll come back again. Heck, maybe I’ll become a member when I move to the city. I love the idea of supporting the museum, assuming it isn’t too pricey.

I’m living large now, but once I start repairs to my building, money will be tight. But I plan on getting a part-time job to supplement my rental income. I have six years of property management experience, after all. Hopefully, the fact that my references will all be coming from family members won’t make that much of a difference.

I may have spent my entire career thus far working with my family, but I’ve grown our business and revenue by fifteen percent since I took over control of the portfolio three years ago. I’m a natural with rental property stuff, and I’m sure there are tons of owners in the city who would like to turn the day-to-day management of their investments over to a capable young woman willing to work for slightly less than their current company.

After all, I can live on forty dollars a week in groceries when I have to, and I've had to for most of the recent past in order to save up my down payment.

But today isn't a day for pondering future frugality. Today is a day for basking in the luxurious feeling of being at a stunning museum with an even more stunning man, who has already made reservations to feed me fancy sandwiches.

If I wasn't already falling for Anthony, I would be after today.

As things stand, I don't know if my heart will ever be the same. As he guides me into the first period room—a stunning 16th-century bedroom—it clenches in my chest, making me dizzy with the romantic wonder of it all.

“Wow.” I pause beside the velvet rope at the edge of the room, my fingers curling deeper into the crook of Anthony's arm as I take in the ornate paneling and silk wallpaper. Electric “candles” flicker from the fireplace mantle, catching the gilt details in the furnishings and making them glow. “This is incredible. I love it so much. You're a genius.”

“Thanks.” He laughs before kissing my forehead with a sweetness that sends my poor heart into another round of clenching and aching. I'm caught somewhere between joy and a bittersweet longing for something I'll never have, but so grateful to be here with him that I don't mind the hint of melancholy.

It's kind of beautiful, actually.

Bittersweet feelings remind you that life is fleeting and all beautiful things come to an end.

So, you have to relish them now, embracing the beauty with everything in you and holding on tight for as long as it lasts.

“The craftsmanship is incredible,” I murmur, leaning over the rope to get a better look at the carved legs of the card table set up in the center of the room. “Can you imagine waking up in a room like this every morning? Living in this kind of beauty? Do you think it would ever become ordinary?”

“Maybe to some people,” he says. “But not for me, I don’t think. It’s been decades since I was a kid sharing a cramped room with two of my cousins, and I still wake up feeling grateful for the beautiful place I call home.”

I glance up at him, falling a little more in love with him. “I like that about you.”

He shifts his focus to my face, his gaze softening. “I like you, too. A lot. Even if you weren’t a client, I would still want to be here, sharing this with you. You’re a good one, Maya Swallows.”

My throat tightens, touched by his words. “You, too.”

“Not as good as you.” His smile fades as he nods to his left, and there’s a hint of pain in his voice as he asks, “Should we move on? Lots of things to see before four o’clock.”

“Absolutely.” I wonder what he’s thinking that made him sound so sad, but I’m not quite brave enough to ask.

But maybe by tonight I will be...

Crazy as it is, I already feel closer to Anthony than any man I’ve dated, and the feeling only grows as we wander the museum, indulging our mutual love of beautiful, creative things.

We explore English drawing rooms with heavy draperies and delicate teacups, Dutch

parlors filled with blue and white porcelain, and an American Federalist-style bedroom that reminds me of a scene from *Little Women*. Finally, we head up to the second floor to wander through a Zen garden and a replica of an ancient Japanese home that makes me reconsider my aversion to minimalism.

Yes, I love knickknacks and sculpture and pretty things to look at while I'm having my morning coffee, but there's something to be said for a blissfully uncluttered space.

"I feel more enlightened just walking through there," I whisper as we move through the rounded doorway into a hallway filled with Japanese art and sculpture.

"Me, too," Anthony says. "And hungrier. Ready for tea?"

I exhale a happy sigh. "Yes, please. I hope they have Lapsang Souchong. It's my favorite."

"Mine, too," he says, shooting me a sideways look. "But most people don't like the smokiness."

"Not me, I love it. The smokier the better."

Page 41

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:58 am

He nods, his eyes flashing the way they do when he's having a brilliant idea. "I know where I'm going to take you tomorrow night. I'll make reservations when we get home."

"Where?" I ask.

"It's a surprise," he says, grinning smugly. "But you're going to love it, no doubt in my mind."

"Well, you're batting a hundred so far."

He arches a brow. "I hope you mean a thousand. A hundred wouldn't be too great."

I laugh as I confess, "Yes, a good batting number, whatever that is. I'm not a sports person. Can you tell?"

He puts an arm around me, hugging me against his side. "I had an inkling. But that's fine by me. Artsy people are better than sporty people, anyway. I mean, I love catching a ball game or watching hockey with my cousins, but I never leave a sporting event feeling like I've grown as a person the way I do the opera or an afternoon here."

I nod, marveling at the giant buddha that fills the final room in the Asian Art Wing. It's at least twenty-five feet tall and exudes a sacred energy that lifts the hairs on my arms as we pass by on our way to the mezzanine. "I get that. Though I did enjoy watching Sully and Elaina play rugby in high school. I loved how fierce they were on the field."

“Sully,” he echoes, his brow furrowing. “You mentioned her earlier, right? The photographer?”

“Yeah,” I say, amazed that he remembered. This man is actually paying attention, a thing nearly as sexy as the way his broad shoulders fill out a sweater. “We’ve been friends forever.”

“One of my friends is dating a woman named Sully,” he says. “I think it’s a nickname, but?—”

“Oh, yeah, it’s a nickname for my friend, too. Her real name is Gertrude, so we used to call her Gertie. But lately she’s liking ‘Sully’ better.” I laugh. “Which is also a nickname, short for Sullivan, her last name.” I blink faster, as I start to wonder... Could it even be possible? “Your friend’s name isn’t Weaver, is it?”

His face goes completely blank for a moment in a way I’ve never seen it before, but before I can wonder what the heck that’s all about, he smiles and shakes his head. “No, his name is Brian, but Weaver sounds familiar, too. Must be one of those days, when everything has a hint of *déjà vu*.” He motions to our right. “We’re in here. The Patrons Lounge.”

He reaches for the door, holding it open for me, and I forget about the strange moment as I take in the warm and welcoming space. The lounge is peaceful, all wood paneling and comfortable leather chairs, with small tables beside them holding tea trays for the patrons enjoying an afternoon treat. A fire crackles in a marble fireplace on the far side of the room, and to say I’m thrilled when the hostess leads us to a table right beside it, is an understatement.

I love a fire.

And I love that Anthony orders three different varieties of Lapsang Souchong so we

can do a side-by-side taste test.

And I love cucumber sandwiches and scones and tiny macarons in pink and green and all the other treats on our tray.

But most of all, I love how easily the conversation flows between me and this amazing man. I love the way he looks at me like he wouldn't want to be anywhere else, the way he steals a kiss after wiping a macaron crumb from my lip, and how perfect it feels to leave the museum on his arm, headed back to his place in the dim light of an early winter sunset.

I'm falling for my fake boyfriend, no doubt about it.

But with his hand wrapped possessively around my thigh as our cab heads back to the Village, filling my already humming body with anticipation for the night to come, I can't bring myself to care.

chapter 13

ANTHONY

Fuck me.

Fuck me hard. No lube.

I'm an idiot, and idiots don't deserve lube.

What the hell was I thinking? I should have seen this coming. Maya's a small-town girl from rural Maine; Weaver's also originally from rural Maine and is now dating a woman from his hometown. Hell, I sent a friend of mine up there to help him troubleshoot issues with his family business almost two months ago.

I should have remembered the place was called Sea Breeze. If I had, the second Maya told me where she was from that night at the club, I could have ended things right then and there.

And I would have. At that point, Maya was an intriguing possibility, but one I would have been able to resist in the name of not royally fucking up my life. Getting caught pretending to be a prostitute by a friend and former employee—the same man who’s on my shortlist of people to take over for me at Baxter and Holloway—isn’t on my holiday wish list.

But now...

Now, the thought of letting Maya walk out of my life makes me physically ill. And angry. I want to fight the person threatening to ruin things with this woman with my bare hands, but that person is...myself.

Page 42

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:58 am

Fuck me.

The mantra pounds through my head as our cab winds through the darkening streets of Lower Manhattan. I squeeze Maya's thigh and her head rests trustingly on my shoulder in the cozy back seat, but all I can think about is how quickly this perfect thing is going to implode.

How quickly she's going to learn to hate me...

Or at least think I'm one twisted son of a bitch.

She and Sully aren't just acquaintances; they're best friends from childhood. If we were to try to make a go of this in the real world, there's literally no way we could avoid running into Weaver and his soon-to-be fiancé. He told me he plans to pop the question at Sully's friend's New Year's Eve party, right before they head back to the city. No matter how hard I might try to keep my relationship and friendships separate, it would only be a matter of time before fantasy and reality collided with disastrous results.

My house of cards is about to come crashing down, and there's nothing I can do to stop it.

Nothing, except for ending things with Maya on New Year's Day, the way we originally planned, and I can't do that. After just twenty-four hours, I'm pretty sure Maya's the person I've been waiting for, the one I was beginning to doubt was out there. Her sweetness, her humor, her good heart and passion and big dreams—it's like she was made for me.

And I was made for her.

The only thing I've lied about is my job. Everything else I've shared with her has been the real deal. The feelings growing between us are, too.

But do I have a snowball's chance in hell of convincing her of that?

I don't know. I need advice, perspective, and there's only one person I can contact about a problem with my fake escort client.

My phone burns in my pocket, but I can't text Twyla with Maya pressed against me, asking if there's anything I want to add to the grocery delivery she's assembling. She wants to cook for me tonight, to thank me for the perfect day.

She's so good, so trusting.

And I'm starting to feel like the villain in a gothic novel, taking advantage of the innocent young woman entrusted into his care.

Thanks to a traffic jam in the Flatiron District, by the time we reach the apartment, our groceries are already waiting in the lobby. I gather the larger bag, while Maya takes the smaller one, and we trudge up the five floors to the apartment. Which is, of course, another lie. I don't live in a fifth-story walk-up. I live in a luxury building, with a doorman and staff who deliver my groceries to my penthouse and put them neatly away before I get home from work.

Inside, Maya heads straight for the kitchen, pushing up the sleeves on her sweater. "Prepare yourself for greatness," she announces. "My grandmother's shepherd's pie is the stuff of legend. She has a top-secret blend of seasonings she uses on the lamb that she only shares with immediate family members. And you have to memorize the recipe. She refuses to write it down. I think she seriously believes someone might

break into her house to steal it.”

“Sounds like I’d better make myself scarce,” I say, with what I hope passes for a normal smile. “To preserve the family secret.”

She winks. “Nah, you can watch if you want. You’ll just have to close your eyes when I apply the rub.”

“I never want to close my eyes when you’re applying a rub,” I quip, making her laugh and a fresh wave of self-loathing rush through my chest. But I couldn’t stop flirting with her if I tried.

Which means I have to figure a way out of this mess.

Stat.

“And I have a few emails I need to handle,” I add, nodding toward the stairs. “Mind if I grab my laptop and head upstairs? I can come help set the table and make salads in a bit.”

“Yeah, no worries. Take your time. I’ve got this.” She’s already pulling ingredients from the bags and laying them out on the island. “Pudge will keep me company. He loves to help cook.”

Summoned by the sound of his name, her massive orange baby emerges from under the desk in the office nook under the stairs with a meow that seems to say, “You called?” that makes us both smile.

“There he is,” Maya coos. “How was your day, buddy? Ours was great.”

Pudge meows again, pausing to headbutt my leg as I pass and purring as I reach down

to rub his scruff. Guilt twists my stomach all over again.

Now I'm starting to feel like shit for deceiving a cat.

"I'll be back down in few," I say, practically bolting for the stairs.

Once I'm safe in the bedroom with the door closed behind me, I pull my phone from my pocket and shoot a text to Twyla—THE SHIT HAS HIT THE FAN. I just found out that Maya is friends with Sully. WEAVER'S Sully. As in my friend and former VP of Acquisitions, who knows that I am not now, and have never been, a male prostitute.

Thankfully, Twyla responds immediately.

Page 43

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:58 am

But her response leaves a fuck ton to be desired.

Twyla:Shit! That's right. You're the one who gave Weaver a member reference, aren't you? Oh my God, I'm so sorry, Anthony, I completely forgot about that.

AnthonyHow could you forget? That's how he was able to skip the waiting list!

Twyla:Yes, I know! Or, I remember that now, anyway. But you've never come into the club with him, Anthony! So, the two of you were never connected in my mind. Honestly, I've seen more of Weaver in the past few years than I have of you. We developed our own relationship and I just... I guess I started to think of him as MY friend and forgot that he was your friend first. So, when he asked me to do him a favor and give his girlfriend's bestie a discount and a hook-up with the safest escort I could find, I didn't hesitate to say yes.

Anthony:Fuck, Twyla. Just...fuck.

Twyla:I'm sorry! I know this is bad, but we can figure it out. Just give me a second to think.

I curse, passing faster in front of the windows, where the last of the sunset light is fading to a deep purple bruise above the snow-covered city.

This is bad. So fucking bad.

Even worse than I thought.

Twyla: You gave her a fake last name, right? When you two met in the suite? The way I told you to?

Anthony: Yes. She thinks I'm Anthony Clark not Anthony Pissarro.

Twyla: Okay, great! Then, why are you stressing? There's nothing to worry about, my friend. Weaver is out of town and isn't getting back until January 2nd. That's why he asked me to take special care of Maya. He knew he would be away from the city for her entire visit! Your contract with Maya ends the morning of New Year's Day so you you'll be fine.

Anthony: And if I don't want it to end?

Twyla: Oh no. You didn't...

Anthony: Didn't what? Start to have feelings for her? This amazing woman you practically thrust into my lap? What did you think was going to happen? I'm not a professional, Twyla. I don't know how to hold someone like Maya at a distance.

Twyla: It's only been a day!

Anthony: I know! She's really fucking amazing, all right?

Twyla: And you've been lonely for a long time, haven't you? I'm sorry, Anthony. I should have seen this coming. I should have realized you'd be vulnerable to the Pretending Trap. I don't hire emotionally fragile escorts for this exact reason. They get sucked into the pretend and start thinking it's real, which only leads to hurt on both sides.

Anthony: I'm not emotionally fragile.

Twyla: You walked out on your job in the middle of a board meeting. The job that was basically your entire life. You're not just fragile; you're probably in the middle of a mental breakdown. And instead of helping you find a therapist or a life coach, I put you in a situation where you're going to get your heart broken.

Anthony: I'm not worried about me. I'm worried about Maya. And you should be, too. She's the innocent party, here. She's the one we both lied to.

From downstairs, I hear Maya singing along to something playing on her phone. The scent of garlic and herbs wafts up the stairs, homey and inviting. My chest aches with the domesticity of it all.

With how right it feels to have her in my kitchen, in my life.

This isn't the result of emotional fragility or a midlife crisis. This is real, and I'm pretty sure it's real on both sides.

The way Maya looks at me...

Well, if that isn't the look of a woman with feelings, I don't know what is.

Twyla: I didn't lie. I told her you were a relatively new hire. And I do fully intend to pay you your cut of the fee if you'll let me.

Anthony: Try it and see how fast I rip that check to shreds.

Twyla: I would send you a direct transfer through the company payroll not a check, psycho, but okay. I hear you. You don't want to be paid; you want to play house with this woman. Why not just tell her the truth, then? I obviously don't know her well, but she seemed like an empathetic person. And you're a gorgeous, successful, self-made man who can buy her a condo and a multi-national corporation for her birthday.

What's not to like about a secret like that?

Anthony: She isn't that kind of person. I honestly don't think she'd care about the money. She'd care that I lied to her and deceived her and took her virginity under false pretenses.

Page 44

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:58 am

Twyla: So, you've already sealed the deal, huh? Good job, Pissarro! I wasn't sure you had it in you. I'm assuming it was lovely for you both?

Anthony: That's private. Between the two of us.

Twyla: Oh wow, you ARE falling hard, aren't you? Have you stopped to think this might just be lust at first sight? Not true love? Maybe you should enjoy the week and see how things go. By day five, you might have fucked this out of your system, and the problem will have solved itself.

Anthony: That's not going to happen. I know myself, Twyla. I know this is fast, but it's real. I thought love at first sight was bullshit, too. My aunt and uncle swear they were in love halfway through their first trip to Coney Island when they were teenagers, but I never believed them. I figured they were seeing the past through rose-colored glasses. That years of being happily married had altered their perspective. But now...

Twyla: Now you're having feelings for a girl you barely know.

Anthony: But I feel like I do know her. I feel like I've known her for a long time, and like I've been waiting for a woman like her for even longer. She's just...special. Beautiful and kind and funny and someone I already admire so much. And I'm pretty sure she feels the same way.

Twyla: Aw, well shit. Now I'm getting choked up. You just warmed my jaded heart. For real. I hate that!

Anthony:I'm sorry.

Twyla:No, I'm sorry. I feel terrible about putting you in this position. Both of you. Let me see what solutions I can come up with. I'll chew on it and get back to you as soon as I can.

But in the meantime, just try to enjoy yourself, okay? You deserve some fun in your life and so does she. You don't save up the kind of cash this woman has saved working at a rental management company without busting your ass and cutting back on everything but the bare necessities.

She sacrificed for this experience and she deserves a beautiful one, whether it ends with the two of you giving a relationship a try or not. So, don't ruin it by running away tonight, okay? Or tomorrow. Or the next day. Just hang tight, have an amazing time, and I will do my best to come up with a seamless transition strategy by New Year's Eve.

You're coming to the party at the club, right?

I told Maya I included a ticket for both of you with her fee.

Anthony:We haven't discussed it.

Twyla:Discuss it. And make plans to be here. That way I can help massage the situation in person, and you'll both be guaranteed a fabulous New Year's experience! Not to brag, but my parties are pretty epic.

Anthony:No offense, but I don't like the idea of sharing Maya like that. I like to keep my sex life behind closed doors.

Twyla:Then you guys can stay upstairs, Mr. Prude. Or book a private room. People

make sacrifices to the dark lord for these tickets, Anthony, and you're getting one for free. Don't look a fairy godmother gift horse in the mouth. And don't make it harder for me to help you solve this problem.

Anthony: Fine. I'll discuss it with her.

Twyla: Good. Now, go have fun. I'll reach out soon, but right now I have to tell the king of some country I've never heard of that he can't bring armed guards into my establishment tomorrow night. No guns allowed. Not even for royalty.

Anthony: Good luck. And thanks. I appreciate the help, even if you are the one who got me into this mess in the first place.

Twyla: I also apparently introduced you to the love of your life, so... I'm still the best. Later, friend!

The love of my life...

I don't know if that's true, but I can't deny that I can't wait to get back downstairs. Even ten minutes away from Maya feels like an intolerable depravation.

The thought of never seeing her again because she's decided to hate me for being a dirty, rotten liar is deeply disturbing.

I sink onto the bed, running a hand through my hair. Through the tinted glass windows, I see snow starting to fall again. We haven't gotten this much snow in December in years. The city has grown so warm over the past decade that there have been times when the parks couldn't keep the outdoor ice rinks frozen.

But all of a sudden, it's like climate change decided to take a year off and give us all that white holiday season we remember from when we were kids.

The city looks magical, the way it did last night when everything still seemed possible.

The sound of Maya's laughter drifts up the stairs—she must be playing with Pudge. It's a sweet sound, genuine, just like everything else about her. Maya is just Maya, boldly, bravely herself in a way so few people are. In a way I appreciate so fucking much. I don't want to play any part in teaching this kind, genuine woman that it isn't safe to be open and trusting.

She deserves the truth from me and one hell of an apology.

But she also deserves that stress-free, sexy good time she paid for.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:58 am

I'll have to find a way to walk the line between truth and fiction, and hope she'll forgive me when I finally come clean.

"Or I could ask her to run away to an island off the coast of Greece with her male escort and never come home," I murmur, the thought more than a little tempting.

But I've learned my lesson from my impulsive break from my company. Running away has only created more problems. And I don't really want to run away with Maya. I want to welcome her into my life and maybe even...build a life together.

It's crazy, but I'm already there, already dreaming about a future with this woman.

But when I get downstairs to find Maya lounging on the couch in the living room in a silky jade robe that hugs her curves, it feels less crazy.

I mean...fuck. She's stunning, from the tips of her toes to the mischievous smile curving her lips as she looks up from the copy of *Sense and Sensibility* she's pulled off the shelf.

"Pie's in the oven, but it takes seventy-five minutes to cook. So, I slipped into something a little more comfortable." She rolls a shoulder, causing the robe to slide farther down one shoulder, revealing the interior curve of her breast, making my mouth go dry. "I hope you don't mind."

"Oh, I mind," I say, my voice low and rough as I start across the room, stripping my sweater off and tossing it to the ground as I go. "I mind very much."

“Oh no, I hope I’m not in trouble,” she says, her eyes dancing as she tosses the book onto the cushion, her gaze still locked on mine.

“Never. But you’d better get your ass up those stairs if you don’t want to be fucked on that couch where anyone looking in might see us.” My t-shirt goes next before I stop in front of her, reaching for the close of my pants.

She bites her bottom lip, the hunger in her expression making me harder. “If a person were worried about things like that, seems like they should have invested in drapes.”

“Are you criticizing my décor, Ms. Swallows?” I ask, drawing my zipper slowly down, the sight of her nipples tight against the satin of her robe nearly enough to undo me.

She shakes her head as she reaches up, guiding the fabric slowly off her creamy white shoulders, then the tops of her breasts, then those pale peach nipples I can’t wait to feel hard against my tongue. “Never, Mr. Clark. I kind of like the idea that someone might see. Is that wrong?” She reaches for the close of my pants, her hands brushing mine as she curls her fingers around the top of my boxer briefs, adding in a whisper that destroys the last of my control, “And I also want to learn how to give an incredible blow job. Do you think there’s time before dinner?”

“Dinner can wait,” I say, threading my fingers into the hair at the back of her neck and fisting the silky strands. “And so can blow jobs. I need to be inside you, right fucking now.”

I pull her up by the back of her neck while fisting her hair, her moan of desire as her lips crash into mine assuring me it was the right thing to do. Her arms tremble as they go around my neck, her entire body joining in the vibration as I cup her breast in my free hand, squeezing her fullness as I circle her nipple with my thumb. “God, yes. I’ve been dying for you to touch me. All day, it’s all I could think about.”

“All day,” I agree, kissing her harder, the need for her building even faster than it did in the shower this morning.

She sucks in another sharp breath as I lift her into my arms, guiding her legs around my hips as I carry her over to the chair in the corner, the one with its broad back to the window.

I don’t mind the thought of some stranger seeing what we’re up to—I find it as hot as she does, in fact—but no one is going to see Maya’s face when she comes except me.

I guide her down onto the ottoman lounge, loosening the tie at her waist and spreading the robe open before quickly disposing of the rest of my clothes. The happy sigh that escapes her lips as I lengthen myself on top of her, nudging her thighs wider so I can press the hot length of my cock against where she’s already so hot and wet goes straight to my chest.

“How do you do this?” she asks, whimpering as I roll her nipple tighter between my finger and thumb as she writhes beneath me.

“Do what, beautiful?” I ask, grinding against her clit, sweat breaking out between my shoulders despite the chill in the room. Fighting the urge to take her right now, to slam home and ride her hard and deep is taking more control than it should.

She’s still so new to all this, and probably sore from last night and this morning, but it’s hard to remember that with her slick heat all over my shaft and her nails clawing into my shoulders.

“Make me feel like I’m going to die if I don’t have you?” Her nails drag down to the base of my spine, the slight sting turning me on nearly as much as the lust drunk slur of her words as she begs, “Inside me, Anthony. Please. I want you so much. I want you so deep I can’t feel anything but you.”

Without a beat of hesitation, I give her what she's begging for.

I enter her in one slow, unrelenting stroke, her gasp as she takes every inch making my head spin.

"Yes, yes," she chants, lifting into my thrust, taking me just that tiny bit deeper, until my balls are cradled in the soft curves of her ass and the feel of her so hot and tight around me destroys the last of my rational mind.

I'm rougher than I was last night, less controlled, pumping into her hard and fast, until the sound of skin slapping against skin fills the air, punctuated by her gasps and the occasional curse ripped from my throat. But she doesn't seem to mind. In fact, she's right there with me, bucking into my cock.

I shouldn't come inside her again, but I can't stop myself. The feel of her pulsing around me as she cries my name calls to some primal part of me, a part that demands I empty my balls inside her.

That I mark her as mine.

That I leave her so well-loved and filled with my come that she'll never have any reason to go looking for anyone else.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:58 am

I've never wanted children—being abandoned by both my parents left me fairly certain I'm unprepared to care for a child—but right now, that primal instinct likes the thought of fucking a baby into the sweet woman catching her breath beneath me.

“You destroy me,” I murmur into her hair.

She wraps her arms and legs tighter around me, holding me close. “Me, too. But you also make everything better. I never imagined it would be like this. So easy and...right.”

It is right, and so fucking wrong.

I shouldn't be fantasizing about knocking up a woman half my age who I've lied to since the moment we met. But images of Maya big with my baby, with her breasts and belly swollen with our child, won't stop dancing through my head, making me so hot I'm already getting hard again.

She blinks up at me, her eyes widening slightly as I pull back before stroking slowly back inside her. “I thought you... Didn't you?”

I nod, my lips hooking up on one-side. “Yeah, I did, but...then you whispered in my ear. Apparently, that's all it takes.”

Her lips part as I begin to thrust into her again, slow and easy this time, taking my time. I hold her gaze and this perfect woman lets me into the depths of her soul. There are no walls, no barriers, just her hope and need bare to me as we reach the edge again.

“Oh, Anthony,” she whispers as she begins to vibrate beneath me. “Oh, Anthony, It’s almost too much. Too good. I don’t know if I can.”

“You can,” I assure her, reaching down to rub her clit with my thumb as I continue to rock into her, slow and deep. “And keep your eyes on me when you do, baby. I want to memorize how fucking beautiful you look when you come for me.”

“Oh, God,” she says, trembling harder. “Oh, God, Anthony. Yes, oh God, yes.” She comes, her lashes fluttering, but her gaze still locked on mine as her orgasm takes her.

I come a beat later, feeling my face contort with bliss, but giving her the same trust she’s giving me. I don’t look away or close my eyes or bury my face in the curve of her neck. I show her what she does to me and she rewards me by coming for me again, her second, swift orgasm so intense that her slick heat grips me like a fist.

And it is by far the hottest, sweetest sex of my life.

By the time we catch our breath again, I can’t fight the urge to confess, “This isn’t pretend for me. Not even a little bit.”

“It’s not for me, either.” The relief and joy mingling in her gaze hurt as much as they comfort.

Is this going to make it harder or easier to hear my confession, when the time is right?

I don’t know. But I know now isn’t the time. I refuse to ruin this moment for her. Or for myself.

Call me a selfish bastard, but I don’t want to mar the memory of the first time we confessed we have feelings for each other with any ugliness.

I'm still pretending, I guess, but not about the things that count.

The warm, perfect feeling in my chest as Maya and I take another shower and sit down to share the amazing meal she's made is real.

Maybe the realest thing I've ever felt, and I'm going to fight like hell to keep it—and Maya—close.

chapter 14

MAYA

I'm a lucky woman.

I was born to solidly middle-class parents who provided for all my needs while also making sure our home was a place where I felt safe and loved for exactly who I am, no modifications required.

And yes, we're kind of a sickly, allergic clan, and I found myself in the back of an ambulance, clinging to my dad's or sister's hands while they fought to breathe after being accidentally exposed to one of their food triggers far too many times for comfort. And yes, my sister's crappy boyfriends and crappier husband made me afraid for her—and wary of men—but on the whole, I've led a blessed life.

I have wonderful friends, hobbies that bring me joy, work I find both challenging and exciting, and dreams I feel confident I can make come true.

Well, except one...

After years of being friend-zoned and dismissed as a person worthy of romantic interest, I wasn't sure I'd ever have the husband and family I once saw as part of my

future. But I'd started to accept that maybe not all dreams come true, and that maybe that was okay.

After all, even without romantic love in my life, I have never wanted for affection, care, or support.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:58 am

But on Tuesday morning, as I wake to Anthony's lips on my neck and his hands sliding over my body with reverent care, I feel like everything I've wanted is within reach. I've been given an embarrassment of riches in this incredible man who, in just a few days, has made up for every lonely night I spent at home, wondering if I'd ever be the girl asked to go to the dance.

Every one of those hard nights was worth it because they all led me here to him.

"Again?" I tease, even as I arch into his touch.

We made love most of the day yesterday, hunkering down in the apartment as a storm dumped another six inches on an already snow-covered Manhattan. We ate leftovers, played Scrabble, read books curled up together in bed, and took a nap with Pudge in the afternoon, before kicking him out to protect the innocence of his eyes as we made love before heading down to order smoky BBQ from one of Anthony's favorite restaurants.

I'm so sore, my intimate places feel bruised, but that doesn't stop me from lifting my arms, making it easier for Anthony to strip my nightgown over my head.

"If you're sick of me, tell me to stop," he murmurs against my neck as his hand brings my body to life. "I can control myself, I promise."

"Please don't," I say, sucking in a turned-on breath as he guides my leg up and over his and enters me from behind.

He goes slow, giving me time to adjust, and just a few minutes later, I'm coming for

him again, basking in the thrill of all the sweet and filthy things he groans into my ear as he joins me.

Things about how good my tight little pussy feels.

How beautiful I am...

How sexy...

How perfect...

And I feel perfect with him, so perfect I never want this week to end.

And maybe it doesn't have to. We haven't spoken about the elephant in the room since Sunday, when we both admitted this doesn't feel like pretend, but I feel confident that we will. We'll cross that bridge when we come to it and hopefully find a way forward that feels as idyllic as these first few days.

Afterwards, I snuggle against him, admiring the way the early morning light sparkles off fresh snow outside, so grateful to be warm and safe beneath the cozy down comforter with the man of my dreams.

"We should get up," he says, but makes no move to throw off the covers. "I'm sure Pudge is ready for breakfast."

I trace patterns on his chest. Even the crisp hair on his chest is perfect—not too much, not too little. "Pudge is always ready for breakfast. He'll be okay. Just five more minutes... Or ten. We won't be able to be lazy in bed tomorrow. I have to be up and out early for the inspection meeting at the apartment."

He tenses for a beat before his arms tighten around me. "That's right. I've been

thinking about that. Maybe I can come with you, after all.”

I lift my head, studying him in the soft morning light. “It’s okay. You don’t have to. You said you had a meeting with your financial advisor that couldn’t be rescheduled, right?”

The idea that Anthony has a financial advisor as an escort is kind of wild. But it’s also kind of adorable. He’s clearly doing very well for himself in this alternative line of work.

Probably too well to want to give it up to play house with a small-town girl fresh from the sticks, my inner voice frets, but I ignore it the best I can.

Yes, Anthony and I are going to have to discuss his job eventually—and I’ll have to be honest with him that him sleeping with other women, even if it’s just business, is a dealbreaker for me—but I’m still in “present moment” mode. I refuse to do anything to ruin a moment of our time together.

The hard stuff can wait for a few more days.

“I do, but this feels more important,” he says. “I don’t want you going down there alone. Even to the safer subway station. If something happened to you, I’d never forgive myself. I’ll call my advisor later and see what I can figure out.”

The words make my heart skip—he cares about me, he really does—but before I can get too sappy about how amazing it feels to have my man getting protective about my safety like something out of a Jane Austen novel, a loud meow sounds from downstairs.

Anthony arches a brow. “I told you. He’s probably wasted away to nothing by now.”

I answer him with a wry arch of my own. “Right. Because Pudge is clearly on the verge of starvation, not at a weight that gets me a lecture from the vet about putting him on a diet every time I take him in.”

“Pudge isn’t fat. He’s just big boned,” Anthony says. “And you feed him healthy food in reasonable portions. It isn’t your fault he seems to have a gift for finding unattended goodies.”

“Oh no, that reminds me... I forgot to install the lock on the trash.” Cursing softly, I throw off the covers as I reach for my nightgown, pulling it on before grabbing the pair of sweatpants I was wearing to stay warm during dinner last night and my cashmere cardigan. I’m starting to look as cozy—and chaotic—as I do at home, but Anthony doesn’t seem to care.

He couldn’t keep his hands off of me last night, which is probably one of the reasons that putting the childproof—and Pudge proof—lock on the trash slipped my mind.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:58 am

Sure enough, when we get downstairs, signs of Pudge's late night forage litter the floor in front of the refrigerator, even as the greedy beast in question moans in front of his empty food dish like he's been on a hunger strike for days.

"You are so naughty," I say, wagging a finger his way as I grab a fresh trash bag from under the sink and start to gather the mess. Thankfully, there wasn't much in there aside from mostly empty takeout containers that Pudge has licked clean, but I still feel terrible for messing Anthony's tidy home. "I'll get the mop in a second," I assure him.

"Don't worry about it," he says. "The floor looks fine and the cleaning service is coming in a few days."

"Oh. Okay, that makes sense," I say, adding another luxury item to Anthony's list of expensive habits. But I don't mind cleaning my house or...our house, should it come to that. I truly believe we could make things work financially should Anthony decide a future together is worth giving up his spendy lifestyle.

He's so smart and charming. I'm sure he could find a wonderful job with chances for advancement that wouldn't depend on him staying in supermodel shape or getting naked with strangers. Besides, he's getting older. I don't mind the age gap between us at all, but surely at forty, he's starting to think about quitting the biz eventually...

I'm about to throw caution to the wind and ask him if he's thought about when he might switch career tracks, when he distracts me with a steamy kiss by the sink before reaching past me to grab the kettle on the stove for coffee.

“And I have more enjoyable things in mind than mopping,” he says. “The storm is through and it’s going to be warmer today. What do you think about taking Pudge on a Manhattan adventure?”

I hum beneath my breath, staying close as he fills the kettle. “I’m intrigued. What kind of adventure are you thinking?”

“Ice skating in Central Park?” he asks.

I grin. “Do they have skates in his size?”

“Ha ha,” he says, giving my ass a gentle slap before stepping around me to put the kettle on to boil. “We’ll take him in your carrier, woman. I can wear it if you’re worried about falling on the ice. Not to brag, but I’m a beast on the rink. I used to play in an intramural hockey team before business got too crazy a few years ago.”

Refusing to think about what “crazy” business means for an escort or how many women Anthony has probably slept with, I shoot back, “I’m not too shabby myself. Never played hockey, but I grew up two blocks from the rink our town puts up in the park every winter. I can do a double spin. Never got the triple, but I haven’t fallen in a really long time, so...”

“Hot,” he says, grinning down at me as he wraps an arm around my waist.

I laugh, leaning into him. “Thanks. But I’ll still let you carry Pudge if you don’t mind. He might be a little much for me to manage on skates.” I glance down, to where Pudge is rubbing against Anthony’s leg with a passion he usually displays only with me. “And he obviously has a thing for you.” I shake my head with a faux disgusted sound. “Get a grip, buddy. Haven’t you ever heard of playing hard to get?”

“Don’t listen to her, Pudge,” he says, gathering my ginger love into his arms, where

he immediately begins to purr. “You don’t have to play hard to get with me. The feeling is totally mutual and we’re going to tear it up on the ice.”

And that’s how we end up on the subway uptown an hour later, with Pudge in his carrier—a clear bubble backpack that lets him see everything around him while staying safe and cozy—and Anthony and I bundled in sweaters and scarves.

The walk through Central Park to the rink is pure enchantment, with fresh snow peacefully resting beside the recently cleared paths and holiday music drifting from vendors selling toasted nuts and mugs of cocoa.

Christmas may be over, but it doesn’t seem like anyone in New York is ready to let the holiday season go just yet. The rink is still bedecked in lights with a massive tree in the center that Pudge studies with extreme interest as we stop to take a quick selfie halfway through our skating session.

“He looks like he wants to be up that tree wrestling with the Nutcracker ornaments,” I say, laughing as Pudge meows in agreement.

Anthony glances over his shoulder toward the pack. “Oh yeah? Are you a Christmas tree terror, Pudge?”

“The worst. I had to switch to felt ornaments to protect the ornaments and his paws,” I say, as we skate off to join the rest of the people circling the ice on this peaceful morning. Thanks to our relatively early rise, we’re here before the tourists have descended and the city feels like it belongs to the locals again. But by the time we finish at eleven, the hordes are assembling at the skate rental.

“Hungry?” Anthony asks as we change back into our shoes, Pudge prowling the area around us on his leash, enjoying a break from the carrier. “We could grab lunch up here before we head back to our neck of the woods.”

“Starving,” I say. “But we’d have to find a pet-friendly place. I don’t think Pudge will be up for much more carrier time without an extended break to stretch his legs. Preferably somewhere warm and dry.”

Pudge meows as he shakes a paw made damp from melting ice rink shavings and shoots a slightly traumatized look my way.

I gather him into my arms, assuring him, “I know, wet paws are the worst. Sorry, buddy.”

“What about this?” Anthony asks, extending his phone my way.

I glance down to see shots of a cute café with exposed brick, fairy lights, and cat trees and climbing walls integrated into the decor. And they serve brunch!

“Perfect,” I breathe. “If it isn’t too far.”

“Twenty short blocks once we’re out of the park, but we could take a scooter.” His grin turns mischievous. “The electric ones go pretty fast.”

I exhale a nervous laugh. “But not too fast. I’m a chicken.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:58 am

“You are not. You’re one of the bravest people I know,” he says, leaning over to give me a quick kiss that makes me feel warm all over. “But we can take it slow until you feel safe.”

“All right,” I say, trusting him the way I have from the beginning.

He’s just so easy to trust, this man whose hand feels so familiar in mine as we wander toward Central Park West.

Fifteen minutes later, I’m pressed against Anthony’s back as we zip north into the Bronx in the bike lane, Pudge once again in his backpack between us. The cold air stings my cheeks but I’m not nearly as scared as I thought I’d be.

In fact, I can’t stop smiling.

“Hold on, turning left at the next intersection,” Anthony calls over his shoulder as he takes advantage of a green light to turn onto a quieter street.

I hug him tight, breathing in his cologne mixed with winter air, once again keenly aware of how lucky I am to be here. To be alive and healthy and sharing another amazing day with a man who makes every wonderful thing even more wonderful because I get to share it with him.

When we finally reach our destination, the Cool Kitty Cat Café lives up to the photos, and then some.

Holiday lights twinkle along exposed brick walls, evergreen boughs adorn the mantle

above a crackling fireplace in the main room, and the scent of coffee mingles with fresh-baked pastries and panini sandwiches. Cat trees and climbing shelves create a feline superhighway around the perimeter, where resident cats lounge like furry emperors, reminding me of Elaina's motley crew at Sweet Pussy back home.

After we order paninis and a homemade cat treat cookie for Pudge and make our way to our table with a number to await the food, I tell Anthony about Elaina's cat café where I first met Pudge, and the stir it made around our small town when it opened. "The name drove the fussy old ladies crazy. You would have thought she was shooting kittens in the street, not saving them from kill shelters."

"No offense, but small towns sound awful," Anthony says, setting Pudge down and opening the exit hatch on the carrier. "Everything I hear about them makes me glad I was born a big city boy."

Pudge meows his apparent agreement as he emerges with a full-body shake and a luxurious stretch.

"Oh, hush," I tell him. "You loved living at Elaina's. But I'm glad you're liking the city, too."

"Me, too," Anthony says, sending that warm rush of feeling through my chest again.

After a thorough inspection of his surroundings, my normally shy buddy makes his way to a window perch, where another chunky orange tabby that could be his twin greets him with a welcoming head bump. I decide to take it as a good omen that our move to the city truly is meant to be.

"Two mozzarella, tomato, and basil paninis?" The barista who took our order appears beside us, accompanied by a tiny black kitten who seems determined to climb her pant leg.

“Thanks,” Anthony says, taking the plates off her hands.

“Thanks, and sorry about Salem,” she says, detaching the kitten with a playful roll of her eyes. “He’s our newest rescue. He thinks everyone is his best friend and people are for climbing.”

“He’s adorable.” I reach out to scratch his ears, and he immediately leaps into my lap. I catch him with a laugh as Anthony shifts my plate out of kitten reach.

“Now you’ve done it.” The barista grins as she backs away. “He’s yours for at least an hour.”

“What an honor,” I coo as I shift in my seat, making sure the kitten is far enough away from the table to stay out of trouble. “You’re such a cutie patootie, Salem. Yes, you are.”

“Uh oh.” Anthony watches me cuddle the purring kitten as he reaches for his sandwich. “You think Pudge is ready for a little brother?”

I hum beneath my breath, stroking the now purring kitten. “I don’t know. Maybe, but I can’t even think about it until we’re settled in the city, and there’s a lot to do before then. I have to find a place in my budget and pack everything in Sea Breeze and hire movers and sell my car so I don’t have to worry about parking a vehicle.” I sigh. “And I have to find a way to tell my parents I’m moving to New York without scaring them half to death. They worry about me living alone already and I’ve never lived more than six blocks from where I grew up.”

“That’s hard,” he says, his tone softening. “You guys are close?”

“Yeah. Really close.” I keep my focus on Salem’s little head, as I add, “A part of me is scared to leave them, too, but... I’m almost as scared to stay. If that makes sense.”

“It makes complete sense,” he says without missing a beat. “At least to me. It’s hard to grow or change or become the person you want to be when the people around you are invested in you staying the same.”

I look up, nodding in relief. But I’m not really surprised that he gets it. Gets me. “Yeah, I want to be more than the person I am there. I want to grow and try new things, but I don’t know if I can do that in Sea Breeze. Everyone there has their mind made up about who I am, no matter how hard I try to show that I’m becoming someone different. I just want to be seen for who I am now, not the anxious, shy little girl I used to be.”

“You don’t seem anxious or shy to me at all,” Anthony says. “Like I said before, I think you’re very brave. I’d like to be half as brave one day.”

I cock my head, my brows drawing together as I shift my attention fully his way. “What do you mean? You lead this wild, adventurous life totally on your own terms, without caring what polite society might have to say about what you do for a living. If that’s not brave, I don’t know what is.”

He frowns and sets his sandwich down with a sigh. But before he can speak whatever’s on his mind, Pudge suddenly leaps into my lap, sending Salem skidding off onto the floor.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:58 am

The kitten lands on his feet—he’s a cat, after all—but still...

“Pudge, bad boy,” I say, chiding the giant beast now stretching across my thighs, being sure to take up every inch of available space. “Salem was just being friendly.”

“Clearly not ready for a baby brother,” Anthony says, humor in his tone again.

When I look up, he seems his usual smiling, sexy self, but I can’t help but wonder what that moment was about, and if maybe he isn’t as satisfied with his job as he’s seemed so far. Selfishly, I can’t help hoping that he’s at least a little unhappy, and that the combination of job dissatisfaction and the bliss we’ve found together will make it easy for him to walk away.

“Clearly,” I murmur, but for better or worse, I’m still thinking about the future.

And Anthony.

And how much I want to come home to him at the end of every day.

We take a cab back to his place and by the time we reach his neighborhood, Anthony has called my inspection company and learned Kyle is the man I’ll be meeting in the morning, and that he has close to five years’ experience in commercial real estate. I’m touched that he wanted to get the name and background of the man I’m meeting. I’m even more touched when he reschedules his meeting with his advisor and makes plans to come with me for the inspection.

As we head to bed, I’m pretty sure life can’t get any better, in fact.

Unless...

“Can we learn about blow jobs now?” I ask as I close the door behind us, letting my robe slip low enough on my shoulders to bare a scandalous amount of cleavage. “Or are you too tired for a lesson? I know we’ve had a big day, but...I’m dying to do bad things to you with my mouth.”

His eyes burning into mine, Anthony watches me pad slowly across the carpet, looking like he wants to devour me whole.

But this time, I’ll be the one doing the devouring...

chapter 15

ANTHONY

Maya stalks me like prey, and I have exactly zero urge to try to escape.

With her hair tumbling over her shoulders and her big eyes locked on me like she’s already undressing me in her mind, I’m hard before she reaches my side of the bed.

God help me, the way she looks at me makes my heart feel too big for my chest—and my guilt just as large.

If she knew the truth...

If she knew I’ve been lying to her since the moment we met...

I can’t do it anymore. I have to come clean, but not now. Not with her biting her bottom lip like that, nervous but eager, like she’s ready to dive into something she’s wanted for a long time.

Something that's been simmering inside her, the way all the things I want to do to her simmer inside me. I'm going to need a hell of a lot longer than a week to make all my dirty fantasies involving this woman come true, but I intend to make as many of hers a reality as possible. She deserves that. She deserves all the pleasure and confidence I can give her, even if she decides she never wants to see me again once she knows what a liar I've been.

"So, how do we start?" she asks softly, a naughty smile tugging at her lips. "Do I just tell you I'm in the mood for licking your cock and you agree that that's a great idea?"

I exhale, torn between amusement and wanting to bend her over the bed and take her hard. She's so fucking sexy, without even trying, and honestly, I'd always rather be inside her than getting a blow job.

But she wants to lick me, and who the hell am I to deny her?

"You don't have to say a damned word," I say, my voice husky and deep. "Just touch me. Start through my fly."

She reaches for the front of my suit pants, desire flickering in her eyes as she finds me already hard. "Was it the dirty thing I said or the fact that my robe is falling off me that got you ready so fast?"

"It's you," I murmur, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear as she continues to caress my cock through the thin fabric. "Everything about you. The things you say, the way you look at me... Your smell, your taste." I push against her hand, adding in a rougher tone, "Your touch."

"I love touching you," she says, her nipples so hard I can make out the outlines clearly through the silky fabric.

“Take off your robe,” I command. “Then unzip my pants.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:58 am

She hesitates. “Then I’ll be completely naked and you’ll...not be naked. Won’t that be weird?”

“It will be hot as hell,” I assure her. “I love the thought of being able to see your beautiful body while you’re on your knees for me, but if you’re not comfortable with that right now, it’s okay.” I keep my tone low, steady as I add, “I’ll never push you into something you’re not ready for. You set the pace, beautiful.”

“I’m ready,” she says, the flicker of uncertainty in her eyes quickly replaced by resolve. “I want to make this the best blow job you’ve ever had. I don’t ever want you to forget me.”

The words hit me like too much chocolate cake on an empty stomach, sweet and devastating.

As if I could ever forget her. As if she isn’t everything any man could want, and so much more than I deserve.

“I will never forget a second with you,” I murmur, leaning in to kiss her, slow and deep, my hands framing her face.

She slides her robe off, letting it fall to the floor before melting into me, her hands coming up to rest on my chest. The kiss starts slow, tender, but it doesn’t stay that way for long. Her fingers curl against me through my shirt, her nails digging in as she presses closer, silently demanding more.

I deepen the kiss, my tongue sliding against hers, stroking deep, summoning

breathless moans from low in her throat.

When we finally pull apart, her cheeks are flushed, her breath uneven and her nipples practically begging for my mouth.

I cup her breast in my hand, dragging my thumb over the tight tip, making her moan and her eyelashes flutter.

“You’re wet, aren’t you?” I whisper, my balls so heavy they’re dragging between my legs at this point. “I could just make you come on my cock and worry about blow jobs later.”

“No, show me,” she says, her voice breaking on the last word. “I want to make you as crazy as you make me.”

She already does that—and then some—but I let my hand drop from her curves, determined to give her what she’s asking for.

“Then undo my pants and take out my cock,” I say, my voice steady despite the way my heart slams against my ribs as she reaches for my zipper. “Slowly,” I add when she moves too fast. “Watch me while you do it, draw it out, make it clear who’s in control.”

“Me?” she murmurs, doing exactly as I’ve asked, turning the opening of my pants into an exquisite tease. “I’m in control?”

“You’re in control,” I agree, groaning as she reaches into my pants, giving me an experimental stroke with her hand. But the opening is narrow and it’s hard for her to maneuver. “Pull my pants down. You need room to work.”

She nods, her lips parting as she guides my pants and boxer briefs down my thighs,

until my arousal falls free, heavy and aching between us.

Her breath comes faster, her tongue darting out to wet her lips, and I can't stop the low groan that escapes my chest. She glances down, her thighs squeezing together as she runs her fingers up my fever-hot shaft. "I love seeing you so hard for me. It's so beautiful."

My lips quirk up. "Beautiful? Got a thing for angrily swollen eggplants with veins standing out under their skin?"

She teases her fingers over my swollen head, making my breath catch in my chest. "He isn't angry, he's needy. He needs relief, and I'm going to give it to him. So...where do I start?"

"Just touch me," I whisper, so turned-on my cock is leaking pre-cum. "And don't be afraid to be firm."

"Firm," she echoes. "You like it firm?"

I nod, "I do."

Her touch grows bolder, her fingers wrapping around me, tentative at first but gaining confidence as she strokes me, slowly driving me out of my mind. "Is this good?"

"Perfect," I manage, my voice tight, every muscle in my body straining to stay still.

"And now I come down on my knees?" she asks, already dropping down in front of me, the feel of her breath warm on my thigh enough to make my cock leak faster. "And I explore this way?" She leans in, brushing her lips back and forth across the sticky head of my cock before licking the pre-cum away, making me gasp. "Okay?" she asks.

“Brilliant,” I murmur, my voice thick. “You’re a fucking natural.”

“What’s next?” she asks.

“Take your time, and keep following your instincts,” I encourage, my fingers tangling in her hair as she presses another kiss to me, then another, her confidence growing with each one.

She swirls her tongue over my sensitive tip again, bolder, more insistent, and I shudder. “Now I take you inside my mouth?” she asks, her voice trembling but eager.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:58 am

“Fuck, yes. God, Maya,” I say, my voice rough and my fingers tightening in her hair as she sucks the first inch of me into the heat of her mouth. “God, you’re incredible. You’re driving me crazy.”

Her cheeks flush, but she doesn’t stop. Her movements become more assured as she takes more of me into her mouth, her tongue sliding against the underside of my cock in a way that makes my vision blur.

“Now use your hand,” I grit out. “Wrap it around the base to reach the part you can’t get with your mouth.”

She does, wrapping her fingers around the lowest part of my shaft, her strokes in sync with the movements of her mouth. The combination is almost too much, and I have to fight to keep my hips still, to keep from taking control.

She glances up at me, her eyes wide and hungry, clearly enjoying giving pleasure every bit as much as she enjoys receiving it. The sight of her like this—beautiful, eager, and completely focused on owning me with her mouth—nearly undoes me.

“Damn,” I murmur, my thumb brushing against her cheek. “You’re so good, baby. You’re so fucking good. Just slow down a little, beautiful. If you don’t, I’m going to finish way too fast.”

She follows my guidance, her movements slowing but still sexy, deliberate. Her tongue swirling against me as she works my cock with her mouth, her innocent enthusiasm for the task is a turn-on like no other. She moans softly, the vibration sending a jolt of pleasure through me, and I can’t help fisting my hand tighter in her

hair.

“God, Maya,” I rasp, taking control of her head as I thrust a little deeper. “Can you take me like this? Is that too much? Can you relax your throat for me, baby?”

She moans and obliges, making my head spin.

“Perfect, so perfect,” I chant, thrusting into her faster, unable to hold back any longer. The pleasure builds, hot and insistent, and I know I’m not going to last much longer. “Maya,” I murmur, my voice tight. “I’m close. If you don’t want me to come in your mouth, pull back now.”

She doesn’t pull back; she simply moans and sucks me more insistently as I piston between her lips and her hand strokes me in perfect sync. The sight of her, the feel of her, the soft, muffled sounds she makes as she takes as much of me as she can manage and then more—everything pushes me closer to the edge until I shatter with a guttural cry.

My release crashes through me in sticky waves of pleasure as I come down her throat, something primal in me celebrating the sight of her swallowing me down.

Finally, long seconds later, as I’m spiraling down from the high, she pulls back, her cheeks flushed as she lets my cock slip from her lips.

“B plus?” she asks softly, her voice uncertain despite the smile tugging at her lips.

I reach for her, pulling her into my arms and kissing her deeply, pouring everything I can’t put into words into the kiss.

“A plus,” I murmur against her lips. “You’re a sex goddess. I just wish I were still hard so I could give you the fucking you deserve.”

“I can wait,” she whispers as she leans into me, her arms wrapping around my neck. “But I want you to fuck me. That made me so wet, Anthony. I had no idea it would turn me on so much. I want you so much right now, it’s crazy.”

I reach between her legs, groaning as her slickness coats my fingers. “That is crazy. The only thing crazier is you thinking I’m going to make you wait. Lay back on the bed and spread your legs, angel. I’m going to fuck you with my mouth before I fuck you with my cock.”

“Anthony,” she says, the way she says my name—like a prayer and a promise—making it the best word I’ve ever heard.

I’ve never been a big fan of my name, but with Maya...

“I would sell my soul to hear you say my name like that every day,” I say as I kiss my way down her stomach. “Like you can’t wait for me to take you. Like you can’t get enough.”

“I can’t,” she says, moaning as I slide two fingers into her hot pussy. “I’ll never get enough.”

And neither will I.

Which is why I have to put an end to the fucking lies.

You’ll tell her tomorrow, I promise myself as I suck her clit into my mouth.

But for tonight, I let myself get lost in the pretend one more time.

This pretend that feels more real with every passing second, so real I can barely remember what reality was like before her...

chapter 16

ANTHONY

Thanks to Maya's crack-of-dawn meeting with the inspector, we're at my favorite deli in the Financial District a good hour ahead of the usual work rush, ensuring we're at no risk of running into anyone from the office.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:58 am

I'll have to deal with the team at Baxter and Holloway later today—I need to send in my recommendations for my replacement and answer roughly two dozen emails from former colleagues, asking if I'm having a mental breakdown—but for now, we're safe.

Safe...

I've never really considered "safety" all that much. Yes, I grew up in a rough neighborhood, but I had older cousins and friends who ruled our block and always had my back. As I grew up, I learned to be that tough older family member, protecting the younger kids with my fists, if necessary. I'm a naturally big man, and I put in the work at the gym to ensure most people thought twice about starting something with me or the Pissarro clan.

Physical safety is something I've been lucky enough to take for granted in my life, but I'm coming to realize I haven't felt "safe" in other ways for a long time.

Not since my marriage ended, in fact.

When the person who promised to love you for better or worse turns out to be a pathological liar, with no real investment in her vows or in you, it takes a toll. It makes you doubt your capacity to know what love is, what truth is. Your capacity to feel safe making authentic, vulnerable connections with other people unravels from there, leaving you isolated and alone.

But with Maya...

I've never felt so safe, and I've never wanted to keep another person safe the way I do with her. I'm so glad her inspector turned out to be someone I don't know from the neighborhood. If I were sitting back at the apartment while she went to Red Hook alone, I'd be climbing the walls with worry.

Instead, I'm at my favorite deli with my favorite girl, feeling no pain.

"I hope you're considering extra bacon with whatever you order," I say as Maya studies the sandwich menu above the counter. "I encourage extra bacon. Two pieces is good, but four is better."

"Some might say twice as good." She grins up at me. "And yes, I will be going for extra bacon with my avocado and cheddar cheese on a plain bagel. A girl needs extra protein for surviving her first big city property inspection."

I hum beneath my breath. "Damn, that sounds good." I step up to the counter, where one of the new hires, who doesn't know me as well as Tim, is waiting, proving the universe is on my side this morning. "Two avocado and cheddar cheese with extra bacon on plain toasted bagels, please."

I pass over my credit card, she rings me up, and Maya and I step away to clear the counter for the next customer. She stands close, pressed lightly to my side as we watch the early morning bustle on the sidewalk outside.

The morning feels golden, perfect. The sky is clear and sunny, the snow drifts are softening as the temperature creeps into the low 40s, and even the commuter rush seems less hectic than usual—probably thanks to the holiday lull that's kept half of Manhattan home in their pajamas for the week. I've certainly enjoyed the time Maya and I have spent huddled indoors, but it's good to be out, too.

I'm excited to be a part of her first major step as an entrepreneur and relieved I'm

able to do the walk-through with her. She's prepared—her binder full of paperwork and list of renovation-related questions are impressive—but I have more experience buying distressed businesses and properties. I want to help her approach this project with the same rigorous cost-benefit analysis that's been the cornerstone of my career and ensure her first investment is a success.

Success breeds more success and that's all I want for her.

As we collect our sandwiches and head outside again, subway bound, I ask, "Should we grab pastries from the French place on the corner, too?"

She arches a brow. "Just how much food do you think I can handle, my friend? I mean, I like to eat, but those bagels are the nearly the size of my head."

"It takes fuel to build a real estate empire," I say with a shrug. "That's all I'm saying."

She gives my arm a teasing bump with hers. "My one-building empire?"

"For now. But I have a feeling you're just getting started. I see great things ahead for you, kid."

She loops her arm through mine, affection in her voice as she says, "Right back at you, old man."

"Hey," I say with a faux scowl.

She giggles. "I'm kidding. Obviously. You're not old. And I know you're the world's best pretend boyfriend, but you have somany talents, Anthony. If you ever decided to change careers, I'm sure you could be anything you wanted to be."

“Yeah?” I ask, touched by her sweetness, the way I always am. It never gets old, how purely good she is. And no, I don’t need the faith of a good woman to help me turn my male gigolo life around, but I appreciate her support all the same.

“No doubt in mind,” she says without a beat of hesitation. “And it’s never too late for a fresh start.”

“Thanks, Swallows,” I murmur.

“You’re welcome, Clark,” she shoots back with a wink.

Clark. Not Pissarro.

The reminder of my lie makes my stomach cramp, but I ignore the wave of guilt. I’m going to tell her the truth in two days, a mere forty-eight-ish hours, the moment we arrive at Twyla’s New Year’s Eve party.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:58 am

And yes, a part of me wants to spill my guts right now and hopefully start building a completely honest relationship with her as soon as possible, but she has the inspection today and the closing Friday morning. She needs to focus on making life-changing business moves, not wrestling with the fact that the man she's falling for has been lying to her since day one.

She is falling for me. I feel it in the way she touches a gentle hand to my back as we descend the stairs into the subway station, in the way she smiles as I tap my credit card once for her to head through the turnstile before tapping it again for myself, in the way she once again loops her arm through mine as we start toward the Brooklyn bound train.

And I'm falling for her.

Hell, I've already fallen. I'm at her feet, where I'll stay until she agrees to forgive me for lying to her for even an hour, let alone an entire week.

She'll forgive me, I have to believe that. The thought of anything else is intolerable. I don't understand how I ever believed I was happy before Maya came into my life, but now I'm keenly aware that she's necessary to the survival of the last pure, hopeful slice of my soul.

She saved me in the nick of time, and I'm determined to return the favor.

Which reminds me...

"I talked to my friend at that private equity firm I told you about," I say as we wander

down the platform. It's crowded but not packed, and we move with ease down to an open space near an ad for the latest Broadway revival. "He gave me some tips for making sure the apartment is going to cash flow at the level you need to stay in the black after repairs. Once we get the report from the inspector, I can help you come up with some estimates and crunch the numbers if you'd like."

I did no such thing, obviously—I run cash flow analysis in my sleep—but she doesn't have to know that.

Not yet.

"Perfect, thank you," Maya says. "I have my own spreadsheet and a few preliminary quotes from the contractors I spoke to on the phone, but it's always good to run things through a few different lenses." She bounces lightly on her toes, blowing air out through pursed lips. "Gah, I'm so excited. And nervous. And excited. I don't know whether to do a happy dance or throw up."

"Then let's get something in your stomach." I raise my voice to be heard over the roar of the approaching train rushing into the station. "It's acceptable to eat on the train as long as your sandwich doesn't stink."

"Good thing ours smell delicious," she shouts, beaming up at me like the ray of sunshine she is.

She's certainly brought a light into my life that wasn't there before.

Feeling like the luckiest man in the tri-state area, I lead the way onto the train and down to two open seats near the end of the car. Maya settles in beside me and we set about demolishing our sandwiches.

"Oh man," she says around her first bite. "This is so good! How is it so good? It's just

a bagel.”

“I told you I was taking you to the best deli in the city. Never doubt me, woman. At least not when it comes to food.”

She laughs, and I can’t help taking a moment to stare. She’s always beautiful, but when she laughs...

God, she just rips my heart right out of my chest.

“My husband used to look atmelike that,” a thin voice wobbles from across the car.

I look up to see an elderly woman in a giant black coat with her gray hair pulled into a messy bun atop her head casting a warm smile our way.

She lifts a spotted hand from her cane’s handle, motioning first to me, then Maya. “How long have you two lovebirds been married?”

Maya sucks in a surprised breath and starts to cough.

“We’re not married,” I say, laying a hand on her back as I bend to get a better look at her face. “You okay?”

She coughs again, before pressing a hand to her chest with a nod. “Yes. Sorry, I’m fine. Just bit off more than I could chew.” She brushes a crumb from the side of her mouth before smiling at the woman. “And no, we’re not married.”

“Good,” the woman continues, summoning a startled huff from Maya and an arched brow from me. “Live in sin for as long as possible. It’s more fun that way. Keeps things steamy.”

“Oh yeah?” Maya asks, mischief in her tone as she adds, “We’ll keep that in mind, then. I like things steamy.”

“Don’t we all, dear,” the woman says, leaning forward to add in a conspiratorial tone that’s clearly meant for Maya’s ears only. “Especially with a foxy one like that. My Mick was a catch at twenty-four, no one would say anything different. But by thirty-five he had a belly and a collection of green sweater vests, I didn’t have the heart to tell him that they made him look like a chubby leprechaun.” Her sharp gaze slides my way. “But your man seems to be holding up just fine.”

Maya grins as she nods her agreement, clearly enjoying this. “I know, right?” She nudges me with her elbow. “That’s what I always tell him—that he’s remarkably well-preserved.”

“Remarkably well-preserved?” I echo dryly, playing along as the women laugh. “What am I, marmalade?”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:58 am

“Nah, you’re a fine wine, baby,” Maya says, giving me a peck on the cheek that sends a fresh rush of happiness through my chest.

“That’s right,” the woman says, sitting back in her seat with a satisfied nod. “You’re both fine wines, and you’ll blend together beautifully as you age. Just keep choosing each other. That’s the secret to making love last. Love isn’t something you find and mark off your list. It’s a garden, one you need to cultivate with care and devotion every single day.”

“Thank you,” Maya says, her smile fading as her gaze softens. “That’s wonderful advice.”

“And unsolicited.” The woman winks as the train slows and she rises from her seat with the aid of her cane. “But when you’re old, you don’t wait to be invited to say your piece. You can’t. You don’t know if you’ll be alive to say it later.” Cackling at her own joke, she waves as she moves toward the door. “Take care, lovebirds. Your smiles made me happy.”

Maya and I wave, wishing her well. Then, as the doors close and the train lurches into motion again, my girl puts her hand in mine. I squeeze her fingers, and we ride the rest of the way to Red Hook in silence that doesn’t need filling.

Silences rarely do when you’re with the one who’s meant for you.

And we are meant for each other, even a stranger on the train could see that. It gives me faith that we’ll get through my confession on New Year’s Eve, the fallout after, and anything else that stands in our way.

Emerging from the station in Red Hook, I'm surprised by how much this part of the neighborhood has changed since the last time I was in the area, looking at a property I was considering buying a few years ago before electing to go in a different direction. New coffee shops and funky boutiques are now interspersed with the bodegas and an art gallery is going in where the local dive bar used to be. We pass the corner where I used to meet up with friends from school to buy candy at the Dollar Mart, now an organic juice bar.

But some things remain the same. The roughest streets in Brooklyn still form the outer boundaries of the neighborhood, and there's an edge to these streets, even early on a Wednesday morning. Signs of drug use and violence still mark the community, confirming my suspicion that it isn't the place for Maya. It's fine for her to work here, but I don't want her walking home in the dark on these streets.

I'll find a way to get her settled in a safe neighborhood, even if it isn't with me. I have enough connections to arrange for a perfect steal of an apartment I'll secretly help pay for to fall into her lap, even if she's so hurt after my reveal that she never wants to talk to me again.

"Anthony?" she asks, a lilt in her tone that makes me suspect it isn't the first time she's said my name.

I shake my head. "Sorry. Lost in thought."

"About?"

"You walking home through this neighborhood at night. I don't like it."

"It's not so bad, just a little rough around the..." She trails off as we pass two men passed out in an empty storefront with urinesoaking the front of their pants and a needle on the ground not far from the cardboard they've slept on.

“And maybe I can afford to live somewhere else,” she adds as we move on. “I’ll have to see how the numbers shake out.”

“I’ll shake them until they work for a charming studio in Chelsea,” I say. “Where you’ll be surrounded by adorable restaurants, museums, and gay men.”

She arches a brow. “Oh yeah? And why would you want me surrounded by gay men?”

“You know why.” I wrap an arm around her shoulders.

“Yeah, I think I do,” she says, looping a matching arm around my waist. “You know, I thought you might be gay when I met you.”

I frown. “What? Why?”

She shrugs, grinning as she says, “You’re too good-looking and dress too well. Back home, only gay men wear clothes that actually fit or have fancy hair that falls just so.”

I laugh. “Fancy hair? I don’t have fancy hair.”

“You do,” she says. “Very fancy. If that isn’t at least a hundred-dollar haircut, I’m the queen of whatever country still has a queen.”

It’s a two-hundred-dollar haircut, actually—outrageous, but I can afford it, and Charmain really does work miracles with a pair of scissors—and Maya’s getting closer to the truth about how much capital I have at my disposal than I realized.

I’m so distracted by thoughts of my double life that we’re less than a block from the apartment building when I see the aging man standing by the curb. It’s Dave Mackey,

in his usual uniform, right down to the battered boots, dark brown work pants, and Red Hook Raiders baseball cap. He's scrolling through his phone outside Maya's building, his inspector clipboard tucked under one arm.

Ice instantly floods into my veins.

He isn't supposed to be here. I called yesterday and the woman at the office said Kyle Mitchell was assigned to Maya's account. Kyle, a recent hire, who I have never met and would have no idea who I really am.

So, what happened? Is Kyle sick? Need to swap shifts?

Did Dave, being the pappa bear he's always been, decide he should come watch over the small-town girl buying a property in a rough part of town personally? Something like that wouldn't surprise me, but it doesn't really matter how this switch came to be.

Page 56

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:58 am

What matters is that I can't get any closer to that building or my lies are going to blow up in my face and wreck Maya's focus for the inspection in the process.

I have to get out of here.

Now.

Before I fuck this up for her.

"Just a second," I say, stopping dead and turning my back to Dave, my heart hammering as I pull my phone from my coat pocket. I'm a shitty actor, but I give my "worried about what I'm reading" face everything I've got as I open my lock screen and pretend to scan a "new" message.

I curse, shaking my head as if I've received terrible news as I scramble for a believable lie.

"What is it? What's wrong?" Maya asks, the concern in her voice making my frustration rise higher.

But I'm not frustrated with her. I'm the problem here. I'm the idiot who kept doubling and tripling down on this lie when I knew better. I've never been a liar. I don't know why I thought now would be a good time to start, but I silently vow to never pull anything like this again.

I wasn't built for deception, a fact I prove by mumbling, "It's my friend, Chris. He's at the hospital. Something about a workplace accident."

“Oh no,” Maya says, casting a confused glance at my cell. “Is he going to be okay?”

I shake my head. “I don’t know, but I...” I swallow hard, feeling as if my fat, lying tongue might choke me as I add, “But I have to go. Now. I’m sorry.”

I start back toward the subway, Maya trailing after me. “What? Are you sure? I mean, should I try to postpone the inspection until this afternoon? I could come with you, maybe, and then?—”

“No,” I cut in. “I should go alone. And you have to meet your inspector. They’ll charge you extra if you ask for a change this close to the appointment, and they might not have anyone available this afternoon. Just go,” I say, motioning back toward the apartment building as I force what I’m sure is an unconvincing smile. “And I’ll see you later. Text me as soon as you’re done, okay?”

“Okay,” she says, her steps slowing.

I turn, walking faster, fleeing the scene of the crime.

I’m already a few yards away by the time Maya calls out, “I hope your friend is okay!”

I glance over my shoulder and lift a hand in recognition, my stomach bottoming out again at the hurt and suspicion on her face. Maya is a trusting soul who wants to believe the best about people, but she isn’t stupid.

And even after a few days, she knows me.

She obviously suspects I’m lying. Maybe more than suspects.

If you only knew, I think, hating myself as I turn the corner and charge back toward

the subway.

I can't change course now. I'd only embarrass and confuse her even more if I went with her to meet Dave and the truth of who I am came out in the middle of one of the biggest meetings of her life.

But I can't tell her today. I won't wait for New Year's Eve.

I'll spill it all as soon as she gets home this afternoon and then...

Well, then it will be up to her to decide if she thinks this thing we've found is worth fighting for.

I pull out my phone again, texting Twyla—I have to tell Maya tonight. It can't wait until New Year's Eve. Our lives are getting dangerously close to overlapping, and I don't want her to learn the truth from someone else. She deserves it from me. And one hell of a groveling apology.

Bubbles instantly fill my screen—Okay. Then come by the club early tonight, around 5 or so, before the crowds descend. I'll help you.

Anthony: Thanks, but I'll handle it. It's my mess.

Twyla: That's not true. I'm the one who talked you into pretending to be someone you weren't. Though, in my defense, I thought it would be a harmless way to blow off steam before you got back to winning at capitalism. I never imagined the two of you would hit it off like this. But I guess maybe I should have. There was something about the way your eyes met as she walked into the library...

Anthony: You saw that? You weren't even in the room.

Twyla: That club is my baby, Anthony. I see everything. And there were fireworks popping off between you two from the start.

Page 57

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:58 am

Anthony: It's more than fireworks, Twyla. She makes me feel safe. That wasn't even on my radar as something I thought I was looking for in a partner, but this morning, all I could think about was how safe I feel with her.

Twyla: Oh, man. That's it, then. You're done for. This is the real deal. The only thing worse than "safe" is home. Once they feel like home...

Anthony: She feels like that, too. I would ask her to move in with me tonight if I could.

Twyla: And why can't you? You're not a skeezy con man who was pulling one over on this girl, Anthony. You are a titan of industry, a genius legend in the investment banking world! You're also a goddamned billionaire with an impeccable reputation and a philanthropic resume Mother Theresa would be proud of. You may have done a less than honest thing, but you're a good, honest man who has a LOT to offer a woman.

Especially a young woman looking for an older man to show her the ropes in bed and out of it. Just bring her to the club around 5 with a good idea of what you want to say. Let me handle the rest.

Anthony: No. I'll bring her to the club—I want her to be able to talk to you immediately if she has any questions after I explain how this happened—but I need to do this my way. I'll shoot you a text later and let you know what I have in mind.

Twyla: Okay. I guess it's only fair that I be held accountable, but I don't like it. I'm not a fan of consequences. That's why I spend most of my time hidden away in my

office, pulling strings from afar.

Ugh, I knew I shouldn't have given that kid a meeting. Kids from Maine don't belong in New York City sex clubs. It was a disaster waiting to happen from the start.

Anthony:I'm glad you gave her a meeting. And she's not a kid. She's an adult, a very clever, compassionate adult who deserves the truth. I just hope I can deliver it in a way that doesn't make her hate me.

Twyla:She won't hate you, Anthony. You're one of the good ones. Surely, she knows that by now, and I'll put in a good word for you. I mean, I find almost all men loathsome and repulsive these days, but not you.

Anthony:Is there anyone in particular I should hate on your behalf? I'm sorry I've been so selfish. I haven't even asked about your love life.

Twyla:It's okay. I don't have one, and I'm quite happy with that state of affairs. If you don't have a love life, you can't have a 'that asshole promised to love me and then had an affair with my dad' life.

Anthony:YOUR DAD?

Twyla:Yeah. Long, awful story, neither of us has time for. Suffice it to say, I don't talk to either of them anymore. They're dead to me and so is romance. But I have rabbits now. Two big, cuddly, floppy-eared rabbits who love me unconditionally, even when I accidentally ruin their meet-cute with the woman of their dreams.

I honestly feel terrible about this, Anthony. The more I think about it, the shittier I feel. Whatever you need to make tonight perfect, let me know, and it's yours.

Anthony:Thanks, Twyla. I appreciate that. I'll touch base soon.

I head down the stairs into the subway, thoughts racing.

Twyla is generously providing the “where” for an apology for the ages, but it’s up to me to pull out all the stops. With that in mind, I locate the contact information for my ex’s favorite stylist, the one who charges a grand just to show up at Bergdorf’s to help you spend your money, then another five hundred per hour for the actual shopping.

The last time Maya and I were at Twyla’s, she was the most beautiful woman in the room, even in the shabbiest dress. But this time, I want her to shine like the diamond she is.

If she decides to walk away from me, she’ll be doing it in style, damn it.

A part of me hopes that might make it easier somehow...

But I doubt it.

chapter 17

MAYA

Dave’s flashlightbeam cuts through the basement gloom, illuminating century-old bricks and massive wooden support beams as he rambles on about the recent plumbing updates, a pleasant surprise in a structure that’s clearly been neglected for quite some time.

I want to focus on what he’s saying about the building’s excellent bones—this is what I’ve been waiting for, the moment I finally get the scoop on the biggest investment of my life—but all I can think about is the way Anthony balked like a spooked horse half a block from the apartment building.

What the heck was that all about?

Because I'm not buying the "sick friend" excuse for a second. In fact, I'd bet several yards of my apparently excellent L-grade copper plumbing that he faked getting a text.

Faked it.

Faked it and flat out lied to my face.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:58 am

To. My. Face!

And that so isn't Anthony.

At least not the man I've known so far...

But what if I've been fooling myself? What if I don't know him at all? What if he has dark secrets or illegal gambling debt...or a wife?

God, please don't let him have a wife.

I'm so stupidly in love with him that a bookie out to give him a pair of concrete shoes sounds like the lesser of those evils.

"Yep, the foundation is rock solid," Dave says, running his hand along the wall as I struggle to focus on something other than the thought that Anthony might have spotted someone who knew his wife outside my building and been forced to bail in order to keep his double life from being discovered. "Real granite blocks, perfectly fitted," Dave continues. "You don't see craftsmanship like this anymore. They really built things to last back then. And you're well out of the flood zone. That's huge in this neighborhood. Huge. The buildings down the shore are getting hit every few years with damage, even when we don't have a hurricane come through. And when we do?Fuhgeddaboutit."

His New York accent is so thick it's adorable. Or it would be, if I were in a state to find anything adorable right now.

Still, I force a smile, “Well, that all sounds great so far!”

“Yeah, well, I wanted to give you the good news first,” the older man says with a heavy sigh that ruffles his thick gray moustache. “There’s some not-so-great news, too.”

“Uh-oh,” I say, my stomach coiling into a stress knot.

“Yeah,” Dave agrees, leading the way back up the stairs. “Sorry to say it’s not all roses and copper pipes. That’s why I wanted to be here myself for the walk-through. Kyle’s a good guy, but he’s still new. With a situation as complex as this one, I wanted to be sure you knew exactly what you were getting yourself into.”

“Oh, no,” I squeak, my voice now as tight as my tummy. “What are we talking about? Asbestos? Lots and lots of asbestos?”

“Nah, you’re good there. The remediation was done in the late 80s, before it changed owners the last time.” He pauses in front of an ancient-looking electrical box at the back of the first-floor hallway. He opens it up to reveal a rusted-out tangle, I instantly know isn’t kosher. “But the wiring is original to the building, and this isn’t even close to being up to code. I don’t know how they got away with leaving it like this for so long, but it’s a hot mess. And a dangerous one. We’re talking cloth-wrapped copper, old ceramic fixtures, the works. You’re looking at a complete rewire—every unit, top to bottom.” He emits another heavy sigh. “Including the two illegal units in what used to be the attic. I could not find permits for the life of me for those. So, you’d have to apply for them after the fact, which is always tricky, and likely to involve construction expenses to get those up to code, too. That’s your best-case scenario. Worst case, they make you evict the tenants and close the whole attic up again.”

“Close it up?” I wheeze, thoughts racing as I mentally do the math on losing the income from two of the units and instantly realize there’s no way the building cash

flows in that state.

Not to mention the poor tenants who would lose their homes.

“Yep.” He shakes his head as he closes the panel with a disgusted grunt. “Damned shame considering this old girl has such great bones.”

I gulp in air, fighting to keep panic at bay. There might still be a way to salvage the sale. If I go to the seller with proof of all the problems found in the inspection, they’ll have to drop the price...won’t they?

“Okay, so let’s assume I get permits for the attic units,” I say. “Any idea the ballpark cost to get those and the electric up to code?”

“Ballpark? Well, I can’t say for sure, obviously, but I’m guessing... Maybe three hundred thousand for the attic and wiring? Maybe a little more if lumber’s pricey when you start the renovation?” He shakes his head. “And I haven’t even gotten to the issues with the unit on the third floor. All those doorways there have to be widened, every single one. None of that is regulation. And the two-bedroom on the second floor has serious water damage in the bathroom. That whole subfloor needs to be ripped out and replaced before that cast iron tub falls through the ceiling into your lobby.”

“Okay,” I say, nodding with far more steadiness than I feel. “So, three hundred thousand, plus another seventy or so for the rest?”

He pulls a face. “I mean, maybe. If you’re lucky. But I’d say budget closer to a half million total for all the interior stuff. Just to be safe.”

The number hits like a physical blow.

Half a million just in basic infrastructure and safety concerns, and that's before I tackle the cosmetic issues like the peeling wallpaper and ancient appliances that desperately need to be replaced.

“And then there's the roof...” Dave starts, sounding nearly as upset as I feel.

“I thought you said it had ten years left?”

“Yeah, it's good for a while, but the fire escape needs immediate attention, it's also not?—”

“Up to code,” I finish for him, his grim smile all the confirmation I need. “Is that it? Please tell me that's it.”

He glances at his clipboard and exhales a weary sigh. “That's it. Well, aside from the boiler. It's running pretty good right now, but it's ancient. Haven't seen one like that since I was a kid. When it goes, that's another thirty to fifty grand, depending on how you choose to replace it.”

My vision starts to blur.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:58 am

This can't be happening. I budgeted for serious repairs, yes, but nothing like this. This is...catastrophic. And I don't see the seller dropping the price by more than two hundred thousand—tops.

That's a drop in the bucket of what's needed here, and even if I crunch the numbers and think I could justify a larger loan to cover the repairs, I've already maxed out my borrowing capacity.

I just...

I don't think I can make this work.

"Look," Dave says kindly, clearly reading the despair creeping across my face. "Your instincts are good. In the long run, I think this building is a great investment. And it could still be a good deal for the right buyer. But unless you're sitting on a pile of cash you can use for the reno, I'd walk away from this one."

"But I already put down twenty-seven thousand in earnest money," I say, fighting to keep my voice from wobbling. "And I had to waive the inspection contingency to get them to accept my offer over the higher ones. If I bail now, I lose every dime I've put into the deal thus far."

He mutters something beneath his breath as he smooths his moustache. "Well, that's a shame. But if you were my daughter, I'd say to lose the earnest money if you have to. Better than getting in over your head with a bunch of debt in your twenties. That kind of debt can crush dreams, you know?"

I nod, fighting tears as my throat squeezes so tight I can barely breathe. Twenty-seven thousand might not be much to the typical New York City real estate investor, but it's a huge chunk of cash for me. If I lose it, I won't have enough for another down payment for at least a year or two. Maybe more.

But he's probably right.

I'll go crunch the numbers the way I planned, but right now I don't see a way this ends in anything but disaster.

"Well, thank you," I finally manage to force out as I thrust a hand his way. "I appreciate you. Thank you for such a comprehensive and thorough inspection."

"Of course." He gives my hand a gentle squeeze before handing over an envelope with my copy of the paperwork. "And I'm giving you the friends and family discount on this one. I'll tell Tish to take that off before she sends your bill."

Shit, the bill. That's another two grand of my nest egg.

But Dave was totally worth it. As much as this is killing me right now, he likely saved me from making a terrible investment.

I thank him again before heading through the dingy lobby with the flickering orange light dangling from the ceiling and down the stairs into the cold morning air.

Outside, the winter sun feels too bright, the rays bouncing off the snow glaring into my tear-filled eyes.

I start walking fast, with no real destination in mind. I just need to move, to think, to find some way to rearrange the puzzle pieces until I pull off a miracle and make this work.

My phone buzzes and I reach for it like a lifeline, positive it's Anthony checking in. Or better yet, explaining himself in some way that makes sense.

But it isn't Anthony. It's Sydney, asking why the hell I didn't tell her I was going to be in the city. Apparently, she saw my mother at the store in Sea Breeze and learned I was spending the holidays alone in New York.

On impulse I bypass the text explanation and tap her contact button.

She answers on the first ring. "Well, hello, mysterious one. Why are you being so mysterious? And why are you in New York City alone? Better question, do you want to go to the spa with me tomorrow before I fly back to Maine? I'm going to need a massage after this meeting. The dude bros on this project are dude bro-ing too close to the sun. I'm about to lose every last bit of my cool and fire everyone, even if it is the holiday season."

"I hate dude bros," I say with a sniff, her sweet, familiar voice bringing all my emotions swirling back to the surface. "And I hate myself a little right now, too."

"What? Don't you dare hate on my Maya," she says, sounding outraged on my behalf. "Maya is the best."

"I've messed up, Syd," I confess. "Like...a lot." I suck in a breath, Anthony's face flashing through my head as I add, "Maybe a whole lot. Can we meet somewhere later? To talk?"

"Absolutely," she says, without a second of hesitation, proving I have the best friends in the world. "My meeting ends at two. Want to do Oscar Wilde at three? That gorgeous bar near Herald Square we hit the last time you were in town?"

I nod, relief loosening my whip tight jaw. "Yes. Thank you. I'll be there. You're a

lifesaver. I can't wait to talk."

"Me, too," she says. "And it's going to be okay, Maya Moo, I promise. Whatever it is, we'll figure it out together. We always do."

"Yeah," I say, fighting tears again. "We do. Love you."

"Love you, too," she says, ending the call just as another text buzzes into my inbox.

But, once again, it isn't Anthony. It's a beach bag company trying to sell me a palm-tree tote bag in December. As if I'll ever have the cash to fly away to a tropical destination in winter at this rate...

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:58 am

Scowling hard, I unsubscribe from the bag company before stabbing out a swift text to the man who left me high and dry—Inspection revealed major issues. Need time alone to think and do research. Talk later.

Then I switch my phone to Do Not Disturb and speed walk toward the subway.

Yes, I had planned on attending the inspection alone, but Anthony made such a big deal out of being there, of wanting to support me. It makes his complete lack of support—or so much as a follow-up text after he bailed—that much more hurtful.

Maybe his friend really is in the hospital and he's busy being there for him, a soft, hopeful voice whispers in my head, but I know better.

Anthony was lying to me, and I have no idea why.

Maybe Sydney will have some idea, but I have five hours to kill before we meet up at the bar.

Five hours to figure out what to do about the building.

And about the man I'm crazy in love with.

Or maybe I'm just crazy. After all, gorgeous male prostitutes don't live happily ever with small-town girls who bought them for the week. That isn't real life. The fact that I convinced myself it might be, even for a day or two, is probably enough grounds to have me committed.

Right along with waiving that fucking inspection clause even though Iknewit was a serious risk.

I head down the subway steps, tapping my credit card on the sensor with shaking hands, my rosy dreams from this morning going up in smoke all around me.

chapter 18

MAYA

Five hours later—after crunching numbers at a coffee shop in Chelsea and a long, head-clearing walk uptown—I arrive at one of our friend groups' favorite New York City hangouts.

Inside, Oscar Wilde looks like Christmas vomited over every available surface, but in a fun way. The Victorian-inspired bar is still decked to the nines for the holidays, with twinkling lights and evergreen swags draping over every gilded surface. A massive tree dominates one corner, oversized ornaments dangle from the ceiling, and even the famous peacock sculpture sports a tiny Santa hat.

As I step inside, taking a beat to let my eyes adjust to the gaudy explosion, Sydney waves from a velvet booth in the corner. "Maya, over here."

Relief spreading through my chest at the sight of her friendly face, I hurry over, sliding in beside her. "Hey, you look gorgeous," I say, leaning over to kiss her cheek. In a simple brown sweater dress and a glossy blow-out that makes her long, strawberry blonde hair shine, she's the picture of composed elegance, as usual.

"And you look gorgeous...and stressed," she says, concern filling her blue eyes. "I ordered you a Dirty Santa—gin, vermouth, olive brine." She pushes the martini across the small table. "Seemed like you needed something serious."

“You’re an angel.” I take a long sip, letting the chilled alcohol glide down my frazzled throat. Even my throat is frazzled, and every inch of my nervous system is in meltdown mode.

Not only am I no closer to figuring this thing out, I’m also no closer to getting answers from Anthony. Aside from one quick text hours ago—I’m so sorry to hear that, Maya, but we’ll figure it out. I promise. It’ll be okay. Just meet me at the apartment at four, okay? We’ll work on it together.—he’s been missing in action.

And yes, that was a nice thing to text, but until I know why he was lying this morning, they’re just empty words.

Words I’m beginning to think I’ve been a fool to trust...

“Okay, give me the dirt,” Sydney says after I’ve taken several bracing sips of the strong drink. “Who hurt you and where do I find them? Because I will find them, and I’ll make them sorry.”

“I hurt myself,” I confess. “I’ve been so stupid, Syd.”

Then, I spill it all—the secret plan to buy an apartment building and move to New York, the risky offer I made, the disastrous inspection results, and how the math is no longer mathing to make the deal work.

She winces at each revelation, assuring me I’m as screwed as I think I am. “So basically, I’m out thirty thousand dollars for nothing,” I say, fighting tears again. “If I back out now, I’ll lose my earnest money and the cost for the inspection. But if I go forward, there’s no way I can pay for the repairs, and there’s a good chance I’d end up in bankruptcy before it was all over.”

“You should have asked me for help, Maya,” Sydney says, her pale blue eyes pained

for me. “Real estate is what I do. It’s what my father and his father did. It’s literally in my blood. I could have kept you from getting in this kind of trouble.”

“I know,” I say. “But I wanted to show everyone that I could do this on my own. That I wasn’t sweet, sheltered Maya who needs someone looking out for her all the time. But now...” I sigh. “Well, obviously, I’m an idiot.”

“You’re not,” she says, setting down her martini glass with a sharp clink. “Stop that kind of talk right now. You are brilliant and ballsy. And you aren’t the first person to take this kind of risk. Most people who aren’t born with silver spoons in their mouths have to take chances to get a foothold in a competitive market.” She nods firmly. “But as a silver spoon jerk from way back, I’ve never had to worry about that. Which is why you should let me help you fix this.”

I shake my head. “No, Syd, that isn’t why I wanted to talk.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:58 am

“I know it isn’t, but I want to help. I’m a very wealthy woman in my own right, honey, and now that Gideon and I?—”

“No.” I hold up a firm hand, hoping she’ll see the determination in my eyes. “That’s so generous and kind, but I can’t take your money. I made this bed, and now I have to lie in it. Or...get up and walk away from it after learning a very expensive lesson.”

She scrunches her lips into a disapproving line. “I get it. I don’t like it but...I get it. But let’s look at this from all angles first, okay? Maybe there’s another way to get the capital you need to move forward.”

We brainstorm alternatives—a HELOC on the property after closing, a private loan from my parents as an advance against my inheritance, selling my eggs to a fertility clinic—but none of them are really viable.

Maybe not even my eggs...

“I’m not even sure if my ovaries are functioning properly,” I mumble, my lips a little numb from my Elf on the Top Shelfmartini, a peppermint concoction even stronger than the Dirty Santa. “I could be infertile.”

“You are not,” Sydney says, with a defeated shake of her head. “But you don’t have enough eggs in your ovaries to finance those kinds of repairs. Not and have any left for making babies of your own, anyway.”

Tears spring into my eyes again, proving the hot mess train is still barreling toward Breakdown Station. “I won’t have babies. I can’t even find a normal guy to date who

isn't a walking red flag."

Sydney blinks faster. "Wait, what? Who are you dating? And why is his flag red? Girl, you have really been holding out on me."

"Well, that's what you do when you decide to reverse Pretty Woman a Richard Gere of your very own and end up thinking that male prostitutes and small-town virgins have a shot at living happily ever after," I say, lifting my glass in a sarcastic toast to the biggest idiot in the room.

Who is, of course, yours truly.

As soon as Sydney's done choking on her drink, she demands I tell her what the hell I've been up to, and I do.

All of it. From begging Weaver to connect me to his sex-club madame friend, to Anthony sweeping me off my feet, to how fabulous he is with Pudge, to the way he makes me feel so beautiful and fascinating and safe.

To the way he lied and left me this morning after making a big deal out of being at the inspection...

"Holy shit," she says, looking stunned. "I'm going to kill Weaver. Dead. He is so dead!"

"No, don't kill Weaver," I say. "I begged him to help me. He was just trying to be a friend, and I'm a big girl. I knew what I was doing." I exhale a long, miserable breath. "Or...I thought I did. Until I met Anthony and had the most amazing sex ever and fell in love with a guy who is probably lying about everything. Including having feelings for me and my cat."

“Shit, Maya,” she says, taking my hand under the table and giving it a squeeze. “Oh, honey, you are just going through it right now, aren’t you?”

“I think my dumb, impulsive teenager phase is hitting about five years too late,” I say, with a laugh.

It’s not funny—not at all—but that second martini is hitting hard, taking the edge off my pain.

“But we always knew I was a late bloomer,” I continue, glancing down at my phone as it begins to vibrate on the table beside my drink. Anthony’s face pops up on the screen as the muted call buzzes twice before I reach over, sending it to voicemail.

I’m fast, but I’m not fast enough, a fact Sydney proves as she says, “Holy hell, woman, was that him? Pull that picture up again. I need to see this sexy lying beast for myself.”

“He is a sexy beast,” I agree, pulling up the shot I took of Anthony smiling at me over his shoulder in the sculpture court at the museum. With the natural light filtering in through the giant windows and the white marble all around him, he looks like a male model.

Or a movie star.

Or a very expensive prostitute, who breaks dumb girls’ hearts on a regular basis.

“Wow.” Sydney blinks several times. “He’s gorgeous, Maya. And he has really kind eyes.” She looks up from the screen, her forehead furrowing. “Like...really kind. And the way he’s looking at you in that shot?” She shakes her head as she sets my phone back on the table. “I mean, maybe I’m wrong. Maybe he’s not a creep who’s going to steal your identity and give you crabs.”

My brows shoot up. “Crabs? Oh God, I didn’t even think of those. We were both tested for STDs, but can they detect crabs with a normal test? Probably not, right? I mean, aren’t they like...lice, or something?” I make a gagging sound. “Ew. Lice. Why is being a human so gross?”

“It is gross,” Sydney says, patting my hand. “But it’s also pretty amazing. And that guy doesn’t look like he has crabs. He looks like he has a standing appointment at that preppy barbershop in Chelsea that charges two hundred dollars for a shave. He is very well-maintained.” She purses her lips and tilts her head to one side. “And a little familiar, honestly. I wonder if I’ve run into him somewhere. I attend a lot of charity banquets with women who would have no problem plunking down a few hundred dollars for a pretty man on their arm.”

“Try a few thousand,” I mutter, nibbling on the peppermint shortbread that came with my drink. I’m starting to get hungry, but for the first time all week, I’m dreading dinner with Anthony.

I’m not the type of person who can put hard conversations off until they’re convenient. As soon as I lay eyes on Anthony again, it’s all going to come out—all my suspicion and hurt and frustration, all my half-formed theories and secret fears.

“Really?” Sydney makes a thoughtful noise. “How much did you pay this man?” I tell her and she squawks in alarm. “Maya! Jesus. Let me see that picture again.” She grabs my phone, holding it up to my face to unlock the screen before pulling up Anthony’s photo.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:59 am

She then takes a shot of my phone with her phone, making my stomach drop.

“No, Sydney, don’t,” I say, reaching for her arm.

“Don’t what?” she asks, shoving her phone into her bag before I can grab it.

“Don’t report him to the police or whatever it is you’re thinking. With the exception of this morning, he’s treated me wonderfully. He’s been kind and protective and supportive and charming. And he even insists on paying for everything.”

She snorts. “He can afford it. You practically gave him your life savings. I mean, ten grand a week? If I ever burn through my inheritance, maybe I’ll become an escort. I had no idea they made that kind of money.”

“And that was with a fifty percent discount because Weaver’s friends with the owner of the club,” I murmur, flinching when she squawks again. “But still, he’s been generous. And I don’t know, maybe there really was a sick friend.”

“No, there wasn’t. Trust your gut, Maya. The gut never lies.”

“Maybe, but one lie doesn’t make him a bad person. And it certainly doesn’t justify getting him arrested.” I glance around, lowering my voice before I add, “Prostitution is still illegal, you know. And I could get into trouble, too. I’m part of this illegal equation.”

Her shoulders relax and some of the outrage fades from her expression. “I seriously doubt anyone would prosecute you, but don’t worry. I’m not going to report him. I’m

just going to keep his face on file, so I know exactly who to go looking for if anything happens to you.”

“Nothing’s going to happen to me,” I say. “He would never hurt me like that, Syd. Never.”

She arches a brow. “You sound pretty sure about that.”

“I am,” I say, a different kind of suspicion prickling across my skin.

Maybe I’ve overreacted. Anthony at least deserves the chance to explain himself before I jump to damning conclusions. He’s earned that with every perfect moment we shared before this morning.

Sydney nods as if she can read my thoughts.

But we’ve been friends for so long, she usually can.

“Then you should go talk this through with him,” she says. “In the meantime, I’ll make a few phone calls. If you’re open to going into the deal with a partner, we might still be able to make it work.” She holds up a hand, stopping me before I can respond. “Not me. I know you don’t want me to save you, but my bestie from high school, Noelle, has a friend who’s part of a purchasing collective. They buy distressed properties, renovate using as much elbow grease as possible, then sell them off. I’m pretty sure they’ve only bought single unit properties so far, but they might be ready to tackle a bigger project. It’s worth a shot, anyway. I know they have a solid legal framework in place to protect each person’s investment stake, so you wouldn’t be jumping into a completely unvetted situation. There would still be risks, but...worth a shot, right?”

I nod, hope flickering to life inside me again for the first time since this morning.

“Yes. Thank you. I would appreciate that so much. I don’t close until Friday, so there might still be time to meet with them tomorrow. Or, if they’re not ready to move that quickly, I might be able to get the closing pushed back.”

“Okay, good,” she says as we rise from our seats and shrug back into our coats and scarves. “I’ll let you know as soon as I know.” She reaches out, giving my arm a squeeze. “And you’d better text me the second you get the real story from this man. Don’t settle for anything less. If he’s really The One, he’ll see how upset you are and do whatever it takes to make it right.”

The One...

As we hug goodbye outside Oscar Wilde and go our separate ways—me downtown to the Village and Sydney uptown to have dinner with her dad at the penthouse where she grew up—every moment of the past five days with Anthony plays in my head.

The montage is overwhelmingly wonderful and romantic.

And sexy.

And sweet.

And...real.

This isreal. It has to be real, right? I mean, I’m naïve, but I’m not an idiot.

But you have been pretty drunk on orgasms, and I don’t think that makes you the most reliable judge of character. Pretty sure sex isn’t known for enhancing your rational side.

Good point, Inner Voice.

As soon as I emerge from the subway station near Anthony's place, I pull out my phone, planning to call him and ask if he wants to meet at the coffee shop around the corner. I'll be much less likely to fall prey to his sex vibe if we're in public with cappuccinos.

But when I glance at the screen, I see a missed call and a voicemail from my lender...

My heart begins to race as I step off the sidewalk, huddling against the brick wall of a local grocery store in the late afternoon chill. Pushing my fingers to one ear to block out the hum of traffic and the shouts of kids playing at the small park across the street, I strain to hear the soft voice of Mary, my loan officer.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:59 am

“Hello, Ms. Swallows. So sorry I missed you. I hate to leave this in a voicemail, but I’m headed out for the day and wanted you to know what’s happening as soon as possible. You’ll have an email in your inbox explaining all this as well, but unfortunately, we’ve run into a snag on our end. During our final review, we discovered a discrepancy in the property’s appraisal value compared to recent sales in the area. The comps from the past month are really throwing a wrench in things.”

Oh no.

Oh no, no, no...

I bite my bottom lip hard enough to send pain flashing through my jaw, starting to feel like I’m cursed.

Mary sighs, clearly hating every word of the bad news she’s compelled to deliver. “But they are what they are, and given the extent of the necessary repairs, we’re going to need an additional twenty thousand down to process the loan. The lender is no longer comfortable with the lower amount of leverage. I’m so sorry to deliver this kind of update so late in the process, but the good news is that I can get your closing pushed to next week. That’s no problem. That’ll give you more time to get creative with your finances.”

Creative? There’s no amount of creativity on my part that can solve this, and I seriously doubt Sydney’s connections are going to be interested in a neighborhood that’s lost value in a market where property prices usually only move in one direction—up.

“Give me a call back tomorrow morning, okay?” Mary adds. “I’m happy to talk this through with you further and hopefully get a new closing date on our schedule. Have a good rest of your day and...sorry again.”

Sorry...

She really does sound sorry, but not as sorry as I am.

I am so sorry. I should have known better than to swing for the fences. I’m not that kind of girl. I’m a “play it safe and small” kind of girl. I should have started with a cottage in Maine and moved on to larger vacation home purchases, just like my parents.

“Only I don’t want to be like my parents,” I whisper through the tears pushing at the backs of my eyes.

I want to be brave and bold.

I want to grow and evolve and be part of the world outside our tiny corner of it.

Just like that, I decide not to ask Anthony to meet me at the coffee shop like a coward.

I’m not a coward. A fool, maybe, but not a coward.

Inside his apartment building, I take the stairs two at a time, arriving winded at his door, but I don’t pause to catch my breath. I work my key into the bottom lock and click it open. I’m about to set to work on the deadbolt, when the door flies wide, revealing a very worried-looking Anthony on the other side.

“Where have you been?” he asks, frowning as I push past him, dumping my purse on

the bench by the door. “I’ve called three times.”

“I was with a friend and had my ringer off,” I say, turning back to face him, my hands propped on my hips, ready to do battle.

“I’ve been worried sick,” he says, his gaze skimming up and down my body, for once looking more concerned than appreciative.

I realize he’s looking for injuries and some of my irritation fades.

Still, he lied to me this morning and didn’t text for hours after. And I’ve had too terrible a day to feel anything but raw and scared and braced for the worst.

“You didn’t seem in any hurry to text me this morning,” I counter. “And I was worried, too. Worried that you weren’t who I thought you were.” I arch a challenging brow as I add in a pointed tone, “How’s Chris?”

He doesn’t miss a beat before confessing, “There is no Chris. I lied. I’m so sorry, Maya.”

Well...shit. I’m a little shocked by how easy this was, but I do my best not to show it. “I know. You’re a crappy liar. Your phone didn’t even have a new message on it. At least not as far as I could see.”

“No, it didn’t. And yeah, I am,” he says, a pleading note creeping into his tone. “But I’m hoping that’s something you’ll learn to appreciate about me. In time.” He takes a small step closer, adding in a softer voice, “I really hope I can earn more of your time, Maya. That’s all I want.”

Love and hope surge in my chest.

But if this day has taught me anything, it's how important it is to look before you leap.

"We can talk," I say, keeping my guard up as best I can in the face of his magnetic gaze locked on mine. "I'll give you the chance to explain. That's all I'm promising right now."

He winces, but nods. "All right. How about an explanation over a drink? And maybe dinner?"

"All right," I say. "I guess we have to eat. I'll feed Pudge and we can go."

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:59 am

“You might want to change first,” he says. “The bar has a dress code, and I bought you something to wear, a little gift to express how sorry I am.”

His “little” gift turns out to be a designer dress, a diamond necklace that has to be fake, but it still clearly a wildly pricey piece, and shoes I’m betting cost more than my inspection.

But his excess makes me feel worse, not better.

As I stand gazing at my expensive-looking reflection in the mirror in the guest room, all I can think is—He must have something seriously upsetting to explain.

Smoothing my hand down the front of the gorgeous dress, the one that makes me look more like a socialite than a girl on a budget about to lose her ass in a real estate deal, I whisper, “Guess I’m about to find out.”

chapter 19

ANTHONY

The jade silk was the perfect choice.

As Maya climbs the back stairs of The Garden beside me, the vintage-inspired gown makes her look like she stepped out of a 1930s film. It hugs her hips and drapes beautifully across her chest, emphasizing her elegant curves beneath the faux fur wrap around her shoulders. In the hollow of her throat, the diamond pendant I had delivered from Cartier this afternoon catches the light as we move toward the gas

lamps on either side of the bar entrance, as dazzling as the salesman promised it would be.

But not as dazzling as her...

She's so beautiful, so poised, even now, when she's had a day from hell. Hearing about the inspection and the bad news from her lender on the cab ride over made me physically ill. Yes, I can make those problems go away for her, if she'll let me, but she doesn't know that. All she knows is that a man she trusted lied to her and her first real estate purchase looks like it's going to end in complete disaster.

But still, she's relatively calm and composed.

She's so much stronger than she gives herself credit for, and I have no doubt that she's going to do incredible things, with or without me.

But damn, do I want to be there with her, beside her, cheering her on every step of the way.

I hope the surprises I have planned are enough to convince her how sorry I am, and that I have zero plans to lie to her again. If I never see that distant, wounded look in her eyes again, it will be too soon.

"Watch your step," I murmur, cradling her elbow as we step over the threshold and start down the narrow stairs on the other side. "It's steeper than it looks."

She doesn't respond, but she doesn't pull away, either, which I decide to take as a move in the right direction. When she first came out of the guest room in the dress, I reached for her and she backed away, ripping my heart in two in the process.

I hate that I hurt her, that I made her doubt herself or the connection between us for a

single fucking second.

As we move into the bar proper, I vow to do whatever it takes to regain her trust. If tonight isn't enough, I'll keep working until I prove myself to her, even if I have to move to Sea Breeze and leave flowers on her doorstep every day. I'm not a big fan of small towns or cold, rocky coastlines—I'm usually a Caribbean man—but for Maya, I'll learn to love long walks in the freezing Maine air.

It's been less than a week, and I'd already do just about anything for her. God only knows how quickly things will progress if she agrees to move in with me and give being a couple a try. I'll probably be proposing by Valentine's Day.

Inside the bar, the air is alive with flickering, amber light and holiday-infused jazz that floats from hidden speakers. Erté prints line the wall between the mirrors on this side of the room, their art deco figures echoing the Grecian-inspired drape of Maya's dress. She looks like she belongs here, like she's a regular at clubs with champagne service that starts at five hundred per bottle. But then, even in her off-the-rack black velvet dress, she held her head high in a room full of multi-millionaires.

Maya knows her own worth, and so do I, which is why I didn't hesitate to call every close friend I thought I might have a chance in hell of convincing to join me at a secret sex club on a few hours' notice. Thankfully, my friends are an adventurous lot, and after only a few calls, I had two of my nearest and dearest on Twyla's special guest list.

I spot Bailey Anne and Harold settled in the corner, beneath an art installation featuring peacock feathers that dangle from the ceiling like willow branches, creating a shelter for the booth beneath. Their heads are bent in conversation, but they look up as we approach.

Bailey Anne's eyes widen on Maya before flicking to meet mine with a small nod of

approval, while Harold beams at us like he's already imagining our walk down the aisle. But then, Harold's been trying to set me up for years. He never said anything outright, but I could tell he wasn't my ex-wife's biggest fan. As soon as the divorce was final, he shot me an email assuring me that second marriages are always ten times better than the first. He and his second wife have been together for thirty years, a fact he manages to bring up every time we meet for coffee.

But before Maya, I wasn't ready to date seriously, let alone think about marriage.

Now, however...

I meet Harold's gaze with a shaky smile, glad my old friend seems to approve. Harold was the CFO at the bank that hired me straight out of college. He taught me everything about office politics that they don't teach you in school, but he's always felt as much like a father figure as a mentor.

I was hoping he'd take to Maya nearly as much as I hope she takes to him and to Bailey Anne, my running club friend I've known since we were on the same track team in junior high.

"I have a couple of people I'd like you to meet," I whisper to Maya as we cross the room. "I asked them here especially to speak with you. If that's okay?"

"All right," she says, looking surprised, but curious.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:59 am

Curious, not suspicious. It's another small win I celebrate as we stop in front of the corner booth. "Maya, meet Bailey Anne Kinsey and Harold Granger, two of my dearest and oldest friends."

"Which means we know all his secrets," Bailey Anne says with a mile-wide smile.

She's wearing her hair in her signature ponytail, but she's replaced her usual jogging suit with an elegant black pantsuit that makes my already tall friend look even taller. When she rises, she towers over Maya, her pale green eyes crinkling as takes Maya's hand in hers. "How are you, doll? I've heard so much about you."

"Have you?" Maya arches a doubtful brow. "Really?"

Bailey Anne laughs. "Well, not until about three hours ago, no. But since then, Anthony's been texting pretty much incessantly.

"Incessantly," Harold agrees, scooting out of the booth and extending a hand Maya's way. At seventy, he still carries himself with the dignity of the high-powered executive he once was and looks elegant in a custom three-piece suit. "So pleased to meet you, Miss Swallows." He gives Maya's fingers a squeeze. "I've been waiting for my young friend to come to his senses and find someone to care for again." He casts a glance my way as he releases Maya's hand. "But it looks like he was waiting for you, and I'm glad he did. From what I've heard, you sound like a treasure."

"Well, thank you. That's a very kind thing to say." She glances back at me, hope and caution mixing in her gaze. "But may I ask why you've been pestering these nice people with a stranger's life story?"

“I wanted them to know who you were,” I say. “So, they would understand why tonight is so important.”

“We’re here as character witnesses,” Bailey Anne explains, settling into her chair as the waiter appears with the bottle of champagne and four glasses I ordered ahead of time. Maya’s phone buzzes in her small bag, but she ignores it, proving I’ve at least captured her attention.

“Which I, for one, think is delightful,” Bailey Anne continues. “As a society, we should do more things like this. A mandatory ‘bring friends to vouch for your character’ meeting three or four dates in would have saved me so much time when I was online dating.” She shudders. “Have you done any of that, Maya?” she asks as I pull out Maya’s chair and settle down beside Harold on the banquet, letting the women have the chairs. “Online dating?”

Maya shakes her head. “No, I haven’t.”

“Good,” Bailey Anne says. “Don’t. It’s awful. Especially here in the city. The men are all sociopaths or neurotic workaholics or both. You’re better off hanging a ‘single and looking for an age-appropriate gentleman’ sign around your neck at the grocery store.”

“Which Bailey Anne actually did,” I offer, thanking the waiter for the champagne and indicating he can leave the rest of the bottle in the ice bucket beside the table.

Maya’s eyes widen as she glances back at Bailey Anne, once again ignoring her phone as it vibrates twice more. “You didn’t.”

Bailey Anne grins. “I did. And Paul and I have been happily married for three years. I don’t know what I’d do without him.”

Harold makes an approving sound. “That’s the kind of creative thinking you need in these modern times. Don’t let the social media tech billionaires convince you there’s only one way to skin a cat. People can still make connections in real life. My daughter, Deb, met her boyfriend at a pasta making class.”

“And even if she hadn’t, she still would have learned to make pasta,” Maya says. “It’s a win-win.”

“That’s the spirit,” Harold says, lifting his glass. “A toast to open minds and open hearts.”

“To open minds and open hearts,” we all echo. As I clink glasses with Maya, I hold her gaze for a beat, relieved that she seems comfortable with my friends. On the way over, I started to worry that she might feel ambushed.

“So, Anthony says you’re in real estate?” Bailey Anne asks after we’ve sipped our champagne.

“I’ve managed my parents’ portfolio of rental properties for years. I was hoping to start my own business this year, but I’ve hit a few snags along the way,” Maya says, some of the light dimming from her eyes.

But hopefully, by the end of the night, I’ll be able to put her worries about the real estate deal to rest tonight along with all her other worries.

“I get that,” Bailey Anne says with a sigh. “New York real estate can be a beast.”

“Bailey Anne manages preservation for buildings on the historic register,” I offer. “She’s the go-to for anyone who needs an expert in seventeenth-or eighteenth-century real estate.”

Maya leans forward, curiosity animating her features. “Wow. That must be fascinating. And challenging. I had to have part of an eighteenth-century ceiling replaced in a property last year. Finding someone who could replicate the hand-carved plaster mold was almost impossible.”

“That’s always a challenge,” Bailey Anne agrees. “So many of those skills are dying arts in this day and age. I ran into something similar with a staircase railing last fall. But I found a craftsman in the UK who still carves spindles in the same style.”

“And what about you, Harold?” Maya asks, glancing down at her purse as her phone vibrates again. But once again, she leaves it in her bag. “What do you do?”

“I’m retired now, but I used to be this brilliant boy’s boss,” Harold says, sending a fresh rush of nerves straight to my stomach. I take another sip of champagne, watching Maya’s expression as he adds, “Never met a kid so smart about numbers and so clueless about people.”

Maya laughs as she glances between us, clearly trying to decide if he’s serious. “Really?”

“He almost got fired twice in the first month,” Harold confirms. “Had no idea when to keep his mouth shut or play dumb so his superiors didn’t feel stupid for not understanding his math on the projections. But his math was spot-on. So, I told the rest of them he was staying put.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:59 am

“And then he taught me how to navigate office politics,” I add.

Maya blinks. “And what office was this?”

“One of the biggest banks in New York,” Bailey Anne supplies, arching a brow my way. “Are you being modest again? Why am I not surprised?” To Maya she adds, “He’s a genius with numbers, graduated high school when he was practically a fetus, and was off making straight As at Columbia while the rest of us were failing Pre-Calc and getting drunk in Stephanie Crier’s attic.” She motions to me with her champagne flute. “But that’s not the kind of character reference I’m here to give. Yes, he’s a genius and very successful, but when it comes to relationships? Disaster.”

“Hey,” I say, my frown deepening as Harold adds, “I’ll second that. I knew his marriage was doomed from the start.”

Maya’s lips part, but if she’s shocked to hear that I was married, she doesn’t show it. “Really? How so?”

“They didn’t laugh together,” Harold says. “Love without laughter never lasts. It’s like expecting a plant to grow without sunlight.”

“And she cheated on Anthony like it was a sport and she was training for the Olympics,” Bailey Anne adds, making Maya wince.

She meets my gaze across the table, her usual compassion shining her eyes. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Thank you,” I say, “but it takes two to make a marriage fail. When I realized we were growing apart, I didn’t try nearly as hard as I should have to bridge the distance. Instead, I found excuses to stay late at the office, until one day I came home early and she um...” I clear my throat with a soft laugh. “She clearly wasn’t expecting me.”

“She was boinking the doorman,” Harold offers, making my brows shoot up my forehead. “Well, she was,” he maintains. “No sense sugarcoating it.”

“And ever since then, our boy has hidden his heart away,” Bailey Anne says, making me squirm a little. This isn’t what I was expecting, but I should have known better than to think Bailey Anne would pull any punches. “Which is a shame,” she continues. “Because he’s got a great heart. Even when we were kids, Anthony was always the guy you could count on to stick up for you on the playground or share his cookie at lunch. He never talked shit or spread rumors and without his free tutoring, I’m pretty sure I would have failed geometry in seventh grade. Does any of that surprise you?”

Maya’s cheeks flush as her fingers trace up and down the stem of her glass. After a beat, she shakes her head. “No. It doesn’t.”

My chest goes tight with hope, but before I can speak or catch her gaze, Harold adds, “And when my wife was hit by a taxi driver crossing Fifth Avenue, Anthony was the first one at the hospital. He held my hand until my daughter got there, and then he held us both together until we got the news that Maggie was going to be fine. That’s not something I expected from an employee, but I sure was grateful. And I’ve never forgotten it.” He turns to me, his blue eyes misty, making the backs of my own eyes start to sting. “I confess, I was hoping you might end up my son-in-law someday, Anthony, but then Deb had to go and take that damned pasta class.”

We all laugh, his joke breaking the tension just in time.

As we reach for our glasses, Maya's phone buzzes again, three times in rapid succession. She reaches into her bag, glancing at the screen with a small frown before turning it off. "I'm so sorry. I swear, I'm not usually this popular."

"Is everything all right?" Bailey Anne asks.

Maya nods. "Yes, it's fine. Just friends from home checking in."

Bailey Anne sighs. "I wish I had friends from home." I arch a pointed brow, and she laughs. "I mean, friends from a cute little town in Maine kind of friends from home. City friends are different. We're all so cynical."

"Speak for yourself," Harold says. "I've grown rather optimistic in my old age. I'm starting to have faith that it will all work out. Probably not in my lifetime, but I see a bright future ahead. We're going to learn to do better. As a planet and a people."

Bailey's lips curve in a bemused grin. "I hope so, Harold. That sure would be nice."

"To learning to do better," I say, lifting my glass Maya's way.

"To learning to do better," she echoes, her gaze softening as she adds, "though I think you're doing pretty good already, Mr. Clark."

Harold and Bailey Anne exchange a subtle glance, making me glad I thought to warn them ahead of time. I didn't tell them the whole crazy story—I wasn't sure Harold was ready to hear that I decided to moonlight as a male escort—but they know I wasn't completely honest with Maya the night we met.

And they know I'm here tonight to make up for that...

"Ready for your next surprise?" I ask as we set our now empty glasses down and

Bailey Anne reaches for the bottle chilling on ice.

Maya's brows lift. "Another surprise?"

"Anything worth doing is worth doing right," I say with a little shrug, hoping she likes the next surprise as much as meeting my friends. It's a little riskier, and could very well blow up in my face, but I still want to make the offer. I want her to know that I'm ready to put my money where my mouth is, and that I believe in her.

I really do. There's no doubt in my mind that, with the proper support and capital at her fingertips, Maya can transform that building in Red Hook into something truly special.

"Hope to see you again soon, Maya," Bailey Anne says with a warm smile. "I have to run in ten. Pilates." She lifts her newly full glass with a laugh. "We'll see how that goes. I don't usually have champagne before I strap into the machine, but hell, it's still the holidays."

"I don't usually have champagne at all," Harold says with a tired shake of his head. "I can't handle bubbles the way I used to. I'll be lucky to make it home without falling asleep in the cab."

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:59 am

“I’ll order you a coffee, my treat,” I say as Maya and I rise, waving off Harold’s protest. “It’s my pleasure. It was so good to see you both. Let’s get together again soon.”

“Yes, let’s,” Bailey Anne says. “And have them send over a dark chocolate raspberry mousse with his coffee, too. I think Harold might need some sugar to help keep him awake. And two spoons, in case he needs help finishing the whole thing.”

Maya laughs. “A woman after my own heart. Always make it easy for people to share their dessert.”

“Damned straight,” Bailey Anne says. She and Harold wave and offer wishes for a happy New Year as we move back toward the front of the bar.

“Thank you for that,” Maya whispers when we’re out of ear shot. “I like them.”

“And they liked you,” I say. “Thanks for keeping an open mind.”

“My mind is wide open,” she murmurs, her voice husky in a way that goes straight to my dick, easing his fears that we might never get to be naked with her again. “I’m sorry. I think I may have misjudged you.”

“You had every right to misjudge me. I’ve been keeping secrets, and I still haven’t explained this morning.”

She tips her head in acknowledgment of the fact. “No, you haven’t.”

“But I will,” I assure her. “That’s part of the next surprise. It’s waiting for us in the private library.”

“Private library, huh?” Her gaze flickers with anticipation. “That’s a pretty exciting surprise all by itself. You know I love a library, but I need to visit the ladies’ room first. Champagne and a small bladder. And I may have had a martini or two this afternoon, so...”

“You had every right to a martini or two after the day you had.” I motion toward the end of the hall closest to the front lobby, where we both entered the club last time. “I think the closest restrooms are in the front. I’ll send a hostess to waitfor you and show you to the room after? I want to make sure everything’s ready.”

“All right. See you soon.” She nods as she backs away, clearly still curious, but far less suspicious than when we arrived half an hour ago.

“Soon,” I promise, gaining confidence that I’m going to win her back.

I remain confident as I offer Harold and Bailey Anne a last grateful wave, speak with Raven, one of the hostesses, about Maya, and hurry toward the small library. There, beneath the spines of books in faded green and blue, the loan paperwork I had messengered over earlier is already spread out on the leather-topped desk in the corner. I would prefer to give Maya the money outright, no strings attached, but I know her well enough to realize that wouldn’t fly with her.

She doesn’t want charity. She wants to build a business of her ownonher own.

Hopefully she won’t consider a zero interest, forty-year loan charity...

I just want her to have options, to either do the repairs needed on the Red Hook property or look for another investment that will require less work. Half the real

estate developers in the city come from old money. They had help getting where they are today and wouldn't be nearly as far along if they hadn't had a leg up on everyone else.

I want to give Maya that leg up.

I want to give her...everything.

I pace the small space, mentally rehearsing my speech, turning the words over and over in my head, trying to find the perfect way to tell my fake girlfriend that I want her to be my real girlfriend.

Ten minutes pass. Then twenty, but I'm so lost in thought that I'm only just starting to wonder what's taking so long when Raven bursts in without knocking, startling me.

My throat tightens at the stricken expression on her face.

"I'm sorry, sir, but she's gone," Raven says, her brow furrowing. "I started to get worried and went in to check on Ms. Swallows, just to make sure everything was okay. But the window was open in the restroom and she was already down the fire escape. I tried to call for her, but either she didn't hear me?—"

"Or didn't want to stop," I finish, bracing a hand on the desk as my stomach pitches.

What happened? Everything was going so well.

Or so I thought...

But clearly it wasn't going "so well", or she wouldn't be gone.

Gone...

She's fucking gone, and I have to get out there and fix this before it's too late.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:59 am

“Which way was she headed?” I ask as I cross the room.

Raven shifts to one side, making space for me to move past her. “Away from the back of the building, but not by the rear entrance. She was in the alley one street over. If you’re facing the door, it’s just to the right of the club.”

“Thank you,” I say before turning to jog through the bar, not stopping to see if Harold and Bailey Anne are still at their table or have noticed me making a break for the door. My chest constricts as I circle the bar and start up the narrow stairs, taking them two at a time.

Blood pounds in my ears, nearly drowning out Raven’s call that I’ve left my coat.

Fuck my coat.

Maya’s out there in nothing but a light wrap, so desperate to get away from me that she’s fled on foot. I have to find out why, and I have to make this better.

But even as I hit the bottom of the stairs outside and sprint down the street, hoping to cut her off when she emerges from the alley, I know there’s a chance I’ve lost her for good.

chapter 20

MAYA

I’m an idiot.

A naïve, starry-eyed, backwoods idiot who was probably well on my way to getting scammed by a sociopath.

A voice deep in my chest insists—Anthony is not a sociopath! He’s the best man you’ve ever met!—but I ignore it. That voice belongs to the Inner Idiot and the idiot is no longer calling the shots around here.

I have no idea why Anthony lied to me about everything, but I don’t doubt Sydney’s intel for a second. Sydney is very smart and savvy and obviously thinking a hell of a lot more clearly than I am.

I should have googled him on day one! I should have reverse image-searched his face as soon as I had a photo. What on earth was I thinking? Just blindly following and fornicating with this man with zero reservations or suspicions?

Sydney’s voicemail replays over and over again in my head as I hurry through the dark streets, my heels clicking against the pavement. My fake fur wrap does little to ward off the winter chill, but I barely feel the cold.

My shame is keeping me warm.

“The man you’re seeing isn’t who you think he is, Maya,” Sydney had said, her voice vibrating with concern. “Clark isn’t even his last name! He’s lying about who he is and what he does for a living and God only knows what else. Get somewhere safe, where he isn’t listening, and call me, okay? Or, better yet, come to my place. You and Pudge can stay here tonight, and I’ll tell you everything I found out during my Internet deep dive. But don’t worry too much, okay? I don’t think you need to be scared for your safety. He doesn’t seem like a dangerous person, per se, but until we know why he lied about his whole ass life, I want you to be very careful. Very! Okay? Liars aren’t to be trusted. Call me!”

Liar. Anthony is a liar. About everything!

Were Bailey Anne and Harold even his friends? Were any of the stories they told true? They seemed sincere, but so did Anthony when he was watching me across the table, like all he wanted in the whole world was for me to know that he was someone I could trust, and he was lying the entire time!

An outraged sound bursts from my chest, followed by a soft sob. Because I love him. I still love him, even if the man I thought I loved is a lie.

I swipe at the tears on my cheeks, trying to focus on my next steps. I know how to handle myself in a crisis. You just put one foot in front of the other, focusing on the next best step until you're through the hard parts and have a chance to recoup and take a deep breath.

First, I have to get Pudge and get out of the apartment before Anthony realizes I've left the club and comes looking for me. I'll just grab the cat carrier, enough food to get Pudge through the night, and head right back down to the street. Sydney is several inches taller than I am and at least twenty pounds lighter, but she'll have some pajamas I can wear.

Even if she doesn't, I'd rather sleep naked than take the time to pack and risk running into Anthony. I can't look at him right now. If I do, I have no idea what I'll say, what I'll?—

“Hey lady, stop right there. Hands up.” The voice is young, wobbly, and cracks on the word “there,” but the sight of a skinny figure in a black ski mask stepping out of the shadows in front of me is enough to stop me in my tracks.

The kid can't be more than fourteen or fifteen, but he's holding a gun. Or something that looks like a gun. I'm not an expert in firearms, but my uncles all hunt and?—

“Is that a Super Soaker?” I ask, the words out before I can think better of interrogating the person trying to mug me.

“What? No! It’s a— It’s...” The boy’s voice cracks again as he jabs the orange-tipped “weapon” forward. “Just give me your purse, okay?”

“I don’t have any money or credit cards in my purse. Just my cell phone and it’s almost as old as you are. You won’t get more than twenty bucks for it. Tops,” I say, part of me insisting I’m crazy for haggling with a criminal, but my gut says this kid is more scared than I am. “But if you want to walk me back to my place, I can get you a sandwich or something else to eat. Are you hungry?”

“No. Well, yeah, but it’s not... I mean, that’s cool, but...” He sucks in a breath, hitching his chin up as he puffs up his chest. “Look, just give me your money, okay? I know you have money. You have to. You’re obviously rich as hell, lady. Okay? Just give me whatever you’ve got, and nobody has to get hurt.”

“I’m not worried about getting hurt. At least not by that water gun.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:59 am

“It could be full of acid,” he says, his eyes glassy behind the holes in his mask.

I arch a brow. “Is it full of acid?”

He exhales, hesitating for a beat before mumbling, “No.”

“I didn’t think so. Acid would melt through that plastic reservoir pretty quick.” I take a careful step forward. “Listen, you seem like a decent person, okay? It’s not too late to make some different choices here. I?—”

“That necklace,” he cuts in, his eyes widening as his gaze fixes on my neck. “That’s worth something. It has to be. Just give me that, and I’ll go.”

My fingers fly to the hollow of my throat, feeling the cool, comforting heaviness of the charm Anthony gave me earlier. I have no idea how much it’s worth, but it obviously wasn’t cheap. I mean, it could be a fake—Anthony’s lied about everything else—but it doesn’t feel fake.

And even if it is, it still means something to me. It was given to me by a man I’m crazy in love with.

Even if that love turns out to be foolish, it was still real. For me.

“This was a gift,” I whisper, my chest tight. “From a man I love, who I just found out has been lying to me from the moment we met. Maybe that should make it less valuable to me, but it doesn’t. It’s also the first gift I’ve ever received from a man who wasn’t my father. And I’m twenty-four, almost twenty-five. How sad is that?”

He grunts. “My dad left when I was seven, and he never gave me shit.” He lifts the orange tip of his gun again. “I’ll take the necklace, lady. Now. I need it more than you, I promise. Please.” He sucks in a breath, and when he speaks again, he sounds like he’s about to cry. “Please, I can’t go home without something.”

“Things are hard at home?” I ask softly. “Want to talk about it? Maybe I can help? There are places kids can go when they’re?—”

“Yeah, I know those places, and they suck. I don’t need to go into foster care, I just...” He swallows hard, sniffing before he adds, “It’s my mom. She’s a good mom. Really good. She lovesus so much.” A ragged laugh bursts from his chest. “She just...sucks with money. Like, really sucks. She keeps thinking more is just going to appear by magic, you know? But it isn’t. And now she blew her entire paycheck on a big Christmas for me and my little sisters. I already took my shit back to the store to get the cash, but it isn’t enough, and I can’t take the kids’ toys back. They already opened them and they just...they’d be so sad. They’re still little. They don’t understand how much trouble we’re in. But this is the third time we’re going to be late on rent and the landlord said he was going to change the locks the next time we?—”

“Maya, are you okay?” Anthony’s voice comes from behind me, steady and even, but so deep the words vibrate across my skin. He clearly isn’t pleased to see me being threatened, even if it is under rather...odd circumstances. “If you hurt her, we’re going to have a problem, okay? Step away and put the toy down.”

The boy glances between us, visibly shrinking as he takes a few steps back, letting the Super Soaker clatter to the pavement.

But then, Anthony has six inches and at least thirty pounds of muscle on yours truly. As confused and hurt as I am by everything that’s happened tonight, when he shifts in front of me, putting himself between me and the boy, I instantly feel safer.

Safe from being robbed, anyway...

My heart is still very much in danger, a fact Anthony proves as he says in a kinder tone, "I heard what you're going through. I'm sorry. I never had much growing up, but my aunt and uncle were both good with money. They never had a lot of it, but my cousins and I never had to worry that there wouldn't be a roof over our heads. That sounds really hard."

The kid nods, looking utterly miserable.

"But robbing people isn't the way to fix this," Anthony continues. "That's only going to make things harder for you and your mom. Can you imagine how upset she'd be if she had to come bail you out of jail tonight?"

The boy looks up sharply. "You aren't going to?—"

"No, I'm not," Anthony says. "But most people would. You got lucky tonight. I doubt that will happen the next time." He casts a pointed look down at the toy. "Even if you aren't using a real gun."

"And kids have been shot by police for threatening people with toy guns," I pipe up. "If they can't tell if the gun is real right away, they sometimes shoot first and worry about killing a kid playing with a Super Soaker later. Then, your mom would be identifying your body at the morgue. Her heart would be broken, and she and your sisters would still be evicted."

To my surprise, the boy's thin shoulders begin to shake.

"Oh, no," I say, feeling terrible. "Don't cry. We'll help you. It's going to be okay." I start to go to him, but Anthony puts a hand out, giving a slight shake of his head.

“We will help,” he says, his tone much firmer than mine. “But only if you promise never to do anything like this again.”

The kid nods, sniffing hard before he says, “I promise. I’m so sorry. I just didn’t see any other way. We need the money by the first, and I’m only fifteen. I deliver food after school, but that’s barely enough to cover groceries. There’s no way I can make enough for the rent, too, especially not in a few days. Even if I drop out of school, I?—”

“You’re not dropping out of school,” I say. “That’s your way out. You’re obviously a smart, hard-working kid. Keep that up at school and one day you’ll have so many more options than you have right now. But not if you drop out.”

“No,” Anthony agrees. “That’s a non-starter, but I might be able to help you with something that pays more than food delivery. Mind taking off the mask?”

The boy hesitates, but after a beat, reaches up and pulls the ski mask off, revealing curly brown hair cropped close to his head, a narrow face, and sad, but intelligent brown eyes that have clearly seen more than anyone should at his age.

He looks so scared, so young, and I instantly feel even worse for him.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:59 am

Anthony makes a considering sound. “All right. We can work with this. You look young, but not young enough to make people ask questions. What’s your name?”

The boy swallows, his Adam’s apple bobbing in his thin neck. “Bennie.”

“Alright, Bennie, I’m Anthony, and I worked at this company for over a decade.” He reaches into his pocket, pulling out his wallet and a cream card from the inner pocket. He holds it out toward Bennie. “Show up here tomorrow at ten a.m. I’ll put in a call to be sure they’re expecting you. Report to Carrie in Human Resources. She’ll get you set up with a uniform and show you the ropes. Executive runners start at twenty dollars an hour, but if you work hard, you can earn a raise in as little as three months.”

Bennie’s eyes go wide. “R-really?”

“Really. One of my cousins worked there last summer and really enjoyed it.” Anthony extends the card a little farther. “Go ahead. Take it. This isn’t a trick. It’s a life preserver. Show up at the office tomorrow and take advantage. If you do, there will also be an envelope waiting for you. I’ll make sure there’s enough money inside to cover the rent and a little extra for you to put aside in case of another emergency.”

“You’re lying,” he says, his words sending a flash of pain through my chest. “The rent is eight hundred. There’s no way you’re giving a kid who tried to rob your girlfriend eight hundred dollars and a job. Shit like that doesn’t happen in real life.”

“He is a liar sometimes,” I say, making Anthony stiffen beside me as I move out from behind his arm. “But not about this. This is real, and you should jump on the

opportunity and do everything you can to make the most of it. Because you're right. Stuff like this doesn't usually happen in real life. But every once and a while...it does." I search his still uncertain gaze, hoping I can get through to him. He's too young to give up on a shot at something better than what he's known so far. "That's why we have to hold onto hope. If we stop hoping, then we stop believing our lives can get better. And then, when luck finally swings our way, we're so jaded and beaten down that we let our chance slip through our fingers. It's understandable when that happens, obviously—it's hard to keep hoping when life gives you so many reasons to give up—but it's also so sad. We lose so much when we stop hoping, and other people do, too. No doubt in my mind, our society would be a better, happier, healthier place for everyone if we all had more hope."

Anthony grunts softly. I look up to see him watching me with a tender appreciation that looks so real it sends another ache of bittersweet longing through my chest. "You should listen to her," he murmurs to Bennie, his eyes never leaving mine. "She's a wise woman."

I frown. "I don't know about that, but I do know you can take Anthony at his word." Fixing my focus on Bennie once more, I add, "And you can trust the money will be there tomorrow. I'll make sure of it. I have enough to cover it if he doesn't, and I'd like to do that for you. My way of helping keep hope alive."

Bennie swipes tears from his cheeks, but his voice is steady as he whispers, "Thank you. Both of you. I know I don't deserve this after I tried to rob you, but I'm not going to mess this up." He stands up straighter, rolling his shoulders back as he lifts the card into the air. "I'll be here tomorrow, and I'll work harder than anyone else. I know how to work hard. I'll show you. You won't be sorry you gave me a chance."

Anthony nods. "I don't think I will. Good luck, Bennie. Hope the new year is good to you and your family."

“You, too.” Bennie glances between us, his mouth softening in a crooked smile that makes me think his hope isn’t dead, after all. “I’ll see you around maybe. Get home safe.” Glancing my way as he backs toward the end of the street, he adds, “And stick to the main streets when you’re alone after dark. There are way worse guys than me around here.”

I nod. “Thanks. I’ll keep that in mind.”

Anthony and I watch him run off, clutching the card like a lifeline, and suddenly I’m very conscious of the fact that I climbed out a restroom window to get away from the man standing beside me, patiently waiting for me to make the first move.

Maybe he can sense that I need to feel in control right now.

Or maybe he also has no idea what to say.

I’ve never climbed out a window and ghosted a date before. But then I’ve never gotten a voicemail like the one Sydney left me tonight.

Pulling in a bracing breath, I turn to him, ignoring the way my heart lurches at the sight of the worry in his eyes. Until I know what’s going on, I can’t even think about forgiving him.

Hell, I still have no idea exactly what I’d be forgiving him for.

“My friend Sydney left a voice message while we were chatting with your friends,” I finally whisper. “She said you’re not who you’ve been pretending to be. She said Clark isn’t even your real last name.”

A pained expression flashes across his face, but he doesn’t look surprised.

And he doesn't refute the information.

"Well, shit," I choke out, my throat tight. "Then it's true?" I shake my head. "I mean, of course, it's true. Sydney's not the kind who gets things wrong. I guess I just..." I finish in a soft, shamed voice, "I hoped there was some mistake."

"Maya, please," he says, sounding as miserable as I feel. "I'm so sorry. I was going to tell you tonight. I swear it. That's why I had my friends come to meet us at the club. I wanted you to hear from people who know me that I'm not some kind of?"

"Some kind of lying creep?" I finish for him, my stomach churning.

He winces. "Something like that, I guess. But I promise, I never meant to hurt you." He searches my face, his gaze burning into mine as he adds in a whisper, "I never meant to fall in love with you, either. But I did. And the thought of losing you because I waited too long to come clean makes me physically ill. Please, just give me the chance to explain."

I chew my bottom lip, torn between the part of me that just watched him go out of his way to help a kid in trouble and the part screaming that liars never change. Once a liar, always a liar, and I can't build a future with someone like that.

I learned that from watching my sister nearly ruin her life before she wised up and kicked her liar to the curb. That's not a lesson I want or need to learn firsthand.

But still...

There's so much good between us, too much to run without giving him the chance to explain. That was never my plan.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:59 am

I didn't have a plan, honestly, I just wanted to get to Sydney and get some answers.

"You'd better start with your real name," I finally say, pushing on before he can reply. "And don't try to hide anything. Like I said, my friend is on to you. I was on my way to her place to get the entire story when Bennie..."

"Tried to mug you with a water gun?" he supplies when I trail off. "You were good to him, by the way."

"You were better," I say, grudgingly.

He shakes his head. "No, you were the one who got through to him. I meant what I said. You're a wise woman. Wise and kind and beautiful and I don't want to let you go. But...if after you hear me out, you want to leave, I'll call you a cab myself, okay?"

I pull in a breath and let it out slowly, my teeth chattering a little as I nod. "Okay."

He strips out of his suit coat. "Here, take my jacket. You're shivering."

I shake my head. "I'm fine. We're almost there."

"I insist." He wraps the coat around my shoulders, surrounding me with his warmth and the clean, evergreen-and-fancy-hotel-lobby scent of him. The smell is already so familiar, so sweet. I'll never be able to walk through a forest or the Ritz-Carlton in Portland without thinking of him.

Anthony Whatever His Name Is will haunt me until the day I die.

“Last name?” I demand, unable to wait a second longer.

“Pissarro,” he says, putting an arm around my shoulders as we move out of the alley onto the main street.

I frown, the name resonating for some reason, but I can’t put my finger on why. Still, “That makes sense,” I say, glancing up at his classic profile, one any ancient Roman statue would be proud of. “You’re way too Italian to be a Clark.”

His lips quirk. “Thanks. Though that was my gram’s last name when she died, and she was as Italian as they come. After my grandfather passed away, she married a Clark, though he was long gone by the time I moved in with her. She had a thing for men with heart disease, apparently.”

“So that was true? About living with your grandmother when you were little?”

He nods. “I stuck to the truth as much as I could. I hated lying to you, but once I started, I...didn’t know how to stop. Not without ruining your experience. I mean, you came to the city to procure a certain kind of service, not a boyfriend.”

Boyfriend...

The word is still enough to make my heart run screaming in giddy circles.

But as we start up the stairs to the apartment, I tell my heart to take half a dozen seats and chill. Anthony’s a smooth talker, yes, but he’s going to have to perform some serious verbal gymnastics to convince me to stay at his place tonight, let alone commit to exploring a relationship.

Which reminds me...

“I need to text my friend,” I say, tugging my phone from my purse as he shuts the front door behind us. “Tell her that I won’t be to her place for another hour or so.”

He nods tightly. “All right. An hour is generous. Thank you. I’ll do my best to make the most of it.” He bends down, scooping a purring Pudge into his arms. “I’ll go get him a treat. Then, we can talk.”

I nod, my pulse speeding faster as I text Sydney, warning her of the change of plans and promising to text or call as soon as I’m on my way.

She texts back almost instantly—Okay. Hopefully he can explain himself. Like I said, he doesn’t seem like a bad guy, but this whole situation is...bizarre. And I want better for you than a bizarre liar, even if the liar in question is some kind of financial genius who’s richer than God.

My brows shoot up. Richer than God?

What on earth?

But anyway, Sydney continues, good luck, honey. Let me know when you’re on your way. I already have the guest room ready for you, and I’m ordering five different types of ice cream now!

I’m about to text Sydney to demand more information—and to ask her to get Butter Pecan, the most comforting ice cream flavor—but stop myself.

I don’t want the truth from Syd. I want it from the man pouring two glasses of water from the pitcher in the fridge while my cat twines through his legs.

Pudge is clearly still a big Anthony fan.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:59 am

I don't know if the same can be said for me, but I'm ready to listen.

I just hope this story isn't as bizarre as Sydney seems to think it is. I don't want to be with a bizarre liar, either, but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't praying for a reason to give Anthony a second chance.

I don't want to leave this man, not tonight, or any night in the near future.

chapter 21

ANTHONY

I've never needed the perfect words more than I do right now.

I'm desperate to make Maya understand, to make her stay...

Seeing her in the process of being mugged—even if it was by an ultimately harmless kid with a toy gun—turned me inside out. The thought of not being close enough to protect her, of having no say in whether she's going home to an apartment with a doorman in a safe neighborhood or to a sketchy street in Red Hook, makes me even crazier.

So instead of the perfect thing, I lead with, "No matter what happens tonight, please let me lease you an apartment in Chelsea. My treat, just for a year or two, while you get on your feet. I need to know you're safe, even if..."

I trail off, refusing to finish the sentence.

I can't go the rest of my life without Maya in it.

I just can't.

She arches a brow as she slides onto the stool on the other side of the island, but doesn't seem completely shocked by the offer.

That makes more sense when she murmurs, "So you really are richer than God? Sydney just texted that you were. She didn't get into the finer details, but..." She glances around the apartment, her brow furrowing, before shifting her gaze back to mine. "So, what is this place? One of your rental properties or something?"

"It's an Airbnb. I don't have rental properties," I say without hesitation, determined to answer her questions with complete honesty. "I own a few single-family homes and some commercial property in Red Hook, but the homes are all for family. I don't charge them rent."

"So that was true, too." Her eyes narrow. "Is that why you bailed this morning? You were worried about being recognized by someone you knew in the area?"

I nod. "Dave Mackey is an old friend of the family. I actually worked for him part-time in the summers for a while during undergrad, and he did the inspections on all my properties in the area. When I saw it was him, instead of Kyle..."

She makes a soft, considering sound. "That would have been embarrassing for both of us." She glances away with a pained expression. "Though feeling angry and betrayed might have taken the edge off all the bad news. After all, compared to being played for a fool by the man you're falling in love with, what's a few hundred thousand dollars in unexpected repairs?"

"You aren't a fool," I say, moving around the island. I want to cup her face in my

hands, to hold her steady so she can't look away from me, but the tension in her shoulders makes it clear she isn't ready for me to be that close.

So, I settle for covering her hand with mine as I add, "I'm the fool. I should have told you the truth that first night. I should have told you that I wasn't an escort, I was just a lost man who'd wandered into his friend's club and been offered the chance to meet a beautiful woman he'd noticed in the library. From the second I saw you, Maya, I just...I had to know you."

"So, you lied to me because you didn't know how to walk up and say hi?" she demands, her tone making it clear she isn't buying that for a second.

I shake my head. "No, I lied to you because Twyla told me you were looking for an escort, not a date with a stranger who hadn't been vetted." I hesitate a beat, letting my fingers slide up her arm to curl around her wrist as I add, "And because I couldn't stand the thought of another man putting his hands on you."

She pulls her arm away and slides off the stool, pacing across the room as she mutters, "I can't touch you right now. Touching you is...hard."

"I'm sorry," I say, my chest tight.

"I still want you so much," she says, spinning back to face me, the tears shining in her eyes hitting me like a punch to the gut. "But how can I want you, Anthony? When I don't even know who you are anymore?"

"You know who I am," I say, as I cross to her, arms extended in a primal gesture of supplication. "Ninety percent of what I told you was true. The only things you don't know are that I'm good at numbers, so good that I graduated with two masters' degrees before my twenty-first birthday, landed a series of jobs in the financial sector that made me a very wealthy man, then walked away from everything one night,

when it suddenly became clear to me that my work wasn't making me happy. It wasn't my purpose, not anymore." I drag a hand through my hair, adding in a softer voice, "That was the night we met. I'd just set off a bomb in the middle of my life. And then, there you were, and Twyla was begging me to take the job so she didn't have to turn you away... It just seemed like fate, and I never planned to take your money. She's holding my portion of your fee now. She was going to give it back to you tonight before we left the club."

Maya's quiet, so quiet that I risk another step closer, bending to catch her gaze. I wait until she looks up from the floor to add, "Please, Maya. This week with you...it's the best thing that's happened to me in so long."

Bottom lip trembling, she asks, "Why? I'm nothing special."

My heart shattering, I reach for her beautiful face, cradling her jaw in my hands as I whisper, "You are the most special. You are...everything. You're kind and genuine and good to your core. You're funny and thoughtful and when I roll over and see you sleeping next to me in the morning, I feel like the luckiest man on Earth. That's why I kept finding reasons not to tell you the truth. The thought of you leaving... I..." I swallow, fighting a wave of emotion before I add in a rougher voice, "Please don't leave. Please, just give me the chance to prove to you that this is real. That we're real."

Her lip wobbles again, but she doesn't try to pull away. "I hate that you lied to me."

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:59 am

“I hate it, too,” I agree. “Dumbest decision I ever made, but I don’t usually make dumb decisions. I promise.”

“But if we’re being completely honest...” She exhales. “If I’m being honest, I don’t know how I would have handled a gorgeous, wildly successful finance guy with perfect hair and a stupidly hot body approaching me at the club that night. It might have felt too scary. Thrilling, but...scary.”

My lips quirk. “I don’t have a stupidly hot body.”

“You have a stupidly hot everything,” she says. “And you were right before, about what I was looking for that night. I wasn’t looking for perfect or real. I was looking for a situation I could control, for a way to have an experience I’d been dying to have in a safe, STD-tested environment, where I wouldn’t get hurt.” She blinks faster as she adds, “I was so afraid of getting hurt.”

“I’m so sorry I hurt you,” I say, smoothing her hair from her face. “But if you give me another chance, I promise I’ll never do it again.”

“You can’t promise that,” she says. “When people get really close, sometimes, they hurt each other. It’s part of being in love. You can’t have the beautiful part without the scary part. Even my parents fight sometimes, and they’re the happiest couple I know. But Dad still forgot their anniversary one year, and Mom still spent two hours crying in the laundry room.”

“I’ll never forget our anniversary,” I say. “Every Christmas Eve from here on out, all I’ll be able to think about is you. Even if you never want to see me again.”

She sways closer, making my bones go wobbly with hope. “Do you really think I want that?”

“I hope not. I pray not, and I’m not a praying man.”

“Well, that’s going to be a problem,” she murmurs as she shifts fully into my arms, the feel of her breasts soft against my chest wrenching a soft sound of relief from my throat. “My parents are very Catholic, and if we end up going all the way, they’re going to want to see us married in a church.”

“I’ll go to confession at St. Joseph’s tomorrow,” I say, without missing a beat. “Confess my sins and promise I’ll be in a pew every Sunday from here on out.”

“We don’t have to go every Sunday, just enough to prove we’re serious. Just in case.” A soft, wonder-filled smile blooms across her face. “You’re seriously considering marriage? After less than a week?”

“When you know, you know, Maya Swallows,” I say, throwing caution to the wind. “I almost bought you a ring instead of that necklace, but I figured you’d think I was crazy.”

“I do think you’re crazy,” she says, her fingers teasing into my hair. “But I’m crazy, too, so...”

“Can I take you upstairs, beautiful?” I whisper as her lips move closer to mine. “And show you how sorry I am?”

Pudge meows loudly from beside our feet, making us shift apart with a laugh. “Pudge would like another snack, first, I think,” she says, smiling down at the cat before casting a heated glance my way. “But then...you’re mine.”

I'm already hers, a fact I intend to prove tonight and every night, as long as I'm lucky enough to have this perfect woman in my arms.

chapter 22

ANTHONY

Pudge is still devouring his catnip chew, purring with pleasure on his favorite chair, when Maya takes my hand.

There's an urgency in her grip, her fingers tight around mine as we lock eyes, that sets my every nerve on fire. Neither of us speaks as we head for the stairs, the silence between us heavy with anticipation, making my pulse race.

I wasn't sure I'd have this chance again—the chance to touch her, to love her, to make her come apart in my arms—and I don't intend to take a second of tonight for granted.

But that doesn't mean I'll be able to take the first time slow. I want her too much. I need to be naked and inside her ten minutes ago, proving nothing is going to come between us again.

We reach the door and push through, slamming it behind us, and then her mouth is on mine and our hands are everywhere.

“Need you so much,” she says, her breath hitching as I jerk her dress up, gripping her gorgeous ass through her silk stockings.

“More than anything,” I agree. “God, you feel so good, baby,” I say as she presses closer, deepening the kiss.

Her lips are hungry, urgent, moving against mine with a boldness that sets my blood on fire. My girl knows what she wants, and she's no longer the slightest bit shy about asking for it, demanding it, even.

And I fucking love it.

I kiss her back just as fiercely, my hands sliding up to her waist, fingers digging into her curves as I tug her flush against me.

She lets out a soft cry as her stomach comes into contact with where I'm hard for her. The sound is half-gasp, half-groan of need and pours fresh kerosene on the fire burning between us. I push her back against the wall beside the door, pinning her there as I devour her. I stake my claim with my hand loosely around her throat as I fuck her mouth with my tongue, promising I'm never going to betray her trust again with every stroke.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:59 am

“More. Touch me,” she gasps when we finally break apart for air. “I want to feel you everywhere. Just you. Always you,” she says, her nails raking over my skin as she shoves my shirt off my shoulders.

“Always,” I promise, stripping her dress off and her stockings down her legs before kissing my way back up her curves. I’m high on the taste of her skin, on the sounds she makes as I shove her panties to one side and glide two fingers deep into where she’s so damned hot and wet that I can’t wait another second.

I rip open my fly and shove my pants and boxers down, freeing my cock.

“Yes, now, please,” she says as she quickly disposes of her panties.

The second they hit the floor, I grip her thighs, lifting her into the air. She wraps her legs around my waist, bringing her slick heat against my shaft, driving me wild.

“Put me inside you,” I order, my voice rough as I press her harder against the wall.

Her hands move between us, positioning me. The second I feel her pussy, soft and hot, pressed against the head of my cock, I shove forward, burying myself in one sharp thrust.

She cries out and for a moment I worry I’ve gone too fast. But then she pants, “Don’t stop, don’t ever stop,” in my ear, her breath warm on my neck as she claws at my shoulders, demanding more.

“Never,” I vow. I’m never going to stop wanting her, needing her, fucking her with

every bit of my heart and soul.

Because that's what she deserves—passion and truth and a lover as fearless as she is.

“I love you,” she moans, clinging to me as I take her hard against the wall. “I love you, Anthony.”

“I love you so much, baby. So much, more than anything,” I promise before I kiss her again, fierce and unrelenting.

As we slam together, bodies growing hot and sticky despite the chill in the room, her perfume mingles with the intoxicating scent of her arousal. The sexy smell makes something primal inside me roar and my balls clutch with the need to fill her, to mark her, to make her come all over me, until her juices are dripping down my shaft and she's too well-loved to think about leaving me ever again.

“Come for me, angel,” I pant as I shift my angle, grinding against her clit. “Come for me. I need to feel your pussy squeezing my cock so fucking bad.”

“Tell me you're mine first,” she orders, gripping my ass in both hands, pulling me even closer, her touch sending sparks racing across my skin. “Tell me.”

“Look at me,” I say, my voice raw.

I pull back, waiting until her gaze locks with mine. I slow my next thrust, gliding into her with one achingly slow stroke that leaves us both gasping. Her heat, her tight pussy, the way her curves cradle me with every movement—she's sexy as hell.

But it's her eyes, the brave, fearless look in those sky-blue eyes that I want to keep staring into for the next four or five decades that destroys me, heals me...saves me.

“I’m yours. Forever,” I promise, gliding into her again, my heart skipping a beat as her lashes flutter and her lips part. “Until the world burns down. Just you and me.”

“You and me. Oh God, Anthony. Oh God, I need you,” she says, cupping my face and tugging me closer.

I oblige her, my lips crashing against hers. I swallow every sexy, turned-on sound she makes as I move faster, driving into her welcoming body. Her breath comes faster, and her legs tighten around me, urging me on, until she’s making those soft, whimpering cries that I know mean she’s near the breaking point.

“Come for me, Maya.” I grip her thighs, holding her steady as I piston into her, panting, “I’ve got you. I’ve got you, baby. Come for me, come so fucking hard.”

She screams my name, a shudder running through her as her head falls back against the wall, her pretty face twisted in passion in a way that makes me crazy. The sight of her unraveling in my arms is almost enough to make me lose control.

It’s only the thought of how much I want to see her go again, how much I want to draw out this pleasure, this closeness, that gives me the strength to step away from the precipice.

I bite down hard on the inside of my cheek, using the flash of pain to keep me steady as the last waves of Maya’s orgasm ripple around where I’m still buried inside her.

“Bed,” I growl against her neck as she catches her breath. “I’m not finished with you yet, beautiful.”

“Yes,” she says, nodding loosely. “Take me to bed.”

I guide her legs from around my waist before wrapping my arm around her ribs and

hauling her to the bed in one smooth motion.

We tumble onto the soft white sheets, a tangle of limbs and hot breath as we kiss. I reach down, needing to be inside her again, but before I can position myself, she pushes me onto my back.

“You forgot something,” she says as she rolls on top of me, straddling my hips with a determined look in her eyes.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:59 am

“What’s that?” I ask, loving the sight of her on top of me, her hair wild around her shoulders.

“Well, my bra to start.” She strips off the lingerie and tosses it to the ground, taking my breath away. “But more importantly, you told me that you’re mine.” Her voice is soft, husky, and sexy enough to make my cock jerk against her thigh as she adds, “But I didn’t return the favor.”

“No, you didn’t,” I murmur, my hands settling on her waist as she rocks against me, the feel of her slick sex against my aching length summoning a groan from low in my throat. “Fuck, Maya,” I gasp, my fingers digging deeper into her flesh as she rolls her hips, teasing me with how close I am to entering her, but pulling away before I can thrust up into her heat. “You’d better tell me.”

“Tell you what?” She arches a wicked brow as she rolls her hips in the opposite direction.

Her movements are deliberate, torturous, and her gaze filled with a mixture of love, passion, and an unabashed knowledge of the power she holds over me. And in that second, I fall even more in love with her. With her bravery and her honesty and the perfect way she sighs as I cup her breasts, my thumbs brushing over her hardened peaks as I say, “Tell me you’re mine, Maya.”

She shivers, her rhythm faltering for a moment before she continues the slow, teasing rocks of her hips.

“Tell me I’m the only one you ever want to fuck,” I say as I take control of her hips

and shift her forcefully into position, her turned-on gasp as I jerk her pussy to the top of my cock confirmation that this is what she wants. “Tell me my cock is the only cock you ever want buried inside you. Tell me, and I’ll let you sink down on me, let you take every inch.”

“Yes,” she says, her breath coming faster, making her breasts bob in the cool air. “You’re the only one I want inside me. The only one.”

“Good girl,” I rumble as I slide inside her again, her body so wet and ready for me, there’s no resistance this time.

There’s just sweetness, ease, heat, and hunger. Just the perfection of Maya riding me toward her second orgasm of the night, looking like a pagan sex goddess escaped from a primal forest.

We come together harder, deeper, until the only sounds in the room are our gasps and the rhythmic slap of skin against skin. I grip her hips, meeting her movements with thrusts of my own, driving her higher, closer to the edge. Her hands brace against my chest, her nails digging into my skin as she bites her lip, her body tightening around me in a way that makes my vision blur.

“Come with me this time,” she gasps, her voice trembling. “Come with me.”

“Kiss me,” I demand, my own release building, threatening to overwhelm me. “I want to taste you when I come.”

She leans down, her lips finding mine in a desperate, messy kiss that pushes us both over the edge. She shatters first, her body trembling around my twitching cock, her cries muffled against my lips. I follow seconds later, calling her name as I come in hot streams inside her, filling her with the evidence of how much I need her, tonight and every night.

Afterward, we melt together, her body draped over mine, both of us boneless as we remember how to breathe. I wrap her up in my arms, holding her close, anchoring us as we recover from the perfect storm we created together.

“Okay?” I ask as I press a kiss to her temple, my heartbeat slowing as I run my fingers up and down her spine, soaking in the miracle of her.

Ofus.

“The best,” she whispers after a beat, her voice soft, vulnerable. “It was even better with no lies between us.”

I tighten my hold on her, her words settling deep in my chest. “It was. And it’s only going to get better, baby. I promise.”

She pulls back far enough to catch my gaze, a contented smile on her lips. “I don’t know if I can handle too much better. That first orgasm was so intense it almost killed me.”

“But you came through it like a champ,” I say with a wink. “No pun intended.”

She exhales a soft laugh. “You totally intended.”

“You’re right,” I confess. “When it comes to you, I’m full of intentions.”

Then, I tell her about the no interest loan paperwork I had waiting at the club and the playroom I’d reserved, where I intended to let her tie me up and take her retribution on me for lying in whatever way she saw fit.

She hums thoughtfully as she sits up, still straddling me with my now soft cock inside her. “Retribution could be fun, but not at the club. I’d rather tie you up in private.

And I don't need your money. I'll figure something out." She sighs. "Or I'll lose the deposit and consider it a bought lesson. I'll be able to save up enough to try again. It might take more time than I'd prefer, but those are the breaks sometimes."

I nod. "True, but I don't want those to be the breaks for you. Not when I can help. And there aren't any strings on this loan. It's yours, whether we end up together for the long haul or you decide to walk away tomorrow and never come back." I give her hip a gentle squeeze. "Please, let me help. This is one of the ways I show I care, by using my money to make life easier for the people I love. And I'm always going to care for you, no matter what."

"I could get used to this," she says, her voice barely above a whisper. "To being loved."

"Me, too." I brush her hair from her face, letting my fingers linger on her temple. "You make me so happy. Let me make you happy, too."

Her lips hook into a crooked grin. "Um, pretty sure you already did that. Twice in fact. Almost three times."

I arch a brow. "Yeah? Almost three?"

Page 76

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:59 am

She shrugs. “What can I say? I really like your cock. I would have missed it if we went our separate ways. A lot. Like...a lot a lot a lot.”

I grin. “Three a lots? That’s...a lot.”

She laughs. “Yeah, it is. It’s my favorite.”

“It’s your only,” some twisted part of me feels compelled to remind her. “Is that going to be something you regret someday?”

She tilts her head, studying me as she considers the question. “I don’t think so, but...if I do, I guess we could always go back to the club and find a hot guy to have sex with me while you watch.”

My insides liquify at the thought, and I’m pretty sure the top of my head opens to let out a burst of steam. But before I can respond, Maya bursts into delighted laughter.

“Oh my, you should see your face,” she says, still laughing. “I was kidding, baby. I don’t want to be with other men, especially not while you watch. Don’t have a heart attack.”

“We’ll see who’s having a heart attack,” I say, tackling her onto the mattress. I roll her beneath me as she giggles, clearly very pleased with herself.

I show her how pleased I am with her, too, this time from behind while she cries out into the pillow.

Afterwards, we head downstairs for snacks, and end up snuggling on the couch with Pudge, sipping tea and eating shortbread cookies while looking over a copy of the loan contract on my phone.

“This is a lot of money,” she says, searching my face as she finishes her final cookie and pulls Pudge into her lap, scratching our sleepy boy’s big belly.

He’s not officially “ours” yet, but I plan on asking her to move in with me tomorrow. Or maybe later tonight if I can’t force myself to wait. But thank God, Maya doesn’t seem to mind that where she’s concerned, I have no patience for delayed satisfaction.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” she continues as Pudge begin to purr loud enough to make us both smile. “You don’t have to. I promise. It won’t affect the way I feel about you.”

“Well, it would affect the way I feel about myself,” I say. “This is your dream, and the only thing standing in your way is the capital to make it happen. I believe in the project, and I believe in you.”

Her gaze softens. “Thanks. I believe in you, too, though. And if you need that money to launch your own ‘next thing’ now that you’ve left your old job, I totally understand that. I’m not sure what ‘richer than God’ means, but even God needs seed money sometimes. And you have to put your own needs first.”

I clear my throat, a little uncomfortable about this part, but determined to be honest with her about everything from now on. “My portfolio usually earns what I’m loaning you in less than a month. I’ll be fine.”

Her jaw drops. “What the... You earn four hundred thousand dollars in returns in less than a month?”

“Interest and returns. Yes.” I give a sheepish shrug. “Like I said, I’m good with numbers. And I started investing when I was eighteen. Compound interest can do a lot in twenty years. Which reminds me, we should get you set up with an investment account ASAP. Time is on your side now more than it ever will be and you should take advantage of that to secure your future. Just in case you decide to kick me to the curb down the road and don’t inherit everything when I die.”

“Hush, don’t talk about dying.” She reaches over putting two fingers to my lips, making Pudge meow in protest as he’s squished deeper into her lap. She pulls back, apologizing to the cat, “Sorry, buddy, but I don’t like to hear Anthony talking about dying.” To me, she adds, “I just found you. You don’t get to die for a long, long time.”

I smile as I pull her sock-covered feet into my lap, giving them a squeeze. “I’ll do my best, but I am sixteen years older than you are. And men don’t tend to live as long as women. Statistically, it’s likely I’m going first. Probably by a decade or two at minimum.”

She frowns harder. “Stop it. Right now. That’s quitter talk. Look at the shape you’re in. You’re a Roman statue come to life. You’re going to live to be a hundred and ten. Maybe a hundred and twenty.”

“I’ll try,” I say, rubbing her instep. “But just in case I have a more average life span, I’m hoping you won’t fault me for not wanting to wait too long to take the next step.”

Then, I ask her to move in with me. She says, “why the heck not,” and we head back to bed, this time with Pudge, who tails us up the stairs, refusing to be left by himself. As we slide under the covers with Maya’s head on my chest, he curls up beside us, purring, clearly pleased with the way things are progressing.

“But I have one request before I take you up on the loan,” Maya says, yawning as she

snuggles closer.

“Name it,” I say, kissing the top of her head, hoping she knows I’d give her a kidney if she asked for it.

“You have to keep the money I paid for the escort service,” she says, a smile in her sleepy voice. “My entire life, I’ve been a very good girl. I need one scandalous story to tell when I’m old and gray. And saying that I met the love of my life after I hired him to sex me up is about as scandalous as it gets.”

I grin at the ceiling. “You areveryscandalous.”

“So, you’ll keep it.”

“I will,” I say, already making plans for that seven-thousand-dollars. “And I’ll never forget how kind you were to me when you thought I was an aging boy toy who needed someone to believe in him to change his life for the better.”

She sighs. “You’ll always be my boy toy, baby.”

Page 77

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:59 am

My smile stretches wider, even as a sweet ache spreads through my chest. Fuck, I love this woman. “Thanks. And you’ll always be my dirty little virgin who couldn’t wait to be fucked hard.”

Pudge makes a disapproving sound low in his throat.

“Oh, hush,” Maya says as I laugh. “If you don’t like the dirty talk, you can sleep downstairs. Daddy and I have no plans of cleaning up our act anytime soon.”

Daddy...

I like the sound of that.

Apparently, Pudge does, too. He scoots closer to the side of my leg, starting to purr again as we all soften into sleep. And for the first time in longer than I can remember, I feel surrounded by family.

Like I’m where I belong, and that life is only getting better, from here on out.

chapter 23

MAYA

Two days later...

The view from Rainbow Room takes my breath away. Sixty-five stories above Manhattan, the city spreads out beneath us like a blanket of stars, holiday lights still

twinkling in every direction. A drizzly winter rain falls softly outside the floor-to-ceiling windows, making the city gleam in the golden light from neighboring skyscrapers.

It isn't as pristine or peaceful as the snow, but it's beautiful in its own way, and it's not like we'll have to go far in the rain after the party's over. Anthony got us a room at a nearby hotel, a gorgeous suite that made me feel like a princess when we checked in this afternoon.

I can't wait to climb into that big, canopied bed with him tonight and eat room service breakfast in bed in the morning.

I told Anthony that I'd never had room service before and he immediately called the suite's private concierge, placing an order for an obscene amount of food. Come tomorrow morning, we'll be propped up on our giant fluffy pillows, devouring omelets, gourmet French toast, pastries, a smoothie sampler, and a fruit plate that cost more than I used to make in an hour working for my parents.

And then, tomorrow afternoon...we're moving in together!

Pudge is already at Anthony's place with the pet sitter, and I called my parents to tell them that I won't be returning to Maine, after all. I told them that I'm in love, moving in with the man of my dreams, and starting my own rental business.

Were they shocked? Absolutely.

But they weren't nearly as resistant to the idea as I'd expected them to be.

I'm sure it helped that Anthony was on the video call, too, looking gorgeous and devoted and promising to do everything in his power to keep me safe in the big city. He'd already had a background check on himself delivered via express courier to my

parents' house that morning, a detail that seemed like overkill considering I'd already explained to them the day before that Anthony used to be Weaver's boss and wasn't really a "stranger" at all.

Weaver's a local boy and comes from a well-respected, albeit cold, family. My parents know Weaver, have seen how wonderful and loving he is with Sully, and were happy to take his word for it that Anthony is a solid guy.

I was worried my father, in particular, would think the background check was Anthony protesting too much and might mean he had something to hide. But Dad seemed charmed by the special delivery. He kept referring to the report as we chatted, asking Anthony about his vacation home in Key West and if he enjoyed fly fishing, particularly for tarpon, a giant fish my dad has apparently always dreamed of conquering with his rod and reel.

Anthony, being Anthony, immediately offered to let my parents use the home anytime they liked, so that Dad could finally face off against his fishy nemesis.

After we ended the call, I turned and apologized. "I'm sorry, I didn't realize Dad's inner Silas Mariner would come out on the call. He doesn't usually invite himself to people's houses on the first phone date."

But Anthony only laughed. "Hey, he invited me up to dig for clams and go out on the lobster boat with your cousins. Sounds like a good time."

I roll my eyes. "It is not a good time. Moon snail infestations are decimating the clam populations around our town. But Dad keeps forgetting that and going out with his bucket anyway. Then, he spends the entire morning getting upset about snails and how fast the world is changing for the worse."

"Not always for the worse," Anthony said, leaning in to kiss me.

We'd spent the rest of the afternoon in bed because...why not?

We weren't closing on the property until this morning anyway.

Thankfully, that went off without a hitch, and as of ten a.m. today, I am officially a property owner! I already have a meeting with an electrician on Monday to talk about replacing the wiring and a crew arriving on Tuesday to work on the fire escape. Best of all, Sydney has a connection with the permit department, who moved the inspection of the attic space to the top of their list.

Assuming she approves my plans, I should be able to bring those units up to code with a relatively small cash investment and a few months of renovation time. Add in a moderate rent increase for the existing tenants and much higher rent prices for the one vacant unit and another coming empty in six weeks, and the financials are suddenly looking much brighter than they did before.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:59 am

Everything is coming together, all because I decided to stop playing it safe and go after what I wanted for the first time in my life. Even if this magical thing with Anthony goes up in smoke in the New Year, I'll never regret the time we've spent together or all the things I've learned in just a week of living boldly.

But I don't see the magic fading anytime soon, not when every day with this man is somehow better than the last.

"Penny for your thoughts," Anthony says now, his hand warm on my lower back as we follow the hostess through the elegant space toward our table. Crystal chandeliers cast intimate pools of light over white-clothed tables, and the band plays soft jazz from a small stage near the dance floor, adding to the vintage holiday feel in the restaurant.

"Just thinking about magic." I lean into him. "And how excited I am to start work at the apartment building. Mark my words, I'm going to be in the black and paying you back in six months. I see great things in the future."

He grins. "I do, too, but don't worry about paying me back so fast. I told you, I don't care when you start making payments. Or...if you make payments at all."

I wrinkle my nose at him as we reach a corner table with an unobstructed view of both the city and the dance floor, where a bottle of champagne already waits in an ice bucket. Anthony pulls out my chair, and I settle in, smoothing my new dress as I sit. It's an elegant navy silk number, another gift from Anthony that was waiting for me at the hotel this afternoon.

He really has to stop buying me things, but I can't deny he has great taste. I would never have considered navy for an evening gown, but the color brings out the blue in my eyes and the pink in my cheeks and looks effortlessly elegant.

"I told you, I don't want a sugar daddy," I whisper as the hostess walks away, leaving us to peruse the menu. "This is a loan, one I will pay back as soon as possible before moving on to further New York City real estate domination."

His eyes glitter with amusement as he studies me across the table.

"What?" I ask, arching a brow. "I'm serious."

"I know you are," he says. "I love it. Your ambition is sexy. And I have no doubt you're going to make it work. Your plan for turning the lobby into two studio apartments is brilliant. There's a scarcity of studios in that area. You'll boost your revenue in a serious way while also filling a need for the community."

"Thank you." I sit up straighter in my chair as I pick up my menu, enjoying his praise. I love how supportive we are of each other. It feels so good to know he has my back and that I'll always have his. "I mean, I'd rather have my own small apartment than have to live with a roommate for the rest of my twenties." I cast a playful look Anthony's way over the top of the heavy cardstock. "Though my new roommate isn't so bad."

"I'm not your roommate," he says, his gaze narrowing in playful irritation. "I'm your partner."

I bite my lip, enjoying that more every time he says it. Anthony said he felt too old to be a "boyfriend," and while I don't think he's even close to old, I agreed he was too distinguished for such an adolescent word.

He's not a boy; he's a man. And "partner" is the perfect word to describe what he is to me. What we are to each other.

We're partners. The help doesn't just flow my way. We've spent hours brainstorming ideas for what comes next for Anthony, too, and he loved my suggestion that he should consider applying for a teaching position at one of the universities in the area. He wants to get back to the pure beauty of math that he once loved so much, and he clearly enjoys mentoring people.

Besides, I have some serious "professor" fantasies that I wouldn't mind living out when I go visit Anthony at his office after hours...

"You are," I agree, brushing his leg with my foot beneath the table. "You're also my lover. Which is also much better than a roommate."

"Damned straight." He pours champagne into delicate flutes. "You look beautiful tonight. Maybe I should become a personal shopper. I have great taste in clothes."

I grin. "You do. Though I think your brilliant mind might get bored with fashion after a while."

"Especially if I'm not shopping for you," he agrees. "You're my fashion muse. I've already ordered a few things for the ski trip in February, by the way. All you'll need to shop for are base layers and socks. I couldn't get excited about socks."

"I have base layers and warm socks. I'm a Maine girl," I say, a wave of giddy excitement rising inside of me again.

We already have plans to take a ski trip with Sydney and Gideon, and to have dinner with Weaver and Sully as soon as they're back in the city. Two weeks ago, I was reluctantly single and not sure I'd ever lose my virginity, let alone fall in love. Now, I

have plans for the future with the man of my dreams. A man who looks at me like I'm all he's ever wanted and all he'll ever need.

Maybe it's crazy to believe this is all going to work out after just seven days, but I do.

I believe in miracles. And in this man.

"Love you," he says, his eyes soft in the candlelight. "And I really love it when you look at me like that."

"Like I'm never going to let you go?" I whisper.

He holds my gaze, making my nerve endings prickle with awareness. "Yes." A slow, wicked smile stretches across his lips as he adds, "And like you can't wait to be naked and alone with me at the earliest convenience."

I grin as I murmur behind my glass, "Well, I am a very dirty girl."

"The dirtiest. And the best." He lifts his glass toward mine. "To new beginnings."

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:59 am

“To new beginnings,” I say, clinking my glass to his.

Our waiter arrives just then, and we place our orders for each of the four courses. As he moves away with the menus, the band launches into a jazzy version of “Strangers in the Night” and I smile. “Want to dance?”

He cocks his head. “I thought you didn’t dance, Maya from Maine,” he says, calling back to that first night.

“Do you remember everything I’ve ever said?”

“Everything,” he says. “And yes, I’d love to dance. Any excuse to touch you.”

“Good,” I say, rising from my chair as he stands, holding a hand out my way. “Besides, I happen to think we move very well together.”

“That we do.” He squeezes my hand as we cross the small dance floor.

Once there, he pulls me close. Other couples move around us, but I barely notice them. All I can focus on is Anthony’s hand on my waist, his warm fingers wrapped around mine, and the sexy smell of him teasing at my nose as he guides me around the edge of the floor.

And no, we’re not the most graceful couple, but we’re in sync and in love and enjoying the hell out of ourselves, and that’s all that matters.

“I feel like Cinderella,” I say, grinning up at him.

“I feel like the cranky ogre who lived in the swamp,” Anthony says. “The one who finally woke up and realized there’s more to life than work and going home to his shack alone.”

I arch a brow. “Your ‘shack’ is the biggest, most beautiful apartment I’ve ever seen. It makes Sydney’s look like a hovel.”

“But it’s cold,” he says. “Bare. It needs books and rugs and art. I want to change everything. Together.”

After the song, we return to our table, where the first course awaits—delicately sliced raw scallops with citrus and a hint of chili oil that make me moan in appreciation.

“Should I be jealous of your appetizer?” Anthony asks, his eyes darkening at the sound.

I moan again. “Yes. I think I just cheated on you with shellfish.”

He laughs and we return to discussing ideas for warming up his big, empty apartment, both of us agreeing that we want something more like the Airbnb, a place full of thoughtfully chosen objects that remind us of things we love. As the main course arrives—herb-crusted lamb for him, duck breast for me—we move on to plans for the guest room and a special play structure for Pudge in the hallway beside the library.

And yes, my new home has a library, and yes, I’m appropriately thrilled about it.

“And a kitten friend for Pudge too, maybe?” Anthony asks. “I mean, he’ll get lonely in the house with us gone at work all day. I’ll be home more for a while, but I got an email from Columbia earlier, saying they’d be thrilled for me to fill in for one of their professors when she goes on maternity leave in March.”

“Oh my God! That’s amazing,” I say, beaming at him across the table. “You should have told me.”

“The email arrived this morning, just before we went into the closing, and I got distracted,” he says, a hopeful smile on his face. “But I think I’m going to accept. It’s a great chance to try out teaching for a shorter period of time before committing to something long-term.”

“It’s perfect,” I agree, lifting my glass of pinot noir. “To your new gig. I’m so happy for you.”

We toast again and I promise myself this is my last glass of wine. I don’t want to be too tipsy to enjoy the rest of the night or, God forbid, hung over tomorrow morning. I’m looking forward to breakfast and move-in day way too much for that.

I’m looking forward to everything waiting for us in the future.

As midnight approaches, we move to the window to watch the city celebrate far below. Anthony wraps his arms around me, and I lean back against his chest, struck all over again by how much he feels like home.

“Ten seconds,” he murmurs in my ear. “Do you have your resolution ready?”

“I do,” I say, gazing at him over my shoulder.

“Tell me,” he murmurs.

The countdown begins, voices rising around us, but we’re in our own world. I turn in his arms, wanting to see his face when the year changes.

“I’m going to keep being fearless,” I say. “And keep falling madly in love with you.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:59 am

“Ditto,” he says, just as the crowd reaches “one” and shouts of Happy New Year fill the room. He kisses me slow and deep—my first New Year’s kiss ever—making my toes curl in my heels. By the time we part, fireworks are exploding over the city, streaking the sky with color.

We watch the show, oohing and ahing along with everyone else, letting ourselves be swept up in the magic. The last of the display is ending and we’re about to head back to our table, when my phone buzzes several times in my clutch. I pull it out to see a string of photographs from Elaina of Sully and Weaver embracing at the cat café New Year’s Eve party she throws every year, Sully now sporting a giant ring on her left hand.

I suck in a happy breath. “Oh my God! Weaver proposed! And Sully said yes.” I turn the phone toward Anthony, making him smile.

“Good for them,” he says. “I had a feeling about them from the moment they met.”

I had that feeling, too.

And I have that feeling now, about us. I wouldn’t be surprised to be engaged before next New Year’s Eve. Like Anthony said, when you know, you know, and I already know there’s never going to be anyone as perfect for me as him.

We hit the dance floor again, spinning until my feet start to ache, then return to our table for dessert—a chocolate soufflé that melts on my tongue and sets me to moaning a second time.

“I’m jealous again,” he says with a playful arch of his brow. “Can I please take you home now, before I have to challenge that soufflé to a duel?”

“A duel?” I ask as I lick chocolate from my spoon. “Sounds exciting. But yes, I’m ready to go. We need to see if that bed is as comfortable as it looked.”

“And if that bathtub is big enough for two,” he adds, motioning for the check.

Spoiler alert—the bathtub is totally big enough for two, and as Anthony gives me a very naughty bath I’ll never forget, I’m more excited for the new year than ever.

The future is looking bright.

So bright that I’m not surprised when Sydney texts a short time later to share that she’s pregnant and expecting a baby in July. And that she wants Elaina, me, and Sully to all be godmothers for her little one.

“A baby,” I whisper, cuddling closer to Anthony in the shadowy hotel room after I’ve put my phone on to charge. “I can’t believe it. Time is flying by so fast. It seems like just yesterday that we were staying up all night at a sleepover at Sully’s, daydreaming about the day we’d get our first kisses.”

“How was your first kiss?” Anthony asks.

I shudder. “Horrible. How about you?”

“Also, pretty bad. But it was Bailey Anne, so we laughed about it after and decided we should never be more than good friends.”

I prop up on my arms, studying him in the darkness. “Really? Bailey Anne? How old were you?”

“Twelve,” he says. “And we both thought kissing was overrated. Though she changed her mind about that pretty quickly when she and Charlie Slater started dating the next year.”

“Well, I’m sure Charlie had nothing on you, sexy,” I say. “Though I confess I’m glad Bailey Anne doesn’t like you in that way. I’d like to be her friend. She’s cool.”

“I bet she’d like that too,” he says.

But there’s a strained quality in his voice that makes me ask, “Are you sure? You sound funny. Don’t you think we’d get along?”

He shakes his head slightly. “No, I do. I was just thinking about Sydney and the baby. Her boyfriend’s older, right?”

I nod. “Yeah. She actually briefly dated his son before they got together. It was major drama at the time, but they all worked through it.”

“She isn’t worried about starting a family with someone so much older?” Anthony asks. “Worried that he might not be around for the long haul? I mean, I’d love to have a family, but I’ve kind of come to terms with the fact that it doesn’t seem to be in the cards for me. What about you? Do you want kids someday?”

I cock my head, emotion swelling in my chest as I realize where he’s going with this. “Yes, I would. And I wouldn’t hesitate to try for a family with a slightly older man. Especially if he was a kind, generous person who went out of his way to help teens in trouble, put family first, and loved coming inside me as much as a certain person I know loves coming inside me.”

“Yeah?” he asks, clearly touched. And amused. He’s smiling so hard our teeth bump together as he kisses me. “Speaking of coming inside you,” he mumbles, as he rolls

on top of me. “I really do love it.”

As we make love again, slow and sweet, I’m suddenly awash in the certainty that everything is going to work out better than I could have dreamed.

And that the man I love is going to be there every step of the way, helping me dream even bigger.

epilogue

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:59 am

Anthony

The late afternoon sun slants through the chapel's stained-glass windows, painting my graduating students in jewel tones as they file past Columbia's president to receive their diplomas. The historic auditorium smells of wood polish and tradition, filled with the rustle of robes and muffled excitement.

Five months ago, I wasn't sure if teaching was the right next step. I thought it might end up being a temporary thing, a way to fill the time while I reflected on where I want to go from here in my life and career.

Now, watching my brilliant students launching into the world, better prepared for everything they'll encounter in the financial sector because of the work I put in, I can't imagine doing anything else.

I love my new job almost as much as I love my new life.

And it's all because of one person...

As if sensing my thoughts have turned to her, Maya squeezes my hand from her seat beside me in the front row. She insisted on coming, even though she's had one hell of a week with the crew. The conversion of the lobby into studio apartments hit another snag when the custom windows she ordered arrived in the wrong size and the plumbers put the toilet in the kitchen in unit two, pushing her timeline back another three weeks. But she rallied by shifting her attention to other projects and got the all-clear on the new electrical several months ahead of schedule.

That's just Maya—nothing keeps her down for long. She already has a waiting list of potential tenants for the studios, mostly young professionals drawn to her vision of affordable micro-living spaces with built-in storage solutions and Murphy beds. The existing tenants love her, too—she's raised the rent less than any landlord on the block, while improving their quality of life and the safety of the building as a whole, just as she promised.

She keeps her promises. It's one of the many things I love about her, this woman who hooked me hard at first sight and has spent every day since proving she's the best thing that ever happened to me in a hundred ways—big and small.

“No sex eyes in front of the students,” she mutters out of the side of her mouth, making me grin before forcing my attention back to the stage.

“Can't help it,” I mutter back. “You're a snack in that sundress, woman.”

She squeezes my hand again with a happy smile, sending a wave of gratitude rushing through me. It's so easy with her. So easy to make her happy, so easy to feel at home and at peace while still wanting to ravage my girl every chance I get.

Especially this afternoon...

She looks stunning in a pale blue-and-white striped sundress that matches the spring sky outside, her hair swept up in an updo that shows off her elegant neck. Paired with the sapphire tennis bracelet I got her as a twenty-fifth birthday present, she looks effortlessly classy, like she belongs in this prestigious hall or anywhere else in the city she wants to be.

I know her friends were surprised by how quickly their “shy little Maya” assimilated to city life, but I wasn't. Maya can hang back in unfamiliar situations, until she feels comfortable, but at her core, she's a lion. She's brave and bold and always ready for a

challenge.

And I really hope she's up for the next challenge I'd like to throw her way...

With my free hand, I touch the ring in my suit vest pocket, assuring myself the vintage diamond is still where I put it this morning. It probably would have been safer in its box, but on this unseasonably hot May afternoon it's too warm for a jacket, and none of my other pockets were large enough to hide the box without making a noticeable lump.

And I want this to be a surprise. I booked a table at the cat café where we first went with Pudge in December, and the pet sitter is transporting Pudge up there an hour before we arrive, so he can get ready to play his part. As soon as we reach the café, I'm going to pass the ring to Penny, our favorite waiter, who will place it in a locket around Pudge's neck.

I think Maya will be happy that I included our fur baby in the big moment. Pudge is part of our family, after all...a family I hope will grow even bigger in the coming years.

Maya says she wants at least two children, and I can't wait to give them to her. The thought of fucking my baby into this beautiful woman is unspeakably hot. And something I shouldn't think about until we're alone, if I don't want to embarrass myself in front of the entire graduating class.

After the ceremony, we linger in the courtyard as the graduates take photos with their families. I shake hands and congratulate my students and their proud parents, wishing them the best for the future, until most of the crowd has filed out for pictures in front of the trees.

The cherry trees are in full bloom on the quad, their petals drifting on the breeze like

snow as Maya and I head toward the parking garage.

“Oh no,” Maya says, stopping dead beside me on the paved path. “I think I left my purse in your office. Do we have time to run grab it before our reservation?”

“Absolutely,” I say, checking my watch. “We’re not due at Bernard’s until six.”

We’re not going to Bernard’s, but I don’t want Maya to know that until we arrive at the café, and we still have plenty of time. I wasn’t certain how long the socializing would take, so I made sure to give us a sizeable time cushion between the end of the ceremony and our dinner.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me,” she says, as we head down the path in the opposite direction. “I’ve been forgetting everything lately.”

“You have a lot on your plate,” I say. “Like I’ve said a hundred times, I think you should hire an assistant.”

“But if I hire an assistant, I won’t be able to keep making loan payments every two weeks,” she says as we pass through the arched doorway into the mathematics building. Inside, the halls are quiet now that the semester is over, and our shoes echo on the marble floors as we start up the steps. “And I’m proud of those payments, even if they are still small. For now.”

“I’m proud of you, too, but your quality of life is my primary concern. And if your quality of life would be improved by bringing on someone to help manage all the moving pieces...”

She hums beneath her breath, trailing her fingers along the oak paneling as we reach the door to my small office on the second floor. “Maybe. But right now, I have another concern.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:59 am

“What’s that?” I ask, unlocking the door and holding it open for her.

“Well,” she says, caressing the lapel of my vest as she pauses in front of me. “I’m not sure how to tell you this, Professor Pissarro, but I’m really struggling in your class.” She looks up, blinking wide, innocent eyes.

And just like that, I’m hard.

Because I know my girl...

I know she has a professor fantasy she’s been wanting to live out, and I know we’re not here because she “forgot” her purse.

“Is that right?” I ask, playing along. “Well, come in, Ms. Swallows. And we’ll see what I can do to help.”

“Thank you, Professor,” she says, swaying into the room in front of me, her hips pure temptation beneath her dress. “I really appreciate that.”

“So, where are you struggling the most?” I ask, closing—and locking—the door behind me.

She turns back to me, perching on the edge of my desk. “Oh, all of it, but especially the complex equations. They’re so long and hard...” Her fingers play at the top of her dress, making my mouth go dry as she slips one button through its hole and then another. “Just long, hard equations that keep me up all night wondering if I’m ever going to make it as a financial professional...”

I arch a brow, torn between laughter and a groan of desire. She's ridiculous and playful and sexy and perfect and I love her more every day.

"Perhaps you need some extra tutoring," I say, stalking toward her.

"I think so." She bites her full bottom lip, making me ache to do the same. "You're just such a demanding teacher."

"I don't think it's demanding to expect a student to turn their final paper in on time, Ms. Swallows," I say, drinking in the sight of her as she slides fully onto the desk, her skirt riding up her thighs.

"I'm sorry I was late, Professor," she says, spreading her legs, making my heart skip a beat as the damp crotch of her pink panties come into view. "But isn't there something I can do to make it up to you?" She teases idle fingers up her thigh, and it's all I can do not to fall to my knees, jerk her panties to one side, and fuck her with my mouth right then and there.

But we haven't played the game to its conclusion just yet...

"Are you trying to negotiate your grade?" I ask in a hard tone, loving the way she shivers in response.

"I don't know." She rolls her shoulders, causing her unbuttoned dress to gape wider in the front, revealing the tops of her breasts and a matching pink bra. "Is it working?"

Her words hang in the air, thick and electric, and I swear I can feel them settle over my skin. The sight of her perched on my desk, flushed and teasing, is easily the hottest thing I've seen since the last time she decided to ambush me in the library at our place, determined to act out a very naughty version of Beauty and the Beast.

Fuck, she's the best...

The very, very best, and I mean to show her just how much I appreciate her playful side.

I lean forward, bracing my hands on either side of her thighs, caging her in but not quite touching. "Ms. Swallows," I say, my voice low and rough, "attempting to seduce your professor into changing your grade is a serious offense. It could lead to consequences."

Her breath comes faster as her nipples tighten against the silk of her bra, making me even harder. "What kind of consequences, Professor?" she asks, her voice a mix of mock innocence and breathy anticipation.

I let my gaze trail slowly, deliberately down her body. Her dress is barely clinging to her shoulders now, the fabric slipping lower with each subtle movement she makes. "The kind I'm not sure you're ready for," I murmur. "You have no idea how I like it, Ms. Swallows. I could have deviant proclivities."

Her lips part, hunger filling her gaze as she whispers, "And what if I'm not afraid, Mr. Pissarro? What if I want to be deviant with you?"

"Then you should pull your skirt up and show me your panties," I command.

Her breath quickens again as she slides her hands higher, jerking her skirt up to her hips and slowly spreading her legs. Her panties are even more soaked than they were a few moments before, the damp fabric clinging to her sex in a way that nearly destroys the last of my control.

I circle her wrist with my fingers, guiding her hand to her own body, pressing her palm between her thighs. "Touch yourself, Ms. Swallows. Show me how you'd get

yourself off if your professor wasn't watching."

She gasps, her eyes widening, but she doesn't pull away. Instead, she obeys her deviant professor, rubbing herself through the fabric until her lashes flutter and she's making soft, eager sounds that have my cock testing the integrity of my zipper.

"Look at you," I rumble, slowly working open my belt as I watch her play with herself. "You're a good girl, Ms. Swallows."

"I want to be good for you, Professor, I really do, but I..." She whimpers, her hips shifting restlessly against her own hand. "But I want you so much. I want you inside me, not my fingers. Please?" She pulls her panties to one side, baring herself to me completely.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:59 am

A second later, my lips are crashing into hers as I jerk her panties down to just above her knees. I drag a finger through her slick heat, teasing her entrance before circling her clit. She moans, her head falling back as she clutches the edge of the desk for support.

“Why are you so wet, Ms. Swallows?” I ask, my voice tight with control. “Are you like this with the boys in your class, or is this just for me?”

“Just for you, Professor,” she gasps, her thighs trembling as I rub slow, deliberate circles over her sensitive skin. “Just for you.”

“This drenched little pussy is practically begging to be fucked,” I murmur into her ear. “Is that what you want, Ms. Swallows? To be fucked on your professor’s desk?”

“Yes,” she breathes, her voice breaking on the word.

“Say it. Tell me how much you want to be fucked.”

“Please, Professor,” she whispers, her hips bucking against my hand. “Please fuck me.”

“Good girl.” I step back, my fingers leaving her just long enough to shove my pants and boxers down. Her eyes go wide as she watches me stroke myself, the tip of my cock glistening with need. “Off the desk and turn around,” I order, my breath coming faster now, too.

She hesitates for only a moment before sliding off the desk and turning to bend over

it, her hands braced against the wood. Her skirt is bunched around her waist, her panties still pushed to the side, and the sight of her like this—bare and ready for me—makes me curse under my breath.

I grip her around the waist, loving the way she moans as my cock brushes against her slickness. I reach down, positioning myself, teasing her with just the tip as I ask, “Is this what you were imagining when you decided to seduce your professor?”

She moans and squirms in response, pressing back against me, trying to force me deeper, but I grip her tight, holding her in place.

“Tell me, Ms. Swallows,” I say, my voice low and steady. “Are you a dirty little girl who needs to be fucked hard?”

“Yes,” she cries out, her voice thick with desperation. “Please!”

Heart hammering in my chest as I fight to go slow, to draw this out for both of us, I push into her swollen folds, savoring the way her body stretches to accommodate me. She moans and her pussy gushes fresh heat over my bare cock, snapping my control like a thread.

She cries out, her hands clawing at the desk as I fill her in one swift, savage thrust.

“Good girl, so fucking good,” I groan, gripping her hips as I take her with a wild abandon, setting a punishing rhythm that has her crying out with each thrust.

Her back arches, her body meeting mine with every stroke, and the sounds she makes—raw, desperate, shameless—drive me wild.

“But I’m not using protection and I don’t pull out,” I pant, leaning over her, my chest pressed to her back. “I hope you’re ready for me to come inside you, Ms. Swallows,

to fill this wet little pussy.”

She whimpers with desire, her head falling forward as I drive deeper, hitting a spot that makes her legs tremble. “Oh God, Anthony. Anthony!”

I reach around, finding her clit, rubbing tight, frantic circles as I thrust into her, so close to the edge I’m nearly blind with it. But I force myself to wait until she shatters with a scream, her body clenching around me, before I let go.

I come with a roar, my release crashing through me in waves of bliss as I empty my balls in thick, hot streams deep inside her.

And for a moment, the world stops, and it’s just the two of us, tangled together, sweaty and sticky and smelling of sex in my tiny office.

When I finally pull out, reaching for tissues on the far side of the desk, she turns to face me, her cheeks flushed and her lips swollen.

There’s a gleam of wicked exhilaration in her eyes, and I can’t help but laugh as I reach for her, pulling her into a kiss that’s as soft and sweet as our role-playing was dirty.

“That was so fun,” she whispers as I wipe come from her thighs and clean up my cock before tucking myself back into my pants.

“So fun,” I agree, tossing the tissues in the trash can nearby. “You’re an excellent student.”

“And you’re a very bad teacher,” she replies, her voice full of warmth as she grins up at me. “Next time would you spank me a little? For being such a shameless hussy who’s trying to seduce her professor? I think I’d like it.”

I laugh again and kiss her forehead. “I think that could be arranged.”

She exhales a happy sigh. “You’re good to me. And I love you. And now I’m hungry.”

“Then, we’ll need to feed you,” I say, the moment so perfect and my girl so beautiful, I can’t make myself wait or stick to the plan. “But first I have a question for you.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:59 am

She blinks at my shift in tone. “Everything okay?”

“More than okay,” I say, reaching for the ring that’s been burning a hole in my pocket all day. “I had an elaborate plan for dinner—champagne with our bagels at the cat café, Pudge bringing this over in a locket...but this feels right. And I don’t want to wait anymore.” I open my palm, revealing the vintage engagement ring I bought at Sotheby’s last week, an Art Nouveau masterpiece as elegant and timeless as she is.

Her hands fly to cover her mouth, her eyes wide as I sink down on one knee in front of the desk. “Maya Swallows, you are the best person I’ve ever met. Every day with you is my new favorite day. I love your good heart and your enthusiasm and your drive. I love your passion and your silliness and your sweetness. But most of all, I love the way you love me.” Her eyes begin to shine, making my throat go tight and my next words emerge rougher than the ones that came before. “You’ve made my life so much brighter than it’s ever been. And all I want for the rest of that life is to share it with you, hopefully making you as happy as you make me.”

Swiping tears from her cheeks, she nods. “Yes,” she says, a smile brighter than any diamond stretching across her face. “Yes. You’re all I want, Anthony Pissarro. Just you and me and as many days together as we can beg, borrow, and steal.”

I slip the ring on her finger with shaking hands before pulling her in for a hug so tight her feet come off the floor. “Love you, baby,” I whisper into her hair.

“Love you, too, baby,” she says, the sweetness in the words making my chest tight with gratitude. When she pulls back, I soak in the smile on her face, wanting to memorize every second of this. Of her. “I can’t believe you had this in your pocket

the entire time you were banging your naughty student,” she laughs, holding up her hand to study the ring. “Wow, this is pretty. I love it so much, Anthony. Really. It’s beautiful.” She looks up at me again, her eyes shining. “And it means I’m going to be yours.”

“I’m already yours,” I reply, drawing her against me as she moves back into my arms, cradling her close.

Later, at the restaurant, we’ll celebrate with Pudge and the staff at the cat café. We’ll call our families and friends, share the news on Maya’s social media, and do all the things people do when they’ve decided to roll the dice on forever.

But right now, holding her close in the fading light of my office, surrounded by books and lesson plans and all the dreams we’re making a reality together, I’m so glad it’s just the two of us.

Just me and my girl.

epilogue 2

Elaina Murphy

A woman discovering that being left

behind sucks as much as she expected it would

It’s a gorgeous day.

Just completely fucking gorgeous...

And I’m miserable.

Completely fucking miserable...

It's the sun's fault.

Damned sun...

There it is, hovering above the horizon like a huge orange asshole, bathing the ocean in a haze of pink and gold that I know would have made my mother cry. She loved beach weddings. She would have loved this one, even if Sydney is visibly pregnant.

Mom preferred people do things in order—dating, marriage, then babies—but she loved Syd. She would have been so happy to see her saying “I do” to the man of her dreams and Gideon watching her walk down the aisle like she's the best thing that ever happened to him.

Hell, the best thing that ever happened to the world.

He's so in love with her, it's ridiculous.

And beautiful.

And gross.

Love is gross. I hate it. I don't ever want to be in love again. I'm glad that I haven't been on a date since I buried Mom four months ago, let alone found anyone to shack up with in my apartment above the cat café. The cats are all I need. Just cats and new scone recipes and a steady stream of nights alone watching reality television, interspersed with the occasional Zoom book club meeting.

Now that all my girlfriends have moved to New York to be with their sexy boyfriends and husbands, we can't do book club in person at the café anymore. But that's fine.

Who needs hugs or shared food or laughter that isn't filtered through a screen?

Not me.

This is fine.

Better than fine.

A twisted part of me is even glad that Mom's gone, and I don't have weekly dinners at her place on my schedule anymore. I miss her so much but seeing her in pain all the time at the end was killing me. She'd always been so strong, so independent, raising me alone while running her own dry-cleaning business and volunteering at the church every time they opened the doors. Barbara Ellen Murphy was a powerhouse, then she was a desperately sick woman who hated not being able to get out of bed, and now...she's gone.

I bite the inside of my cheek as I pop the top on my second beer and try to talk myself into joining the dancing. It doesn't matter that I'll be the only one dancing alone. Dancing is still fun.

Right?

"Fuck if I know," I mutter, blaming the aforementioned piece-of-shit sun for the tears that sting into my eyes as I take a pull on my IPA.

"El?" Maya's voice pulls me from my thoughts. "You okay?"

I glance over to find my bestie reaching for a lemonade from the ice bucket full of drinks on the refreshment table, and I force a smile. I will not ruin this day for anyone else. I will continue to hide my despair until they're all gone and I'm alone in my apartment, where I can have a good cry.

Or a primal scream. Or whatever feels most fitting after a day pretending that I'm fine

with being the one happily-ever-after forgot.

“Yeah, just zoning out a little. It’s been a long day,” I say, my fake smile stretching wider as Anthony appears behind Maya, touching a gentle hand to her hip as he reaches past her to claim a beer.

She glances at him over her shoulder, just for a second, but that’s all it takes for them to exchange one of their deeply-in-love smiles. They are also grossly in love and so sweet and good to each other it’s honestly a little nauseating. They only got engaged a couple of months ago, but they have the energy of people who have been devoted for ages.

They were just...meant to be, and I’m happy for Maya, I really am.

But I’m also lonely. And sad.

And a little jealous, a shameful feeling I do my best to push aside as Maya says, “It has been a long day. But the ceremony was perfect. You did such a beautiful job. You make public speaking look so easy.”

My smile softens, starting to feel a little more natural on my face. “It’s not public speaking if everyone in the audience is a friend.”

“Oh, yes, it is,” she insists. “If you ask me, that’s even worse. I’d be way more worried about making a mistake in front of friends than strangers. Strangers you never have to see again.”

I cock my head to one side. “Yeah, I guess. I never thought of it that way.”

“But if you had made a mistake, it would have been fine,” Maya hurries to add. “I mean, if it had been my ceremony, I wouldn’t have cared. Right, Anthony? We

wouldn't have cared. I mean, on such a happy day, what's a little mistake?" She glances back at him again, asking in a softer voice, "I'm doing a great job of convincing her to marry us on Tuesday, aren't I?"

Anthony exhales a soft laugh as my eyes go wide. "Fabulous job. Keeping it very low stress."

"Tuesday?" I ask, blinking as I glance between them. "Why the rush? You guys just got engaged. And I thought you were thinking about a winter wedding at that lodge in upstate New York?"

"Well, yes, we were but..." The smile that stretches across Maya's face could light up the darkening beach. "But I'd rather get married before I start to show, and I'm sure my parents would prefer that too, so..."

"Oh my God!" I blurt out as the meaning of her words hits home. "You're pregnant? Oh my God, congratulations!" I pull her in for a tight hug, her laughter stirring the hair already falling out of my updo.

"Thanks," she says, laughing as we part. "We're only two months along, but I swear I've already gained ten pounds. If we don't do it soon, I won't be able to fit into the dress I bought last week."

"And most of the people we would want at the wedding are already here through Wednesday," Anthony adds. "And my family is going to fly up on Sunday so..."

"So, we'd be honored if you'd officiate," Maya says, capturing my hands and giving them a squeeze. "We've shared so much in our lives so far. It would be so special to share this, too."

"Of course," I say, my heart swelling with love and breaking into tiny pieces, all at

the same time. I tighten my grip on her fingers. “Of course, honey. It would be an honor. We can talk tomorrow about what you’d like for the ceremony, and I’ll start working on it right away.” I motion to the chairs and refreshment tables and other wedding accoutrement. “And we already have everything you need for a ceremony on the beach, so...”

“I know! It will be perfect.” She leans in to hug me again, gushing, “Oh, thank you, Elaina. Thank you.”

I close my eyes, a wave of bittersweet emotion tightening my chest. “My pleasure, love. Anything for my Maya Moo.”

Only she isn’t mine anymore. I know we’ll always be close, but as I wander away down the beach half an hour later, after forcing myself to hit the dance floor with all the lovebirds, I’m plagued by the certainty that none of my friends will ever be mine the way they once were. Their husbands come first for them now, before their friends. And soon, Sydney and Maya will be starting their families.

I love babies—my own biological clock has been ticking like a time bomb for the past year and a half—but I know they leave very little time for anything else. I’m guessing soon even Zoom book club will be a thing of the past.

Everything is changing so fast.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:59 am

Everything except my life, which seems to be stuck in a holding pattern, no matter how hard I try to move forward.

I've considered selling the café and moving closer to my friends—with Mom gone there's not much left for me here—but I could never afford to live in New York. I've run a successful business for years and am one hell of a baker, but bakers don't get paid a living wage in the city, and I couldn't afford to start a new business down there.

And without a college degree or other marketable skills, I'd likely be living close to the poverty line for the rest of my life. That's the last thing Mom wanted for me, the last thing I want for myself. In Sea Breeze, I earn a comfortable living and have even been able to put money away for retirement someday.

A retirement I will likely spend alone, unless one of the girls loses their husband and decides to come back to Maine to be old ladies together, but I don't want that for them. Besides, forty or fifty years from now, they'll probably have children and grandchildren who need them more than their old friend, Elaina.

Hell, we might have even lost touch completely by then.

The thought makes tears sting into my eyes. The darkening beach ahead is still swimming as I approach a bonfire at the edge of the sand, not far from the dock where Weaver and Sully stay on his yacht when they're in town.

And there, perched on a fancy beach chair in a summer sweater and linen pants, looking like something from an Eddie Bauer catalogue, sits Hunter Mendelssohn.

Hunter Mendelssohn, Anthony and Weaver's friend, private equity billionaire, and all-around asshole.

Hunter Mendelssohn, who did wicked things to me for three days straight, practically moving into my apartment above the café—the better to be inside me every second he wasn't closing deals and dismantling illegal fishing monopolies—only to leave without so much as a “see you later.”

And now, here he is, smug as you please, sipping a beer as he watches me approach like he's been expecting me to wander up to his bonfire.

“Elaina,” he says, his voice as deep and delicious as I remember. “Good to see you. How have you been?”

“Fuck yourself in the face with a hot poker,” I say pleasantly, the first genuine laugh of the day bursting from my chest at his startled expression. “Oh, come on. You didn't think I'd be glad to see you, did you? You're a shit, Hunter. A complete shit. What kind of grown man leaves without saying goodbye?”

“I didn't realize you cared about things like that,” he says, already recovered from his brief moment of surprise. Now, he's back in bored billionaire mode again, looking utterly relaxed as he sits back in his chair, his bare feet stretched out into the sand. “If I remember correctly, you said you were looking for a good time, not a long time.”

“Bullshit,” I say. “You weren't raised by wolves. You knew better than to slink out the backdoor while I was busy with the Sunday rush.”

“I had a plane to catch, and you'd warned me not to show my face downstairs.” His lips curve in a patronizing smile. “If I remember correctly, you were concerned the young men in town might see you with me and get the wrong idea.”

I bristle. “It’s a small town. People talk, and I didn’t want to have to answer a bunch of questions about a guy who was leaving in a few days. And still, you could have left a note. That wouldn’t have required you showing your face anywhere.” I shrug and take another pull on my beer. “But whatever. Who cares? It was a moment. It’s over. Just stay out of my way, and I’ll stay out of yours.”

He inclines his head. “Okay.”

I narrow my gaze, studying him in the glow of the fire. “Why are you in Sea Breeze, anyway? I thought your business here was over.”

“I came to see you, actually,” he says, chuckling at the no-doubt stunned expression on my face.

Pulling myself together, I prop a hand on my hip and intensify my glare. “You’re kidding.”

“No, I’m not.” He stands with one smooth movement that reminds me how well he uses that athlete’s body of his. Hunter may spend his days dominating the finance world, but he clearly puts in time at the gym. At forty-two, he’s in better shape than most men my age and knows exactly what to do with that big, hard body of his.

Don’t think about his body. Or how hard it is. Or how hard you want him to fuck you against the wall in your apartment.

Lifting my chin and praying my willpower holds as he ambles closer, until the soap and citrus smell of him teases at my nose, reminding me of how good my sheets smelled after he ravaged me in them, I say, “Seriously. What are you doing here?”

“That night we grilled shrimp in your apartment,” he says, now looming over me, forcing me to tilt my head back to maintain eye contact with his much-taller self. “Do

you remember what we talked about?”

I frown as scenes of that night flit through my head. “We talked about a lot of things. And we had a lot of wine.”

“And two desserts,” he says, moving closer still, until his body heat warms my skin and my traitorous nipples tighten beneath the bodice of my bridesmaid’s dress.

But it’s getting cold on the beach as the sun finishes setting. That’s the only reason I’m having this reaction. It has nothing to do with the man looking at me like he’s imagining what I looked like wearing nothing but a smile as I rode him in a chair by my kitchen table.

We’d been so hot for each other after the second dessert, we couldn’t even make it to the bed...

“And before you took the espresso mousse from the refrigerator,” he continues, “you told me how much you wanted children. How you were dying to have a baby, actually, but hadn’t found the right situation yet.”

I frown harder. “Okay. And?”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:59 am

“What if I could provide you with the right situation?” he says, making my brows shoot up my forehead.

“What?” I say with a sharp huff of laughter. “What does that even mean?”

“My mother is dying,” he says, sending a flash of pain through my chest. “It’s cancer. Inoperable. She doesn’t have much time.”

“I...” I swallow. “I’m sorry. My mom died a few months ago. Also cancer. It fucking sucks.”

“It does,” he agrees. “So does feeling helpless to comfort the only person who really matters to you in the world. There is literally nothing I or my money or my influence can do for her. There’s only one way I might be able to ease her passing.” He pauses, his already penetrating gaze boring into mine before he adds, “All she’s ever wanted is to see me settled down and starting a family.”

My breath catches and my heart beats faster. But surely, he doesn’t mean what I think he means. “And what does that have to do with me?”

“You want a baby,” he says. “I need a fiancée, preferably one who’s pregnant with my child, ensuring my mother dies believing I’ll have the family she’s always wanted for me and someone who adores me by my side once she’s gone.”

I shake my head, my stomach churning. “That’s twisted, Hunter. She wouldn’t want you to lie to her.”

“Not if she knew I was lying,” he says. “But she won’t. You’re good with people. Charming. Likeable. I firmly believe you’re capable of convincing her we’re in love and eagerly anticipating the birth of our first child. And, if you succeed in that, once she’s gone, I’ll make sure you and the baby never want for anything.”

I blink faster. This still sounds crazy, but a part of me is also...intrigued. “What do you mean by that?”

“I mean ten thousand a month in child support until the child turns eighteen and all other expenses paid.”

I’m grateful I don’t have beer in my mouth because I’m sure I’d be spitting it out. “Ten thousand?”

“Fine, fifteen,” he says, clearly mistaking the shock in my tone. “And I’ll pay off the loan on your building. But that’s all I’m willing to offer.”

I laugh. “You’re crazy.”

“It’s a generous offer.”

“Still crazy,” I say, even as my wheels turn faster. “And what if I would rather move to New York? To be closer to friends?”

He frowns, but after a beat says, “I can get you a place in the city, but not on the Upper West Side. We’ll have to find you a place in Lower Manhattan. Or, better yet, Brooklyn. Once my mother’s gone, I don’t want to see you or the child. A clean break will be best.”

My eyes widen and pain locks around my ribs again, but after rolling his words over in my head for a beat, I realize it’s a good thing he wouldn’t want to be in the picture. After all, I don’t have feelings for Hunter or respect Hunter or want a man like him in

my life for the long haul. I turned out just fine without ever knowing my father. I'm sure I can provide the same kind of loving single-parent home my mom gave to me.

Knowing our connection has an expiration date—and that I'll be able to raise my baby in peace, close to the friends I love, in a place I could never afford to live without a financial boon of some kind—could actually be...pretty amazing.

A dream come true.

Maybe even the miracle I didn't see coming my way fifteen minutes ago.

It's still crazy and risky and possibly something I'll come to regret if something goes awry, but I'm not stupid. If we decide to go through with this, I'll get all his promises in writing before I take a single step toward the OB-GYN to get rid of my IUD.

"We'd need a contract," I finally say, fighting to keep the excitement from showing on my face when he says, "I've already had one drawn up. It's at my rental. If you like, we can go take a look at it now." He glances over my shoulder. "Assuming you're done at the wedding. I was planning to come by your place in the morning to speak to you about the proposal. I didn't expect you'd be available tonight. Weaver told me your friend was getting married."

"She was. She is. Married, that is," I say. "And she won't mind if I leave the reception a little early. I'll text her on the way to your place. I think it's better I see the contract now, before I have a chance to sleep on this and talk myself out of making a deal with the devil."

"I'm not the devil," he murmurs, his hand settling on my hip, setting my skin on fire. "If I remember correctly, you enjoyed the time we spent together. Very much."

"And I'll enjoy saying goodbye to you forever even more," I say with a smile.

It's true...sort of. But I'd be lying if I said I wasn't looking forward to baby-making with Hunter. The thought of him inside me with nothing between us makes me wet and my nipples are still scandalously hard.

The man knows exactly what to do with his body and with mine.

He's so good, in fact, that I won't mind if it takes a few months for us to get pregnant. I haven't had a reliable lay in my life for way too long. And as much as I loathe Hunter's smug personality, his skill at delivering earth-shattering orgasms will allow me to overlook that...for a time.

"You will say goodbye this time, right?" I add, as his hand slips down to cup my ass, drawing me against where he's already hard, proving I'm not the only one vulnerable to the chemistry between us.

"I will," he says, his voice husky. "And I'll mean it. For keeps."

"Good," I say.

It is good. It's great.

And pretty soon, I could have everything I want, every dream for my life falling into place, save one...and who needs a husband anyway? As long as I have my girls and my freedom and a precious little one of my very own, I can't imagine wanting for anything else.

Right?