



Royal Baby Maker

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Description: The day I met Bishop Callehurst he was standing half-naked in the massive kitchen of his over the top Hollywood mansion, drinking a glass of water and letting it drip all over his impossibly solid body. I didn't know he was royalty. I was too distracted by his hungry stare... and how he kept smirking every time he stole a peek down my shirt. Turns out this prince needs a baby, and fast.

He swears it's about keeping access to his money. Love or romance? They don't factor in. But if that's true, why doesn't he pick one of the hundreds of gorgeous women his mom parades in front of him to be his baby-mamma? Why me? I'm not special—I can barely walk his two Pomeranians without falling over. His royal sexiness has plans for me. Dirty, wild plans that can only happen between the sheets. There's a million reasons not to go along with what he wants, but with him kissing my thighs and holding me close... I've forgotten all of them.

Note: This is an extended release of the Dog Walker & the Prince (a limited time novella that was included in the Royally Mine Anthology) It includes an extra special epilogue!

Total Pages (Source): 33

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:19 am

- Chapter One -

Nellie

For the sixth time I checked the directions my roommate had sent me. The address on my phone definitely matched the one in front of me. And that was what concerned me the most.

I'd lived in Los Angeles for several years, and even so, standing in front of a mansion up in the Hollywood Hills would never be something I'd take lightly. This house was big enough to be a castle! They probably hired it out for film studios to use!

Seriously, Gigi? I thought, eyeballing my phone again. I know I need the cash, but I thought I'd be walking dogs for some busy house mom. Not... not whatever THIS is! Inhaling until my lungs ached, I squared off with the tall steps that led up to the open gates.

I could do this.

I mean... I had to do this.

Carefully I climbed the stairs. I was a little tired from walking up the sloping street, so by the time I reached the front door of the mansion, I was breathing quicker. Jeez, I'm out of shape. I could thank my ex for that. He'd made it way too easy to stay inside all the time, eating terrible takeout because he could never bother to help me cook.

That was the past, and my future was going to be good, and bright, and everything that my cheating ex wasn't. One more deep breath, then I knocked on the huge door. There was no answer—through the glass, I spotted movement. “Hello?” I called, tapping. “I'm here about the dog walker job?”

Something scrabbled at the inside of the door. When I bent closer, my shoe crunched on a piece of paper I'd first missed. I lifted the pink sticky note into the air—it must have fallen off the door. It read: Deliveries come inside.

Hm. I wasn't a delivery, but...Gigi would tell me to take initiative! My roommate had way less shame than me. She was born without the part of her brain that warned This is a bad idea.

When I opened the door, two orange puffballs slammed into me. I hurriedly closed the door so they wouldn't get outside. “Hey there,” I said, grinning.

The Pomeranians yipped while bouncing at my heels. They were pretty identical, but one had a tail that pointed up higher than the other. Petting their heads, I scanned the wide room with wonder. A curling white staircase reached upwards on my right, large couches in red and gold were placed strategically around the room.

Off to one side there was a hallway—down it I could hear water running. Giving the dogs another quick pat, I rose and dusted myself off. “Anyone home?” I called, walking carefully into the gigantic kitchen. One of the Pomeranians circled my legs, slowing me down and distracting me with its adorable energy. “Ah!” I laughed. “You're way too cute!”

“Thanks,” a very rich, VERY male voice said. “That's kind of you.”

Freezing in place, I lifted my eyes. The room was all marble—entirely luxurious—but that wasn't where my focus went. Right in front of me was my

speaker.

And he was half naked.

The guy was leaning on the side of the gigantic kitchen island. In one hand he held a glass of water, freshly poured—the condensation dripping off the sides and down onto his chiseled, tattoo-covered torso.

His thick hair had a wind-blown, slightly shiny look, as if he'd been sweating. I noted his running shoes, his grey and black shorts, then the FitBit on his wrist. Definitely a jogger.

He set the glass on the counter and the noise made me jump. “You know,” he said, ruffling his hair. “You should be careful breaking into people's homes. Though, I've never met a burglar as attractive and polite as you.”

My brain fizzled; I stepped closer, laughing nervously. Hot guys don't flirt with me. I didn't know how to handle his charming grin. “I'm here for the dog walker job. My name's Nellie.”

I'd extended my hand to him like we were business partners. He stared at it, then me. That long pause made me feel tiny as a snail. Just as I started to withdraw, he circled the counter, grabbing my palm and squeezing it tight. “Bishop Callehurst.”

“Nice to meet you,” I said.

He squinted at me, clearly waiting for something. His eyes were a soft gray—like smoke on the horizon. “I didn't know my mother had gone and hired someone to walk Jaws and Cujo.”

Jaws and Cujo? I peeked down at the Pomeranians where they were stretched out on

the tile. Did he pick their names? I had a thing for classic horror movies.

Bishop cleared his throat, looking pointedly at my hand where it was still clasped on his. Could I be anymore awkward? Blushing, I tried to pull it away, but he held on before releasing me. His chuckle rolled through me like a wave made from honey. “Thought you were stuck for a second there.”

It wouldn't be so bad to be stuck inside a big, testosterone filled sandwich like Bishop. I saw it in my mind's eye—his arms circling me, his breath warm as he rumbled against my spine. Focus! I reprimanded myself. I was here for a job, not to flirt with Mister Sexy No Shirt.

“Is your mom around?” I asked, flexing my fingers by my side and trying to forget how firm his hand had been.

“She'll be here soon.” Leaning forward, he brought his face close to mine. “Are you really a dog walker?”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:19 am

I dug my heels in so I wouldn't back up. "What kind of a question is that?"

"A pretty straight forward one."

His teeth were glinting in the sunlight that streamed through the huge windows beside us. I bet he thinks he's incredibly charming. And okay, he sort of is. But I was done with "charming" men in my life. "I'm not a dog walker until I get hired as one. You're really sure your mom is coming? Maybe I should go look for her."

"Trust me," he said, and it came out clipped—the first hint of him being anything less than flirty. Bishop grabbed the edge of the counter. He squeezed it like he wanted to snap it in two, his voice low and tired. "She's not the sort to wander far from me."

"Alright. Sounds like all I need to do is stay near you." Bishop's smile soaked up all the wickedness in the world. He swayed forward, smooth as the way a fishing line would whip through the air. His hook landed in me. "Hold up," I said, sliding my heel backwards. "What are you doing?"

"Getting closer to you." The knob on his throat flexed. "That's what you wanted, right?"

"No—I mean, I wanted..." Fuck. It was way too warm—I was way too warm. Bishop was all encompassing, his shoulders so broad they blocked the sunlight, and his lips looked soft. Would they be sweet or cruel?

If I kissed him, I'd know the answer.

Get a grip! My brain came to life, warning me that I was about to make a mistake I could never take back. My foot had bumped something furry. One of the dogs yipped, a noise high and sharp. A noise that cut my heart in two.

In a whirl of motion I spun around, crouching to check on the Pomeranian. “I’m so sorry!” I gasped, cupping its cheek while it licked my palm. “Did I hurt you?”

The dog danced in place, unharmed. I breathed out a great gasp of relief.

Bishop was staring down at me. All of his sexual energy had vanished, but in its place was a quiet curiosity that burned in his gray eyes. “You were really worried about him, huh?”

“Of course I was.” Giving the dog a quick hug, I let him down to prance with his friend. “The poor guy could have been injured. I should have paid more attention.”

“That’s Jaws,” he said. “You can tell him from Cujo by the way his tail is pointed up higher—like a fin.”

I crouched there, petting the dogs with a smile that was starting to hurt my face. “So I’m guessing you named them, and not your mom.”

“You’d be right.”

“I appreciate your taste in scary movies.”

“Movies?” His chuckle was brief. “The books are where my heart lies. But yes, I have an appreciation for the classics... among other things.”

Lifting my eyes, I caught him gazing down the front of my shirt. His eyelids were heavy, shadowing his pupils. A massive erection tented his shorts. He wasn’t trying to

hide it; Bishop wasn't ashamed of his obvious lust. And with the huge cock he was smuggling under there... why would heeverbe ashamed?

In a flustered haze I jumped to my feet. “Whoa! Hey, you can't just ogle me like that! I... I don't even know you!”

His laugh made the tattoos on his bare chest dance, distracting me further. “Ah. So once we become more familiar, I'm free to stare down your shirt all I want. I get it.”

“That's not what I meant!”

“If you don't want me 'ogling' you, you'll have to get less gorgeous breasts.” His smirk could cut glass.

Jaws and Cujo were running around, barking as I approached Bishop with my hands in fists. I didn't know what I was going to do, I was just furious. Furious that he was so blunt... furious that he was making my body heat up.

A pounding rattle moved down the hall, ending when an older woman swung into the kitchen on sharp Prada heels with a box in her hands. “Bishop! There you are! Haven't you changed yet? Everyone will be here soon, and youknowI need you to make a good impression.” She dropped the box on the counter and I saw it was full of fancy cake balls and other tiny pastries. “Heaven knows you've spent the last years doing your best to prove to the world that you're some sort of ruffian. Then again, how could anyone say no to marrying my perfect little prince?”

Bishop's eyes flew to me. He was no longer smiling.

Did she say marry? Wait, more pressing, did she say... prince? Surely she just meant a prince to her. She was his mom, after all—I didn't need an introduction to figure that out. Miss Callehurst had the same dark hair and wolf-gray eyes as her son.

She clapped her hands, striding forward to pinch her son's cheek. "I can't wait to meet my royal grand-baby!"

There was no misinterpreting her that time. Royal baby? In disbelief I stared at Bishop. His shrug said volumes. This guy... this half-naked guy who'd been staring down my shirt... was a genuine prince?

Rapidly I ran through what I knew about royal families, because I was sure Los Angeles wasn't a damn monarchy. Picturing rolling fields, horses, dragons and swords called to mind the middle ages. Which would work, if time travel wasn't a fictional thing. Don't be silly, there are definitely real royal families out there... like in England! But he didn't sound British. No detectable accent at all—and thank god for that. He was dangerous enough already.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:19 am

“Oh!” His mother blinked at me. “And who's this?”

Determined to not let this new information sway me, I stepped forward and offered my hand the same way I'd done to Bishop. “Nellie Pinewood, ma'am! I'm here for the dog walker position.”

Watching me through her thickly-applied mascara, she pursed her lips. “You have much experience with Poms?”

Cujo and Jaws had jumped up at the sight of Miss Callehurst. When I crouched, they ran to me excitedly. It was a better reaction than I could have hoped for—it gave me a rush of confidence. “Only a little bit. But I worked at a dog rescue for a year when I was eighteen, and I've always loved animals.”

I was readying myself to give her a more detailed rundown of my skills. But she just turned away and said, “Their leashes are hanging in the mudroom back here. Go on, take my babies out for some air before everyone arrives. Oh, and be careful—they love to chew oneverything. So if you have anything expensive...” Pausing, she looked me up and down. “Well. Never mind.”

Wow, rude. I bit back a response and just said, “Okay.” Skirting around Bishop to head to where the leashes apparently were, I did my best to give him a wide berth. It didn't stop him; he bent close, breathing on my neck. All the tiny hairs on my body stood tall—then taller, when he casually bumped his hip into mine.

“Oops,” he chuckled. “Guess I should go strip upstairs and get ready. Nice meeting you, Nellie. I hope you get the job. I'd lovet to see more of you.”

- Chapter Two -

Nellie

Jaws and Cujo were eager to trot along at peak Pomeranian speed. That was good—I needed a reason to move fast and shake off whatever that encounter had been.

Bishop Callehurst. What is with you?

Men with his looks were always trouble. Men with his looks that were royalty? Yeah. No way I was messing with that.

Gigi would smack me for even considering it.

And I wasn't considering it.

Not seriously, anyway.

After a few rounds up the steep Hollywood hills, I guided the panting dogs back towards the house. As I approached up the steps, I spotted the array of expensive cars packed tightly on the big-for-LA parking lot.

Miss Callehurst mentioned people coming over soon. She'd made it sound like some arranged marriage thing. Mother of his child... What would it be like to have a prince's baby? To have Bishop's baby?

Would it have his dark hair? My brown eyes? Some perfect combination and—Oh my lord, stop thinking about this! Reminding myself I didn't care, I was only here for the job I desperately needed, I pushed through the front door.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:19 am

Letting the pups off their leashes, I headed through the hallway and into the grand foyer. Just beyond, I could hear voices; several feminine ones. Curious, and needing to find Miss Callehurst, I leaned around the corner.

The guests—all beautiful women—were strewn out on plush leather chairs or couches. Bishop was sandwiched on both sides by them. They stared at him with thick lashes fluttering, simpering and sanguine. He was being worshiped like some ancient god. No longer in his workout gear, he was dressed in a suit jacket lined in rich emerald green. It hung open, the button-down shirt beneath doing little to hide his muscles. Rich, midnight pants hugged his strong legs.

He cleans up good, but he's no god, I reminded myself quickly. I was halfway through rolling my eyes when I glimpsed his face—his empty smile. I'd only spent a few minutes with the man but I could tell there was a difference in the energy he'd displayed to me in the kitchen, and this. Earlier he'd been having fun. But right now...

He was miserable.

“Oh! Good—someone to refill my drink,” a young woman said. She was dressed in a low-cut dress the color of blood. Her body was leaning towards Bishop, and if I looked closely, I could tell he was subtly leaning away.

She was staring at me. That was when I realized who the “someone to refill her drink” was. Clearing her throat, she wagged a glass full of ice. “Go on,” she said curtly. “Get me a new mimosa.”

Before I could stop myself, I said, “I'm not a maid. Also, no good mimosa is served

with ice in it.”

Bishop didn't muffle his snort of laughter. The women were all aghast at my response; I didn't really understand the weight of it. The woman with her empty glass was turning redder than her dress.

Miss Callehurst rounded the corner. “Ah, there you are, Nellie. Get the dogs into the kitchen and give them some water, they must be parched.”

Happy to get away from these stuck-up socialites, I clicked my tongue at the dogs so they'd follow me from the room. As I went, I spotted Bishop still smiling at me. His reaction had my stomach doing cartwheels.

Once I'd settled the dogs with fresh water, I hung the leashes where I'd found them earlier. Unsure what else to do, I sat on a squishy stool by the granite island. It felt odd to be alone in the spacious kitchen. I imagined that any second a fancy chef would bust through the doors with an exquisite tasting menu just for me.

I jumped when Bishop pushed into the room. He was no chef, that was for sure. “You're still here,” he said.

“I'm waiting for your mom to tell me if I've got the job or not.”

“Well, of course you've got it.”

I sat up taller. “How do you know?”

Bishop leaned over the opposite side of the island. His hands were folded on top, just a foot away from my own. “Mom isn't the type to waste time. If she didn't like the way Jaws and Cujo responded to you from the start, she wouldn't have let you leave with them.”

“That's kind of intimidating,” I said with a laugh.

His eyebrow moved lower. “Speaking of... I think you gave Iris quite a scare out there.”

“Iris?” My forehead tightened. “Oh, her. I wasn't trying to be rude, but what kind of person assumes a stranger must be the maid?”

“A girl who's used to being waited on hand and foot her whole life.” He muffled a yawn, he was clearly exhausted; was it from entertaining those women? Then he looked at me, suddenly refreshed. “I thought it was hilarious how upset she got. You should be careful, though. She's going to hate you now.”

“Because I corrected her?” I shook my head sharply. “That's kind of an overreaction.”

“Overreaction is Iris in a nutshell.” Stretching his arms over his head, his muscles strained against the shirt he was wearing. The jacket had vanished—I tried not to stare. I really did. “You're not used to this world, are you?”

I unstuck my tongue from the roof of my mouth. “You mean the world of the rich and famous. Nope. Don't plan to get used to it, either.”

“You're not into power or money?” he asked, doubt plain on his face.

“I'm into doing a good job and hanging out with cute dogs.” I glanced over at the Pomeranians where they were stretched out in the warm sun on the tile. “Animals are straight-forward in what they need. What they want. I like that. I need that in my life right now.”

When I looked back at Bishop, his lips were in a strained line. The glimmer in his smoky eyes was mysterious—compelling. My heart crawled into my belly to hide.

His hands closed the distance on the counter-top and brushed over mine. “You're pretty complex for a dog walker.”

Bristling, I narrowed my eyes. “I'll tuck that line away in my list of 'Things Guys Say That Totally Get Me Into Their Bed.’”

Bishop's smirk warmed my core; he tightened his hold on my fingers. “You're playing, I get it, but if you're asking me to try and seduce you... I'm not sure you could survive it.”

My mouth was so dry that my attempt at a sarcastic laugh failed. “That's bold. You'd fumble at that attempt, trust me.”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:19 am

“You're wrong. Very wrong.” Standing, he leaned over the counter, his nose nearly touching mine. His fragrance was burning charcoal and rich earth—the scent of a devil. “If I wanted to make you spread your thighs for me, offer me your sweet pussy, it wouldn't be an attempt. I always succeed when I go after something I want, Nellie.”

The rigid iron in my spine cracked in two. Telling him to back off wasn't in the cards. It wasn't even an option. And in that split second, when I did nothing but stand there while he gripped my fingers, I made it clear to us both that I was interested in what he could do to me.

Bishop shut his eyes, inhaling. “Fuck. Your fragrance is amazing.”

“My... what?”

His gray irises were a turmoil of storms. “You're already wet for me. I can smell it.”

Blushing hot, I yanked my hands away. Someone as gorgeous as Bishop talking bluntly about my pussy was erotic. When I stepped back, my thighs scissoring, I knew my panties were soaked through.

He stared me in the eye, his smirk patient but ever growing. One finger of his stroked my wrist, then two. My clit and lips swelled, a sharp inhale giving my attraction away. “Wait,” I whispered.

Bishop circled the island, forcing me up against the nearest object—the fridge. “Wait?” he repeated, blocking me in. “You think I'm going to grip your plump ass and fuck you right here, right now? Oh, Nell. That's not how a prince behaves.”

His fingertips settled on my jaw, drifting along my throat to feel my rapid pulse. His voice was a thick growl. “Unless that's what you ask for,” he said. “Because if you beg me, how could I say no?” Grinding his nose along my temple so suddenly it made me shiver, he pushed his other hand onto my hip and just held it there. The lack of movement was torture.

My ears were ringing, as if my heart was screaming through my body. Every cell was hot with desire. In mere minutes, Bishop had made me crave him.

Something hot and firm rubbed along my thigh—his cock through his pants. “This... we can't do this, not here,” I stammered.

“Not here?” he teased. His lips brushed my skin, sending a bolt of electricity right to my clitoris. “Then you know it is going to happen. Good. I want it to be very clear. I need you to understand that I want you, Nell.” Bishop rolled his hips, his shaft almost painful in its hardness. “Like I said before, I always get what I want. Comes with the territory.”

When he said “comes” my pussy clenched. How had this happened? One second we were bantering over a granite island, and now, here I was pushed against a cold fridge while a man I'd met just this morning ruined my panties.

My brain buzzed, recalling all the women who'd sat with him earlier. I didn't think I was ugly, but they were way out of my league in poise and power. His mom wants him to marry one of them, right? I'd understood that from just a few snippets of conversation. He was supposed to pick some high-end lady to wed and bed.

So why the hell was he saying he wanted me?

“Bishop!” his mother shouted, seconds before pushing into the kitchen. In that moment Bishop slid off of me, behaving like the fog that colored his eyes. His grin

was wide, sharing a secret with me as he leaned on the counter, pretending he hadn't been inches away from sticking his hand down my jeans to finger me.

Bracing myself against the fridge, eyes bugging out, I gaped at him. I must have looked ridiculous. Miss Callehurst didn't act like she noticed, she just swept inside, beaming at her son. "The guests just left. How did it go? Wonderful, right?" He went to speak—she answered for him. "Yes! Exactly! Iris was enamored by you, as she should be."

"Mm," he said, shrugging. "If you say so."

Breathing heavily, I pushed off the fridge and forced my heart to slow down. It was good that she was so distracted by her son, it let me gather my pieces of dignity off the floor.

Miss Callehurst spotted me, startled. "Nellie! Why, you blend right in with the walls sometimes." Laughing into the back of her hand, she slid something from her purse; a checkbook. "Let me get this to you, I've got much to do today. Please be here tomorrow at the same time, I'll have a key made for you so you can come and go as needed. I can't be sure anyone will be around all the time to let you in to get the dogs."

Swallowing, I stepped closer. "Wait. You're saying I've got the job?"

Her eyes flicked up at me from where she was making perfect scripture on the check. "Yes, dear. Of course. Unless you've decided you suddenly don't want it?"

Over her shoulder, Bishop winked at me.

Did I want the job? I didn't know anymore. The realization that I'd have to interact with Bishop every day had given this once innocent job a new spin. His mother was

watching me; she couldn't see him rub his palm over his erection, drawing my eye and making my insides pulse.

This man was shameless. And used to getting what he wanted.

Being near him would be torture... but what could I do? I needed the money if I had any intention of getting my life back on track.

“Yes,” I said, reaching out to take the check. “I'd love the job.”

“Good. Glad to have you.”

Bishop chuckled darkly. “Yes,” he agreed, folding his arms over his broad chest. “We're both very glad to have you, Nell.”

I joined in with their smiling. But deep down, my stomach was a mass of knots.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:19 am

How many pairs of panties was I going to destroy in Bishop's presence?

- Chapter Three -

Nellie

It was hot enough outside that the city below looked smeared with Vaseline, and it was only seven in the morning. Each time I wiped my eyes I burned them with more sweat. The dogs were handling it fine; they trotted along by my sneakers as we climbed the sloped street back towards their house.

I didn't mind cramps growing in my muscles as I pushed along. Exerting myself was helping me keep my mind from wandering. Because when it started waltzing off, it inevitably headed right towards the super-sexy-punchable-face of Bishop.

Just what was he thinking? I asked myself for the hundredth time. I'd almost asked my roommate about it last night, but in the end, decided that was a bad call. If I brought Bishop up, it gave him power. I wanted to forget everything he'd said.

Forget the way he'd made me shiver in his kitchen.

Dammit.

It's okay, I told myself, spotting the row of cactus plants that served as a landmark just three blocks from the house. If you just get in and out each day, you won't run into

him again. Besides, a man like him—a prince—was probably rarely home. He'd have important things to do.

Things like... meetings, or uh... signing things. Big stuff. Stuff I definitely had no clue about, because the only people who deal with royalty are rich, stuck-up people—like those women simpering for Bishop yesterday.

Why had he looked so put out by the experience? I'd gotten the vibe that he was a serious flirt. That was how he'd behaved with me in the first minute of our meeting, anyway. By all logic he should have been all over those girls. His serious face as he reclined in his chair had stuck out to me.

But it sounded like his mother thought the event had gone well... that Iris person was going to “win” his hand or something. The memory tightened my guts into the shape of a boulder. So I pushed harder, chased the dogs, and reconfirmed my decision to forget all about that handsome jerk. Him, and the array of women who were eager to marry him.

“Hey there!”

Bishop was jogging my way. He waved, showing off the shape of his biceps, giving me a peek at his chest through the loose opening of his tank top. He was covered in sweat but, unlike me, he didn't look like a suffering cow.

I pulled up short. The dogs barked, tugging me forward right into his path—they wanted to play with their master. I kind of understood, especially when he grinned and leaned down to pet their heads.

“Morning,” I said. “Didn't see you when I showed up to grab Cujo and Jaws.”

He glanced up at me, hair in his eyes and a smirk as unmovable as the sky. “I usually

go out early to run. How are you feeling today?"

"A little tired. You seem to be in good spirits."

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:19 am

Winking, he stood up to his full height. “I am. I had great dreams about you all night long.”

My mouth slid open. “Oh, uh.” Unsure what to say, I went for the escape route. In my hurry to get away I promptly tripped over my own two feet. “Shit!” I blurted, folding my arms under me to brace myself. Luckily, the landing wasn't bad. There was less dirt on my forearms than there was on the fancy sneakers I was getting a personal view of.

I was lying right at Bishop's feet.

What a start to my day, I thought bitterly. Scalding from humiliation, I kept my forehead on the pavement. The dogs promptly swarmed me with their tongues and tiny paws, like they'd decided humans were now food. Were they going to kill and eat me? That would be a relief.

Hooking his hands under my elbows, Bishop lifted me upwards. I weighed nothing in his grip. “Whoa, you okay?”

“I'm fine,” I said, struggling to meet his eyes. He was too concerned—and it's hard to dislike people like that. I needed to hate him to handle him. The longer he held me close, searching my face, the more I forgot why I wanted to hate him. My ribs were sore from my heart punching them. His body radiated heat; he was so close, so damn close.

I want to kiss him, I realized with a start.

Oh.

Oh no.

The dogs yanked on the leashes, throwing me off balance all over again. Bishop held me tight until I got my control back. Gently, I guided his hands away. “I should get the dogs inside,” I mumbled. “Hot out here. For them, I mean.”

Bishop glanced down the road. “I’ll keep you company.”

My smile was coy. “In case I get lost walking a few yards?”

“Or in trouble. Never know what could happen out here on the streets.”

I gave a slow-as-syrup pointed look around the cute and quiet area. “Oh yes, super dangerous. I appreciate you going out of the way to keep me safe—”

“You’re welcome,” he said over me.

“—But I have these guard dogs.” I jiggled the leashes. The two puff balls yipped, hurrying as they got closer to their home.

Bishop laughed, the sound tickling me in the depths of my heart. I found myself watching him curiously, my snarkiness vanishing under his rich, genuine smile. “They’re pretty scary,” he admitted. “I just think a woman like you deserves all the protection in the world.”

A rush of heat moved up my neck. “What does that mean?”

When he walked beside me, he managed to block the sun out. His features darkened with shadows, and still, his smile glowed. “I can tell you have a good heart. But the

reality is that people with good hearts get hurt the most often.”

A flutter crept upwards, threatening to smother my ever-weakening hate-monster. Taking his compliment at face value was exactly the kind of dumb shit I used to do with my ex. So I stuck out my chin and put on my bitch-face. “Not hurt. Just taken advantage of until we learn better.”

Bishop hesitated; it was enough for me to skip ahead of him and climb the steps to his front door. He followed me inside, saying nothing as I power-walked into the kitchen. His silence pricked at my guilt. Maybe I was being too rude; he was only joking around. Flirting, at worse.

Flirting is a bad thing! I told myself, unclipping the dogs. I strung their leashes on the wall hooks by the pantry. Bishop was still quiet, his presence speaking volumes as he hovered in the kitchen doorway. Filling the silver bowls on the floor with fresh water, I watched the two thirsty dogs scramble into each other as they drank.

Their energy sapped mine. I stifled a yawn, wondering how quickly I'd get used to these early mornings.

“You're tired,” he said, breaking his silence. “You should stay for breakfast. Get some coffee in you.”

“Oh, no.” I waved away his offer. “I can just grab a cup at Starbuuuuwhaat are you doing?” I'd faced him, which gave me a front row seat to him peeling his tight shirt over his head.

Bishop caught the waistband of his jogging pants. Inch by inch he guided them down past his slim hips; the top of his moss-green briefs peeked at me. “I'm undressing so I can take a shower.”

“In what! Your kitchen sink?”

“Of course not.” He stepped out of his pants. “The shower is upstairs.”

Covering my eyes so I was blind, I froze on the spot. “Quit stripping in front of me!”

“Why?” he laughed. “Terrified you’ll do something awful if you catch a look at me naked?” He chuckled darkly. But then, he was quiet. Way too quiet.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:19 am

“Hello?” I asked. “Did you... leave?”

Nothing.

Spreading my fingers, I spotted him standing there proudly in his briefs, hands on his hips as if to say, “Like the view?”

And I fucking did.

“Come on!” I groaned, covering my eyes again. “That's not even fair!”

“Well, maybe that was a little mean. But do you really want to miss your shot at seeing an honest to god prince in the nude?”

“You're too forward.” Or too good at reading my mind. Slowly but surely I slid my hands away. Bishop was focused on me like a dragon who'd spotted a fine piece of treasure.

Knowing how I was gawking at his finely carved muscles—the swirls of ink that curled over his chest, biceps, and vanished into his briefs... I wondered how hungry I looked.

He read my face, full lips tightening. His hand closed on my wrist. “Follow me.”

We were halfway up the curved staircase when I understood what I was doing. But we were stepping over the threshold of the hallway bathroom before my logical brain cells fired again. “Wait, this is too soon. I'm not ready to shower with you!”

Shutting the door behind me, he let me go. “Relax.” Reaching over the gorgeous black and gold tiles of the step-in shower, he twisted the knobs. “Nothing will happen... unless you want it to.”

I swallowed around the hard lump in my throat. “That's the problem.” His head whipped around so he could stare at me. Realizing what I'd just admitted to, I threw my hands up. “That came out wrong! I meant—even if I did want to do something, we... we can't, you know, because you're a prince and I'm a not-prince and you have ladies waiting to marry you and and...” I was babbling.

He moved to stand over me. Gently but firmly he grabbed the hem of my shirt.

“What are you doing?” I asked, the words vibrating on my tongue from my nervous shaking.

“You don't want to get your clothes wet,” he whispered. “Well, not all of them.”

- Chapter Four -

Bishop

This fucking woman.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:20 am

It had been some time since I'd felt such a spark. I'm not proud to admit that I'd been chasing every possible rush in life, just to feel anything at all, up to a few weeks ago. Everything had changed when I got the news about my father's little request.

His requirement.

From there I'd endured the meetings with strange women... I'd borne the idea of having to pick one of these faceless harpies who wanted nothing from me but my money and the security of my lineage.

I'd thought I was fine with such a life.

And then I'd met Nellie Pinewood.

“Hold still,” I said, slipping her shirt over her head. The motion set her long hair swirling, pieces sticking to her forehead, in her eyes. Before she could smooth it out I beat her to it. With precision, I tucked her strands of hair back behind her ears, luxuriating in how soft they felt between my fingers.

She'd gone still, like she was waiting to see what I'd do next. There was a tiny crease in her lips, a tightness that plumped and smoothed the longer I watched her. The magnetic pulse between us begged me to kiss her. But I wouldn't. Not yet.

Half-crouching, I traced her ribs, stopping when I'd reached the top of her jeans. A quick flick and the button was undone. The zipper came next, the sensation of the metal peeling open resonating in my lower belly.

I revealed the pale-blue of her panties, and my own underwear—the only thing I had on—became useless in hiding my cock. “Fuck,” I breathed out, adjusting myself, then making her step out of her pants.

Something in Nell clicked. Or it broke. I didn't know, I just stood up to watch her finish stripping down. She did it with speed—rushing to beat the part of her that would talk her out of this situation.

Her body was elegant; welcoming. I ached to snatch her up and press myself against her, into her, just be a part of her existence. She pointed at me, and the motion set her breasts swaying hypnotically. “You have to finish.”

“Oh, I'll finish,” I said, chuckling at my own wicked thoughts. My cock-head was almost peeking out of my briefs. I didn't waste any more time, I copied her, pushing my underwear down and abandoning it on the floor.

I'd been waiting to see her reaction to all of me. Studying her face, I was fascinated by how she wet her lower lip with her tongue. Her body was tinged red, her heart working overtime. Standing tall, I made my proud dick twitch in the air. “I noticed you've stopped pretending you don't like me.”

Her eyes darted to mine, holding steady. “Are you this cocky with all the dog walkers?”

“Only the cute ones.”

“Hmn,” she said, pursing her lips. “Earlier you called me beautiful. Why the downgrade?”

Chuckling, I brushed my thumb over her cheek. “Blame the dirt that's all over your face. Come on.” With that, I pulled her into the shower. The water rained on us both.

It massaged my skin with both heat and force, turning Nell's hair into a long stream of rich chocolate.

Wiping her eyes, she faced me; I shielded her from the water, my back to the spout. There were freckles on the bridge of her nose and I wished I had all the time in the world just to count them over and over.

“Was this what you were waiting for?” she asked.

“What?”

She nodded over my shoulder. “My face to be clean. Were you holding back from kissing me because of all that dirt you talked about? Or were you just pretending you were into me this whole time?”

Her boldness stunned me. It also sent my cock thickening, rising up between us until it bumped her thigh. Nell inhaled through her teeth. “I don't know,” I whispered huskily. “What does this tell you?”

My hands clamped onto her smooth shoulders, pressing her into the glittering tile. The air was thrumming with steam, the ceramic walls rumbling like a storm, and still, I could hear the subtle increase in the rhythm of her breath.

I didn't think I'd been holding back, but if I had been, it'd been subconscious; waiting for her to make it clear she was ready for me. I so rarely met women who dared to challenge me. Nell had from the first minute. I'd thought it was because she had no idea how important my family was... but when she'd learned, she'd only fought me harder.

It was fucking refreshing.

Nell's mouth slid over mine, warm and sweet. Her fist circled around my cock. "We shouldn't do this."

"We definitely should."

"Do you have a condom?"

Her question startled a hard laugh from me. Thumbing her chin, I looked her in the eye and said ever so calmly, "You don't get it yet, do you?" Drops of water collected on her parted lips. I kissed them away, cocking my head so I could whisper straight into her ear. "We're going to screw, and you're going to come, and come, and come as I fill you up with my seed until there's noway you don't get pregnant. And if by some miracle it doesn't happen this time..." I licked her throat and she trembled like the last leaf of winter. "I'll keep at it until it does."

- Chapter Five -

Nellie

“Wha—what are you talking about?” I managed to blurt the question out. He managed to erase it away with another simple kiss... and then a second one that was way less simple; all tongue, teeth, and tremors.

His cock slid across my slit, making it hard to focus. “I want to make you my wife, Nell.”

“That's insane,” I said, my voice losing its edge. He was breaking me. It must have been intoxicating for him—his prick hardened impossibly further, teasing my labia as he rubbed over them.

“You're beyond gorgeous,” he purred in my ear. “I also saw how sweet and kind you are. How strong, the way you stood up to Iris. You're perfect...this is perfect.”

The ridge of his shaft bumped over my clit; I couldn't see straight, my moan ragged.

“Listen to yourself,” he said, each syllable punctuated by his grin. “Think about it—how good this all feels. I want to make you groan my name, I want to fill you up, give you everything. And I'm going to.”

Delirious with pleasure, I stopped trying to argue. I didn't know what I was even

arguing about. Bishop was right on the mark; this felt amazing and I didn't want it to end. All forms of reason evaporated, replaced in my blood stream by blossoms of lust.

I wanted to fuck this man.

I wanted to be fucked.

Forgetting that he was a prince meant to marry someone special and powerful and not me in every sense was easy with his cock spreading me open.

His arm circled under my thigh, lifting one leg higher. He exposed me to the humid air, water pelting my tummy, my clit. With his thumb of his free hand he pulled my clit-hood back, rubbing me in lazy circles, still inching his cock deeper inside.

He was taking his time impaling me. Each time I thought he was fully in, he'd shift and give me more. "Fuck," I gasped, and my voice echoed back to me in the shower.

"Good," he whispered, playing with my swollen clit. He sank into my tight walls another inch. "You're crushing me, fucking hell—you feel so good."

"Bishop! I... I can't..."

"Don't tell me you can't fit me, I know you can, baby girl."

"No," I said quickly, staring up at him. "I can't handle waiting. Go all the way, stop torturing me."

He was startled; then he laughed, fingertips squeezing into my soft ass-cheeks. In one grand thrust that resounded in the air, he slammed his cock into the hilt. Both of us gasped, and I inhaled more of the steam.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:20 am

I tasted him as he kissed me.

And I tasted my own defeat.

I knew I was going to let him come inside of me. I couldn't imagine ending this moment, back off the edge and giving up this kind of pleasure. It was otherworldly... and I was greedy. Too many bad things had happened to me lately, and this was the first real, amazing, rejuvenating experience and I fucking deserved this.

Again, he thrust into me, his thumb circling my clit faster. He let my leg down but I wrapped both around his waist, clinging on, never letting the kiss end. Fiercely, he shifted so he could hold my thighs, bouncing me in the air on his cock.

He wasn't rubbing my clit any longer but he didn't need to; his hard stomach ground against me, each motion hitting me inside and out. Hot, massive tingles shook me. They raced over my brain, through my heart, down into my pussy until it was all I could feel... all that I was.

Like an animal in heat I fucked this man I barely knew. I rode him desperately, moaning without shame, feeling truly fearless. It was intoxicating... and I wondered if I could become addicted to a human being.

"I'm coming," I whimpered.

"I know," he panted, leaning on the tile, shielding me once more from the shower. His cock was stretching me out, swelling as I thrummed on top of it. My orgasm left me weak, breathless, and I didn't know if I could blame the lack of air among the

steam.

Bishop pushed my feet to the floor. Bracing against me, he threw his head back. I looked up to see his hard-cut jaw, my body one big rush of excitement at the sight of his muscles... his pure manliness.

Suddenly he looked at me. I jumped, forgetting for half a second that he was fucking me at all. We were reading each other, trying to understand the moment... to tell if we both felt the same. Then it all vanished; he gripped my wet hair, forcing my head to the side so he could kiss my neck. His shaft swelled once, twice, and something hotter than I already was spilled inside of my pussy.

Bishop was mumbling against my skin, things like, “Yes, so fucking amazing.” And once... I think he moaned my name.

He'd done it. He'd come inside of me.

I'd let him do it.

How reckless was I? If I was pregnant... my life would change... and it might not be all good. I didn't know Bishop; what if he abandoned me, what if he stayed and was as awful as my ex? What if what if what if... What if I'd asked these questions before letting him fuck me?

Stepping backwards, I watched the water swirl down the drain. More and more replaced it, the stream never ending. Each drop was replaced by a new one. None of them were unique... none of them mattered when you could replace them.

“Fun fact,” he said, his voice still rough. “Shower sex is great because you can wash off without having to walk anywhere.”

Ignoring him, I opened the glass door and set foot on the rug. Towels hung on the walls; I snatched one down, binding it tight around my body. “This was stupid,” I mumbled. “What was I thinking?”

Bishop turned the water off. “Hey, what's wrong?”

Shooting a look at him, I said, “You're playing with me. You don't know me, you don't love me, so how can you want to make ababywith me?” Flaring with righteous anger, I faced him fully. I felt a million feet tall, my ex's face flashing in my mind. “You're just another playboy asshole in my life, something I was trying to avoid repeating.”

His face twisted up; had I hurt him? “This isn't about love.” His voice was cold as a frozen lake. “It's about making you swell with a little royal baby. How can you hate that idea? Didn't you see all those women clamoring for me to pick them?”

That put me over the edge. Grabbing my clothes, trying to ignore how acutely I could recall the way he'd peeled each piece off of me, I left the room. The fucking nerve of him! I thought, stomping on my heels into the hall. Was he expecting me to jump up and down at the idea of him blessing me with his fucking jizz? Did he think his sperm wore little gold crowns and would change my life if they got up inside my womb?

Ugh.

Justugh.

“Bishop?” The voice warbled up the staircase. “Are you home?”

A bolt of terror turned my legs into noodles. His mom! If she caught me as I was—naked in her house—what would she do? Fire me, at best. Shit. Whipping my head side to side, I ducked into the first door on my right.

The room was gigantic, much like every room in this over-the-top mansion. Bishop's bedroom, I realized, spotting some of his clothes hanging in the open closet. The bed could fit five people, the blanket a shiny emerald color. At least he doesn't use accent pillows. I mean, what did you even do with those when you were trying to sleep? Did you toss them on the ground? It was a small thing, but it made me smile.

Another noise came from the hall; gently, I shut the door, hurrying to put my clothes on. A second later the brass knob twitched. My heart was on the verge of exploding until Bishop's face appeared, not his mom's.

He was dressed in just a towel around his middle. His hair was slicked back, he hadn't taken the time to dry it, he'd rushed to chase after me. "Nell," he said, stepping my way. "You have to listen to me. I'm explaining everything all wrong."

"Oh no," I snorted, buttoning my jeans. "You explained it perfectly. Your favorite word, isn't it? 'Perfect?'"

Bishop didn't slow down, he came my way like a living shadow made from sin. There were huge windows on the far wall, and still, the sunlight didn't touch him. A scent hit me; the salty-musk of what we'd done. The shower couldn't wash away the fact we'd fucked. My body was responding to the memory, muscles tensing, blood racing.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:20 am

I didn't know I'd backed up until I hit the wall near his bedside. Bishop cupped my neck, bare chest rubbing over my shirt and making the clothing pointless. "You're looking at this all wrong," he said softly. "You said you needed this job. That means you're tight on money."

Staring at his lips as they made alluring shapes, I said, "That doesn't mean I want a relationship with a stranger. I'm not a prostitute."

He laughed warmly and I shivered. How was he so damn sexy? "If you go along with what I'm asking and make a baby with me, you'll be set. The power, the cash, you'd have it all... no strings attached."

"I think a kid with you is sort of a huge mother fucking string, Bishop."

He leaned down, kissing the sensitive skin just behind my ear. The rush of pleasure had my brain swirling in my skull. "Make a prince... or a cute princess... with me. You won't have to walk another dog."

"Maybe... maybe I like dogs." I swallowed. "They're more trustworthy than men like you."

Again he chuckled; my knees bent, his strong arm holding me against the wall. Or maybe it was the pressure of his body against mine. I didn't know anymore. "Men like me? Men who offer you an amazing shot at security? You don't have to love me, Nell. I don't care if you don't."

An unexpected forest of thorns grew up from my middle. I tried to smooth it away,

but his words... they hurt. He's honest, that's good. That's... what matters. Didn't it?

His hand cupped my stomach. The touch was intimate, it stole my breath away. It was too easy to imagine a future where an adorable baby would fit in my arms. I could even see Jaws and Cujo licking its face.

It was sweet... and exciting... and it crushed my heart up until I just wanted to run away and never look back. A baby? Now? Ever?

“I need air,” I gasped, pushing around him. “I... I need to think about this.” Gripping the door frame, I looked back at him. His eyes were dark; brooding. I wanted to read his mind, but maybe seeing his true thoughts would confuse me more.

Maybe I'd learn my uncertainty was actually hurting him.

No way, impossible. Guys like Bishop had less emotional capacity than a chunk of dirt. It was easy to try and flatter me by saying I was beautiful or gorgeous or... Kind, he called me kind. No one had ever said that to me before.

Gnawing at the corner of my mouth, I hesitated. He was still watching me, waiting to see what I'd do next. He was curious—but I was the one with a thousand questions.

“Bishop.”

His eyebrows shifted up. “Yeah?”

“Is that offer for breakfast still on the table?”

There; the light was back in his eyes. “I know a great cafe. Best mimosas around.”

“I'll go on one condition. Two, really.” I inched the door open. “You'll explain

everything that's going on with this baby stuff, and also, you're going to have to sneak me out of here Black Ops style.” I peered into the hall. “I don't want to explain our wet hair to your mother.”

- Chapter Six -

Bishop

We were sitting in a quaint little cafe that would probably appear on Yelp in a week and become impossible to get a seat at without a reservation. But for now, it was quiet, and cute, and perfect for newly growing love.

I was lounging with a comfortable ease, some confident “I just had sex” energy. But Nell... she had the feral look of a stray cat who could bolt at any second. “Go on,” I said gently, folding my hands on the beige placemat. “Ask whatever you want to ask me.”

She wasted no time going for my throat. “Why the hell does a guy like you need a baby? You're so young! And you don't seem the... fatherly type.”

Chuckling dryly, I tilted my head. “Ouch. Fact is, I actually love kids. I didn't want one so soon, or so I thought. But imagining one with you is stirring something in me. You—”

I couldn't finish; she was laughing so obnoxiously it drowned me out. Ignoring the glares from nearby customers, she wiped at her eyes. “Bullshit.”

She was sharp. Though, it wasn't all bullshit. Nell was curling herself around an ancient, throbbing part of me that craved the idea of knocking her up. “Alright. Fine.

But the truth is a lot less exciting.”

“Try me.”

I almost made a flirty joke. Catching myself, I said, “How does a bunch of lineage paperwork and one cantankerous, old man with a chip on his shoulder about his legacy strike you?”

Nell blinked once, twice, then she put her chin on her fist. “Actually, that sounds interesting. I wanted to know about how you're a prince and that seems related. The old guy is your dad, yeah?”

“Bingo fucking bango.” Gripping my coffee, I took a deep swig, holding it in my mouth until the bitter flavor overpowered my similarly tasting mood. “Good ol' dad was born, raised, and to this day refuses to leave Caluvan—it's near Saudi Arabia. He's kind of a big deal, oil empire and all.” I could see the gears working behind her eyes. “Mom met him on a trip. He sent her back here after they married, poor woman was home sick. He promised he'd come soon. She's still waiting for him to buy that ticket.”

Her skin went pale. “You mean... your mom hasn't seen her husband since she came back here?”

“No, no. He funds every flight back to his palace that she wants.”

“And you? Do you ever visit him?”

“Nah.” I went to take another drink—when had I finished my coffee? Frowning at the mug, I turned it in my hands. “We Skype, but I like it here better. It's where I grew up.”

She watched me too closely. I didn't like this feeling... like she pitied me. "It sounds so lonely. For all of you. I mean, he's your dad."

Clearing my throat, I pushed the mug away. "He's not lonely. He's got business partners sucking at his teat, not to mention a whole other second family to keep him company." There; her shock was much more welcome. "Yeah... dear dad couldn't keep it in his pants."

"But... your mom..."

"Didn't divorce him. It happened soon after I was born. According to him, it wasn't a problem." I dropped my voice to imitate his gruff baritone. "Relax, Cathleen. We can fix this. You and Bishop matter the world to me. This other woman and her baby are nothing." I leaned back in my chair so hard it was amazing it didn't tip over. "He's changed his tune these days. Thatnothingis now being hung over my head. Dad wants an heir, and my illegitimate half-brother might beat me to it."

Nell was even whiter now. "Your dad is forcing you to get married and have a baby?"

"He'd never say it that way. But fact is, if I don't do it first, my mom will be..." My smile took on a plastic look. Did she sense I was putting on a show, that this situation actually upset me more than I let on? "Put it this way. I create a kid, or we lose all of our wealth and power. Our home. Everything."

"That's so sad. What kind of dad would force his sons to hurry up and have a family? Where does love factor in?"

Shifting in my chair, I caught the waitress's eye. "Business trumps all." She refilled my mug with coffee, and with her gone, I aimed my smile back at Nell. "Anyway, this doesn't have to be a big deal. It could even be fun." Casually, I rubbed her knee under the table. Her face warmed, turning a lovely pink that was beyond gratifying.

“What about the others? The women your mom is trying to set you up with?”

I shrugged. “I’m the one who chooses who I ultimately propose to.”

“No, I meant, those other women were amazing... so pretty and refined and important. Why the heck would you choose me over them?”

Several reasons flashed through my head. I said none of them, and instead, I squeezed her knee again. “I can remind you why.” Abruptly she jumped to her feet. Nell didn't behave like any of the girls I'd been around before. No one turned me down, especially not multiple times. Intrigued, I leaned back and considered her tight jaw. “You okay?”

She smoothed her shirt and breathed in. “I really have to sleep on this, maybe for a few days, even weeks. What you're asking is—it's not normal.”

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:20 am

“Fair warning; I'm not a normal guy.” The bridge of her nose crinkled; I wanted to rub it away with a kiss. She tossed some money on the table. “Hey, whoa, this breakfast is on me.”

Stuffing her wallet into her back pocket, she said, “I don't want your generosity until I know it doesn't come with a price.”

The heat in her eyes was meant to scald me, but it just warmed me up from the inside out. Grabbing her hand, I held her in place. “Think about my offer as long as you need to. I'm on a timeline, but I'm not going to try and force you. The fact is... I want you, Nell. Icraveyou. So if you insist on working for my mother, seeing me every day, you need to realize I'll never stop throbbing with a need to fill you with my seed. It's more than just my duty... I've felt your pussy, how close to your womb I could get, and anything less than pouring myself into you until I'm a dry husk won't satisfy me.”

Her lips parted. “Bishop...”

I watched as her chest rose and fell, and my voice dropped even lower. “As long as you're in my life, I'll never stop trying to be with you.”

- Chapter Seven -

Nellie

“Connor, no!”

As I entered my apartment, something launched itself at me from the corner of my eye. Twisting so fast my spine cracked, I barely caught the pint-sized kid before he slammed into my face. “Whoa!” I laughed, holding him up by his armpits. “Hello there!”

He was pretty cute, considering he'd just tried to kill me.

“I'm so sorry,” Gigi said, rushing over to take him. “This is Connor, my sister's son. He's... a bit crazy.”

“Crazy!” he giggled, grinning to show off his teeth and the gaps between.

Gigi pouted dramatically. “I turned away for a second to make him a snack.”

Shutting the door, I said, “No worries, it's fine.” My roommate set the kid down, and he promptly hugged my legs. “You're a little daredevil, huh?”

His laughter was loud and clean and real. It melted my heart. After how my day had been, seeing a child was strange. The world is trying to tell me something. But was it that kids were cute, or that they wanted to murder me, or maybe both?

Handing Connor half of a sandwich, Gigi pulled out her phone, typing a message. Then, sensing my mood like some powerful empath from a super hero movie, she squinted at me. “Uh oh. Something's wrong with you.”

I dropped into one of the two chairs by the door. Our table was small, and it worked better as a launching pad for children than a place for meals. “I wouldn't know where to begin.”

“Boy trouble?”

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:20 am

I laughed sharply. “That's putting it mildly.”

She sat across from me, one eye on Connor as he ran in circles around the room. “I thought you were done with men. I think that's what you said to me the first night you moved in.” She threw her arms up, voice rising, “Gigi! Guys suck!”

“That's not how I sound! Plus, can you saysuckin front ofhim?”I jerked my thumb at Connor.

Gigi made a face. “He's fine. Tell me more about your dating problems.”

“It's not dating. I... don't know what it is.”

“Now I'm extra curious.”

Sighing, I ran my hands over my eyes. “Bishop, the guy I'm dog walking for, is being very forward.”

“Mnhm. Go on.”

Eyeballing Connor, I dropped my voice to a hush. “He sort of wants me to be his baby mama.”

Gigi startled so fast that she dropped her phone to the floor. Connor squeaked, jumping in place. “Fall down!” he giggled.

“He wants you towhat?”

Burning with shame from my toes to my scalp, I imagined my shower encounter. “Let me back up. Bishop is kind of a prince—”

“Are you for fudging real?”

“—And I guess he's in a competition with his half-brother to produce an heir first. He made me an offer to be the one to do this with him, and I'm not seriously considering it... I'd have to be nuts to do that. I don't know why he even picked me.” Briefly, I wondered if he'd made the offer to other people. Was I really the first? Impossible.

Gigi looked at the ceiling. “This is way too weird.”

“I know,” I agreed, drawing a circle on the table with my finger. “I'm nothing special, why would a rich guy go for me?”

She slammed her hands onto the table. “Shut up! You're a great catch. I'm saying it's crazy for anyone to want a baby so quickly with a stranger. He must really be desperate to make his dad happy. That, or he's super into you. You could be soulmates.”

I was laughing, but her serious face took me down a peg. “That's not a real thing.”

“Sure it is.” She leaned towards me. “Hm. How do you feel about him? Any sparks, any sense he's your one true love?”

I wanted to chuck something at her, but the only things nearby were her phone—expensive—and Connor—illegal child abuse. Helplessly, I thought about how good it had felt when Bishop held my tummy possessively. How natural it felt to kiss him.

But soul mates? Wanting a baby with a stranger...?

She'd called it earlier; I'd have to be crazy.

I kept that in mind when Connor changed the subject for us by dumping an entire bottle of mayonnaise I didn't know we even had onto the floor. Gigi sobbed, hurrying to clean after him as I watched with reserved amusement.

Each time that little kid flashed me a smile, it opened up a place in my heart for more love to fill. I told myself, again, that soul mates weren't real. That one true loves were make believe. And that even if those things did exist...

Bishop Callehurst wasn't any of them.

Not for me.

- Chapter Eight -

Nellie

Bishop was avoiding me.

There was no mistaking it; I'd catch glimpses of him before or after walking the dogs, but that was all. He was acting like he hadn't offered to let me be his baby-making-dog-walker. I was oddly irritated by that. So irritated, in fact, that I was starting to WANT to talk to him.

By the time I'd worked up the determination to confront him, he was nowhere to be found. His presence was absent in the house that morning, and he remained a ghost when I returned with the two exhausted dogs.

Washing my hands in the kitchen sink, I perked up at the sound of footsteps. The sight of Bishop's mother and not the man himself deflated me. She was holding a gold paper bag in one hand, looped as if it was an expensive Gucci purse. "You're back," she said. "Good. How were they?"

"Fine. I'm worried about the heat, though. I might have to take them out even earlier until it cools down." I wiped my palms on my jeans; she squinted, like I'd offended her. Should've used a towel like a properly fancy person. "Hey," I began, before I could stop myself, "Is Bishop distracted lately?"

She adjusted her thin shawl while scrutinizing me. “My son has a large amount of responsibilities to attend to. It’s a wonder I can get him to do half of what he should, especially when he keeps adding in new obstacles. Did you know it was HIS idea that we get those dogs?”

Blinking, I looked down at the fluffy puppies. “I didn’t, no.” He did say he'd named them, though, so maybe it shouldn't be so surprising.

“He was supposed to take them on his morning jogs, but I guess he's never been the type to keep his promises.” Flinching at the rush of coolness that attacked my heart, I started for the door. “Wait. Nell, do me a favor.” She offered me the paper bag; inside was a wooden box wrapped in a silver ribbon. “It's a gift for the diplomat Bishop is entertaining. They’re having lunch at the Elephant Room.”

Clutching the thin, rough handles, I swallowed. “You want me to bring this to him—er, to them?”

“It should be on your way home. I hate to ask, but I've got my own things to get to.”

I couldn't say no. Or that's what I told myself, because deep down, I knew I was using this as an excuse to corner Bishop. “I'll do it, sure.”

“You're a life saver.” Her thin lips slipped into a smile that was almost appreciative. It was the face of someone who was happy they were getting their way. But that was fine, because I knew how she felt.

I was getting my way, too.

The Elephant room was gold and silver, like someone had melted a giant Christmas

ornament all over the walls. Every person that wasn't sitting at a table was rushing around in a pale gray suit or skirt, trays balanced on their palms; thick, black folders stuffed with thicker credit cards under their arms.

I dodged the servers, winding my way through the tables and trying not to gawk at the ceiling. Gold-dusted tusks—that I sure hoped were fake—juttied down to create a breathtaking sculpture of an elephant's head.

This place was expensive.

This place wasn't meant for me.

“Nell!” It was Bishop who called my name, waving at me from a long, dark table set against the back wall. The men sitting with him looked as expensive as the Lamborghinis outside. I wondered why they didn't have a private room, until I understood that being seen was the whole point.

Approaching with the paper bag at my side, I wished I'd changed into something nicer. Jeans and a washed-too-many-times blue racerback stood out among all this glamour. But the way Bishop's eyes hung on me, as if I were more stunning than the architecture above, said otherwise. He appreciated what he saw. So did I.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:20 am

Like the time I'd seen him surrounded by women who wanted his surname, he was wearing a fine suit jacket and dark pants that glided over his strong thighs and firm ass. We both knew I was staring, but he wasn't expecting me to hold his gaze, making a face as if to say, Yeah, you're hot, but what happens next?

Holding out the bag to him, I said, "Your mom asked me to bring this to you."

"She sent me a text or twenty about how I'd forgotten it."

He reached for the bag. I let him take it, clinging to it a second longer. "You do seem like you're forgetful lately."

His face went rigid—so did his grip. "Maybe. Or maybe I'm just putting my energy into something very important."

Was that a jab at how I wasn't important? Studying his hard-set jaw, I watched it relax, saw how his fingers loosened at his sides. He wasn't upset with me... he was stressed. Following where his eyes flicked to, I saw the man sitting at the other end of the table.

He was staring at us.

No... at me.

His skin was caramel brown, only a bit lighter than his hair. He was dressed in just a loose white shirt, but somehow, he seemed more opulent than everyone else. I spotted his Apple watch, the newest smart phone resting on the table, and the cocky,

inquisitive smile as he looked me over.

I didn't know him, but I knew men like him.

“Bishop,” he called, motioning with two fingers. “Who is this lovely woman who's joined us?”

Lines passed across Bishop's forehead. Then they were gone and he was taking me by the elbow towards the other man. His grip was firm—welcome. It sparked the too-real memory of our shower encounter, reminding my body how talented his fingers could be when they tried.

Everyone else had quieted, watching curiously, listening in. They, too, wanted to learn who I was. This attention was new for me. It made my skin sticky, my mouth so dry I was tempted to snatch an unfinished drink off the table and chug it.

Letting me go, Bishop folded his arms. “This is Nellie Pinewood. Nell, this is Corriane Flemish, a diplomat from Jordan and the biggest cheat in Black Jack that I know.”

“Tsk, flattery,” Corriane said, looking too amused. He reached out for me and, compelled by all the movies I'd seen, I offered him my hand. He kissed it; his lips were much scratchier than Bishop's. “It's a pleasure to meet the woman who's managed to steal the fickle heart of Bishop Callehurst.”

“Oh, no, that's not...” I almost said I'm just the dog walker! Before I could, Bishop wrapped his arms around my middle from behind, his chin settling on my head. I was blushing and I could do nothing to fix it.

“I'm not fickle,” Bishop said into my hair. “I'm just picky.”

Not so picky. He chose me after one quick fuck.

My own callous thoughts burned me like acid.

Corriane was still smiling. I could see the shape of it behind the tall glass he'd picked up to sip. "I'd love to learn more about such a special woman. Join us for lunch, Nellie. Please."

Day became night, and not once did the restaurant try to usher us out. How could they? The bill this group of men was racking up was immense. They ordered bottles of scotch older than me, demanding that the waitresses join in for a sip or four.

The celebration winded down until it was only me, Bishop, Corriane and the two men I learned were his bodyguards. They weren't impressing me—both were red faced and drunk.

"Now that it's quieter," Corriane said, leaning forward to speak to us privately, "I suggest we go have some real fun."

Bishop eyed me with something dark and wary. It was a look that didn't fit him, like a coat two sizes too small. "Not tonight."

Both men shared a look, then Corriane smiled sweetly at me. "Could I have a moment with my friend?"

"Oh, sure. I'll just..." Motioning at nothing, I stood and hurried to the bathroom. The buzz of alcohol had made me unsteady. I wasn't drunk, just loose in my knees; grateful for my sneakers. I'd seen the heels most of the women in this place were wearing. I'd envied them until now.

Wasting time doing nothing, I looked into the silver, sleek toilet in the restroom stall. It spoke to me in a sweet voice that had my hair standing on end. “How may I serve you?”

Even their toilets drip money, I mused. Facing the gigantic mirror, I tried to fix my hair. I really needed to clean up—did I smell like sweat? Was that why they were reluctant to go out with me?

Washing my face, I tied my hair back and decided that was good enough. Whatever Bishop and Corriane wanted to do, I'd go as is... or I'd just head home. It was late, anyway.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:20 am

Returning to the main restaurant, I saw that Bishop was standing—hunched over Corriane who was still sitting, the two of them talking in coarse, low tones. I spotted the golden bag his mother had given me. It was sitting, forgotten, on the table. Picking it up, I stood across from Bishop, wondering what was going on.

Corriane saw me first. His glare was poison, his tone dismissive. “Is it because of her? Is that why you won't go?” He made a rude noise. “Send her away. She's your woman, she'll listen.”

“Excuse me?” I asked, so stunned it took me a second to register his comment.

The vein along Bishop's throat pulsed. “Stop it. Don't you dare.”

“What?” he laughed, pushing his chair back but not standing. “Are you scared of her? You? Bishop Callehurst, the man who could get any one of the women in this place to bend over for you in public if you just say the word?”

“Leave it, Corriane.”

“Pathetic. I'm nowhere near as rich as you, and do you think my fiancée would dare to talk back to me? Now, take me to one of the local strip clubs. You're supposed to show me a good time, like your father said. This farce is over with.”

Bishop had steadily grown more crimson. Sweat shone on his forehead, his body so still, so coiled, he could have jumped through the damn ceiling. He was furious.

It wasn't Bishop who exploded; it was me.

The wooden box in the bag was as good a weapon as any. Bunching up my muscles and wishing I'd taken baseball lessons, I threw it right into Corriane's chest. He caught it, grunting in pain, his face draining of color—I was sure he'd vomit and was disappointed when he didn't. “You asshole,” I hissed. “A strip club? You'reengaged!How disgusting could you be?” I was seething with anger for this woman I'd never met. How could he disrespect his fiancée so much?

Slowly, so slowly, Corriane lifted his head. His grimace twisted his handsome face into something monstrous. But that was nothing compared to his smile. “Oh ho,” he wheezed. Coughing, he gathered himself, speaking more steadily. “You chose a girl with fire in her, Bishop. Or... did you actually choose her? There's been no wedding, surely, or I'd have been invited.”

I knew Bishop was staring at me; I didn't look away from Corriane.

He kept speaking. “You're no one, Nellie Pinewood. Not Bishop's wife, not even his fiancée. Certainly not someone with any right to tell me how to treat my woman. I'd warn you to watch your back, because I could make your life with Bishop's family quite terrible, but I suspect that I won't have to bother. Hopefully his next girl knows her place.”

I was shaking violently.

Corriane went to stand, but the wooden box shifted in his lap. He grabbed it, squinting at the silver ribbon, seeing it all for the first time. “Thank your mother for me, Bishop. No, wait, I'll do the honor myself.” He didn't know what the gift was—he didn't care. He'd probably throw it in the trash once he was alone. He was simply driving home the fact that hewouldbe talking to Miss Callehurst... telling her what happened here tonight.

Bishop gripped the back of his own chair, toppling it over. The noise drew the

attention of the last people in the restaurant; the two body guards jerked awake, having dozed off in their seats. “I knew you could be a cheat,” he growled, “But I didn’t know you were such a shithead. How dare you talk about Nell like she’s nothing?” His arm shot out; I thought he was going to hit the other man.

So did everyone else.

The guards tried to jump to their feet. Too slow, too wasted, they tripped on their own legs. And Corriane... I squirmed with delight at the fear in his face. Sensing danger, he pin-wheeled his arms, falling backwards and sprawling on the floor.

Bishop's hand didn't come close to him—it scooped mine up instead, pulling me away from the table. It thrilled me to have him hold me so securely.

Corriane was shouting, red faced as he tried to untangle his coat from the chair's legs. His guards bent down to lift him, and instead, they all fell back into a pile. Bishop's eyes flashed to mine, bright with a humor so contagious we started laughing.

I couldn't stop cracking up, not even as he rushed me from the Elephant Room. Definitely not in the fresh air of the busy Hollywood street. It wasn't until he tugged me around a corner, into the alcove of an alley where he captured me with a kiss, that I finally quit laughing.

The joy was still there. The fire, the light, the rush—all of it existed. It buzzed through my cells, reminding me I was alive and here with a man who burned for me, defended me, like no one ever had.

Is Gigi right? Are soulmates real?

I didn't believe in that stuff. I couldn't afford to.

Yet somehow, as Bishop's lips glided over mine—his palms searching my ribs for a secret door to my heart—I began to wonder if I could afford not to believe it. What else could explain my growing infatuation? This desire to seek him out?

Careful, I told myself, fighting to think around the fog in my head. You've picked the wrong kind of men before. Well. One man, but once was enough when it came to heartbreak. Be cautious... be wary. A burst of shame struck me. Be realistic.

Everything Corriane had said in the restaurant came back to me. The bits about me being tossed aside, the part where he'd expected Bishop to take him to a strip club. Expected—like they'd done it before.

“Wait,” I said, grabbing his hands as they moved down my legs. He'd undone my top button and some of my zipper before I could stop him. “Bishop, just wait. I need to know... I want to ask about what Corriane said.”

He winced, as if a shard of glass was moving through his guts. “I can't believe the balls he has.”

“But is it true.” I hesitated, tasting the moment—fearing the answer. “Am I going to get thrown aside, like this is a game for you?” A game I fell for so damn easily.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:20 am

“Fucking hell.” He stood taller, his powerful grace so natural that I sensed for the first time the royal blood in his veins. “Weren't you listening to me the other day? I want to be with you.”

“Because you have to be with someone.”

“No,” he said, biting the word in two. Holding my cheeks, Bishop kissed my temples—one, then the other. “Because you drive me wild. Because you make me breathe easier, and I can't tell you how long it's been since I've felt so relaxed.” He fixed me with an intense stare, searching me for... something.

Shivering, and not from the cool air, I said, “He spoke about you the way he did because this has happened before. Just tell me.”

“What Corriane said—that bastard.” His chuckle was pure pain. “The things I used to do, they were things expected of me. The number of calls from my father, emphasizing how I'm supposed to entertain every single important person he sends my way... they're in the hundreds.”

He'd started squeezing my face. It was unconscious, bordering on painful, so I grabbed his wrists. He snapped back into the present. “Bishop...”

“Sorry. It's only that, I never realized how much I hated entertaining all those people for a man I barely knew until I suddenly had a reason to say no.”

Relief bubbled in me like freshly poured champagne. “I can't believe I threw that box at him.”

Laughing in that warmed-honey way of his, Bishop nuzzled my throat. “It turned me on. I love how you don't take anyone's shit.”

“Will you get in trouble for what happened? Corriane looked upset.”

“Probably. But who cares? My father can't do a thing to me, not when I'm on the verge of giving him what he's always wanted.” He touched my stomach—I inhaled. “You respond to everything I do with so much enthusiasm. It makes me rock hard, Nell. Feel me.”

He went to guide my hand, but I was way ahead of him. Grazing my palm over the front of his dress pants, I discovered how stiff his hard-on was. Stroking him from base to tip, I thrilled with his thick groan. “Where's your car?”

Heat flashed in his eyes. Wordlessly he pulled me down the alley, straight to the garage where a bright white Mustang waited. The car doors opened, blue lights illuminating the leather interior, a rhythmic pop song thumping softly through the speakers. When I touched the backseat, I knew they were the kind that heated up.

I could get used to this kind of treatment.

- Chapter Nine -

Nellie

In the three weekssince I'd begun working for the Callehursts, I'd learned several things about the rich and famous. Stuff like how they spent too much on Instacart when it'd be much easier to go to the store themselves, or how they'd never be caught dead wearing the same outfit twice. But chief among my lessons was this:

Being royalty doesn't mean you have any manners.

Page 20

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:20 am

Miss Callehurst was a queen, but that didn't prevent her from shooting withering looks at me. She'd stopped hiding her distaste, though she was polite enough not to tell me what was under her skin.

I knew, of course.

I knew because Bishop had bluntly told me when I'd asked what was going on.

“Oh. I let her know I was seeing you.”

“Youwhat?” My headache was instant. This meant she knew we were sleeping together—she had to know—and she'd bit her tongue and not said a word to me about it. I'd been sneaking around with Bishop, thinking we were staying under the radar, and she'd...

He poked me. “Are you angry? I thought you'd be relieved. You're not a secret, Nell. I want everyone to know you're mine.”

Swimming in a sea of pride, I smiled at him. “You're better at this flirting thing than I ever gave you credit for.”

He clicked his tongue and stretched back out on his bed. “Please. You loved my technique from day one.”

Okay. I had—but he didn't need to know that.

Checking my phone, I frowned. “Speaking of your mom, I should go find her. It's pay

day.” The last week, when she'd written my check, she'd stabbed it at me so violently I'd expected her to slice open my throat.

Bishop rocked onto his side, his lowered eyebrows casting a slyness to his features. “‘Pay day.’ You do know I'd take care of you and any of your bills.”

“That's nice, but I'm... I still have to think this marriage thing through.”

“You don't get it.” He sat up, the springs shifting with his weight. “Even before we marry—”

“If.”

“—I'd still happily help you.”

Chewing my lip, I considered my words. “I appreciate that, but I'm one of those gosh-darn modern day independent woman. Plus, I like your dogs. I'd miss them if I wasn't walking them.” Giving him one more quick kiss, I dodged his arms that wanted to hold me down and do way more to me. His playful scowl made me grin. “Be back up in a bit!”

I was mostly down the curving stairs over the foyer when I heard the voices. I recognized Miss Callehurst easily, but the second one... I had to concentrate.

“Thank you, Cathleen. I really appreciate you putting in a good word about me with your son.”

Iris. The girl who'd thought I was a maid.

Leaning against the banister, I peeked over enough to see the tops of their heads. They couldn't see me from their angle. Bishop's mother was dressed in her usual

draped shawl and pencil skirt. Iris had on something so low cut that, from where I was, I could tell she didn't have on a bra.

Miss Callehurst said, "It's nothing, dear. I only want my son to be happy, and someone like you is the right match, the only way to give him a joyful future."

I grit my teeth. She knows Bishop wants to be with me. He told her! And still... she kept on parading women under his nose. Undermynose, too.

Their talk blurred as they headed into the kitchen. Perching on the step, I debated running up to Bishop to tell him what I'd heard. But when I started to move, my skull became weighted. I was overwhelmed by the realization that two people were actively working against me.

Wanting some air, I stumbled out the front door. I forgot about my paycheck. I didn't care about anything but escaping the crushing sensation taking over my insides.

Crouching by the huge birds of paradise bushes, I heaved. Blood pounded in my ears, so loud I nearly missed the sound of the door opening behind me. Not wanting anyone to see me sweating in despair, I moved out of view next to the thick red flowers.

Iris had her phone to her ear, talking softly. "Yeah, it's going perfect. He'll definitely pick me, and then I'll do like we said. It'll be easy to—" Maybe she heard my shaky breath, because she whirled, stepping towards me with narrowed eyes. "Hey! What... oh, it's you."

Swallowing my bile down, I stood straight and forced a half smile. "Funny meeting you here."

"Yeah. Funny." Into the phone she mumbled, "Call you later." She buried it in her

gigantic rose-gold purse, never looking away from me. “I guess I'm not shocked to see you in the dirt. But where are your animal friends?”

Ignoring her rudeness, I did my best to keep the quiver from my voice. Why did I feel so sick? “You're wasting your time trying to kiss up to Bishop's mother. He's already picked me.” Though, I didn't completely decide if I want to be picked yet. I didn't say that part.

She looked down her nose at me, which was easy in her six-inch heels. “What do you mean, he picked you? That's the first I've heard of it.”

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:20 am

“Miss Callehurst has her sight set on you, for whatever reason, so I'm not shocked she didn't warn you, but Bishop—”

“I mean,” she snapped, shutting me up, “Why hasn't he told me this?”

I pulled up short. “He'd have no reason to talk to you.”

When she laughed, she threw her hair over one shoulder. The sound burrowed through my bones and brought the nausea back. “Right, no reason. Especially not when we're chatting over coffee, or sitting in his kitchen. Nope, no chance to tell me to bug off because he's picked some random side piece to be his wife.”

The ground was sliding out from under me. I pictured them, sitting like he and I had, talking over the kitchen island... laughing... flirting. Not once speaking about all the promises he'd made to me.

She was smiling so her teeth showed. “Bishop will never marry you. You're nothing. It's sad, really.”

I wanted to tell her she was wrong. The urge to scream, to cry, to rip out the damn flowers I'd been hiding behind—all of it was buried under my rush of hot-sickness. Recoiling, afraid I'd puke, I took off stumbling across the yard. Iris called something out to me, but I didn't turn back to listen.

All I could do was run.

He didn't tell her. Yanking at the driver's side door of my car where I'd parked it on

the steep hill, I dove inside. Bishop didn't say a word about us. Frantically I rolled my windows down. My car's interior was sweltering, sapping away the last of my strength. I slumped in the seat with my eyes shut, desperately trying to stop my stomach from eating itself.

Calm down. Breathe. Cranking on the AC, I drove my car slowly down the road. I hadn't gotten my paycheck, I hadn't even told Bishop I was leaving. Right now, I needed a moment away from that whole damn money-corrupt world.

I was feeling ill from Iris's cruel dash of reality. It was so bad I started to shake. Is this really from talking to her? No, it's got to be something more. Low blood sugar, yeah. And if not, when was it ever a bad time for chocolate?

Heading around the corner, I parked my car outside of a small gas station. Just get a snack, some water, and then you can think straight. Before I could get my purchases to the counter, another wave of nausea—this one so sharp it made me ball up on the spot—hit me. “Fuck,” I gasped.

“You okay?” It was the man running the register. His chubby face was slack with nerves, like he expected me to drop dead and he'd be left to clean up the mess.

Licking my dry lips, I said, “Fine. I'm totally fine.” This is more than nerves or fucking blood sugar. A live wire tingle of fear inched towards my brain, lighting it up with a terrifying guess about why I felt so off.

Turning away, I hurried to the small back section in the store. It was the spot they kept things like Advil, condoms, and... No, just breathe. It can't be that. Grabbing the pink box, I threw everything on the counter and waited impatiently as the man rang me up. When he handed me my items in a bag, I looked around quickly. “Is there a restroom I can use?”

He stared. Then he pointed, asking no questions.

Normally, I'd be relieved the bathroom wasn't a filth-hole. I was too focused on my task to care. Ripping open the box I'd bought, I went through the motions, reading the instructions over and over because I'd never done anything like this before and didn't want to make a mistake.

How long has it been since my last period? I didn't think too hard about the answer to that question. I didn't need to. Because right in front of me, held daintily between my fingers like it was a poison needle, was the clearest answer I could have imagined.

Were the two pink lines on a positive pregnancy test always that bright?

- Chapter Ten -

Bishop

My thumb rolled across my phone's screen. I kept checking it for new messages, wondering why Nell wasn't replying. After she'd driven off yesterday, she hadn't come back, not even to get the paycheck she'd been going on about.

Something had happened—I just didn't know what.

The lime-green numbers on my alarm clock flashed; six in the morning, the time I'd get up and run. Jogging had become a ritual for me. It was addictive, pushing myself so hard that the only thing that existed in the world was the oxygen scraping through my lungs. It gave me relief from the depressing ins and outs of behaving as my family asked.

I'd been doing it for years. I wouldn't do it today.

I have to see her... find out why she's avoiding me. Sure, it had only been sixteen hours since we'd touched, but she wasn't behaving like normal.

Over the past weeks, Nell and I had gotten close. We texted all the time. My message box was full of our banter, the random chats about movies or dinner plans. Her silence was a warning.

Dressing in designer jeans and a loose, white shirt, I tip-toed down into the kitchen. Morning light streamed through the windows. Touching the dimmer switch, I turned on the recessed lighting.

Jaws and Cujo came shuffling over the tiles towards me. “Shh,” I cautioned them. Kneeling, I scratched their ears, giving them all the attention they needed so they'd stay quiet. I didn't want my mother waking up—I needed to speak with Nell alone.

It was seven when the front door opened. I heard the tell-tale “fwish” of the weather stripping. I'd made a pot of coffee, sipping my second cup as I continued to sit on the cool tile with the dogs sprawled in my lap.

They sensed her before she came around the corner. Yipping, their claws skittered on the floor. Nell bent low, beaming at them, not noticing me. “Hey guys,” she whispered. Cujo and Jaws licked her face, but as much as they cheered her up, I could see the dark circles under her eyes. She hadn't slept well—if at all.

“They really adore you,” I said. The sound of my voice made her jump. Fear made her pupils tiny, her whole body going still as she looked at me. I flashed a comforting smile—all she did was stare at the floor.

Avoiding my eyes, Nell stood, hurrying to gather the dogs' leashes. “I didn't see you there,” she said to the wall.

Bracing my hand on one knee, I pushed myself to my feet. “What happened yesterday? Why are you ignoring my texts?”

“I have to get going. The heat has been bad. Gotta walk them before the sun...”

“Nell!”

My tone was as worn out as my bones felt. She kept facing the wall, the leashes balled up in her hands. I was only a few inches away but I had the terrible premonition that, if I reached for her, I'd discover we were worlds apart. That she was lost to me.

“Please,” I said, “Just tell me what I did wrong.”

Her hair was strewn over her face, hiding her expression under the brunette waves. I didn't need to see, though—her body language was enough. Her voice was so quiet I strained to listen. “I'm the one who made a mistake.”

Fascinated, I watched as she hugged herself. Was I imagining it, or was she holding her belly intentionally? Rapidly, my intuition began to fire. Her behavior made total sense if... if she was... “Nell, are you pregnant?”

Her eyes finally came up to meet mine. Tears pooled then spilled over, her whites bloodshot. “Yes.”

The air went out of me in a big wave. I was lightheaded before I remembered to breathe again; big gulps that turned into laughter. “How can you be crying? This is wonderful news.”

Nell's despair melted into shock. “Wonderful?”

“Yes, wonderful.” Embracing her, I swelled with relief... with joy and fear and excitement. She soothed me just by being in my arms. “It's amazing, you're going to carry our child. It's really happening. Everything is actually going well for once in my life.”

My palm caressed her stomach. She locked up, darting her attention to the floor. “Not as well as you think.” Carefully, she pulled away from me. In the cool-blue and

growing orange daylight, she looked so fragile. “Bishop... I heard your mother talking to Iris.”

“What? When?” I knew the second I asked. “You mean yesterday.”

“They were in the foyer as I came down the stairs. Your mom was promising Iris that she'd make sure you two ended up together.”

“That's ridiculous,” I growled. “Mom knows I want to be with you.”

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:20 am

Nell wrapped the leash around and around; I was sure the knots would be impossible to undo. “Right... but... does Iris know?”

The question threw me off. “I’m not sure. It wasn’t something I thought mattered.” She shifted on the spot. I hated that, seeing her fidget—knowing she was doubting me. “Nell, I don’t care if my mother is batting for Iris. If something else is going on, tell me.”

Filling her chest until she unfurled, gathering her strength, she... waited. It was a long minute, and in it, I felt judged. “Iris told me she’d been chatting with you. I got the idea that it was very friendly. The kind that wouldn’t happen if you’d made it clear to her that you’re done with your mom’s attempts at match making.”

“She’s lying. I don’t think I’ve said anything to her since your first day working here.”

“But shewashere yesterday. For all I know, she’s been here a ton. Why would she bother lying?”

I stepped towards her—she backed up. “To upset you, Nell. She’s threatened by you, and rightfully so.”

She screwed up her face. “Stop it! Don’t try to make this go away with flattery, I’m not that shallow!”

“Why the hell is it so hard for you to trust me?” I groaned, fingers clenching into painfully tight fists. “I can’t compliment you without you thinking I’m—I don’t know, fucking with you! I’m not a monster, I’m not tricking you.”

We stood there, facing off like enemies and not the soon-to-be parents we were. The indent in the base of her throat fluttered. Her lips were bloodless from how fiercely she was biting down.

How had we gotten here?

One of the dogs whimpered. The sound plucked at my heart, and Nell reacted even more obviously. Shaking herself, she stared at Cujo where he was backed into the kitchen corner with his friend. Their eyes were wide, black; worried.

Nell's hands came up to her face. Covering her eyes, she slumped in place. I thought she might collapse. I was ready to grab her when she dropped her arms, watching me with so much regret she could have been a different person. "I'm so sorry. Bishop, it's not your fault. You didn't do this to me—you didn't hurt me. That was all my ex's handiwork."

My eyebrows scrunched up. "Your ex? What did he do to you?"

"Nothing. Everything. I want to trust you, but I'm not sure I even know how anymore." Clasp ing her hands against her chest, she spoke around a bitter smile. "I'm full of broken, shattered things that want to destroy everything around them. My ex always told me I was selfish." In wonderment, she stared up at me. "You were the first person to ever say I was kind."

Pain drove through me like a truck that had lost control. I grabbed her shoulders, her hair, just holding her desperately because I worried she'd fall apart and I'd never have a chance to put her back together. "He was wrong about you."

"I know," she laughed, empty of humor. Clutching my hand, she pushed it to her cheek. Warm, wet tears soaked my skin. "You'd think learning it wasn't anything you did that made your ex cheat on you would help your sanity. But no. It just made me

hate myself for being blind for so long.”

Fueled by new hatred for a man I'd never met, I shut my eyes and breathed through my nose. “If I could kick his ass, right now, I'd drop everything and go do it.”

That time, her laugh was real. It shook through her body, I felt it move through my hands to my soul. “Thanks. That's sweet.”

“Listen... I know why you were so afraid to believe in me now, but if you'll let me, I want to show you that some people in this world aren't so awful. Not everyone cheats.” My thumb rubbed over her cheek; it shifted under the angle of her growing smile. “I would never do that because I...”

The words stopped on my tongue. It didn't matter; Nell knew what I'd almost said. Summoning my confidence, I parted my lips, but she put her hand over my mouth to quiet me. “Don't say it, not unless you mean it. I can't do fake love. You have to take responsibility for what you say.”

Prying her arms away, I kissed her. She opened for me like a flower in Spring, her body going soft, tension fading away. “I'll never lie to you. I'll never risk your heart. I love you, as crazy as it might seem, and I'm not going to marry some other woman—not even if my mother prefers it.”

Nell's eyes were full of newborn stars. “You really mean it?”

Pressing my lips on hers, I mumbled, “I do.” My tongue sought out the roof of her mouth, stroking quickly. “I really, truly mean it. I love you, Nellie Pinewood. And I love this baby.”

She trapped my hand on her belly, not moving me away. “I love you, too. But... this baby... we need to wait to tell anyone else. There's a chance it won't make it. It's so

early, that stuff happens, you know? So much can go wrong.”

“Nothing will go wrong,” I said severely.

Nell hesitated in the wake of my belief. “Okay. Alright. We should still wait until we're sure.”

Nodding, I scooped her into my arms. “Deal.”

“Hey—what are you doing?”

“You have to walk the dogs, but you need to take it easy. I'm helping.”

“This isn't helping!” she gasped when I threw her over my shoulder.

Page 24

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:20 am

I crouched, grabbing the leashes, whistling for the dogs. “Sure it is. You walk them, I walk you, and we all win.”

She's having my child.

I'd definitely won.

- Chapter Eleven -

Nellie

Our fingers were looped together, strong enough to hang us from the top of a mountain. I wanted to believe we couldn't be pulled apart—that we were inseparable in the face of simple things like family politics.

I had faith in Bishop... in us.

That didn't mean I wasn't trembling as we stood in front of his mother.

“Mom,” Bishop began, giving my fingers a squeeze. “We have something to talk to you about.”

She was bent over a notebook on the back patio, her eyes flicking up once—pointedly—to take in my obviously round stomach. Four months was a long time in the world of pregnancy. I'd ridden it out with Bishop at my side, our fears and joy mingling before and after every doctor visit. I always, always thought something was terribly wrong. Most of the time it was just heartburn. Or gas.

He'd endured each of my paranoid phone calls with loving patience.

One night, he came by with a DVD copy of Jaws and a pint of Chunky Monkey ice cream. It was the first time he'd visited me at my apartment.

Gigi found us sleeping on the couch the next morning. She'd given me a look, then started dropping hypotheticals like, "If you had a kid, who would the godmother be?" and "Is purple and gold an okay color scheme for a baby shower?" I didn't mind her not so subtle hints, because after that, she let Bishop sleep over any night I wanted him to.

"Mom," he said again. That time she didn't look up.

"Miss Callehurst... please, you know what's going on. Let's talk about it."

"Talk about what?" she muttered, texting someone on her phone, then making a note in her book. "I'm in the middle of arranging a social event, so if you'd both give me some space."

I blinked. "Social event?"

Her eyes rolled up to mine, her voice scathing. "A party, dear."

Bishop grabbed the top of the long patio couch. "Enough. No more pointless parties or arranged setups. I'm having a baby with Nell, this is happening."

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:20 am

My heart was on the verge of bursting. But his mom didn't react; she just lifted the phone, tucking it to her ear and answering it on the second ring. "Hello? Ah, yes, bring the flowers around back. You can set them in the kitchen for now until the coordinator arrives."

Blown away by her attitude, I couldn't keep my voice from rising. "Are you listening? I'm pregnant with your grandchild!"

There—she stared at me. In a smooth motion she ended the call, placing her phone gently on the outdoor cocktail table. "For all I know you're just getting fat."

"How could you..." Bishop started. She stood quickly, brushing around us and heading back inside. "Stop being so impossible!" he snapped.

Standing inside the French doors, she sent a cutting look Bishop's way, then rested it on me. Her eyes were gray like his, but nowhere near as warm. "Here's what's going to happen. Tonight, my son will attend this party. He'll smile and entertain the guests, and when Iris arrives, he will take her aside and tell her he plans to marry her."

"That's not happening," I said flatly.

Bishop lifted his head high. "Why are you fighting this? You and dad wanted an heir, I'm giving you one."

"Your father will never let you marry this woman!" she scoffed, hands clutching at her shawl. "She's the damndog walker. We hired her to fill in for your laziness, not so you could knock her up! Don't embarrass this family any more than you already

have.”

I wished I had some clever comeback. I looked on as the woman who fought tooth and nail against my happiness turned her back and walked away.

“She hates me. Your mom literally hates me.”

Scratching at his hair, Bishop groaned. “Don't worry about it, she hates a lot of people.”

My feet were killing me; so was my heart. I dropped heavily onto the couch. “If she doesn't accept me, this won't work.”

He slid beside me, pulling me against his firm chest. Bishop was constantly holding my belly and now was no different. “She can scream at the sky but that won't stop the rain.” I squinted at him, he laughed weakly. “What I mean is... even if she puts Iris in my path, I don't have to go to her. This is my baby inside of you, Nell. I'm making you my wife. Let everyone else screech at us as we walk down the aisle.”

That soothed me enough that I relaxed in his arms. The backyard was small, neatly arranged with rose bushes and crawling ivy up the walls. It was late enough that the sun was setting, our viewpoint allowing us to watch the purple hue take over downtown's skyline. “Are you really going to the party?”

“Sure. I wouldn't miss a chance to wear you on my arm.”

My laugh was hollow; I pet his hands over my stomach. “I'll look like a beluga whale that you broke out of Sea World and stuffed into a dress.”

“Did you know I happen to love whales?” Kissing my cheek, he casually rolled his palms upwards, brushing my swollen breasts. I gasped, pushing him away as he

chuckled in my ear. “You're beautiful. Radiant.”

“Radiant is code for 'Nothing really nice to compliment about you.'”

“That's definitely not true.” He palmed my belly, tracing over the curves. Bishop's voice was deep and rich as a river full of gold. “In all seriousness, you drive me wild, Nell. You're more woman than ever, and more of you is never a bad thing.”

There was a parade in my chest. I was sure he could feel the hard pattern of my breathing. “Bishop... is there any chance she's right? Could your dad turn me down, take your brother and his baby even if we beat them on the clock?”

“You're worried that I'll lose everything.”

I hadn't wanted to say it, but... “Yeah.” I grabbed his forearms, pulling them around me, locking us together like I expected someone to physically try and pry us apart. “You were willing to marry a stranger, make a baby, to keep your family happy. If you don't get the ending you wanted it'll be tragic.”

“Are you joking?” Shifting me so that we were facing each other, he nipped my bottom lip. His kiss was fierce—it went on long enough that the sun was nearly gone when he finally stopped. “Nell, you're the ending I want. If I lose all my wealth, my power, but I get to keep you... keep this...” He stroked his hand over my swollen belly. “Then I've come out further ahead than I could have ever hoped for.”

Was it possible to fall deeper in love than I already had?

“Now come on,” he said, smiling slyly. “We've got a party to get ready for.”

- Chapter Twelve -

Nellie

I'd been to his home countless times, but tonight, I didn't recognize it.

Copper streamers, ice shaped like swans, crystals lighting up every single wall... Miss Callehurst had gone all out. She'd hired a valet to park the guests' cars, but I'd rolled up with Bishop, and one look at him and the valet had waved him through to park wherever he felt like it. He did live here, after all.

But now, as we stood in the foyer of a place that should have felt familiar, I saw I was in a different world. Who were all these people? How had Miss Callehurst put something this grand together so quickly?

"I feel massively out of place," I whispered.

Bishop gripped my arm in the crook of his. "You're with me. You belong here more than anyone else."

"Alright, but I don't think they feel that way." I'd caught two or three salty glares from the women strutting around. They didn't like seeing me next to Bishop—and I suspected they liked my rounded belly even less.

Some people might assume I was gaining weight, but scandal never chases after the tame rumor. These strangers saw me as the pregnant nobody who threatened their chance at marrying upwards.

I hadn't meant to wear something that revealed my pregnancy, but Bishop had scoffed at every outfit I'd produced from my closet. "Not good enough," he'd said. Then Gigi had swirled into my bedroom, clutching a red dress that would put most of my "assets" on display.

Bishop refused to let me try on anything else after that.

Both my friend and lover had assured me I looked good. I'd almost felt that way until I saw the other women. Cupping my stomach nervously, I followed Bishop deeper into his house. Most of the party was taking place in a large dining area. The furniture had been removed, replaced by long tables of tiny cakes and trays of golden champagne.

"Let me get you something," he said, pulling us up along the display of desserts.

"It's not like chocolate will make me feel more at ease."

Lifting an eyebrow, he waved a mini vanilla and fudge pie under my nose. "So you don't want this?"

Frowning, I snatched it away from him as he grinned knowingly. "Of course I want it. Shush." Nibbling the snack, I surveyed the busy crowd. Whenever I glanced at someone, they'd turn away, making their spying very obvious. "Why are we here again?" I sighed.

"To show that we don't need to hide." Adjusting his tie, he promptly scooped an arm around my hip, nodding at a pair of men in matching white suits. "And to show you off."

"You said that earlier. I don't know if I'm feeling like I'm worth being 'shown' in public at all." I'd said it with a smile, but Bishop's hard stare stopped me in my tracks,

my fingertip poised between my lips to get the last bit of chocolate.

Bending down, he kissed me around my finger. His tongue slid side to side, as if he was trying to get a taste of the dessert before it was gone. Heat flashed in his eyes. “You're worth the world to me, Nell. You're definitely worth having on my arm at a party like this. Everyone can see how much we're in love... and how wonderful your pregnancy is going.”

Red as a beet, I wondered how many people were staring at us. But then I didn't care—what was there to be ashamed about? He was right; let the world see how happy we were together.

Nothing can ruin this moment,I thought.

And then I saw Corriane.

He saw me, too, and on long legs he came our way. He was dressed in a pastel blue vest over a black shirt, every one of his edges crisp and hard. His hands were deep in his pockets; I imagined him hiding a knife there. Fuck, what was he going to do to me?

“Nellie!” he shouted, loud enough for the room to hear him. If they hadn't been staring before, they were now.

Page 27

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:20 am

Drawing myself up, I faced Corriane. The last time I'd seen him he'd been sprawled on a restaurant floor, furious with me and Bishop. Would he sneer at me? Mock me while everyone looked on?

I prepared myself for what to say in return. But then he wrapped his arms around me, hugging me like we were old friends.

Baffled, I looked at Bishop over his shoulder. The prince shrugged, though I could see the veins in the backs of his hands throbbing; he'd been ready to take Corriane down if he started trouble.

Not entirely sure he wasn't starting something, I pulled out of the hug. "Hi?" I asked stupidly.

His grin was brighter than the chandeliers above us. He gripped my upper arms, gazing down at my belly. "Look at you! You're stunning, my goodness. Bishop, how can you let her walk in these heels? Tsk!"

Bishop and I shared a look. "Corriane," he said, "It's nice to see you smiling. I didn't expect you to be here, honestly."

"Because of our little fiasco?" Chuckling, he let me go and reached into his pocket. There was no weapon, just his phone. He scrolled through it as he spoke. "I should apologize for that night. I acted like a real jackass."

No argument there, I thought with a tiny smile.

Turning the phone so I could see it, he showed me a photo of a beautiful woman. She was smiling at the camera. In her hand was a wineglass, the other sat half full on the table in front of her. "Is that your fiancée?" I asked, blinking.

"An angel, yes?" Grinning ear to ear, he showed the picture to Bishop. "The gift from your mother. She gave us wine glasses inscribed with the day Lavon and I had our first date. I remember she'd told me how she hated wine. I was determined to change that, so I took her to my favorite winery. It was a wonderful time." He paused, then added, "Good memory, your mother."

"She does have that," Bishop said softly. He was unsure what was going on; always looking for danger. I appreciated that, but I didn't think Corriane was tricking us somehow. He looked... happy. Especially when he stared at the photo of his fiancée.

Shaking himself back to the present, he nodded at me. "You were right, you know. It shouldn't have taken something as simple as some wine glasses to remind me, and yet... well." He shrugged helplessly. "Lavon is my jewel. I love her, and if I'd gone to a strip club that night, I'd have ruined everything. Thank you both for stopping me."

If I doubted his confession, I couldn't doubt the raw regret in his frown. Corriane had gone from thinking I was trash to... respecting me. I clasped his hands with all the affection I had in me. "It's nothing. Anytime you need me to chuck a box at you, I'll be there."

He laughed hard, grabbing Bishop to give him a playful shake. "See? Such fire! Your baby will be a wild thing, be ready for it."

"I will be," Bishop said. The muscles in his neck had finally relaxed.

Corriane walked off, and as he did, I took the opportunity to scan the crowd again. Some people still scowled, but not all of them. There was wonderment in some

faces—interest. Corriane was a powerful emissary, his approval of our relationship was a signal flare to everyone else that we weren't joking around.

“Huh.”

“What?” Bishop asked.

Grabbing another tiny pie off the table, I finished it in one bite. Making him wait while I chewed was satisfying. “I was just thinking that maybe this could work out.”

Looping a piece of my hair around his finger, he tugged. “Oh,” he whispered in my ear. “You only just realized that?”

Kissing him quickly on the cheek, I dodged away as fast as I could. My pregnancy didn't slow me down a ton, but I was aware of it. “I'm going to get some air, this many people plus my hugeness is making me too warm. Be right back.”

I dropped onto the ledge that surrounded the mudroom where people could leave their coats. It was quiet; cool, thanks to an open window, and empty because everyone was partying. “Damn heels,” I groaned, taking one off so I could massage my foot.

“Oh, you poor thing,” a voice said behind me. I turned in time to see Iris. She was dressed in a gold sequin dress, straps coiling from her shoes up to her knees. Sinking down beside me, she flashed me a pitying look. “Pregnancy is hard on you, huh?”

Looking side to side, amazed she was speaking so sweetly to me, I balked. “Um... I guess so.”

“Here, do you need a tissue? A mint?” She was digging into her expensive looking

purse. "Tell me how you're doing."

Okay, now I was super lost. This girl was not my friend. "Why are you trying to be nice?"

Her false eyelashes flapped like wings. "Oh my gosh! How can I not be nice to you? You're bursting with that baby. Things can't be easy for you right now. But at least you're brave. It takes guts to stand in front of all those people, parading your illegitimate baby-belly around."

There it was. How could someone so pretty say something so ugly? "Bishop is going to marry me." I hadn't said it out loud until now. When I did, a flutter spun through my body, flipping like a fish in a pond. We're going to get married. Would that make me a princess, a queen? I didn't care; just being his wife would be enough.

Covering her mouth, she laughed in rapid short bursts. It reminded me of someone with the hiccups. "You're so stupid. What did you do, trick him? Tell him you were on birth control when you weren't? Girls like you, using men to get yourself out of shitty situations, piss me off."

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:20 am

Igniting with rage, I waved my shoe around in the air as I spoke. “I didn't trick anyone!”

Her shoulders shifted up lazily; she wasn't scared of me. “That's how it will look, especially when you marry him. People will think he had no choice. I mean, they've seen you, they know you're pregnant. What's the term, shotgun wedding?”

Heat spread over my face. “You don't know anything about us.”

“I know this.” Leaning closer in the tight space, she dropped her voice. “He's royalty. You're no one. The best thing you can do for both of you is to get rid of that baby. If it's too late to do it the quick way, put it up for adoption. Just make it go away. This isn't your world, dog walker.”

“My world is wherever Bishop is.”

“God, you're naive. I—” she didn't finish her thought. Both of us heard the rustling, creaky noise nearby. Twisting, she looked over and spotted Jaws chewing on the strap of her purse. “What the hell?” she gasped, jumping to her feet. “That bag is worth two thousand dollars!”

It was hard to hide my smile, so I didn't try. “Too bad.”

Abruptly, Iris shot her foot out, kicking the Pomeranian. “Dumb dog!”

He yelped; I jumped up, made light and fast by my need to protect the small animal. “Hey! What the heck is wrong with you?” Pushing Iris aside, I scooped the dog up

into my arms.

She turned just enough to give me a side-eye. “That dog is nothing, just like you're nothing. You don't deserve this family's money any more than Bishop does.”

My cheek was pressed to Jaws, but he seemed fine, just shaken up. Registering her comment, I blinked. “Wait, what?”

I'd never seen Iris flush before. “Nothing, forget it.”

Still holding the dog, I blocked Iris up against the wall of coats. “No. What do you mean Bishop doesn't deserve the money? If he doesn't, who does?”

She had her chin held high. “It doesn't matter.”

“I think it does.” In my arms, Jaws growled. He wasn't exactly terrifying, but the sight of his tiny teeth pushed Iris from silent pride to frantic nerves.

Her eyes darted around, and when Jaws growled again, she fixated on him. “Alright, fine! It's not like it matters anyway. You and your dumb baby-mama stuff messed everything up. Bishop was never supposed to have a kid with anyone.”

Startled, I tried to fit the puzzle together. “Not even you?”

“Of course not.” Wide-eyed, she stared down at me. “His half-brother hired me. I was supposed to marry Bishop, but never give him an heir. That way...”

“His brother would get everything.” I inhaled sharply. “Why would you help him?”

“Because money, duh.” Iris rolled her eyes. “Even you can understand that.”

“I don't want his money!” She winced at my outburst. “I never did. I told him that multiple times, I'm not looking for some sugar daddy!” My laughter sounded manic. I felt it, too, like parts of me were sliding apart. Had money really led to such a huge scheme between Iris and Bishop's brother? Could people be so desperate? Of course they can. Why had I been so naive?

She shook her head in disbelief. “But the baby... if you didn't do it to trap him, then why?”

“Because I love him, Iris. I love him with everything I am.”

There was shock in her eyes. Then I noticed she was looking just over my shoulder. Hugging Jaws, I turned, spotting Miss Callehurst watching us from the hall. Her arms were wrapped around her chest, mouth so tight it was almost invisible.

“Cathleen,” Iris whispered.

“It's Miss Callehurst,” she said flatly. “Get out of my house. Never set foot here again.”

Without a single argument, Iris grabbed her chewed-on purse and dodged around us both, vanishing into the house. I didn't see where she went, but I believed she was leaving like she'd been told. I'd have—Bishop's mom was terrifying.

Her attention shot to me and I went cold. “How much did you hear?” I asked.

“Enough.” She took two steps forward, her poise grand...comfortable. But when she got close to me, I saw her pebble-hard glare looked wet on the edges. “I see why the dogs like you so much. Not everyone can champion for such small things when they cause expensive damage.”

“It was just a purse.” Setting Jaws down, I watched as he ran up to his owner, bouncing at her ankles.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:20 am

“Just a purse,” she said, bending low to pet the dog. Her hair hid her face, I was surprised to see her smiling when she stood again. This wasn't like her pretend pleasantries, this was a real smile, and in it, I saw how similar she was to her son. “Just a baby. Just a marriage. Any of these things can be tossed aside by the wrong people.”

I went red. Very red. “Okay, you did hear a lot. Listen... about Bishop.”

“You love him.”

I bit my tongue, trying to decide how to answer. “Yes.”

“And he loves you. Clearly.” Shaking her head, she came closer. I saw how tired she was behind all of her makeup. “I told you it was his idea to get the dogs. I didn't tell you his reason.” Glancing behind her, she considered the air, then me again. “My husband has been very absent. I loathe the word 'lonely' but maybe I was. Or am. Bishop thought as much, so he got Jaws and Cujo for me.”

My heart skipped. “He can be very thoughtful.” Moving forward, my toe bumped something—my shoe. I quickly slid it back on. “Miss Callehurst, I want you to know that I get why you wanted Iris over me.”

Amusement turned her lips into a pucker. “Do you?”

“You thought she would be a fit for your son. I don't think that was wrong, I mean, before it turned out she was out to backstab him. If I was you, and I had a kid, I would do my best to look out for them.”

She watched me curiously. “There's a silent 'but' on your tongue.”

I bit my lip. “But—you don't always know who is best for you. Or anyone, really. Bishop isn't who I'd have guessed. Now? I can't imagine being with anyone else.”

Quicker than I expected, she crossed the last distance, embracing me. It was a short hug, but it meant the world to me. Holding me at arm's length, she sighed. “Call me Cathleen. A daughter-in-law should be on a first name basis.”

“You don't even let me call you that,” Bishop said. He was standing down the hall, half-leaning on the wall with one ankle crossed over the other. He looked astoundingly comfortable; like a suit of armor that belonged there. If I looked closer, I could see that he was watching not just me—but his mother, too—with fascination.

Moving towards him, I held out my hands. He took them up, then he went further, sweeping me into his arms. Fingers coiled in my hair, making it so I couldn't escape. He heard everything, I thought in a daze. He knows his mother is happy for us.

I wanted to behave, but even so, I let my nails scrape over the back of his shirt, untucking it from his belt. I dipped under to brush his skin; he stiffened at my contact. Beneath my hands, each of his muscles tightened, reminding me how strong he was.

We gasped when he pulled us apart—just an inch, enough to speak. “Dammit, you make it very hard to behave,” he grumbled.

“It's not my fault. It's the pregnancy.”

“Sure it is,” he said, his eyes lighting up with mirth.

“It is! Really!”

“You're protesting like I care what the reason is,” he said, chuckling under his breath. Taking me by the hand, he faced us towards his mother. She'd stayed quiet, patiently toying with the end of her shawl as she hovered nearby. “Mom, you're really okay with this?”

Her thin eyebrows arched high enough to pull her fine wrinkles smooth. “Would it matter if I wasn't? You've always done what you wanted, Bishop. I'd be foolish to expect that to change with love involved.”

His hold on me tightened. “I do love her. And you're right, even if you hated Nell, or if Dad decided he wasn't going to give us what he promised, I wouldn't have been able to walk away from her. In fact... the only walking I want to do is down the aisle.”

Instantly my heart wedged in my throat. The background noise of the party was soft, but it faded more as I focused on Bishop's determined expression. With ease, he dropped to one knee. I'd begun trembling. I was shaking so much that, when he took my hand up in his, he hesitated. “I'm fine,” I squeaked out. “Keep going. What's that about an aisle?”

He grinned sharply. “Is this how you're going to be? You'll never walk anywhere if you're shaking this much.”

“Shut up, shut up,” I said, gulping for air. “Ask me what you want to ask!”

Miss Callehurst had put her shawl over the bottom of her face. She scrunched it there, as if it could hide how overwhelmed she was.

Clearing his throat, Bishop flipped his shirt out of the way—I'd pulled it out of his pants when I'd clawed at his back. Smooth as a spoon over fresh cream, he flourished a small, navy blue box from his pocket. I'd known he was about to... deep down, it

had been obvious... and still, I let out a rush of air. “Nellie Pinewood, you're the sweetest, kindest, most beautiful woman I've ever had the pleasure of sharing a shower with.”

“Bishop!” Fuck, I was beyond red.

Laughing low in his chest, he showed me the ring in the box. It was white gold, the metal wrapping around a princess cut diamond bigger than a chocolate chip. “It would mean the world to me if you'd pledge the rest of your life to me. I want to be by your side from now until we're old and gray and still kissing like we'd just met. I want to see how amazing our children will be with you as their mother. Will you marry me?”

At first I thought, Children? As in more than one? But then a comet-sized explosion of joy crashed into me. I was flaring with heat inside and out, a being of pure bliss, and speaking became impossible. Tasting tears as they rolled down my cheeks and caught in the corners of my nervous laugh, I nodded over and over.

“That's a yes?” he asked, no longer joking. I'd never seen him so serious.

Page 30

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:20 am

“It's a yes!” I cried, wiggling my finger as he slid the ring on. It was gorgeous, and other girls might have studied it longingly. All I wanted to do was kiss this man.

So I did.

And then I didn't stop.

- Epilogue -

Bishop

The pair of Pomeranianstrotted down the aisle together. On their collars they each wore a small pillow, my wedding ring and Nell's, respectively. The sight of them made my grin stretch wide. My mother, perched in a front seat nearby, was clasping her lilac-gloved hands with a proud smile.

Cujo panted, wagging his tail as he reached me. I bent down to take the ring. Opposite me, Gigi took the other from Jaws. The priest who was officiating smiled politely, but I wondered if he thought we were very strange for making the dogs our ring bearers.

Honestly? I didn't care what anyone thought.

This wasourwedding.

No one else's.

People were still laughing politely behind their hands when the music changed. Pachelbel's Canon filtered through the air. And then I saw her.

Nellie came forth like from some sultry dream. There were peach and yellow flowers in her high-coiffed hair. Instead of a veil, a long, silvery cape drifted along behind her up the aisle. Our guests gasped appropriately. I knew she was beautiful. I knew she felt beautiful, and how could she not?

The snow-cream dress clung to her rounded belly. There was a slim belt under her swollen breasts, the same design dancing at the hem of her massively ruffled skirts. No one dead or alive could match her. My beautiful bride—just seeing her had my heart thrumming.

Deeper than the love, more primal, was my urge for her. This woman was about to become my wife. Everyone in this room could see she carried my child in her womb. I'd never been so possessive, so wild and unhinged, for anyone like I was for Nell. I guess that's how you know it's love.

Watching her approach me brought pricks of heat to the backs of my eyes. I was overwhelmed by this woman. By her scent, her presence, by the very idea of her and what waited for us down the road.

Nell paused in front of me. "Hi," she whispered.

I worked the dry knot down my throat. "You're the most beautiful woman in the world. Did you know?" My hands clasped around hers. The priest cleared his throat, but I didn't let go. I never would.

Distantly, I knew things were being said. My distracted cells worked to connect with

Nell's as we hovered so close. We were merging on paper but I wanted us to bind together on a level even deeper.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:20 am

“Do you, Bishop Callehurst, take this woman to be your wife? To have and to hold until death do you part?”

“Death couldn't separate us,” I murmured, lifting her hands, kissing her knuckles. A tear boiled over in the corner of her eye and fell quickly down the slope of her cheek. “I'll love you into the next life, Nellie Pinewood.” Glancing at the priest, I nodded. “I do.”

“And do you, Nellie Pinewood, take this man to be your husband?”

“Of course I do!” Nell blurted, jumping into my arms, kissing me violently before the rings were even on our fingers. Cameras flashed and people laughed, a few cheering. Someone whistled; when Nell pulled back I saw it was Corriane, who had his fist balled with his fiancée's and held above their heads. The sight of his joy made me smile.

The empty seat beside my mother made my heart hurt.

Dad hadn't come. He'd managed the honor of Skyping with me to hear the news about the baby on its way. The severe man had nodded in approval, almost coldly commenting on how of course my mother and I would get access to his money. Like we were fools to worry that my half-brother would rob it out from under us.

Part of me hated that, too; knowing people would suffer because of my father's fickle wishes. But ultimately, all I cared about was providing a future for my mother. For my new wife.

For our children.

“I can't stop staring at it,” she whispered, turning her hand over and over. “It's simpler than the engagement ring, but I love that. It's just perfect.”

“You're perfect,” I said, carrying her into the hotel room suit. She'd been in my arms since the limo had pulled up outside. I knew our friends and family had wanted to talk to us, but I'd excused ourselves, insisting Nell needed to be off her feet.

Now, I kissed her forehead and set her on the massive bed. The waves of tulle and lace settled around her like a gigantic lily flower. There was color high on her cheekbones, the centers of her eyes dilated. “I feel intoxicated,” she whispered, chuckling nervously. “Do you?”

My hands came down heavily on either side of her hips on the blanket. “Yes.”

“What is it from?” she asked, her lashes dipping heavily to touch her smooth cheeks.

“Love.” My nose rubbed hers. “And lust. Definitely lust. You look fucking incredible in this dress, Wife.”

Nell's lips parted, glistening with surprise and her rising hunger. “Say that again.”

“Wife,” I teased.

Shutting her eyes, she drifted back on the pillows and groaned. “That's the sexiest thing I've ever heard.”

Hovering over her, I started to undo my bow tie. The silk slid through the quiet, both

of us tasting the energy as it began to boil around the room. Our bodies were magnetic; even as I crouched on her, she arched her hips, pushing to feel my firm inner thighs. “Fuck,” I hissed.

“Take this off,” she said eagerly, her polished nails going for the buttons of my charcoal vest.

My eyes twinkled—I saw my need mirrored in her face. “You do it.”

Sitting up on her elbows, grunting with her belly in the way, she flicked the hard plastic discs one by one until my vest and shirt both hung open, displaying my naked skin. I was breathing heavily; the ink on my body writhed.

“Lie on your side,” I said, palming my erection through my pants. She was frozen, just watching me. “God, I love seeing you hypnotized by my cock.”

She bit her lip. “It's because I haven't seen my husband's cock before, and I can't wait to.”

My dick flexed in my grip. I knew I'd gone still, nostrils flaring, my desire for her plain as day. Quickly, I moved to help her slide her dress out of the way. I exposed her long legs, the silken thigh-highs... and her lack of panties. “Jesus, Nell,” I groaned. “You were like this the whole time?”

She buried her grin in the pillows.

“No,” I said flatly, leaning over to catch her chin. I made her face me again, and her smile vanished. “Tell me what it felt like to walk down the aisle with your little pussy naked beneath your wedding dress. How hot were you, waiting this whole time to show me?”

Her tongue darted over her teeth. “Crazy hot. Feel me and see.”

Tracing my hand over her thighs, I moved her dress higher. Her vanilla skin was bare, her folds already swollen and open. I could see her clit flex. I knew she was soaked and I didn't have to feel her to tell.

“You smell so damn amazing,” I said, my words strained—all of me was straining. Then I saw my hand on her leg, the wedding ring on my finger, and any hope of holding back evaporated.

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She whimpered as I traced two fingers over her cunt. Spreading her folds, I dipped my tongue, lapping greedily. Her thighs hugged my face, driving me to lap at her liquid center faster.

I couldn't tell if she was squeezing me to make me stop or to make sure I wouldn't stop. Bracing myself with one arm wrapped around her hip, I licked my thumb and pet her firm clitoris. “Ah!” she moaned, wriggling, pressing her naked pussy onto my lips. My nose was grinding into her pinkness now.

In my pants my cock was heavy with need. It pulsed constantly, demanding I set it free. I ignored it by focusing on how amazing it was to have my new wife's pussy dripping down my chin.

Stroking a finger down her seam, I pushed it in patiently. “Do you feel that?” I asked as the metal band vanished inside of her. “That's the ridge of my wedding ring. It's inside of you—did you ever imagine that happening?”

“Fuck,” she managed, her voice cracking. Her ass rocked on the mattress.

“You need more in this greedy cunt, is that it?” I expected steam to rise off of my tongue. I was burning up; so was she. Her hot insides flexed around my finger. I inserted a second, then a third, thrilling with how she vibrated right down to her knees as they crushed my ears.

I could barely hear her over my own breathing now. I'd never been so hard. My balls were drawn up, tight—ready to explode even though I hadn't gotten my dick wet yet. “Come for me,” I growled against her thigh. I nipped her skin, making her

jump—causing her pussy to choke my fingers. “Come for your husband. You're so close you couldn't hold back if you tried.”

My filthy mouth set her over the edge; she keened high, back arching, limbs stiffening. Her walls pulsed over and over, liquid flooding my ravenous mouth. I could have eaten her out until there was nothing left of her to give.

But I needed my own release or I was going to go insane. Moving her legs, I knelt on the bed by her feet. She was panting, skin flushed as she gazed at me like she'd never seen me before. Was I so different now that we were married? Now that she was truly mine?

“I love you,” she said suddenly.

Freezing with my zipper down, I studied her face. The shadows cast by her eyelashes made her eyes dark. Her mouth was red as jam. I crawled over her belly carefully, kissing her with such force the air whooshed out of my nose. “I love you, too,” I said, watching for her reaction. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, better than okay.” Her smile was soft but real. “Just a little emotional. Hormones and all. But I'm fine.”

“Good,” I said, sitting back, peeling my trousers open. My cock came out in my fist, angry red, the head shining with my precome. “Because I'm going to fuck you blind now.”

She inhaled sharply. Watching me closely, she rocked onto her side, reaching back to spread open her pussy for me. She put herself on display and it sent a rush of electricity through my brain to my shaft. My thick veins pulsed under my thumb. “I'd divorce you if you didn't,” she said.

Spooning her from behind, I rubbed my cock up and down her slippery folds. One hand cupped her belly, steadying her, giving me the brace I needed to push my shaft between her gap. After a few thrusts across the outside of her pussy, my entire thick cock was glistening.

Each movement I made drew a shuddering gasp from her. “Bishop, that's—God that's good. Fuck me, please. I'm losing it waiting for you.”

“I know.” I stamped a kiss onto the back of her neck. The dress rippled around us, creating waves of white and silver, but never getting in the way. The fat tip of my cock pressed on her entrance. It drew me in, a persistent pull until my crowned ridge entered. I hissed through my teeth. “Fucking hell you're tight.”

How was she always so snug after all the times we'd screwed?

My wife's pussy was magic. It made a lot of sense, really.

Inch by inch, I filled her up, enduring every flutter of her inner walls. My balls drew against the crack of her ass. We were sandwiched together, locking in and breathing out in simultaneous, almost relieved breaths. My heart beat through her spine. I felt her pulse, her blood, her consuming heat.

And I felt the way her round belly pressed into my palm. Nothing made me as crazy as knowing she was carrying my child in there. Pregnancy was the ultimate gift... and the ultimate proof she was mine forever. I'd claimed her in every way a man could.

Rocking my hips, I built up the pace. I was too fucking aroused to take my time. If she hadn't been pregnant I'd have been rougher. As it was, I gripped her beautiful hair in one fist and pawed at her breasts through her corset with the other.

My lips shaped the words I love you even though my brain was on another level and

unable to hear. Butshedid, her whole being clenched in response. Saliva filled my mouth; my tongue was numbed and buttery.

Deep in her pussy, my dick swelled. Then it swelled more, drawing a low croon from Nell that went on and on until it blurred with my own roar. “More,” she sobbed. “Give me more. I need more of you—more of your come, make it drip out of me.”

“Jesus,” I breathed. My cock scraped through her and I somehow, with her demand, found more speed. I was wedged so tight inside of her that without her juices flowing so free I wouldn't have been able to move an inch. But I did move. I fucked her like a piston on overdrive.

Grunting, I clung to her body as sperm flowed from my cock. Each flare of my chest on her spine drew more cream from me. Endless come. I was draining everything I had—challenging our biology not to knock her up while she was already fucking pregnant.

She came again. I'm not sure when she stopped. Her muscles were clamping down and making me see spots.

Our bodies fit together so naturally. When I draped my hand on her hip, she reached over, winding our fingers together, making our wedding rings touch. “I could stay like this forever,” I whispered, nuzzling her throat.

“Me too.” A long, delicious yawn made her ass roll into my naked hips. “But I'm going to ruin the mood by getting up to pee.”

We both laughed. I sat up, propping my head on my arms behind my head. Nell gingerly stepped off the bed, and when her dress drifted down to hide her perfect legs, no one would have known she'd just been fucked senseless. No one but us.

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She washed up in the bathroom. I listened to the water run, watching the half-open door across from me. Her silhouette kept moving in the crack. It cast shadow, then white light, then darkness again. Finally she swung the door open. She was framed by the hard lines, her curves exaggerated.

I sat up, stiffening everywhere. My cock twitched to life again. “You're impossibly gorgeous,” I whispered.

Nell's blush went up her throat and didn't slow down. Wrapping her arms over her belly, she turned, casting a sly look at me as she faced away. “Undo my dress, husband?”

My cock jumped again. “With pleasure.” Standing up, my hard, veined shaft bounced against my thigh. Her attention darted there, then back to my face. “I can't help it. You drive me wild,” I explained with a throaty laugh.

“I don't mind. I'm just appreciating the view.”

“Same,” I said, the huskiness not gone. Running my hand down the nape of her neck, I watched her goosebumps come alive. With ease I flipped the ribbons holding her corset top, unwinding them until she breathed out in relief.

Gingerly, she touched under her arms. I saw the side of one tit and groaned. “That dress was amazing, but it crushed me. My breasts are so damn huge these days.”

“Such a shame,” I said. Letting my palms slide down her naked shoulders, I pressed firmly on her shoulder blades, then beneath, rubbing under her heavy breasts. “Come

back to bed. I want to massage my wife.”

“Those words are magic,” she chuckled. Facing me, she wriggled the voluminous skirts down her hips. Nell was poised before me in all of her new wife, and soon to be new mother, glory.

Before I could control myself, I put my hands on her stomach and inhaled loudly. “Bed. Now.”

She moved as quick as she could, stretching out on her side—one of the few positions left that she felt comfortable in. I glided in beside her. My hard dick prodded her ass, but I ignored my desire and instead started to work my thumbs into her tender muscles.

Nell's eyelashes fluttered. “That's so good, Bishop. Thank you.”

Reaching down, I massaged her calves. She mewled like a cat. “Was the wedding hard on you?”

“On my body, yeah. But then everything feels like a challenge lately.”

“That makes sense.” I kissed her shoulder and left my cheek there. “One month until you're due.” One month until I'm a father.

She went quiet. I thought she was relaxing into the comfort of my touch, but when I lifted my head, I saw how she was staring at the far wall. Her plump lips were making an awful frown.

I cupped her chin, and she turned, looking up at me. “What's going on in your head right now?” I asked softly.

Blinking furiously, she rubbed at her eyes. Were those tears? “Sorry. I'm sorry.”

“Shh.” Pain shot through my chest. I was flooding with a need to protect Nell and keep her safe. Her sadness was my sadness, and that would always be true. Cradling her to my chest, I shifted her body so she was lying on me with her head under my chin. “Don't ever be sorry for how you feel. Just talk to me.”

For a while she sniffled. Her tears moved between hiccups, to nervous laughter, then back again. “I'm all over the place. I can't hold myself together, and it's your fault.”

I held my breath. “What?”

The shard of despair vanished when she looked up and I noticed she was smiling. Even with wetness on her cheeks and her eyes all red, she looked happy. “Yeah. If you weren't so sweet, and kind... if you didn't love me so much... and if I was capable of doubting that you might actually be a good dad—” she cut herself off and shrugged. “If you were none of those things, I could feel nervous like a normal person. Instead, I'm so overwhelmed by feeling happy that I don't know what to do with it all.”

Words fled me. What good would speaking do, anyway? What she was explaining was a feeling that went so low, so raw, and reflected my own so acutely that there was nothing I could say in response.

So I kissed her.

I kept kissing her until my lungs gave out and my body itched for oxygen so much I could die. And I still kept kissing her for a little longer past that.

Gasping, I broke away. She gazed at me with her cheeks flushed—her lips mildly swollen. “Nell, I love you.” It was such an obvious thing to say, but she waited, not caring that I lacked creativity. “And if it's my fault you're so happy... I'll take that burden.” Grinning, I wiped away the last smudge of her tears. “Thank you for saying I'll be a good father. I'll do my best.”

“I know.” She stroked her belly, then she took my hand and pressed it there. “Feel.”

Under my palm there was a kick. It was small—easy to miss. It sent my heart sprawling. “She's strong like her mom,” I whispered. “Hopefully she'll be a good older sister someday, too.”

Nell's eyebrows furrowed hard. “Are you planning our family photo in your head right now?”

“Our photos. Our vacations. Our everything.” I squeezed her and didn't ease up. My teeth nipped her ear, making her whimper. I was addicted to the noises she made. “I told you before, I want children. As in multiple.” Her thighs scissored; I was turning her on, and knowing that engorged my cock. “Somehow, I don't think convincing you to let me pump my seed into your greedy cunt will be hard.”

“Bishop!” she gasped.

“I'm going to have everything I ever wanted in life,” I whispered, my lips perching on her temple. Lazily I trailed my fingertips down her chest to brush her sensitive nipples. “How many people can say that?”

Nell's hand squeezed mine tight. “Two that I know for sure. You... and me.”

Clutching her, trying to touch and hold every inch of her, I kissed her forehead and closed my eyes. It's true, I thought, palming her belly obsessively. There are two people in this world who have it all.

And soon there would be three.
