



Ruined Promises

Author: *Stefanie Jenkins*

Category: Erotic, Romance, Adult

Description: One dance. One decision.

It only took one night out to turn Lexi Baker's so-called perfect world upside down. A chance encounter with a tall, dark, and handsome stranger makes her feel things she's never felt before, both physically and emotionally. When her emotions get the best of her, she escapes with only his first name: Ben. A one-night stand—that's all it was supposed to be. She was never supposed to see him again. And he definitely wasn't supposed to be standing in her office Monday morning being introduced as her new boss.

Ben and Lexi promise each other that nothing more can happen and they must remain professional. But some promises are meant to be ruined, right?

Total Pages (Source): 68

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:58 pm

There are moments in our lives that prepare us for the transition from children to adulthood. The memories are forever embedded in our brain: the first time you drive a car, moving off to college, eventually graduating college and setting foot into the real world. For me, today is another moment, starting the first day of my career.

A recent graduate of Willow Creek University, I wear my nerves on my sleeve, as I stare up at the ten-story building in front of me. My favorite communications advisor at WCU called in a favor to an old friend and got me an interview with Maritime Media. It's only an entry position as an events assistant, but I have big dreams to one day make it to the top. I knew from when I was a little girl that I wanted to plan events. While some girls played dress-up with their Barbies, I planned lavish birthday parties for them.

Maritime Media is the one-stop local entertainment guide for activities, lifestyle, restaurants, and special events in Willow Creek, NY, and the surrounding area. They attract customers of all demographics, providing information in magazines both print and digitally. The company is known for its events in the community.

I speed toward the elevator as it begins to close and shout, "Can you hold the elevator?" A hand sticks out, holding the door open. The most beautiful piercing blue eyes stare at me as I cross the threshold.

"Thank you." I somehow manage to get out, captivated by how gorgeous this man is in front of me. He has boy-next-door good looks. He is wearing a light gray suit with a white dress shirt and black tie, so he must be in this building for some form of business.

“What floor?” he asks.

I look at the numbers and see that he has already hit the seventh floor. Does he also work at Maritime Media?

“I’m heading to the seventh floor, also.” He smiles, and I just about go weak in the knees. We ride mostly in silence, and I twist my hands nervously, and my foot taps the floor, the sound echoing in the small space.

“Are you okay?” He turns to face me with his back against the wall.

“Oh, sorry. I’m just a little nervous.”

“First day?”

I look down at my feet and tuck a piece of my chestnut-brown hair behind my ear before looking back at him. “Yeah, is it that obvious?”

The elevator dings, and we exit, walking toward the entrance of my new job. My mystery man holds the door open and ushers me inside. He leans down and whispers in my ear, “No. It’s not obvious. It’s just that I would’ve remembered a gorgeous woman like you.”

He’s totally flirting with me. I slowly turn to meet his gaze, and the corners of his mouth turn upward. His smile makes my cheeks warm, and my mouth goes dry. I also feel the moisture pooling between my legs.

We both approach the receptionist’s desk. Is this his first day, too? He motions for me to go first.

“Hi, I’m Alexis Baker. I’m here for my first day.”

The woman smiles. “Ah, yes, Miss Baker. I’ll let Mr. Jennings know you’re here, and then I can show you to the conference room.”

“I can take her back, Ruth. I’m heading that way, too.” He flashes her the same smile, and her cheeks turn the slightest shade of pink as he leans against the counter on his elbows. Okay, guess that answers my question that it’s not his first day.

She nods. “Of course.” My no-named, gorgeous stranger places his hand on my lower back and guides me toward the conference room. His touch lights a fire in me. This definitely isn’t how I imagined my first day going. I enter the conference room and look around nervously.

“You’ll be fine. Alexis, was it?”

“Lexi. You can call me Lexi.”

He smiles and breathes my name to himself. The way my name sounds on his lips makes my heart flutter.

“Thank you.” I pause, realizing I don’t know his name still.

“Dominic.”

“Nice to meet you, Dominic.” I extend my hand, and he takes it. He then leans closer, and my breath hitches. I stare into his eyes. Is he about to kiss me? Do I want him to kiss me? With his proximity, I think my heart might jump right out of my chest. I can hear my heartbeat loud in my ears; can he hear it, too?

“Just so you know, Mr. Jennings isn’t a hard-ass like they say.”

“And who is it that says that, son?” a deep voice calls from the doorway, followed by

a soft chuckle. My eyes widen, and I jump back.

“Son?” I mouth to Dominic, and he shrugs, putting more space between us.

The man I recognize as my new boss, Paul Jennings, enters the room.

“Miss Baker, it’s so nice to see you again.” He shakes my hand and smiles. Everyone in this office is so welcoming. I now see a resemblance between Dominic and his father as they stand next to each other. While Paul has dark hair, Dominic is a darker blond, and Dominic is slightly taller than his father. They both have piercing blue eyes with specks of green and the same facial structure.

“I see you’ve met my son, Dominic.” I glance over at Dominic, and he continues to stare at me.

“Do you work here, too?” I internally hope that he’ll say no. Office romances never work out—too many complications.

I quickly turn my attention back to Mr. Jennings as his laughter fills the room. “Oh, no, Dominic wanted nothing to do with the family business. He is in his final year at Redwood Law.”

Handsome, smart, wow—the full package. I smile timidly, both relieved that he doesn’t work here, but sad that this could be my only interaction with this man. “Good luck, Dominic.”

“Thank you. Well, Dad, I’ll wait for you in your office.” His father nods. “And, Lexi, I’m sure I’ll see you around.” With one last smile, he exits the conference room.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:58 pm

I look at my phone and see it's already 7:18 p.m. Another late night at the office, but I didn't become the youngest events director in Maritime Media's history by working the bare minimum over the past three years. It's not that I don't know how to let loose and have fun. I go out regularly with my friends, checking out local bars, restaurants, and clubs. Of course, while there, I typically scope the places out for hosting events. I also have Dominic in my life.

I pull up my texts and see the last text message I had from Dominic was three hours ago.

Babe: Working late. I should be home around 9.

Hmm, it's strange but not unusual. Dominic typically checks in throughout the evening, seeing how my day was, etc. But this time, nothing. Maybe he was just caught up with something. He's just as much a workaholic as I am, but we make it work. I always figured that was one reason we work so well—both understanding the importance of working hard.

I shut my computer off and pack up my things. Monday is another day. As per usual, I am one of the last ones to leave. I smile to myself as I wait for the elevator to arrive, remembering when I met Dominic on my first day working here.

For an entire month, Dominic found reasons to stop by Maritime, specifically to see me. How he found time with his busy schedule at school, I'm not sure, but it definitely brightened my day, and I looked forward to it. Even his father commented that he hadn't seen that much of his son recently. It took another month until he finally convinced me to go out with him on a date.

After that date, we became inseparable, and here we are three years later. I broke my rule of no office romances, but Dominic and I could be the exception to the rule. Plus, he was only connected to the company—he didn't work there—so that was my brain's way of finding a loophole. After graduation from law school, Burke, Wilson, and Talbot, located downtown, hired Dominic. I think about whether I should just swing by his office but decide against it. There have been so many nights spent curled up on the couch in his office with takeout just so that we could spend time together.

Instead of making my way over to Eighth and Townsend, where Dom's office is, I go in the opposite direction toward our apartment. My best friends, Hadley and Brynn, said that we had rushed with moving in together, but when you know, you know. And unlike Heath Ashby in college, who tried to date both Hadley and me simultaneously, Dominic is the one.

I stop by the local market between my office and our place and grab the ingredients for Dominic's favorite meal and a new bottle of red wine. When I unlock the front door to our apartment, the lights are already on, and Dom's work bag is on the bench by the door. Yay! He's already home. I'm glad I didn't go to his office. I set the bag of groceries down on the counter and grab two wineglasses and the bottle and go in search of Dom. I hear the shower running, so I make my way to our bathroom. When I enter our bedroom, I hear soft moaning.

"Oh, fuck, yes! Right there, baby."

Oh my God, is he jerking off in the shower? I slip my shoes off in our bedroom. Well, now that I'm home, I can help him out.

I stop in my tracks when I hear him say, "Suck me, baby, take it all. You take my cock so much better than Lexi."

It's then that I hear a second moan, a softer muffled moan, definitely belonging to a

woman. Oh my God! I close my eyes. No, this is not happening. I take the three steps to the doorway of our bathroom and come face-to-face with my nightmare—or should I say, back-to-face since Dominic has his back to me while some whore is on her knees, in our shower, in our apartment.

Why can't I move? Why can't I say anything?

“Get up off your knees and spin around. I want to make you come two more times before she gets home.” This woman knows about me, yet she has no issue with being with a man who has a girlfriend?

It's as if my life is going in slow motion, and I can't move, frozen in time. As she stands and spins around, I now recognize the woman to be none other than his secretary, Missy. He tugs on her wet blonde hair, wrapping it around his hand as he slides in her. He was never like this with me.

“Why are you still with her when you love my pussy more? I let you do things to me that she doesn't even dream of.”

I can't take it anymore as my boyfriend plows roughly into this other woman. I drop the wineglasses and bottle, cabernet splashing and glass shattering everywhere, just like the pieces of my broken heart.

I quickly back up as Dominic spins around at the commotion, and his eyes meet mine. Shock and guilt fill his blue orbs. I run out of the room, my feet finally moving. I don't even bother to grab my shoes. I ignore Dominic shouting my name behind me.

“Lexi! Stop! Baby, listen, it's not what it looks like.”

I spin around to face him, my chest heaving up and down. “You mean it doesn't look like a humpback whale choking on a sea snake?”

His mouth gapes open. Yeah, that's what I thought. I roll my eyes and ignore him, grabbing my purse and my keys before slamming the door in his face.

I press the button on the elevator as if pushing it over and over will make it arrive faster. When the elevator dings, I enter and sink to the floor, both thankful and hurt that Dominic didn't continue to chase me.

I allow the tears to fall as the elevator descends. Dominic Jennings promised me the world, and I was a fool to believe him.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:58 pm

Nine months later...

Knock. Knock.

I look up from my work and find my boss standing in the doorway of my office.

“Got a moment, Lex?” he asks, his hands stuffed in the pockets of his gray dress pants.

I scooch back from my desk and extend my hand, offering him to enter and take a seat on one of the chairs in front of my desk.

“What can I do for you on this beautiful Friday afternoon, Mr. Jennings.”

His smile fades. “How many times have I told you to call me Paul.”

I laugh. “Too many to count, Paul.” I emphasize the use of his first name, and his smile returns. When Dominic and I were dating, I would attempt to call him Mr. Jennings, and he insisted I call him Paul, as I was now part of the family. Throughout our relationship, I spent countless family dinners and holidays with the Jennings family. When we broke up, I was grateful that my relationship with my boss did not change.

When Dominic and I had begun dating, the whispers started around the office. There were those who did not approve of my relationship with the boss’s son, and as my workload increased, the rumors began as well. Some coworkers believed that I had only gotten my new job title over favoritism being the boss’s possible future

daughter-in-law, but Paul constantly assured me I earned it by working hard and doing my job well. I was young and vulnerable and spent many nights crying on my best friend's or Dom's shoulder over the whispers in the break room.

"I just wanted to let you know how much I appreciate everything you do for this company. Even after everything with my son"—I look down at my hands—"you persevered. You are an amazing woman, and my son missed out. I'm very fortunate to have snagged you right up after WCU. You always go above and beyond what I ask of you, and this company definitely wouldn't be where it is without you."

I bite my lip to fight back the tears. "Thank you, sir. Not that I don't mind the praises, but is everything okay?"

He nods, running his hand through his short salt-and-peppered hair. His appearance has undoubtedly changed over the years. There are more tired wrinkles around his eyes than when we first met. "Never better. I'll let you get back to your work."

"Thanks. My boss is a real hard-ass if I don't get my work done on time." Mr. Jennings throws back his head in laughter before exiting my office. He pops his head back in. "Oh, and I called a quick staff meeting in twenty minutes."

I look over at my computer, and sure enough, there is a calendar invite for a staff meeting. 4:00 p.m. on a Friday? That's strange. I finish reviewing the specs for this year's BestOfparty in a few months. It's a tradition here at Maritime. Every year, our readers vote for the best of Willow Creek. The categories range from Best Burger to Best Late-Night Munchies to Best Place to Take Out-of-Towners. It's a big deal and one of the best events in town if I do say so myself.

With a few minutes to spare, I grab my notepad and make my way to the conference room. Of course, I am one of the last to arrive, so I choose to stand in the corner. Lacey, one of the sales reps, offers me her chair, but I wave it off. I have been sitting

all day; it feels good to be stretching my legs out.

“Any idea what this is about?” Tiffany, our food and wine editor, asks next to me.

I shake my head. “Not a clue.”

Mr. Jennings arrives and stands at the front of the conference room, looking around at the staff. He smiles and nods. What is going on?

“I’m sure you are all wondering why I called you all in here at 4:00 p.m. on a Friday. I promise I haven’t lost my mind. Well, not any more than I previously had.” Everyone laughs. “I will keep this short and sweet. Effective as of”—he looks down at his watch—“two minutes ago, I no longer own Maritime Media.” I gasp for air, completely caught off guard.

“What?” The staff erupts into chatter, asking questions. Mr. Jennings waves his hands in the air to quiet everyone down. Is this why he came into my office earlier? I’m at a loss for words; I can’t believe this. My hand covers my mouth, unsure what even to say.

“Now, everyone, please don’t worry. Nothing is going to happen to your jobs. I have made sure that you’ll stay on board in your current roles. This sale has been in the works for a little bit; I just did not want to say anything until it was final. I have always held and encouraged an open-door policy here, so I apologize for keeping this a secret.”

His eyes connect with mine, and I see the apology in them. “When I started Maritime Media, twenty-two years ago, I started it in my basement. My wife thought I was crazy, and maybe I was, but then one publication turned into two and eventually three and would expand to the business we are today. I couldn’t have done that without each one of you, so please give yourself a round of applause.”

Everyone slowly claps when he begins to clap first. I look over at Lacey, and she shrugs when I mouth, “Is this for real?”

“Monday morning, your new owner, Mr. Harrington, will be here for the morning staff meeting, and I hope that you all give him the same respect you’ve shown me over the years. I spoke to him not long ago, and he is very excited about this opportunity. So, here is what I want each of you to do: pack your things up, and enjoy your Friday evening. I know that many of you usually work late.” His eyes meet mine again, and I avert my gaze. “But not tonight. I want everyone to go home and enjoy themselves. Now go on, everyone.”

He dismisses the meeting, and everyone slowly walks up to him to hug him and say goodbye. I stay back so that I’m the last to do so. I try to gather my thoughts, the closer I get to him.

“You knew that when you came into my office earlier.”

He nods. “It’s been in the works for a few months, but I didn’t want anyone to worry and treat me or their jobs differently.” He pulls me into his arms. “I meant every word I said in your office earlier.” He pulls back. “I mean it, Lexi. You are a fantastic leader and organized. I know, without a doubt, the world is not ready for the amazing potential that comes out of Lexi Baker.” I wrap my lips around my teeth to fight back the emotion, but a few tears slip out. “Now go on. Enjoy your evening. Do whatever it is you youngins do these days.” I laugh. Mr. Jennings isn’t that old.

“Yes, sir.” I give him one last hug before grabbing my notepad. I turn from the doorway, “Thank you for everything, Mr. Je...” He tilts his head, knowing I’m about to call him Mr. Jennings. “Paul.”

“Have a good night, Miss Baker.”

With that, I head back to my office. I tidy up my desk and for once am leaving the office in record time. I sit back in my chair, processing this afternoon. Mr. Jennings sold the company, which means no more Mr. Jennings, which means no more having to see Dominic when he claims that he is here to see his father. After I first caught him cheating and things ended between us, he kept stopping by the office, trying to talk to me. No matter how many times I told him to leave me alone and there was nothing he could do to salvage our sorry excuse for a relationship, he didn't get the hint. Once his father even had security escort him out of the building because he would not leave me alone. It was then I made the declaration that I would never get involved with anyone not only in the office, but also associated with the office. Dominic may not have worked for Maritime Media, but being the owner's son, he could pop by at any time or any event and have a legit reason for being there.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:58 pm

Now, this is definitely worth celebrating. I pull out my phone and open my best friends' group chat.

Me: Get ready bitches! We are going out tonight.

Me: Now, before you start your bitching we have some celebrating to do.

Hadley: OMG! Is Lexi Baker admitting that she is leaving the office at a decent hour on a Friday?

Me: Yes, that is precisely what I'm saying. In fact, I am walking out of the office RIGHT NOW!

Hadley: *gif of Chris Pratt shocked

Hadley: *gif of Will Smith fainting

Brynn: What are we celebrating?

Me: Well, Mr. Jennings just announced that he sold the company.

Hadley: And that's cause to celebrate why??? OMG! Do you still have a job?

Me: Yes, I still have a job, and we are celebrating because that means I am officially through with Dominic "Can't keep it in his pants" Jennings. No daddy here means no random dropbys and using him as an excuse.

Hadley:*gif of little girl excited dance

Brynn:Hmm, and I thought his middle name was Paul LMFAO

Brynn:So what do you want to do? Cal and I were going to have a movie night. You guys can join us.

Me:As much as I love torturing your roomie with our chic flicks, I want us to go out. Cal can come with us, but I want to go dancing.

Me:*gif of Snoop Dog dancing.

Hadley:How about Eiffel Park? I know the bouncer there.

Brynn:AKA, she slept with the bouncer and just wants to make it known that she slept with the bouncer.

Hadley:Whatever, at least I get laid. *mic drop*

Me:Alright, you two, Eiffel Park is perfect.

Brynn:Cal and I will meet you guys at your place around 7.

Me:We can have a celebratory drink and then take an Uber to the club.

Hadley:Always a planner. *eye roll*

Me:Whatever. You love me. *Kisses* See you soon.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:58 pm

I arrive home and find Hadley already in the living room. After I had found Dominic and his secretary together, I'd gone to Hadley's. She opened the door to me being a complete mess, eye makeup running down my face, and sans shoes. Hadley let me sleep in her guest room for a few nights, and when I argued with her that she needed her space and I would find a place of my own, she smacked me on the side of my head and insisted I stay. She told me that she had the extra room, and it would be just like old times living together.

The next day, with the help of our other friends, we moved my stuff out of Dominic's and my apartment and into Hadley's. The apartment building is closer to Maritime and just a block over from where our other best friend, Brynn, lives with her childhood best friend, Callum. He prefers to go by Cal; the only person who gets to call him Callum without getting an earful is Brynn. They have a strange relationship. They swear they are strictly platonic and have never messed around, but they have some of the hottest chemistry I've ever seen. We are just waiting for it to implode one day.

I met Hadley and Brynn at the start of our freshman year at WCU. We all shared a dorm suite. Brynn and Cal have been best friends since birth, so wherever she goes, so does he. He became an honorary tribe member of our group.

It was as if Brynn, Hadley, and I had known each other for years. People had a hard time believing that we had just met. During our sophomore year, Hadley and I had both begun seeing this guy. With it being new, neither of us gave away too many details, not wanting to jinx anything. That is until he showed up at our door, and we both realized we were dating the same guy. We gladly kicked him out when he tried to explain and spent the night laughing at how we didn't figure it out sooner over a

bottle of tequila.

“Celebrating already?” I laugh at Hadley, lounging back on the couch, sipping on a glass of champagne.

“Yeah, well, this is a huge deal,” she squeals as she stands and brings me over a large glass of my own. “We are officially rid of Dominic ‘I can’t keep it in my pants’ Jennings.”

“It’s not like he died. I still could see him on the street.” I set my bag down and remove my heels before accepting the glass from her.

“This is true, although we could pull some strings and have him offed. I’m sure we could Craigslist a hitman or something.” She nonchalantly shrugs as if searching Craigslist for a hitman is an everyday occurrence in our lives. “Never mind on that.” She holds up her glass, and I follow. “But you were right, and this means he no longer has a reason to stop by your office. So, I say cheers to being rid of him finally.”

“I will cheer to that.” Our glasses clink, and then we link our arms as if we were married and take a sip. Some things never change.

She takes my hand and leads me toward my bedroom. “Now, let’s make sure you look extra hot tonight. We are also celebrating that you are not working late. This is huge. Maybe even more important than being rid of douche face.”

I know I work late often, but this is, I guess, a pretty big deal. I let my best friend go with it. I sit on the bed, sipping on my champagne, as Hadley tears through my closet, looking for the perfect outfit.

* * *

Sitting in a booth in the VIP section of Eiffel Park, I couldn't be happier to be surrounded by my best friends. Hadley wasn't kidding when she said that she knew one of the bouncers. When she texted Josh while we got ready, he not only put our names on the door but even managed to reserve a VIP table for us. My best friend needs to find a way to repay him for this. He went above and beyond.

Tonight isn't my first time at this club, but it's the first time in the VIP section. I am trying to take the full mental note to not think of anything work related, even if it would make for a great party venue.

I look around the room at the smiling and laughing faces. When my attention comes back to our booth, I find Hadley currently on her phone, hopefully making plans with Josh later for hooking us up while Cal whispers something into Brynn's ear, playful smiles on both of their faces.

"Girl, you look hot tonight," Brynn shouts across the table. I do look hot, don't I? I decided on a black skinny-strap backless dress and strappy black heels. And when I say I decided, I guess I should say that Hadley threatened my womanhood if I didn't wear it.

Two VIP waitresses approach the table: one carries a tray with two bottles of Dom Perignon, the other holding a tray of shots. "This is courtesy of Josh, at the front door."

"Girl, you better thank him..." Brynn giggles as the waitress passes out shots between the four of us. "...with your vagina. Hell, if you don't, I gladly will. This is amazing."

I don't miss the growl that emits from Cal, who is sitting next to her, as he pours the glasses of champagne. Hmm, interesting. I know that he's overly protective of her, but that seemed more than that. Maybe the implosion between the two of them will be

happening sooner than we think.

“Cheers to Lexi! To new beginnings.”

Everyone holds up their glass, and we throw back the shots.

“Woo!” Brynn shouts after slamming the glass down on the table. Well, it looks like Cal should have fun holding her hair back later.

The vodka and the champagne are the perfect mixture for nursing a hangover tomorrow in bed with reruns of *One Tree Hill* on Hulu. I bring the glass of champagne to my lips, and my nose twitches as the fizzy bubbles tickle my nose.

Hadley sets her glass down on the table and pulls me into an enthusiastic hug. “I am so incredibly proud of you. You are amazing.” Her words slur a little; clearly, she is already feeling the effects of the champagne we consumed earlier before everyone got to our apartment.

I gently rest my head against hers. “Thanks. You know I couldn’t do this without you.”

She straightens up, and I spin to face her. “No, it was all you.”

A familiar tune interrupts our conversations and blasts through the speakers. I shriek, causing Hadley to jump back and cringe at my high volume. She dramatically rubs her ears as if I just made her deaf. I have been known to dance in my underwear and sing into a wooden spoon to this song.

I down the rest of my champagne and jump to my feet, placing the glass back on the table. Yep, this is definitely going to leave a mark tomorrow.

“Come on; this is my jam!Let’s go dance.” I pout, giving an overdramatic sad face. The amount of champagne flooding my veins makes me not above throwing a temper tantrum in public.

“I haven’t had enough to drink for that,” Cal moans from his seat.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:58 pm

“Do we have to?” Brynn whines, avoiding my eye contact, and snuggles into Cal’s chest as if that will keep her from getting up. He hugs her tightly. They seriously would make an adorable couple and such attractive babies. I think the booze is going to my head, too.

Oh, hell no. I straighten my back, pushing my chest out. “Tonightismynight, and what I say goes, so chug your champagne or order another shot, but damnit, get off your lazy asses and come dance with me!”

I place my hands on my hips and raise my eyebrow, giving them my best mom impression, showing them that I mean business. A few more drinks are slung back, and the crowd escapes the booth.

I hear a few mumbled curses behind me shared between Brynn and Cal. “I heard that,” I joke over my shoulder.

“Meant you to,” Cal singsongs as he slides out of the booth after Brynn.

I throw my hands up in victory as I take Hadley’s hand in mine. The VIP section is full tonight, so we have to squeeze past the crowd to make our way to the stairs that leads us to the dance floor.

We somehow find space on the dance floor. I close my eyes and allow the music to take over my body, swaying side to side as it changes from “IWannaDance with Somebody” by Whitney Houston to “Titanium” by David Guetta and Sia. I push the thoughts of adulting, jobs, and new bosses—something that I can face tomorrow while milking a terrible hangover—but for now, I let the music carry me away.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:58 pm

Long legs.

Round ass.

Perky breasts.

And when she turned around, I caught a glimpse of her gorgeous smile.

I couldn't keep my eyes off her since I watched her group arrive and take over the booth two down from ours. This is my first official week in Willow Creek, New York, and I think I might just like it here.

While I should be focusing on the job at hand, I somehow let my younger brother, Asher, convince me that I could take a night off and let loose. Although, as I look over at him, I find two barely dressed, blonde women hanging all over him in our VIP booth, and I think we have two different definitions of letting loose. He told me I needed to unwind.

But now that I'm here, I don't mind the loud music and the crowds as much since I laid eyes on her.

I don't stop staring at her as I watch her walk down the stairs, headed to the dance floor. Her long dark brown hair is flowing down her back in loose curls, and I want to know what it feels like to run my fingers through it to tangle my fingers through it as I taste those plump pink lips.

With my glass of Macallan 12 single malt scotch in hand, I get up from the table and

walk over to the balcony's edge, resting my arms on the railing. I take a sip from the glass and search the crowd for her.

Bingo. It's like my eyes are drawn right to her.

I spot her in the center of the dance floor. This woman has captivated me, and I can't take my eyes off her—the way her hips sway side to side, the way her smile lights up her face, and the way her eyes close as if she is getting lost in the music. I want to get lost in her.

I take another sip of my drink, finishing off the tumbler. I walk back to the table and place my glass down rather sternly, causing my brother to look away from one of the blondes, who are now basically in his lap, and directly at me. Keeping it real classy, Asher.

"I'm going downstairs for another drink."

"What? Why? We have anything and everything we could ever want up here." I give one last glance over my shoulder at our table to find one blonde grinding in my brother's lap while the other blonde is kissing along his neck. Yeah, I definitely don't want to be around to witness that. Plus, everything I want is down there in a little black dress.

I make my way down the stairs and through the crowd while continuing to watch her. Because of my height, I tower over most women on the dance floor and some men. I have the perfect view of her. As I approach, I follow the droplets of sweat that drip down from her forehead to her neck to between her breasts. I have to mentally tell my cock to stay down because all I want to do is trail that same path with my tongue.

I'm starting to sound more like my brother than myself, which scares me. But I already want to know everything there is to know about this woman before I even

have her name. There is something about this girl that is pulling me to her like a magnet. I choose to forgo the bar because I am getting drunk on just her; she is intoxicating.

I close the distance between us. I step up behind her as she sways side to side, completely lost. I place my hands on her waist and pull her closer to me, her back now firmly against my front. She freezes a moment, her body tense as if she's deciding whether she should tell me to get lost or not, but as quickly as it happened, she begins to relax into my touch. This beautiful vixen goes back to moving her hips side to side in a figure-eight motion, and I'm not sure how much longer my cock will obey and not let her know how interested he really is.

My hand moves from her side to her stomach, holding her protectively against me. The dance floor is crowded, and I want to keep her close. She continues to relax into me as we dance. I am anything but a good dancer—I'm not even sure I have rhythm—but with this goddess guiding me, I feel like I'm ready to take on Dancing with the Stars, or possibly Dirty Dancing. Her ass keeps grinding against my cock, and the thought of burying it deep inside her makes me harder with each motion. I'm sure she can feel what she is doing to me, but she hasn't stepped away. In fact, with the change of song, she changes her position with her head fully resting against my chest and her arm wrapped up behind my neck. This gives me the perfect view of gorgeous tits, front and center.

I'm not sure how long we dance when I notice her friends have begun trailing off back to the VIP section. One friend in particular, a blonde, leans over and whispers something. My temptress nods, and her friend makes her way back through the crowd. I don't mind being alone with her, not that being on the crowded dance floor of a club is really being alone.

I lean down, running my nose up and down her pulse point, inhaling her sweet scent. I can feel her swallow thickly, the tension building between us. I think it's time,

though, that I put a name to this beautiful face. I spin her in my arms, and she slowly dragsher gaze up my body and the breath leaves my body. If I thought she was gorgeous from far away, I'm not even sure I can handle her this close. She is an angel sent from heaven, and I'm the devil ready to corrupt her.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:58 pm

When I felt strange hands grab my hips, I froze for only a moment. My eyes met Hadley's, and we had a nonverbal conversation as to whether I should brush this guy off or not. Nobody wants to dance with an ugly creeper. But the way she smiled and nodded slightly told me he wasn't too bad on the eyes and that she approved.

I should have pulled away and told him tonight was about me and my group celebrating, but what better way to forget about everything than getting lost in someone. And I do just that. The way his hands feel, fingers spread out on my waist, my heart beats so fast it matches the beat of the techno remix the DJ is currently playing.

We are so close that his scent of soap and pine fills my nostrils even through the crowd and sweat. When he slowly spins me around to face him, I come face-to-face with the sexiest man I have ever seen. No wonder Hadley approved.

Dark eyes.

Dark hair that lines his chiseled, sharp jaw.

Broad shoulders that fill out his black button-down shirt.

My eyes follow a bead of sweat as it drops down his Adam's apple, and I am tempted to trace that same path with my tongue and see just how far the sweat will drop. Get a grip, Lex. You just met this man. Wait, we haven't even officially met yet. I don't even know his name.

When our eyes finally connect, it's as if everyone else disappears, and it's just us

alone in the crowd.

“Ben.”

“Lexi.”

“You’re gorgeous, Lexi.”

My cheeks heat up, and my panties dampen at the sound of my name on his lips. I bring my bottom lip between my teeth and bite down. Ben grips my chin and uses his thumb to free my lip from my grasp. I suck in a breath at how intimate the movement is.

“You know, you’re not so bad yourself.” I give him a cheeky smile, now back to feeling relaxed from his touch. He wraps his arm around my waist, twirling me back around, pulling me flush against his chest.

“You’re quite the dancer, too,” he whispers in my ear, and I close my eyes as I feel his hot breath on my skin.

“Oh? I have all sorts of moves.” Woah, where the fuck did that come from? I sway my hips side to side again and then in a figure-eight motion. I hear him growl behind me as I make sure to press my ass into his groin harder, rubbing against the hardening outline in his pants.

Song after song, we continue to dance. He leans down and nibbles my earlobe, making a wetness pool in my panties. “You keep doing that, I’m going to take you right here on the dance floor and devour you,” he growls.

I lean back, reaching my arm up behind him, running my fingers through the damp hair on the nape of his neck. “Maybe I want you to.”

Ben whips me around so fast I worry I'll suffer from whiplash. He brushes the hair out of my face and pulls me tightly against his hard body. I wrap my arms around him to steady myself.

"Do you mean it? Do you want me to?" My body wants nothing more than to say yes. Before I allow my brain and heart to catch up, I nod. His grip tightens on my waist, and his lips crash on mine. This kiss is like no other kiss I have ever experienced. This kiss I feel everywhere, and I am no longer drunk from the champagne; I am drunk on his lips. I slide my arms around his neck, holding him to me. One hand goes from his neck to his chest, gripping his shirt. He groans into my mouth when I roll my pelvis against his erection. The entire time we've been dancing, I've felt it poking against my back. I can't help but wonder what it would be like to wrap my fingers around him. This is so not like me, but there is something about this man that makes me lose control.

When he nips my bottom lip, I gasp, and he thrusts his tongue against mine. He swallows my moan. His hand grips the bottom of my dress and begins to slide it up. The music changes to a song with more bass, and we remember we're in the middle of a crowded dance floor. Ben presses his forehead against mine as I continue to grind against him.

"Lexi, are you sure this is what you want?" His voice is hoarse and tells me he wants me as much as I want him. I stare at him, and he looks just as nervous as I am. This time my heart and brain have caught up with my body.

"Yes."

He grabs my hand and leads me off the dance floor toward the bathroom. My internal monologue is screaming at me, Are you about to have sex with someone you just met moments ago in the bathroom of a dance club? Ben opens the door slightly to check it's empty. He then pulls me into the bathroom, shutting the door and locking it. I

stare at his gorgeous figure. Oh, hell yes, this is about to happen. I attack his mouth with my own, pushing him up against the door with a loud thud.

Without breaking our kiss, I reach for his belt, undoing the loop. When I go to unbutton his pants to free his hard cock, Ben surprises me by swinging me around so my back presses firmly up against the door. Hopefully, no one is on the other side because I am pretty sure they would have heard that loud thump, even over the music.

He weaves his fingers into my hair, tugging on the locks so that my head tilts upward. He takes advantage of my movement by deepening the kiss. I wrap my leg around his waist. One hand meticulously drags down my body to my thigh, aligning my center with his erection. When he pulls my dress up, bunching it around my waist, I throw my head back. It is currently swirling with how much I want this man—no, how much I need this man. It has been so long since I've had an orgasm that wasn't courtesy of my fingers or toys.

His fingers graze over my soaked panties, the moisture seeping through the material. He slides the material to the side and drags a finger over my drenched slit.

Ben groans, placing his forehead against mine. "I hoped I would find you wet, but hot damn, baby, you're soaked." He doesn't hesitate sliding two fingers inside me, and I already feel the orgasm begin to rip through me. His fingers slide in and out as his lips lick, nip, and suck my skin along my collarbone.

"Mmm," he hums against my skin. My pussy walls contract against his fingers, but just as I'm about to come, he pulls his fingers from me.

I whine at the loss of his touch. I open my eyes to say "what the hell" when I see him undoing his pants, freeing his cock. Holy shit, there is no way that thing is going to fit inside me. He reaches down for his wallet to retrieve a condom as I squirm my thighs together, needing some sort of friction in hopes of seeking that much-needed release.

Ben's eyes meet mine, and a devilish smirk appears on his lips. "Spread your legs, Lex. Only I get to make you come."

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:58 pm

His stern voice and dirty words unleash something inside me.

Once the condom is on, Ben reaches behind my thighs, hoisting me up. I instinctively wrap my legs around his waist. While one hand clings to his shoulder, I thread my fingers of the other hand through his dark locks, tugging on the ends and pull him into a searing kiss. A kiss I feel all the way down to my core with a new layer of wetness seeping out of me.

“You are so fucking sexy, Lexi,” he breathes against my lips before claiming them again. I know there is no way I won’t be walking out of here with my lips swollen—both of them.

Ben lines up his cock to my entrance, teasing me as he drags it up and down my slit, coating the condom with my arousal. Without warning, he thrusts into me, and I cry out. He slowly pulls out so that just the tip is still seated within me before shoving his cock back deep inside me. He kisses me feverishly, and I moan loudly into his mouth as his thumb finds my clit, rotating in a circular motion.

“Fuck, I’m going to come,” I moan, and suddenly he stops thrusting and pulls out of me.

“Not yet.” He moves us from the door to the counter. The perk about meeting in one of the hottest dance clubs in town? The luxurious bathrooms. He sets my bare ass on the counter and spreads my legs wide as he lowers himself. He latches onto my clit, sucking on my little bundle of nerves, and then he inserts a finger. “I want to taste you,” he murmurs, the vibrations sending waves of pleasure through my body. I slap the mirror behind me with one hand, thankfully not hard enough to shatter or damage

it, while the other grips on to the counter as Ben laps up my orgasm.

He doesn't even give me time to recuperate because he's standing and sliding his cock back inside me. And he doesn't stop. I come, and I come again before he buries his face into my neck, groaning as he finds his own release. The brush of his facial hair tickles my skin. He slowly pulls back, both of us breathless as we stare into each other's eyes. Did this really happen? Did I just have sex with a stranger in the bathroom of a nightclub? I don't know anything about this man—he could be a serial killer for fuck's sake.

Ben removes the condom and tucks himself away. He tosses the condom in the trash and walks back over to me. I am sliding off the counter, adjusting my panties and dress, when he stands in front of me, caging me in. He cups the back of my neck and kisses me. I taste my release on his tongue. When he pulls back, he places his forehead against mine. "I know you're in the VIP section with your friends, but will you come back to my section for a drink?"

I nibble on my lip, unsure. He traces my bottom lip that is stuck between my teeth, releasing it. "Meet me upstairs, Lex." His eyes plead with me.

I don't know if it's the postorgasm haze or the way this man messes with my thoughts, but I nod. "Okay. But let me freshen up first."

He kisses my cheek, lingering just a moment longer than necessary before he unlocks the door and exits. I spin, facing the mirror. My makeup is smeared with sweat, and my hair is a mess. As Brynn would say, I look thoroughly fucked. Can I go out there and have a drink as if I didn't just let this stranger fuck the hell out of me?

I run cold water on a paper towel and dab my face, fixing the messed-up makeup. This guy—from the moment he walked up to me on the dance floor, I felt a pull to him. My skin feels hot, too hot. I can't believe I had sex with someone I haven't even known

an hour—that's not like me. I can count on one hand the number of people I have had sex with, and none of them was ever like this.

The blood pounds in my ears as I grip the countertop, looking down at my feet. My heart thuds in my chest to the same beat of the music. This is all too much. I close my eyes and count to three, trying to relax my breathing. When I return my gaze to my reflection, my eyes swim with tears that I refuse to let spill over.

I need to get out of here. Thankful I still have my clutch and phone, I quickly text Hadley.

Me: Not feeling so well. Guess the champagne caught up to me. Heading home. See you tomorrow.

With my phone back in my clutch, I open the door and make sure the coast is clear and that Ben or my friends aren't waiting for me and quickly make my escape. I grab a taxi sitting out front and don't look back.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:58 pm

Buzz. Buzz. Buzz.

The sound of my phone vibrating on my nightstand startles me as I stare at the darkness in my bedroom. I managed to get changed out of my dress and into an oversized WCUT-shirt and gym shorts before I broke down crying. My shoes are scattered somewhere in my living room. At least I managed to get my phone on the charger.

I groan as I reach over and lift it to see who's calling. Hadley's name appears. Ugh, I knew I wouldn't be able to avoid her asking questions about my abrupt departure, especially when going out was my idea to begin with. But I had at least hoped that she had gone home with Josh, and maybe I would have more time before she confronted me about it. I set the phone back down as it continues to vibrate. Finally, it stops. Thank God. The phone vibrates again. I grab my phone and hit the Ignore button.

"Oh, hell no! I know you did not bitch button me," my best friend shouts from the living room after slamming my front door shut. Well, so much for her going home with the bouncer.

"Ugh, I need to get my own place," I mutter to myself but loud enough for her to hear.

She laughs. "Yeah, right. We both know that's not happening." I hear the clicking of her boots as she walks down the hallway to my bedroom. "You want to tell me what this is all about because I don't believe your bullshit of not feeling well. I saw your sexy friend come back upstairs and knew something was..."

Hadley stops talking and stares at me as she takes in my appearance. While I did

change my clothes, I hadn't taken my makeup off yet, and by now, I cried enough to have it running down my face.

"Lex, what happened? Did he hurt you? What's going on? You're scaring me." She races over to my bedside and pulls me into her arms. I begin to cry again as my best friend goes into mother mode. "I'm going to fucking kill the bastard if he hurt you. Oh my God, Lex, he didn't rape you, did he?"

I sniff and sit up, wiping the combo of snot and tears with my sleeve.

"Calm down. He didn't rape me. It was nothing like that." Quite the opposite, actually.

She stares at me intently. "Okay, then what am I missing here. Why are we here, then, you looking like that—" She runs her hand up and down at my appearance. "—and not back at the club with you all over Mr. Tall, Dark, and Handsome."

I shrug and pull back from her arms, settling against the headboard, and bring my knees to my chest.

"Lexi, I need you to talk to me. I don't understand what's going on here. But he didn't hurt you?"

"No," I spit out louder than expected. My tone softens. "No, Ben didn't hurt me. He was perfect. It was the best sex of my life. Fuck, I'm not sure I'm going to be able to walk tomorrow."

"You had sex with him," my best friend shouts in surprise. I'm still trying to wrap my head around it myself. I don't do things like that; the random one-night stands are usually Hadley's MO.

I wince at her volume. Oops. I smile shyly. "Yes?" It comes out more as a question than

an answer.

Hadley shoves my arm. “You skank. Look at you.” A giant smile on her face is quickly wiped away with a look of confusion. “Wait, again, why are you here, then, and not there, or in his bed naked with him.”

“I kind of freaked out. We had mind-blowing sex, like seriously an orgasm that ended all orgasms.” More than one. “He invited me up to his VIP section for another drink, and I told him I just needed a minute to freshen up.”

She winks dramatically, and I laugh, but my laughter quickly fades. “But then I started to panic. I mean, I just met this guy. Remember what happened with the last guy I met and jumped right into things with.”

“Aww, honey. Not everyone is like Dominic.” She pulls me back into her arms for a deep hug.

“Well, it’s too late. We didn’t exchange numbers since I guess he hadn’t planned on the evening ending when it did, so now all I know is that his name is Ben.”

“You could always run an ad in the magazine,” Hadley says somehow with a straight face, before breaking out into laughter.

“Yeah, I could see it now. I could do a Dear Jane letter.” I join in on her laughter.

“You mean Dear Ben,” she interrupts, waggling her eyebrows.

“Yes, Dear Ben, if you are the same guy who I met at Eiffel Park and fucked me into next week in the bathroom, can you please give me a call. I’m sorry for running out on you like Cinderella.” I’m thankful that my best friend came to my rescue. I already feel the weight has lifted slightly.

“Works for me.” Hadley shrugs, having trouble keeping a serious expression.

I grab a pillow from behind me, smacking Hadley in the face.

“No, it was nothing. Just a one-night stand. Time to move on.” I sigh.

She gives me a soft smile and doesn’t push the subject anymore. Hadley lets out a large yawn. “I’m crashing here. I’m too tired to go to my room, plus your bed is more comfortable than mine.”

I throw my head back in laughter as I rise from the bed to head to the bathroom to wash the mess of makeup off my face. “We have the same bed.”

“And your point is?” I ignore her statement because, honestly, I’m grateful to have her here with me. “Oh, hey, Lex?” Hadley shouts from her place on my bed. I poke my head back out of the bathroom. “You better not ignore my calls again, bitch.” I can’t hide my laughter. “The only time you’re allowed to ignore me is when you’re retaking a shit.”

“One time I do that, and you never let me forget it.”

“You’re goddamn right.” Hadley’s voice trails off as she steps into my closet to grab a change of clothes.

When we both return, she curls up in the space next to me, and we laugh until we both fall asleep.

If this was nothing more than a one-night stand, why is it that as I close my eyes, I still feel him, smell him, and dream of him?

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:58 pm

Monday morning comes way too quickly, and nothing has gone my way. Not only could I not get Ben out of my head all weekend, but I also debated going back to the club Saturday night in hopes that he would be there again. But why would he? Was he pissed at me for running out? Maybe I'm overthinking everything, and one-night stands in club bathrooms are usual for him. I have no idea; I don't know anything about this man, not even his last name.

These things kept me up late last night, and I ended up oversleeping, which I never do. This man has flipped my world upside down. I raced into the elevator, nearly spilling my cup of coffee, and had just enough time to drop my belongings in my office and get to the conference room for the Monday morning staff meeting. Today we are also meeting the new boss—that alone has me a bit of a nervous wreck. I know everything there is to know about this job, but I just want to make sure I leave a good impression.

"Jeez, I was starting to think you were going to be a no-show," Amy, our fashion editor, jokes as I pull the seat out at the conference table. "Long weekend?"

"Ha," I snicker as I sink into the chair. Oh, she has no idea. Thankfully she begins chatting with a sales rep sitting next to her, giving me a chance to catch my breath. I sigh heavily and rest my head back against the back of my chair when I overhear Amy and Mary's conversation beside me.

"Did you see the new owner this morning? I caught a glimpse when he was in walking into his office. Holy shit, he is smoking hot. He is so much hotter than Mr. Jennings. If I didn't love coming to work here already, we now get some eye candy to watch."

The office quiets down as our operations publisher, John Raymond, walks into the conference room.

“I hope everyone had a wonderful weekend, but it’s Monday morning and time to get down to business. I would like to introduce to you your new boss and owner, Bentley Harrington. Please give him the same respect you gave Paul.”

I’m redoing my messy bun—I’m sure looking a hot mess still—when the room begins to clap, indicating our new boss has entered the room. Hopefully, he is as great a boss as Paul. I feel like I owe everything to Paul for giving me a chance. This is not the time to get emotional for what feels like the millionth time in seventy-two hours.

“Good morning, everyone.”

Oh fuck. That voice. I must be dreaming.

“I’m Bentley Harrington, but you can call me Ben.”

Shit. Shit. Shit. When I open my eyes, I know exactly who I will be staring at. My mouth goes parched. I avoid eye contact and quickly reach for my coffee cup, splashing a little on the table.

“Shit,” I mumble. My cheeks redden as I know everyone heard me.

My heart begins racing again as I can feel his eyes on me.

“Is everything okay, miss?” his deep voice asks, and I want to bury myself six feet under. Keep it together, Lex.

“Ben, this is Lexi Baker, our events director,” John introduces.

I swallow thickly as I know there is no more hiding. I try to even out my breathing as I lift my eyes to meet his dark eyes. This man is even more gorgeous than I remember. The golden flecks of his eyes, reflecting from the fluorescent office lights, the angle of his sharp jaw begging to be nipped, and that beautiful perfect smile that still flips my insides, but it quickly fades away when he takes me in.

Ben runs his hand over his neatly trimmed beard, and I remember how the scruff felt on my skin. His facial expression gives away no indication that he knows who I am, but his eyes tell me everything. Questions clearly flood his brain, but I'm sure the main one is why did I run? I wish we were alone, not having a staring contest in front of my office. Or well, his office. Oh my God, he's my new boss. I slept with my boss. I got off with my showerhead yesterday morning with thoughts of things my new boss did to me with his tongue, fingers, and cock. I can feel the blush creeping up my cheeks and chest in embarrassment.

"It's nice to meet you, Miss Baker. I look forward to working with you." He then turns to the rest of the staff, completely ignoring me. "I look forward to working with all of you. I am sure that the sale of Maritime Media was somewhat unexpected. Paul and I had spoken for some time about this deal, and trust me when I say he did not do this lightly. I know that his company meant everything to him; it still does. I also know that this company runs like a tight-knit family, and I intend to keep that going. Family means everything to me."

Ben's facial expression changes, but only for a millisecond. If I hadn't already been watching him so closely, I might have missed it. But I was watching him and did notice it.

So far, this morning, I learned his first name is Bentley, but he goes by Ben. His last name is Harrington. He is my new boss, and family is everything to him. My stomach drops, and my breakfast is ready to find its way back up when I think of what else I don't know. Does he have a wife? I don't recall a ring on his finger when we had our

fingers linked while dancing. My eyes wander down his body to recheck his hands; however, Ben has since placed his hands in his pockets.

As my eyes rake back up, I can't help but notice the way his suit molds to his fit body. Remembering the feel of his body on mine, my mouth waters, and my panties dampen. I need to knock these thoughts away. He is my new boss and entirely off-limits.

"Well, I've held up enough of your time with me. John, I'll turn this meeting back over to you." I realize that I completely zoned out and didn't listen to anything else he said. Great, this is off to a fantastic start.

"Why don't we go around each department and fill everyone in as to what's going on this week or any important news to share."

Ben stands in the corner of the room, and I try to look anywhere but him as my fellow employees begin to speak, but my body fails me, and I get a glimpse of him in my peripheral vision. My breathing becomes slightly erratic as I notice that his eyes are trained directly on me. I grab the pen from my notebook and pretend to jot notes down as everyone speaks, but in reality, I am telling myself to keep it cool and not run out of the office and say goodbye to my dream job, all because for once, I let my vagina take the lead over my head. The last time I did that, look at how it turned out. Oh, wonderful, I have now not only slept with my old boss's son, but I have also now slept with my boss. I am going to get myself a bad rap around here if people find out.

A smack to my leg brings me out of my thoughts as I quickly whip my head to the right to Amy. She gives me a look indicating that it's my turn. I'm as nervous, if not more, than my very first day here at Maritime Media. I slowly turn my head back to the table. I tell myself mentally the same mantra Hadley forced me to say to myself every time I wanted to cry when Dominic raised hell in here after we broke up. I am

Lexi Baker. This is my dream job. I am the youngest events director for this company, and I got here because I'm a badass bitch.

"Lexi? Anything you want to share from Events?" John chimes in, clearly annoyed that I wasn't paying attention. Great start to a new week and in front of my new boss.

I adjust myself in my seat and straighten my shoulders. I avoid all eye contact with Ben. This is what I'm good at. This is my calling. "Yes, of course, John. Sorry, I haven't had enough caffeine this morning." The room erupts in laughter. I place one hand on my notebook, the other on the table. "As you all know, the Best of Willow Creek Party is the biggest event of the year. The ballots were distributed in the last two months' issues, as well as voting online. Once voting is closed shortly, I have the awesome job of going through the votes, and once they are tallied, they will be approved and finalized. I have the final venue options for approval. Oh, and don't forget"—I turn to where the clump of sales reps are sitting—"we need auction items, so remember to talk to your clients. Ones that are winners, we will definitely want to go after for prizes, but even if you visit restaurants or salons or find those cute bed-and-breakfasts on the outskirts of town at the beach, bring me your suggestions, and I will reach out to them for prizes."

I feel like I just word vomited in the meeting, and it isn't until I look around the room that I remember Ben is standing there. He is still staring at me intently, but the corner of his mouth is tipped upward. I wish I could figure out what his expression is trying to tell me. "That's it from Events." I shrug back into my seat when the person to my left begins to talk about Sports. I glance in Ben's direction one more time before he adjourns the meeting. Seriously, what is wrong with me?

"Okay, everyone, let's get to work. My office door is always open, and I look forward to getting to know you all." I avoid eye contact as I rise from my seat and gather my belongings. The conference room feels like it has been slowly shrinking the longer I'm in there. I need air; I need space.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:58 pm

I quickly race back to the safety of my office, not wasting time to introduce myself to the new boss like the others are. Trust me, I know him rather well. He knows me inside and out. My heart is racing as I grab my phone and pull up my group chat with Hadley and Brynn. They are never going to believe this. I'm not even sure I believe this. I pinch myself just before hitting Send to make sure this isn't all a dream.

Me: 911!

Me(draft): My new boss is

A shadow approaches in my office doorway, and I look up from my phone. Seeing that it's Ben, I quickly toss my phone on the desk. Shit! Another strike against me. First I'm not paying attention during the meeting, and now he catches me on my phone.

"I'm so sorry, Mr. Harrington. It won't happen again."

"Miss Baker, can I speak with you for a moment in my office?"

I hold my breath the entire time, following him down the hall as questions fill my head.

Am I getting fired?

Does he want to talk about what happened?

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:58 pm

The last person I expected to see when I walked into the conference room was the same woman from Friday night who has been on my mind since she walked out of the bathroom that night and out of my life. It was almost like one of these Cinderella stories you hear about. The Prince Charming in search of his princess, but while all he had was a shoe, I only had a name: Lexi. Too bad Prince Charming back then didn't have Google, not that it would have been much help for me either. Lord knows what sort of results would have come up if I searched "gorgeous Lexi, who I love the way she comes on my cock"? Yeah, I'm pretty sure that's how you click on the wrong thing and download a virus.

When our eyes locked, all coherent thoughts left my brain, and I almost forgot what I was doing here in the first place. I'm thankful that John was leading the meeting after my brief introduction, although the speech I had been preparing all morning was not that short.

I couldn't give anything away to my new employees, so I tried not to look her way constantly, but I could sense when her eyes were on me. Was she thinking about me as I had her? Did she regret her decision to run? By the time I had realized she was gone, I went back to the booth her friends had been in to discover they were gone, too.

What are the odds that my Cinderella is my new events director? The way she spoke during the meeting about her department, she transformed someone nervous and uncomfortable to the confident woman I met the other night. Her eyes lit up. I could tell then and there that she loved this job.

When John dismissed the meeting, I watched her quickly exit the room as if she were

running from a fire. That fire was me. Employees had swarmed me, slowing me down, chasing her. I let her slip through my fingers once before; I wasn't going to let her do it again.

I excused myself from the eager employees introducing themselves to find where Lexi had gone off to. I found my way toward the hall of offices, hoping that as the events director, she had her own office.

When I saw the nameplate outside the open door, I smiled before feeling like I was knocked entirely on my ass. I was reminded that I was now her boss, and she, my employee. Today is my first day, and I had already forgotten that, so preoccupied that I had found her.

She jumped as soon as she saw me standing there and set her phone down. I'm not sure what I had thought we would accomplish when I asked her into my office, but as I wait for her to enter, I run my fingers through my hair. Get your shit together, Harrington.

I contemplate whether to sit in front of or behind my desk, but as I watch her stroll into my office, I decide it's best to sit behind it. It's better for both of us, for me to show the authority but, more importantly, to hide my stiffening cock from view.

"Please close the door, Miss Baker."

She slowly closes the door, and my eyes drift to the way the material clings to her firm ass. I jumble to change the direction of my gaze before she catches me. She runs her hands down her sides, straightening her outfit before taking a seat in one of the chairs in front of me.

We sit there staring at each other, neither saying a word. Her beauty consumes me, literally leaving me speechless. I want to pull her into my lap and show her what her

abandoning me the other night did to me. To give her a taste of what she missed, a taste of what I need. But that is not why I brought her in there. She is now my employee, not someone I can have my way with whenever I want.

“Well, I guess we can both say that this turned out to be a more interesting Monday morning, huh?” I break the awkward silence with a chuckle.

“I’m not exactly sure what to say. I guess out of all of the people I had to find on Friday, it had to be my new boss.” She stutters, “Not that I was out at the club to find someone. My friends and I were out celebrating, and you were there... Well, I guess I don’t need to fill you in on the rest.”

Nope, she doesn’t need to fill me in. That night, and meeting her, has been running through my mind since I exited the bathroom expecting to see her just moments later and hopefully in my bed naked that night and so forth.

“When we met, I had no idea who you were. But then again, Paul—I mean Mr. Jennings—didn’t say your full name when he mentioned that you would be starting on Monday. Not that it would have made a difference anyway.”

I laugh awkwardly. “Well, that makes two of us. But in your favor, I prefer to keep my face out of the public, and I introduced myself to you as just ‘Ben,’ not Bentley or Bentley Harrington, the new CEO of Maritime Media.” I always hated that name; it’s why I prefer to go by Ben. “No one is at fault here,” I assure her. “It was just a coincidence. I saw a beautiful woman I wanted; there wasn’t much getting to know each other—well, verbally, at least.”

She doesn’t respond, so I tilt my head toward her to bring her attention back to me. Where is her head at? When I raise my eyebrows, she finally comes out of her daze, shaking her head.

“I’m sorry. It’s just that... but you’re...” She’s cute when she’s frazzled. Shit, stop thinking like that; she’s your goddamn employee now, not your wet dream. She exhales a long breath, gathering her composure. “But you’re so young to be a CEO.”

“Why, thank you. How old do you think I am exactly?” I smirk.

“I don’t know. I wasn’t exactly asking for your age, sex, and location before I invited your cock into my vagina!”

The smile falls from my face with her raised voice. The last thing I need is for my personal life to spread throughout the office on my first day.

Her shoulders deflate. “I’m sorry, that was uncalled for. I don’t know. I just thought you were around my age or a little older.”

I sit back in my chair and cross my arms. “I’ll take that as a compliment, but I’m thirty-five.”

“Great, not only did I have my first one-night stand, it was with someone ten years older,” Lexi says softly. If it wasn’t dead quiet in my office, I might not have heard her. Wait, did she say that was her first one-night stand? And she’s only twenty-five? That is pretty impressive to be only twenty-five and director of events. She is the same age as Asher, and Asher has not even a quarter of the drive and dedication she has to have earned such an important position.

Maybe I should bring Asher around her to see if some of that could rub off on him. Actually, hell no, I don’t want Asher anywhere around her. She is mine.

No, she isn’t, and that eats me up inside.

Lexi crosses her legs, and I can’t help but direct my attention to her toned limbs. I

remember them wrapped around my waist the other night. Just the thought of that moment has me hardening again in my slacks.

“Was there a reason you called me in here?” Her soft voice pulls me from my thoughts. Oh, right, duh. She looks nervous. “Am I being fired? I know there are rules against this, but like we pointed out, neither of us knew who the other was.”

“What? No. I just wanted to lay the ground rules since we can’t avoid the situation.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:58 pm

She bites her lip, and my mind travels to her doing that while trying to keep her moaning down while I plowed my cock into her. “And what is that exactly?”

“We need to keep this strictly professional. It was a one-time thing, and with you as my employee now, we have to promise it won’t happen again. That it was a—”

“Mistake?” I’m caught off guard by her choice of wording. I would never call what we did a mistake. Is that what she thinks? I completely lose my train of thought, now flustered that that is how she feels about it.

“Not at all,” I whisper, so softly that I don’t believe she hears me, or maybe she does as she seems to be lost in her own thoughts as she stares at me, her lips parted slightly.

“Miss Baker.” Damn, I would love to be in her head.

She shakes her head out of her trance. “You can call me Lexi. I mean for God’s sake, it was just about fifty hours ago that you were moaning my name with you buried deep inside me.” She quickly covers her mouth. “Oh my God, I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. Please don’t fire me, Mr. Harrington. I really love this job.” Her eyes are pleading with me. “I promise I can keep this professional and not make comments like that anymore.”

“Well, just as you mentioned, you can call me Ben. I want to run this office on a first-name basis. Everyone on the same page. Just because I’m CEO, I don’t want to feel that I’m above anyone else.” She nods as my mind drifts to wanting to be above her with her on my knees and me in her— Shit, maybe I should just fire her. No, that

sounds like a lawsuit waiting to happen, Ben. That's the last thing you need.

I stand up, adjusting my suit jacket, and extend my hand. Lexi places her delicate hand in mine, and I feel a jolt of electricity rip through my body. I'm not talking about the kind you feel after shuffling your feet around on the carpet and touching something; I mean the type of electricity that can bring a man to his knees.

"Yes, sir. If you don't mind, I should get back to my office and start work. I have lots to get done today."

I'm trying to figure out her expression. She went from being tense walking in here to what seemed like relaxed for a moment, and now I don't think I can pinpoint it. I'm not sure if I upset her with what I said or not. Or maybe she does just want to get back to work. I mean, I can't blame her—I've only been in the office for two hours and haven't seemed to accomplish anything except a boner.

"Oh, sure, of course. I look forward to working with you, Lexi." My eyes drift to her lips as she purses them and brings her bottom lip between her teeth. "Strictly professional, of course."

I try to break the tension again that threatens to suffocate us both at the moment. Maybe I can figure out how to open a window to air it out. As Lexi leaves, my eyes drop down, admiring the way the pencil skirt forms to her perky ass once again. I'm breaking my own rule, not even five minutes after agreeing to it. I run a hand over my face and let out a grunting exhale.

Fuck my life.

Of course the mystery dream woman I haven't been able to get out of my head since she disappeared from the bathroom at the club turns out to be my new events director. I'm Bentley Michael Harrington; of course I can keep this professional—I think?

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:58 pm

What a day. I kept my nose buried in my work all day, avoiding Ben the best I could. When I left the office at six, I noticed his light was still on. We were the only ones left in the office. I debated walking over to say good night but thought better of it. Maybe he was just staying late to learn about his new surroundings.

When I arrive home, I find Brynn, Hadley, and Cal sitting at the island waiting for me.

“Hey, what are you all doing here?” I ask as I flip off my heels and enjoy the feel of my feet on the hardwood floor.

“Well, I live here, in case you forgot,” Hadley jokes with a smile plastered on her face. “But you texted 911, so I thought I would bring reinforcements.” She holds out her hands at Brynn and Cal in a “ta-da” fashion.

Oh shit, that’s right. I forgot that I had shoved my phone in my purse and never checked messages all day.

“Yeah, you can’t text 911 and then ignore us. I was ready to come over to your office to check on you.”

“I’m sorry. It was a long day.”

“Well, I brought plenty of wine.” Brynn holds up two bottles in front of her as Hadley walks over to the cabinet for the glasses. “And dinner to soak up the booze.”

I finally get a whiff of the delicious aroma of the local Chinese takeout place down

the street. My mouth waters at the thought of the chicken and broccoli.

My eyes focus on Cal just as he looks up. “Yeah, well, I’m just here for the food, so feel free to ignore me.”

“Callum,” Brynn scolds, and he holds his hands up innocently.

“What? I’m just being honest.”

Hadley walks over and hands me a glass of red wine before taking a sip of her own. “Now come on, let’s eat. I’m starving.”

The stress I had felt since this morning’s meeting rolled off my shoulders. These girls, and even Cal, have my back no matter what. That’s what these girls do. I had begun to believe that they were my soul mates and that I don’t need a man on my mind.

Yet, there’s only been one man on my mind since Friday night. And now I’ve discovered that this man is utterly untouchable.

Gathered around the coffee table, now covered with an assortment of Chinese takeout containers, fortune cookies, and opened bottles of wine, I enjoy the company of my best friend. In true tribe fashion, we get completely sidetracked from the topic at hand, aka me and my 911, as they talk about their days. I’m not necessarily looking forward to being the center of attention here, so I just go along with it.

Hadley, who is currently sitting on the floor in front of the coffee table, adjusts to sitting on her knees. “Okay, so explain the 911 text. Did you meet your new boss? Did you guys hit it off, okay?” she asks before shoving another piece of orange chicken in her mouth.

So much for avoiding that subject.

I swirl the cabernet sauvignon around in my wineglass, and my shoulders sag. “Oh yeah, I met him, all right, and we hit it off great,” I mutter softly, but loud enough for my friends to hear me before bringing the glass up to my lips and downing the rest of its contents.

I savor the taste, begging for liquid courage to make it through this conversation, but if there is anyone who wouldn’t judge my epic poor life decisions, it would be these people.

I close my eyes, and memories fill my head—from the satisfaction and warmth of his touch that night versus the coldness and panic I felt this morning.

Here goes nothing. I take a deep breath as I feel their eyes burning a hole in my skin, waiting for me to explain.

“I kind of slept with my boss,” I spit out before I chicken out.

Of course, right as I confess, Cal is taking a sip of his beer, and his reaction is to spit out his drink, but he quickly recovers, reaching for the pile of napkins on the table to clean the mess he made.

Hadley’s eyes meet mine as if she’s still trying to process what I just said. Her brows furrow, and she opens and closes her mouth multiple times before she finally finds the words.

“How do you kinda sleep with your boss?”

Unfazed by what I just said, Brynn continues to eat the food on her plate but retorts, “Was it just the tip? That’s pretty hot.” The rest of us turn to face her, and she just

shrugs.

“Okay, on that note, I think I’m going to slip out to get to my date and leave the girl talk to you guys.”

“Wait, you have a date, yet you ate dinner here with us,” Hadley questions.

Cal rises from his seat, taking his plate and empty bottle with him to the kitchen. “It’s only drinks with the chick from the coffee shop. Plus, when do I ever turn down food?”

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:58 pm

He comes back and leans down, kissing Brynn on the cheek. “I’ll see you at home. Text me when you’re about to leave.” She nods. I can’t decide if that’s sweet or weird that he wants her to text him while on a date.

“Hadley, thanks for the beer.” He then turns to me. “Lexi, umm, congrats on banging your boss.”

I hide in my hands, completely mortified while the girls bust out laughing.

I don’t pull my hands from my face until I hear the click of the front door.

“Okay, we will talk about you two later...” Hadley teases Brynn about her relationship or, well, lack of with Cal. “But right now, we are going to get back to little miss slut over here.”

Brynn and Hadley both turn to face me again.

I refill my glass and take a large swig before pulling my feet under me on the couch.

“Okay, remember the guy from the other night at Eiffel Park?”

“You mean the one which I quote, ‘fucked me into next week with an orgasm to end all orgasms’?” Hadley chuckles.

I nod and pull a pillow into my lap as if it’ll hide me. I seriously feel like I want to crawl in a hole and die of embarrassment while I watch the dots connect and the light bulbs go off in my besties’ heads. As if they both realize at once—sometimes I feel

like we all share a brain, not to mention the same menstrual cycles—they speak simultaneously.

“Holy fuck!”

“Lexi!”

“Wait. Wait. Hold up,” Hadley chimes in. “Didn’t you recognize the name?”

I shake my head before I run my hand through my hair nervously. “No, when Mr. Jennings spoke with us about the sale, all he said was Mr. Harrington was our new boss and that he was excited to start.”

“I mean, Harrington isn’t exactly a common name,” Brynn says, reaching for the wine bottle to refill her glass.

I bite my lip. “Yeah, well, I’m sure I may have questioned it had he introduced himself as Bentley Harrington or said that he was the new owner of Maritime Media. But he just introduced himself as ‘Ben.’”

“She was too busy focusing on his cock to catch his last name,” Hadley says jokingly, and I reach behind me for the pillow and throw it at her head, but she shifts at the last minute.

“What happened? I mean, like how did you find out? How did you react?” Brynn asks as she leans her elbows onto her knee.

I let out a nervous laugh as I replay this morning in my head. “I’m sure it wouldn’t have been so bad had I not figured it out in the morning staff meeting in front of the entire staff.”

A burst of laughter erupts and fills the room. I'm so glad my friends find my life so amusing. "It's not funny, bitches!" Yeah, sure, I would be laughing had any of them encountered this same situation, but because it's me, it's different.

"You're right; it's fucking hilarious," Hadley says through the tears running down her face. Seriously? Of all the people, I thought she would have been the most sympathetic. She had witnessed the aftermath of our night together and how much it had messed with my head.

I throw my head in my hands, covering my face. "It was mortifying. I couldn't focus on anything he said. Every time I tried to listen to what he was saying, I remember the sound of his voice as he took my body and made me come harder than anyone ever has. Oh my God! This is finally my chance to start fresh without the memory of Dominic being held over my head, and I fucked it all up." I know it sounds crazy, but I do feel that I can't think of this place without thinking of Dominic since I met him on my first day on the job.

Brynn clears her throat and holds up her pointer finger in the air. "Actually, it was your boss you fucked, not the job." I wish I had another pillow to throw, so instead, I roll my eyes. I reach the table and snag an egg roll out of the container and take a bite. Eating my feelings sounds like a much better idea.

"And then to top it off, after the meeting, he called me to his office." I want to sink further into the couch.

Brynn straightens up. "Please tell me he bent you over his desk and took you right there."

I sigh. "No." But damn it if the thought hadn't crossed my mind. I wanted him to take me on his desk, on the couch on the far wall—hell, I even thought about him having me pressed up against the window. Maybe if that were the case, I would have come

home in a better mood.

“The complete opposite, unfortunately.” I hide behind my glass as I take a sip.

“Oh my God! He fired you?” Hadley stands in an outrage, spilling a little of her wine.

I nearly choke on my wine at her enthusiasm.

“Slow your roll, girlfriend. No, he didn’t fire me, although I think I’d rather he had done that, then I wouldn’t have to be there every day.” I exhale. “No, he said that we needed to forget what had happened between us. That it was a mistake.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:58 pm

“Whoa, what,” the girls shout in unison. “He said that?”

I recall our conversation and nibble on my bottom lip. “Well, no, he never used that word, but he did mumble something after I said it. Maybe he was just confirming it.” It was me who called it that. Of course, that is the furthest thing from the truth. Here it was, the best sex of my life, and it turned into a total clusterfuck. I bite back the emotion, but when both of my best friends come barreling toward me, pulling into their arms, I let loose. The tears begin to fall. “It was just supposed to be a one-night stand; I don’t know why I’m this messed up over his words.”

Hadley brushes the hair out of my face and cups my cheeks in her hands. “Because you’re human. You feel with your heart.”

My friends let me cry it out. I don’t know if it’s the alcohol or the emotions following the best sex of my life that has me a complete mess. Hadley eventually pulls away from our group hug and stands, taking the bottle of wine from the coffee table with her. I hold Brynn’s hand while resting my head on her shoulder. Oh, this should be good.

“This is the new and improved Lexi Baker. You are a badass bitch. And fuck him.” She spits out the last part a little harsher than I think she planned.

“She already did,” Brynn adds with a fake cough in her hand.

“Touché.” Hadley points to her on the couch with the bottle and laughs. “But no, fuck him in the nonliteral sense. I mean, unless he wants to take you on his desk, then yes, definitely go for it because that’s hot as hell.” She does a little twerk that I think in

her mind is supposed to represent me bent over a desk.

I chuckle and take the glass that's handed to me. "No, go in there tomorrow and show him why you are the best damn events director and look damn good doing it."

She holds the bottle up and uses the other hand to raise, ensuring that we stand from the couch. We all clink our glasses and take a drink. Hadley takes a relatively larger sip straight from the bottle.

"I love you guys so much." How lucky am I to have these people in my life?

Clearing my throat, I take a seat back on the couch and cross my legs under me. "Okay, now that we've aired my dirty laundry on a damn Monday, let's talk about something else."

"Ooo, like how fine Mr. Murphy was looking tonight? Seriously, Brynn, why aren't you banging him?" Hadley smirks.

Brynn throws her head back on the couch, groaning. "Because we're just friends," she admits for what feels like the millionth time. But are we seriously the only ones that see how hot their chemistry is? I feel like "we're just friends" are famous last words.

We spend the rest of the evening laughing and chatting before Brynn leaves, and Hadley heads to her room for bed.

I throw the leftover food containers in the fridge and the empty wine bottles on the counter before making my way to my bedroom. Stripping off my clothes, I climb into bed and wonder what's in store for me tomorrow. It wasn't supposed to be this way. I'm supposed to kick ass and love my job, not be consumed with thoughts of the man who now signs my paycheck. I can do this—I can remember that Bentley Harrington

is just my boss and not the sex on the stick I had gotten off to the thought of all weekend.

I finally push thoughts of our one night together out of my head and pray I have the strength to get through this.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:58 pm

Inoticed the light on in her office well past close of business. There was no way I was leaving her in this building alone. Once when I went back to the kitchen, I passed her office and thought about stopping in to check in with her, but as I glanced through her open door, I saw her focused on reading papers on her desk, chewing on the tip of her pen, and my mind went somewhere it shouldn't have.

As soon as I saw the light flick off in her office, I waited thirty minutes to make sure I didn't run into her in the parking lot and give it away that I was only here to make sure she was okay. Plus, I may have done something stupid like call the whole "keeping it professional" thing off since it was after hours and convince her to come back to my place for round two and three...and four.

The drive to the luxury three-story town house I recently purchased is easy. The traffic is light being so much later in the evening. I pull my blacked-out BMW M4 into the garage. I may not like to flaunt my money around often, but I do love my toys. The sleekness of the black on black spells luxury, elegance, and of course, speed. What can I say? I'm aman. Resting my head on the back of the headrest, I scrape my hands down my face, exhaling. What a fucking day.

I exit the car and close the garage as I make my way into the house. I hear soft moans as I walk up the stairs to the next level. Seriously, Asher? For fuck's sake. I don't even need to enter the room to know that Asher has brought another one of his conquests back home. At least he could have taken her to his room.

When I reach the top of the stairs to the landing, I spy from the corner of my eye my brother with his head buried between the legs of the next notch on his belt. Who knows her name? I'm sure as hell Asher doesn't either. I choose not to make

my presence known because I don't need to make the situation more awkward. I also make a mental note to have it professionally cleaned—actually, no, to order a new couch for the living room. I make my way down the hall to my home office. The minibar is calling my name. I pour myself a glass of Macallan 12 and take a seat at my desk.

The liquid goes smoothly down my throat. I browse the internet to pass the time, and the liquid courage has convinced me to google one Alexis Baker, age 25, Willow Creek, New York. Pictures from various events with Maritime Media appear on the screen. I scroll through the images and notice the same group of girls that were with her at the club. Any photo where she's posing with a guy, I quickly forward to the next image. In most photos, she is smiling from ear to ear. That smile is enough to make any man fall to their knees. It's the candids from work events that have me most captivated. She is so focused and driven, and it shows in her work.

I'm not sure how long I spend in my office when a yawn creeps up on me. I turn the computer monitor off and drain the rest of my tumbler. Before I can exit the office and make my way to my bed, the door to my office flings open.

"What the fuck are you doing up still?" My brother strolls in wearing just low-hanging sweatpants and takes a sip from a beer bottle before plopping on the couch across from the desk.

I lean back in my chair, annoyed that bedtime has been delayed, but also relieved because that means I'm delaying the inevitable. I know that no matter what rules I put in place for Lexi and me, it does not apply to my dreams.

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe it was because I sought out refuge in here when I arrived home after a long first day only to find you dining out on your flavor of the week. Or is it the flavor of the day?" He shrugs off my remarks and doesn't deny it. One of these days, his actions will have consequences. I won't always be there to clean up

his messes.

“Yeah, whatever, Dad.” That stings deep, and he knows it. I run my palm along the memorial tattoo hidden with the ink on my arm. Our parents died when Asher was only ten, and I was almost finished my business degree. Our parents were en route to a fundraiser for one of the charity groups our mother was a part of when their small plane went down somewhere over the Appalachian Mountains.

I was not about to allow my brother to go into the system, so I stepped up as his guardian. Balancing finishing my degree and raising a hell-ridden teenage boy was more challenging than it looks in the movies, but somehow I prevailed. It wasn't easy. The sleepless nights and emotional breakdowns were endless, and that wasn't even adding my college course load and needing to make sure I secured a job to support us. Not to mention my ex-girlfriend, Kandace, who left me because she wasn't ready to be anyone's guardian at twenty.

“One, don't call me that. I may have suffered through your teenage years, making sacrifices to provide you with the best life possible after what we went through, but I'm serious, Asher. You're fucking twenty-five, what the fuck are you doing with your life?”

“I'm sorry I'm not as perfect as you,” he spits back before taking a long drag from his bottle.

I shake my head and run my hands through my hair. “I'm not perfect, Asher, far from it.” I pause for a moment, almost ready to spill my current predicament, but think better of it. The longer I fester on it, the more of an issue it will become. I can push that brunette vixen to the back of my mind and move on. Sure, totally can.

“Yeah, whatever you say. You're the poster child for perfection, and you know it.”

I roll my eyes. There is no getting through to him—it's like beating a dead horse.

“Well, if you'll excuse me, I'm exhausted from the first day.” I rise from my seat and stretch.

“Ahh, yes. How'd that go? Any hot new employees?”

My jaw tenses, and I clear my throat. “It went fine.” I leave it at that. “And my employees are off-limits, but feel free to stop by sometime.”

I walk past him and stop in the doorway, bracing my hand on the frame, glancing at the back of Asher's head.

“Oh, and Asher? If you're going to bring your sluts home, at least keep them in your room and not in our shared spaces.”

The sound of his laughter fades as I leave and make my way to my bed.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:58 pm

“Whoa, look at you, asshole—all professional and shit,” my brother’s voice calls out from the doorway of my office.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Harrington, he just barged in wouldn’t wait for me to call you.” My usual bubbly blonde secretary, Taylor, scurries into the office after him, a scowl upon her face.

I stand, buttoning my coat. “It’s okay, Taylor. He’s my brother. Asher, this is my secretary, Taylor.”

He extends his hand and takes hers in his own. He creepily brings her hand to his lips. “Lovely to meet you, Taylor. I hope we get to see each other often.”

Her demeanor quickly shifts as she lets out a weird giggle sound that I have never heard her make before. Is she seriously eating this up? Great, I assume I’ll be getting a new secretary soon enough after he fucks her and doesn’t call her again. I roll my eyes. “That will be all, Taylor,” I dismiss her before he starts stripping off her clothes right here in front of me. She nods and quickly leaves.

“Way to be a buzzkill, big brother.” Asher scoffs and plops into the seat across from my desk. I retake my seat and lean back, the leather squeaking under each precise moment.

“Well, as I told you, my employees are off-limits, especially to you.” I look up and find Asher spun around looking out the door in Taylor’s direction, or possibly trying to scope out the other female employees. “Or did that just go in one ear and out the other like everything else I say?”

Asher startles at my slightly raised tone on the last statement. “Huh?” He spins around and settles back into the chair.

“What brings you around here, anyway?”

It’s been three weeks since I started here, and he has never stopped by. In fact, I haven’t seen too much of Asher period. He’s been easily distracted by something or someone. Much like me, I’ve definitely had a distraction. It’s honestly pretty hard to focus when a gorgeous five-foot-three brunette goddess walks around the office.

“I was meeting a friend for lunch who has an office a few blocks away. I had some time to kill, so I thought I would pop in and see this place in action.”

“Is this friend a woman?” I ask, wondering who it is my brother spends all his time with.

“No, thank you very much. This is a guy.”

I arch an eyebrow.

“Not like that, you asshole. I met him out at the club the other week, and he’s been showing me the ropes of Willow Creek.”

I nod.

Asher leans back in his chair. “So, now you know what I’ve been up to, what’s new in the world of Bentley Harrington. Did you ever find that piece of ass from the club that other week that you couldn’t stop talking about?”

Of course, karma is back to bite me in the ass because before I have the chance to say anything, there’s a knock on my door. Said brunette goddess is standing in the

doorway wearing a simple purple dress and black heels. I pray with everything that is possibly holy that she didn't hear Asher call her a piece of ass.

When my eyes meet hers, she gives me a soft smile, and I can't help but return it. We have somehow made it through the last three weeks unscathed.

"I'm sorry to bother you, Mr. Harrington."

I quickly rise to my feet. "I told you to call me Ben."

I adjust my jacket buttons in hopes that it at least covers my hardening cock with her standing in front of me. Okay, so maybe unscathed isn't the right word. While I may not be able to act on my feelings in real life, in my dreams and fantasies I have had her every which way I can and then some.

"Right, of course, Ben." She smiles again. "I was going over the vendor contracts for Best Of, and I have some questions and concerns I wanted to run by you."

Asher clears his throat, and she jumps. She must not have seen him there. It's nice to see for once a woman not affected by my brother's so-called charm.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't realize you had company. I can come back."

Asher stands and glides over to where she stands in between the door and my desk.

"I'm sorry, I don't believe we've met. I'm Asher Harrington, the better-looking younger Harrington brother." That's right—even though Asher was at Eiffel Park that night, he was up in the VIP section with those blonde bimbos.

He reaches for her hand and brings it to his mouth, brushing his lips against her knuckles, just like he had with Taylor. My blood begins to boil, and my fists clench.

She stares at him but not like most women do—more like she’s disgusted by him. Attagirl. She pulls her hand back and looks at it as if now covered in toxic waste before wiping her palm on her dress. “Lexi Baker.”

“And what is it you do here, Lexi.” I hate the way he says her name as if he were imagining moaning it. I bite back the gag at thinking of my brother and moaning in the same sentence. “I hope that someone with a gorgeous face like yours doesn’t keep herself cooped up in an office all day.”

Page 20

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:58 pm

Is he seriously hitting on my girl? Woah, she's not even your girl, Ben. Okay, it's time to break up this little shitshow unraveling before more me before I break my brother's face.

"Lexi here is our events director."

"I see." Asher looks her up and down and acts as if he actually cares. I want to slap the shit out of him for even looking at her. He looks back at me, and I try to relax my expression. But it's too late; Asher takes in my demeanor and Lexi once more.

Thankfully he doesn't say anything, just rubs his jaw and gives me a sly smile.

"Well, I won't keep you any longer. It was nice to meet you, Asher." She then turns back to me. "Ben, if you can give me a few moments of your time later, that would be great."

"Yeah, I'll come down to your office in say twenty-five minutes? I'll have Taylor run out and pick us up some lunch, and we can eat and go over all of that. Just tell her whatever you want to order."

She bites her lip nervously, and my mind goes back to the night when she knew what I liked. I loved it when she bit her lip as I explored her with my hands. Fuck! Get your head out of the gutter, Harrington. Maybe I should take a leave of absence or something or perhaps attempt dating.

"Oh, okay. Sure."

“You didn’t have other plans, did you?” I shouldn’t have assumed she was free.

She seems so nervous. Was that too much? Too forward? “No, that’s fine. I’ll see you then.”

Lexi gives Asher a small wave and exits my office. Asher watches her leave, his eye homing in on her round ass, while I watch him. My fists clench again, my nails digging into my palms.

Once she is entirely out of range, I wait for it in 3... 2... 1...

Asher spins around and slams his hands to my desk. “Holy shit, you did find her. You even hired her? Damn, that must be some magical pussy that you gave her a job, and a director job at that.”

I slump down in my chair. “Asher, it’s not like that.”

“Oh? Because it sure as hell looks like that to me.”

“Will you keep your voice down?” My voice is harsh. The last thing I need is a rumor going around the office about not only myself but Lexi. I rise again from my chair and shut the door before strolling over to the bar set up in the corner of the office.

Yes, I know it’s only 11:15 in the morning, but if I’m going to explain this, especially to my arrogant younger brother, I’m going to need something more substantial than coffee.

I pour two small tumblers, each with a splash of whiskey that was given to me as a present by the previous owner at the official sale of the company.

“You know I will never deny a drink at any hour,” Asher says as he accepts the glass.

“But for you to drink during the middle of a workday, I’d say you better start spilling.”

I lean against my desk, crossing my ankles and staring at the amber liquid. I swirl it around for a moment before I take a swig and enjoy the smooth, crisp liquid as it goes down my throat. This woman is my undoing, leading me to drink in the middle of the workday.

“Yes, Lexi is the girl from the club. No, I didn’t hire her; she already worked here.”

“I knew it!” Asher shouts with a giant smile on his face. “You got all defensive around her. I thought you were about to pounce. You’re quite the caveman, Ben.” Asher smirks before taking another drink.

“It’s a fucking mess.” I set the glass down on my desk and scrape my hands over my face, exhaling loudly. “I spent all weekend thinking about her only to come in Monday morning and learn that the woman stuck in my brain is none other than my employee. And someone that I have to work with regularly getting ready for the big Best Of event this company puts on.”

“You didn’t google her?”

I’m shocked by his question. “Why the hell would I google her?”

“I don’t know; maybe you googled the employees when you took over the company? I always google women before I go on a date. I don’t see why it would be any different here?” He googles women before he goes out with them? Yeah, I know. Pot, meet kettle since I did, in fact, google Lex, but at least that was after the fact and not before.

I shake my head. “Wow. You are...” I don’t even know how to react or respond to

him right now. “Anyways, no, I didn’t google my employees, or dates I go on for that matter.”

He raises his eyebrows in question. “You go on dates?” I flip him off, but that doesn’t stop him from continuing. “So you wham, bam, thank you, ma’am, and then she was gone.” I take another sip. Does he have to be so crude? “So, what next? You find out when you show up at work and then fuck each other’s brains out on the conference table? Ooo, or on your desk?” He cringes. “Ew, gross, I touched that earlier; I sure hope you sanitized.”

I groan. “No, I mean, yes, I mean no. We found out on Monday morning when I walked into the conference room, and bam, there she is, but we managed to get through the meeting. Then afterward, we both agreed what happened was a mistake and we needed to keep it strictly professional.”

Asher stares at me, trying to read me, cocking his head side to side. He smirks. “Right, professional. So then you haven’t made any additional passes at her, then.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:58 pm

I nod.

“You won’t mind if I do, then? That is one sweet piece of ass.”

I rise and slam my glass down on the desk. “The fuck you will,” I growl.

He smirks and stands, setting his empty glass next to mine. “Right, strictly professional. Keep telling yourself that.” He playfully smacks my cheek. “Good luck with that. I gotta go or I’ll be late for lunch.” And with that remark, he exits my office, shutting the door behind him.

Where the hell did that come from? Was I territorial over a one-night stand, a woman I can never have? Lexi was never mine to begin with.

I press the intercom to my secretary. “Yes, Mr. Harrington.”

“Did Miss Baker stop by and decide on lunch?”

“Yes sir, she picked the Corner Bistro.”

Fuck, of course. Did she know that I’ve been frequenting that place for lunch lately, or is it just a coincidence? When it comes to Alexis Baker, I’m not sure there is such a thing as coincidence anymore.

“Wonderful, Taylor. Order whatever she wants and my usual. Can you have it in her office by—” I glance down at the time. “—12:15?”

“Of course, right away, sir.”

I hang up and get back to work. I compose my thoughts and get a handle on myself before enclosing myself in Lexi's office with her. I can do this. She's just a woman—a beautiful woman that I can't fucking get out of my head. Even my brother doesn't have faith in me that I can keep this strictly professional. It's time I prove him and myself wrong.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:58 pm

I kick my heels off under the conference table and move my neck side to side. A loud crack brings slight relief. As much as I am slumped over on my computer, I'm surprised I don't resemble Quasimodo more.

A slight smile forms on my lips, picturing me like that. Real attractive, Lex.

"You doing okay over there?" The deep timbre of Ben's voice whips my head in the direction of the conference room door, where he stands perched against the frame. I'm thankful to be already sitting, otherwise, I may have embarrassed the hell out of myself because I'm pretty sure my legs would have given right out from under me.

This man screams sexy, dominant, and confident without even opening his mouth.

He pushes off the frame, closing the distance between us.

"We can just call it a night and go over this later if you need to."

I shake my head. "Oh no, I'm fine. I want to get these winners finalized so I can start generating the letters to notify them next week." Ben is definitely realizing it is more than just picking winners out of a hat. I'm not sure people actually understand the number of long hours and hard work it takes to put on such a successful event. Even the smallest details need to be perfect.

He claps his hands together. "Well, then let's get started."

Ben pulls out the black conference chair a few away from me and loosens his tie.

“I hope you don’t mind working in here. It’s just easier to spread all the paperwork out to keep it organized.” This will be the fourth Best Of party that I’ve helped plan and the second one entirely on my own. Over the years, I’ve found a particular way to do things, especially when it comes to this party, which has been dubbed “my baby.”

“That’s fine. This is your project. I’m just here to nod my head, sign my name, and look pretty, I suppose.” He gives me a smile that could easily be part of a Colgate commercial. “And I hope you don’t mind”—he bounces my words back at me—“but I ordered us some food, assuming that once we start, there won’t be any stopping us.”

Wow, that’s unexpected. “And what if I had said yes moments ago to calling it a night?” I tease.

“Hmm.” He twitches his lips side to side in thought. “Then I guess I would be spending my evening binging on sushi alone.”

“We can’t have that now, can we? Although maybe I don’t like sushi, and then that will become a reality anyways.” It’s a total lie, but Ben doesn’t know that. Italian is my favorite food. My motto may or may not be “give me carbs or give me death,” but sushi is a quick second. I prop my elbow on the table and rest my chin on my fist, challenging him.

I am usually not this bold, but there’s something about Ben that brings me out of my comfort zone.

He matches my stance, still holding my gaze. The longer he does, the more I feel as though someone has turned up the temperature in here. His eyes are burning a hole in my flesh as if he were marking me as his. My skin warms as a blush creeps over my neck and chest.

“Now, Lex”—I wish my body didn’t react the way it does when he says my name

shortened, almost like it belongs on his lips—“I would never assume, but I have walked past your office on numerous occasions and have noticed you eating sushi at your desk.”

Does he notice things that like with all his employees? Does he walk past my office often? I hope he didn’t walk past me the day I dropped a spicy tuna roll down the front of my blouse.

“I guess I also shouldn’t have assumed you didn’t have dinner plans.” He arches a brow, confirming that I don’t.

“No, my roommate has gotten used to me not home most nights for dinner. She knows how much of a workaholic I am. I usually stop on my way home and pick something up.” He must think I sound so pathetic; I feel like I am when I hear it like that.

“I’m the same actually.” He nods in understanding. “So, you live with a roommate?”

His arms are extended in front of him as he rolls up his white dress shirt, exposing the colorful lines of the ink on his forearms. It had been dark in the club, so I wasn’t able to take in the intricate detail of his tattoos. And when we were in the bathroom, my focus had been on, well—other things.

“Lexi?”

I pop my head up, my mouth suddenly dry, and my cheeks redden in embarrassment as my eyes meet his. The smirk on his face indicates he watched me thoroughly checking him out. I want to crawl in my seat and disappear just like that funny cat couch gif Brynn uses all the time in our group chat when she wants to avoid talking about certain things.

I shift in my chair, pulling one leg under the other. I'm thankful to be wearing dress pants today instead of the usual skirt or dress; otherwise, I might be slipping and sliding. Just because I want to crawl in a hole right now, it doesn't mean I'm not turned on.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have asked. That's none of my business."

His words finally register. "No, it's fine. I'm pretty sure everyone around here knows." Of course, it's because they were here to witness the demise of my last relationship that left me technically homeless, but that is too heavy of a conversation for now. "I share an apartment with my best friend Hadley. Oh," I say with a little too much excitement, "you actually met her." Ben looks confused. "Well, sort of. I mean, she was with me that night..." I don't need to explain what night—he knows. His eyes darken at the mention of our first meeting. I watch as his Adam's apple bobs and the muscles in his jaw tighten.

"Ah, I see." Silence and tension fill the room, and I wonder if we'll ever be able to move past that.

Ben clears his throat. "So, shall we?" He extends his hand to my neatly organized piles of papers on the table in front of us.

"Yes, we probably should." Otherwise, we might end up being here all night.

Page 23

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:58 pm

He sits up and folds his arms on the table. “All right, Lexi Baker, I’m all yours.”

Oh, if only that were true.

We make it through going over the winners for twelve categories before Ben’s phone chimes, alerting us our dinner has arrived downstairs. Ben leaves to meet the delivery guy, and I not only clear space on the table for our food but take advantage of the distance now put between us.

“Sweet Jesus, are you feeding an army?” I ask when Ben returns with enough sushi to feed the entire Art department.

Ben finishes setting the containers out in the newly cleared space. With his hands on his hips, he takes in the scene in front of him. “Yeah...” He trails off. “I may have overdone it. But the last thing we needed is me getting hangry.” I snort at his use of the word “hangry.” He smirks. “Oh, believe me, it’s not pretty.”

“Don’t let me stop you. Let’s dig in.”

I use my chopsticks to pick up one of the colorful rolls in front of me, and I can’t hold back my moan when the flavors explode in my mouth.

When I open my eyes, I find Ben staring at me, his mouth gaped. I quickly cover my mouth. “I’m sorry; it’s just so good.”

Ben sets his food down and leans forward. “Lex, never apologize for something that you enjoy.” Is he referring to the food or him?

It's incredible that we accomplished almost getting through the entire list of winners after eating a gross yet delicious amount of sushi, yet I still can't get his comments out of my head. Did he say those things on purpose just to mess with me?

While I have my feet now propped up on the conference chair next to me, Ben has been attempting to walk off his meal, pacing back and forth.

"How many more of these are left," he asks from across the room.

"Just two more actually," I respond, chewing on the tip of my pen.

Ben comes up behind me, one hand perched on the back of my chair, while his other hand is flat on the table. His palm is now splayed as he leans his weight over me. When I glance down, I am close enough to see the veins in his muscular forearms bulging against the colored lines in his tattoos. I want to rake my nails up and down his arm to trace the intricate details.

As he leans over further, reading over my shoulder, his scent pulls me in. I take a moment to catch my breath as memories of that night assault me. I must be losing my mind because I swear I hear Ben inhale as his nose is right near the top of my head.

Neither of us moves. I assume he is still reading, but I'm worried that if I move, I'll be right back in his arms. The moment has us frozen in time. I savor the closeness of him. My breathing quickens when I feel his breath on the skin on the back of my neck. What is happening? Is either of us prepared for this? I can feel the heat radiating off his body.

The moment is quickly broken when Ben's phone buzzes on the other side of the table. We both separate as he puts distance between us. I quickly gather up the paperwork, shuffling them into one pile.

I try to gather my things before he is done responding to whoever has his attention on his phone. I am almost free when Ben lightly grabs my arm, causing me to startle.

“Hey, where’s the fire?”

I refuse to meet his gaze. I’m so confused about everything tonight. “Sorry, I just figured I took up enough of your time tonight, and we were all done. Plus, I’ll let you get to whoever that was.” Do I sound jealous? I don’t even know anything about him or whoever is on the phone.

Ben steps back, releasing my arm. He nods and doesn’t push the subject.

“Well, thank you for staying late.”

“It was no problem at all.” We both exit the conference room, and Ben flicks the light off behind him. When he turns left toward his office, I go the opposite way toward mine. “Hey, Lex,” he calls out, and I turn to face him. “For the record, the text was only my brother alerting me he wasn’t coming home tonight.”

I am left speechless, and Ben knows it, too. “Good night, Lexi. See you on Monday.” He turns and heads to his office, leaving me standing there still confused about what the fuck just happened.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:58 pm

I groan as I open the door from my bedroom and make my way to the source of the loud music.

“Really?” I stand in the living room with my hands on my hips, glaring at my best friend, who is swaying her hips to Starship’s “Nothing’s Gonna Stop Us Now.” She spins, now serenading me with a wooden spoon. For someone not even born in the eighties, Hadley is obsessed with that decade’s music and even worse with the movies. I lost count the number of times she made me watch a brat pack movie. I’ve actually grown to love them over the years, but I always pretend I don’t just because I love giving her a hard time.

“You’re in a mood this morning,” Hadley pouts when I refuse to lip-sync the second verse with her.

“So are you.” I shuffle my feet over to a stool at the bar-top counter and plop down, running my hands over my face. “It just happens to be that you’re in a good mood, while I’m—”

“A bitch?” she interrupts, giggling.

“No, I’m sorry, I’m just exhausted. I didn’t sleep well last night.” I prop my chin on my fist and contemplate going back to bed. However, every time I close my eyes, I envision Ben and what could have happened the other night. I feel his hands and lips on my skin. I shiver at the thought, thankful that Hadley has her back to me; otherwise, I know she would be asking what that was all about.

“Yeah, me neither. In fact, it was a very”—she elongates the “very”—“long night.”

Hadley glances over her shoulder, giving a sultry wink.

Well... at least someone's getting laid in this apartment. The track changes as I take in the assortment of food on the counter. There are all the ingredients for Hadley's famous french toast. Her grandmother taught her that the secrets are cinnamon and a splash of triple sec in the base mixture.

"Are we not going out for brunch today?" I ask as I pop a grape into my mouth. Usually, we bounce around trying out different restaurants for brunch, but I love the relaxed feeling we have when we hang out here, too. As long as I get to spend time with my girls, that's all that matters.

"Nope, I figured we could just lounge here."

"Sounds perfect to me." Maybe I can sneak in a nap later, too. I hop off the stool and spin on my heels. "I'm gonna jump in the shower," I shout over my shoulder, walking down the hall.

"Okay," Hadley shouts back, her voice fading the further I get. "Brynn will be here soon."

I grab my phone off my nightstand and connect it to my shower's Bluetooth speaker before turning the shower on. With the sounds of Pentatonix filling the bathroom, I can finally feel at ease stripping out of my pajamas. Seven songs later, I am throwing my towel in the hamper, dressed in black knit shorts and a long-sleeve light tan shirt. I pull up my hair in a messy bun as I walk down the hallway. The smiling faces of both my best friends greet me as I reenter the kitchen.

"So let me get this straight, the loud blasting music is okay as long as it's coming from you and your music but not when I play mine." Hadley narrows her eyes at me, pointing the spatula in my direction.

I shrug it off as I pour myself a mimosa. “Pentatonix is always the exception to the rule. You should know that by now.” I bring the glass to my lips to hide my smirk.

“You look cute.” Brynn looks me up and down as I take a seat next to her.

“Thanks,” Hadley answers for me as she plates the last of the french toast from the pan. Brynn looks between us, confused. “What?” Hadley shrugs. “It is my top after all.”

I pull the hood up and prop my elbows on the counter, batting my eyelashes dramatically. “And clearly, you love it so much since it’s been in my closet for six months.”

Hadley mocks me, sticking her tongue out at me. “Now let’s eat, bitches, before it gets cold. Josh used up all my energy last night, and I need to refuel before seeing him again later.”

Brynn and I help Hadley carry the plates of french toast, eggs, bacon, and mixed fruit as well as the mimosa pitcher over to the coffee table before we settle in and dive into this delicious array of food.

“So Josh, huh?” I ask, shoving a bite of french toast in my mouth, inquiring about the bouncer at Eiffel Park. Brynn and Hadley are sitting on the couch while I chose to take the spot on the floor, sitting with my legs crossed under me.

Hadley gets a dreamy look on her face. “He’s sweet, funny. I don’t know; it’s not anything serious. But damn the sex is...” She smacks her lips together, making an obnoxious noise.

A moan from our right brings our gaze to Brynn, who is moaning around her fork. Her eyes are closed, and we both crack up laughing. Hadley points her piece of bacon

in Brynn's direction. "Yep, there's a lot of those noises, too."

"Oh my God, disgusting," Brynn jokes with a mouth full of food now.

"Hey, I'm not the one moaning over breakfast." Hadley purses her lips, making a point.

"Nope, just clearly moaning around Josh's dick," I mutter, pushing the food around on the plate in front of me.

"Heyo!" Brynn shouts, holding her hand up to high-five me. Hadley rolls her eyes as I rise from my seat to meet Brynn's hand.

"You don't talk much, and when you do, that's what you have to say?"

"You didn't deny it." I hold up my glass at her, cheering her, knowing that I won this war.

Brynn pulls her feet up under her, matching my position. "What's up with you? You're not usually this quiet."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:58 pm

“Spill now,” Hadley demands, “or I’ll keep talking about sexcapades with Josh.” She quirks an eyebrow.

Brynn pouts beside us before mouthing, “Please.”

“We had a moment the other night.”

“Who?” they both ask in unison, and I have serious déjà vu to when I first confessed that Ben was my one-night stand turned new boss.

“Ben.” I sigh before falling back to the ground and covering my eyes with my forearm. The sound of clinking from the plates and glasses being set on the table fill the room before I feel both Hadley and Brynn take seats next to me on the floor.

I pop up, similar to my favorite childhood game, “Don’t Wake Daddy,” and begin spilling my guts.

“I’m just so confused. For one minute, we have no problem being strictly professional. Then the next minute, he’s caging me in at the conference table, leaning over me, his cologne invading my space and sending my senses into overdrive. All I could think about was pushing him past that breaking point so that he took me right then and there. I willed him to kiss me, but it never came. His phone buzzed, breaking the moment. I mean, that must be a sign, right?” I finally exhale, exhausted from getting that all out in one breath. I turn to look at both of them to find their jaws open in shock.

“Well then, I think I would’ve rather heard more about Hadley and the bouncer man,”

Brynn jokes, and I drop back to the floor groaning. “I’m just kidding.” She takes her place back beside me, taking my right hand in hers, while Hadley lies beside me on the other side, taking my other hand.

“Maybe all Mr. CEO needs is a little push,” Hadley says, patting our conjoined hands.

I think either Hadley is either still in an orgasmic haze from a night with the bouncer boy or maybe had one too many mimosas while cooking this feast, but I don’t think a push is going to do anything to Ben but make me look more of a fool than I already am.

Page 26

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:58 pm

Hadley: You're welcome. ;)

Brynn: Please don't hate us.

Brynn: For the record, I didn't agree with this.

Hadley: Yes, you did. Stop lying.

Me: I'm confused. Anyone care to explain?

Hadley: You'll see.

Me: What does that even mean?

I've been staring at my phone for the last ten minutes, confused by the cryptic texts coming from the two of them.

"Lexi?" The voice of our new administrative assistant at the front desk comes over the speakerphone of my desk.

"Yes, Sarah," I respond, picking up the phone and balancing it on my shoulder.

"I have a Mr...." she begins, followed by a muffled voice. "A Mr. Cal Murphy here to see you."

Cal? What's he doing here?

“Would you like me to send him back to your office?” she politely asks.

“Oh, sorry, yes, that would be fine. He knows the way.” I hang up and push back from my desk and walk to meet Cal. Does this have to do with that text from the girls?

I see Cal walking toward me, and I meet him halfway.

“Hey, what are you doing here?”

Cal leans down to my ear and whispers, “Just go with it.”

I pull back, confused yet again. Is anyone going to fill me in? “Just go with—”

Before I have a chance to finish my question, Cal leans down, palming my cheeks, and covers my mouth with his.

I start to push away with my hands on his chest. What the fuck is happening? But he grips my hips, holding me to him.

When we finally break apart, I am so stunned that I’m speechless. What the hell was that?

Cal brushes the hair out of my face and kisses my cheek. When he pulls back, I feel his breath in my ear. “You know he’s watching, right?”

“What,” I gasp.

From the corner of my eye, I see Ben staring at us. His jaw is tense, a line furrowed between his brows. I want to smooth that crease away, but he is the one who set the boundaries.

Then it hits me. Understanding crosses my features, and Cal tips my chin, pinching it between his thumb and forefinger. “Now you get it.”

He smirks, and I narrow my eyes. The girls may have gone a little too far this time.

“He’s still staring, so ready for the big finale?” I’m scared even to see what that is, but I tilt my head to the side.

“Sure, why not.”

He fuses his mouth to mine. I feel his calloused hands on the back of my neck, holding me close, before tipping me back in one of those famous return-from-overseas military kisses, although this is not downtown, this is in the middle of my office, and he is not my lost love, he is just a friend. In a second of panic, I place my hands on his shoulder to keep me from falling backward. To the untrained eye, aka anyone who is not in on this plan, it looks like two lovers happy to see each other.

When Cal’s tongue glides over my lips, seeking permission, I gasp, and he takes advantage, exploring my mouth with his tongue.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:58 pm

There are no sparks. When I kissed Ben, there were enough fireworks to light up the darkest night sky. For a moment, I forget that it is Cal I am kissing and not Ben and get lost in the kiss. When he nibbles on my bottom lip, I come back to reality. I slowly pull back to find Cal's eyes traveling from my eyes to my lips. Oh shit, did he enjoy that kiss? Did we completely fuck up our friendship?

"Relax," he softly assures me with a wink.

I don't know how to feel at the moment. For one, my head is spinning from that kiss, and two, I'm trying not to be weirded out that I just shared a kiss with one of my closest friends. I also can't help but wonder if Brynn knows how fantastic of a kisser Cal is. I am so going to tease her if she doesn't.

A throat clearing from behind forces me and Cal to spin around and meet Ben glaring at us.

"Lexi." There is a sense of scolding to his voice, and I can't tell if it's from me kissing another man or that I was kissing someone in the open office. Either way, there is a hint of jealousy in his eyes.

"Oh Ben, hi, I'm sorry, this is—"

"Callum Murphy." Cal reaches out to shake Ben's hand. Callum? Wow, so formal.

Ben's eyes move back and forth between Cal and me. Can he read between the lines here?

“Bentley Harrington. I’m Lexi’s boss.”

After what feels like the longest handshake of all time, they release each other’s hands but continue engaging in the staring contest. Is this some sort of male territorial thing?

“Well, Bentley,” Cal begins, knowing that I’ve told him that he doesn’t go by it. It’s hard to hide my smile.

Ben holds up his hand. “You can call me Ben.”

“Okay, Ben. I hope it’s okay that I stopped by to surprise my girl and take her to lunch?” His girl? Oh boy, he is bringing out all the stops on this one. Did he take some acting classes or something? He wraps his arm around my shoulder and pulls me into his chest, just like I’ve seen him and Brynn do many times.

“Oh, sure, sure. Enjoy yourselves.”

That’s it? I try to hide my disappointment. What was I expecting, though, Ben to just sweep me off my feet Prince Charming style or be a caveman and pull me behind him and beat the shit out of Cal?

“Okay. Let me just grab my purse.” I turn and grab it from my office and turn on my do not disturb message on my phone. When I join the boys, they’re having some sort of weird unspoken conversation with their eyes.

I clear my throat, startling them both. Yeah, because this isn’t awkward or anything.

“Ready?” Cal asks with his hands in his pockets.

“Have a nice lunch,” Ben says, giving a small wave.

Cal reaches for my hand and links our fingers, and his touch feels so different from Ben's, only further proving how fucked I am. "I'm going to kill you guys. You do realize that, right?"

Cal chuckles as we make our way toward the elevators. "Hey, don't shoot the messenger. This was all Hadley and Brynn's idea. I just went along with it because Brynn promised that I get to pick the movie for the next two months, which means no more romance films." A look of relief passes over his features, but I see right through the facade. He may not admit it, but since we met, Cal does things that he knows will make Brynn happy, so I would bet my next paycheck that he watches one within the month. "Plus, if I had to guess, I'd say the pain I feel in the back of my head right now is your man burning a hole through me with his look."

I look back over my shoulder as Cal presses the Down button to find Ben still staring at us. His tense features have softened, and a part of me wants to give him reassurance that I haven't moved on. But he was the one who set the boundaries.

The elevator dings, announcing its arrival, and Cal places his arm on my lower back, guiding me inside.

As the doors close, I turn to Cal with my pointer finger, poking him in the chest. "You know you're buying lunch, right?"

He throws his head back in laughter. "Actually, lunch is on Hadley today." He steps away from me, his back and foot pressed up against the wall. "It was another stipend for getting me to agree," he admits, holding up Hadley's bank card.

I shake my head in disbelief. I can't believe my friends were all behind this ridiculous plan. When this plan backfires in our faces, I hope they will help clean up the mess.

I snatch the card out of his hand. "Well, in that case, I think we should have the best

lunch of our lives.”

When the elevator doors open, I extend my hand in front, allowing Cal to go first.
“After you, lover boy.”

He nods his head before exiting. Once we are both in the main building lobby, he extends his elbow to me. “Shall we, darling?”

We find a close-by restaurant and enjoy a fabulous luncheon Hadley.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:58 pm

What the hell was that? No, more like who the hell was that? Lexi never mentioned a man in her life. Were they together that night? Is this new? They must be serious enough for him to come to her office.

Why the fuck do I care? She is my employee. Of course it doesn't matter.

I try to immerse myself with work, but I find myself looking at the clock constantly. I figured by staying busy, time would move faster. Trust me, it didn't. What did I think would happen when I shut down all possibilities with us? Of course I would have to see her with someone else. That doesn't mean that it hurts any less.

Jealousy is getting the best of me—and that is something I don't do.

An hour later, I hear her voice in the hallway. When I glance out my door, I see she returned sans her male companion and has already dropped her belongings in her office, heading toward the copy room. I get up from my chair and follow her. Is it a good idea? Probably not, but when it comes to Lexi Baker, I never listen to my conscience. I softly close the door behind me, closing us into the small room.

Lexi jumps, gripping the papers tighter in her hands. "Oh fuck," she shouts, clutching her chest that is heaving up and down. "Sorry, Ben, you scared me." Once composed, she tilts her head, staring at me. "Are you okay?"

I walk forward, a man on a mission, and cage her in, her back now pressed against the copy machine. The only sounds filling the room are our heavy breathing and the printing of whatever brought her in here.

“Did you enjoy your lunch?” My entire body is tense and my tone clipped. I played it off earlier when I methim, but being enclosed in this room with her after my jealousy festered, I can’t hide it.

“Yes, thank you.”

“Cal seems like a nice guy.”

She nods. We are so close I can smell the cinnamon of her gum. “It drove me crazy seeing his lips on you.” I can hear her gasp as she sucks in a breath. Ben, what are you doing? “I remember what those lips felt like, tasted like.” I drag my thumb over her soft lips, and I feel my cock stiffening in my pants. “It’s like it’s engraved in my brain.”

I need to put space between us before doing something neither of us can take back. I leave her staring blankly at me with her thumb brushing over her lips, wondering what the fuck that was. A shocked expression laces her delicate features. To be honest, I am thinking about the same thing.

Asher has been bugging me to let him set me up with someone. Maybe it’s time I take Asher up on his offer. Lord help me when I am turning to my brother for women. But we are never going to get through this if I can’t get Lexi out of my head. What is that phrase they say? The best way to get over someone is to get under someone else? Lexi has clearly moved on, why can’t I? This is now the second moment we’ve shared in just days where the lines we’ve drawn have been blurred in a moment of weakness. Each passing moment has me questioning everything, and my walls begin to crumble. Doing what I just did was wrong and stupid.

When I return to my office, I close my door and send Taylor an email asking to not be disturbed for the rest of the day. I shoot Asher a text, giving him the go-ahead to set me up. I can guarantee that whoever he sets me up with will be beautiful—the

perfect distraction. My brother doesn't associate with women who, as he says, "are less than an eight." I roll my eyes as I hear my brother's words replay in my head. Of course, I'm not a pompous asshole like my brother; looks aren't everything. I'm not looking for someone to marry; I'm looking for someone to help me rid myself of the five-foot-three spitfire who has embedded herself in my head and my heart.

* * *

I open the large glass door to Marina Grill. My brother was more than happy to set me up with someone, and here we are three days later, walking up to meet my blind date.

I am looking down at my phone through my text conversation with Asher to recall the name of the woman I'm meeting when I walk directly into the back of someone.

"Ooof," the voice in front of me says softly, and I hold her arms to settle her. A jolt of electricity shoots through my body.

"I'm sorry, I should have been paying more attention and not looking down at my phone. Are you—" Before I can finish asking if they are okay, she spins around, and I lift my eyes to meet familiar green ones.

"Ben."

"Lexi." I scoff. Of course, of all the people I run into here, it's the woman I am trying to get over and is the main reason behind why I agreed on this date in the first place. I place my hands in my pockets, unsure of what to do with them. "What are you doing here?" I ask and instantly regret my choice of words; what does one do at a restaurant? Embarrassment covers my features, and Lexi must notice because the corners of her mouth turn upward in a soft smile.

“Well, Marina Grill does have the best seafood tacos.” I smirk at her response because that was precisely why I chose this spot for my date tonight.

“So I hear.” The other night when Lexi and I were going over this year’s winners, she mentioned that they had won this category for the last five years.

“Are you here alone?” She looks around.

“I’m meeting someone here, actually.” I rock back and forth on my toes.

“Oh.” We haven’t discussed what happened the other day in the copy room, and I am forever thankful. It was a lapse of judgment on my part. Had I not walked out when I did, there was no telling what would have happened next.

“Are you meeting your boyfriend here? What was his name, Cal?” A loud giggle leaves her mouth, and her hand quickly covers her mouth. As if she can sense my concern, she removes her hand and waves me off.

“I’m sorry. No, he’s not meeting me. I’m just picking up a to-go order. But I should be honest.” There she goes again, nibbling her bottom lip, something I’ve learned she does when she is nervous. “Cal—”

Cal what?

Lexi grows quiet, and her eyes dart to someone next to me. A soft touch on my arm forces me to break my gaze with Lexi. I turn to find a tall, blonde, slender woman staring at me. “Ben?”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:58 pm

“Yes.” I try to remember the name that Asher had told me. I ran into Lexi before I had found her name.

Luckily, she helps me out, introducing herself. “Vanessa.” I take her hand in mine. While they are soft and delicate, they don’t send any jolt of electricity through me. “Wow, the photo Asher sent didn’t do you justice.” I shiver as her eyes roam up and down my body, however not in the good kind of way. It’s different from when Lexi does it. Shit, Lexi.

When I face her again, I see the smallest hint of hurt in her eyes, before she shakes it off. Vanessa awkwardly loops her arm through mine. It’s a little forward, especially after moments of meeting for a blind date. Would I be more interested in this date had Lexi not been standing here? And what was it she was trying to say?

Lexi is the first to break the silence, offering an olive branch. “Hi, I’m Lexi.”

Vanessa gives a brief wave instead of taking Lexi’s hand in front of her. Lexi brings her hand back and wipes it down her pant leg as if her hand had something on it, and that was why Vanessa didn’t take it.

The hostess approaches us and looks back and forth between the three of us. “Table for three?”

I turn to Lexi. “Would you care to join us?” I ask, knowing very well how much of an asshole that makes me sound.

A strangled sound comes from Vanessa beside me. Lexi looks down at her fidgeting

hands. “Oh, no, my order should be ready at any minute.”

“Order for Lexi,” the hostess calls, saving us both from this conversation.

Lexi turns. “Right here.” She signs the ledger and accepts the large white bag with the Marina Grill logo in blue on the side.

“It was nice to meet you, Vanessa. Have a good evening, Ben.” Lexi’s eyes linger a moment longer, and she gives a warm smile.

I glance over my shoulder to see her doing the same as she exits. Lexi is the first to break eye contact, and it makes me feel like an even bigger jerk in this entire situation. I could quickly run after her, but I don’t. Seeing the hurt in her eyes fills me with regret for ever agreeing to this date.

“Sir, if you will follow me, I’ll show you to your table.” The hostess extends her hand, leading the way.

I place my hand on Vanessa’s lower back and follow the hostess.

I find myself zoning out throughout our meal. Vanessa is funny and beautiful; she’s just not Lexi. I hate myself for evening finishing that statement in the company of someone else, someone I should be giving a chance. Yet, I am counting down the minutes until this date is over and comparing the differences between the woman in front of me and the woman I let slip out of my grasp. Conversation with Lexi has come easy, even if it’s as simple as joking over the coffee machine in the break room.

I am leaning back in the chair with my fingers slowly and softly tapping on the white linen. “Would you like any dessert?” the waiter asks, glancing back and forth between us.

Vanessa says, “Yes,” at the same time, I respond, “No, thank you.” And now I’ve lost count as to how awkward this date could go. Has it been that long since I’ve been out in the dating world, or does it just have to do with the company?

“Oh, I’m sorry, it’s just that I have a long day of meetings tomorrow that I have to prepare for.”

Vanessa doesn’t try to hide her hurt and pouts a little, hoping I’ll change my mind. A grown woman whining is not becoming or attractive to me. After an uncomfortable goodbye, where I go to kiss her goodbye on the cheek and she goes for my mouth, we finally go our separate ways. I don’t promise to call her again, because I didn’t want to lie to her. I’m sure she is already on her phone with her friends complaining about how horrible the date was.

I set my phone and wallet in the cup holder once back in the safety of my car. I hesitate starting the vehicle and end up leaning back on the headrest and closing my eyes. I reach for the phone and pull up a new message. I scroll through the names and land on “Lexi.”

I haven’t used her number since we exchanged them the other week. Lexi thought it was best to swap contact information the night before we were supposed to be meeting at the potential venue for the Best Of party. She had used the words “in case one of us is running late.” I took that as a step in the right direction, that is until her boyfriend was mauling her in the middle of the office.

I begin to type out a message.

Me:(draft)Hey, I’m sorry about earlier.

And then delete it and attempt another message.

Me:(draft)I hope your dinner was delicious.

And go about deleting that one as well.

Me:(draft) ...

I stare at the blank message and think better of it. It's one thing to offer her to join my date and me, but to text after hours about non-business-related items, I might as well be unzipping my pants and pulling my dick out for her to take.

I sigh, running my hands over my face, and toss my phone on the passenger seat. I'll just talk to her tomorrow. That is the right thing to do. I pull out of the spot and head home. Another night... alone.

Page 30

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:58 pm

I glance down at the display screen on my phone reading 10:43 a.m. as the line to Lexi's office continues to ring. Where is she?

I hang up the call and decide to dial Taylor's extension.

"Yes, Mr. Harrington."

"Taylor, do you know if Lexi had any meetings all morning?" I ask, trying to keep my voice neutral.

"Umm, let me check." I sit back in my chair, my muscles tense while I wait.

I can hear her breathing and gum popping through the phone, which leaves me feeling slightly uncomfortable, and I am just about to suggest that she can call me back once she finds out the information when she clicks her tongue against the roof of her mouth. "Are you still there?"

"Yep, I'm here."

"It looks like Ms. Baker called out sick today."

Sick? She seemed fine last night. Was it the food? Was she embarrassed by our run-in? Why am I still on the phone with Taylor while having an internal debate? "Oh, okay, thank you, Taylor."

"No problem. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

“That’s all. Thank you.” I could have easily asked for her to retrieve me Lexi’s address, but then she might get suspicious. Taylor is a nice girl, but I have heard her gossiping in the break room before, and the last thing we need is her gossiping about Lexi and me.

Wait, why do I want her address? Get your shit together, Ben. Nothing good can come from going by her house to check on her. Yet here you are pulling up her HR file and writing her address on a sticky note.

I tap my fingers meticulously on the wooden desk, staring at the small piece of paper as if it were a flame too hot to touch. Then again, if I cross this line and do something with the information on this sticky note, I’m clearly playing with fire. Fuck it.

“Going somewhere, Mr. Harrington?” Taylor asks from my doorway as I shrug my coat on.

“Yes, I have to run some errands. I’ll be back later this afternoon,” I respond as I hit the out of office button on my phone.

“Of course, sir.”

“I’ll see you later,” I say as I pass her, headed out of the office.

On the way over to Lexi’s place, I stop by the small grocery store down the street and pick up a container of chicken soup and ginger ale. I can recall how my mother always stocked up on these items when Asher or I were sick. It’s the least I could do.

I find myself looking up at the ten-story apartment building in front of me.

I grip the brown paper bag of essentials in my hand as the elevator rises to the sixth floor. When the elevator dings, alerting me of its arrival, I don’t move. What am I

doing? Too late to turn back now. If she's too sick to come to work, I'm sure she's too ill to go out and grab things like what I come bearing. I quickly hit the Door Open button as the doors begin to close and exit the elevator. I search the numbers on the doors, looking back and forth between each side until I find 6F. Here goes nothing. I knock on the wooden door and wait.

I place my ear on the door and quickly scurry away as I hear shuffling coming from the other side. The door swings open, and my breath is completely ripped from my lungs at the vision in front of me. I'm not sure what to think when she looks this beautiful sick as she does every day. I take in her appearance—black leggings hugging every curve of her body but covered up by an oversized cream-colored sweater hanging off her shoulder, exposing a black strap. I'm unsure if that is another shirt underneath or maybe her bra. I divert my eyes away from that part of her body.

She quickly adjusts herself to cover the revealed flesh and grips onto her door. "Ben," she shrieks in surprise, "what are you doing here?" I watch the curve of her neck bob as she swallows thickly, clearly nervous and thrown off by my arrival.

I bring my hand to my mouth, clearing my throat. "Yes, well, umm," I stutter, which I never do. "Taylor said that you had called out sick, and I was in the area, so I thought I would check on you." Her eyes narrow as she decides whether she believes my lie or not.

"You were in the area? How did you know this is where I live?" she asks with a smirk forming on her lips. Lexi clearly sees right through my bullshit. "And you brought groceries?" Her eyes drop down to the bag in my right hand. I move side to side on my feet and bring the bag to balance in front of me.

I exhale and decide to confess. "Okay, so I wasn't in the area. The truth is, yes, Taylor mentioned that you had called out sick, and I figured with you being a workaholic, you must be potentially on your death bed for you not to show up to

work, and I guess I just wanted to check in on you.” I glance down at my feet, nervously. I am not used to the lack of confidence I seem to portray when I’m in Lexi’s presence.

“Oh.” There’s a look of surprise on her face as she purses her lips together. “Well, that’s very nice of you.” She glances behind her for a moment, and when she turns to face me, her bottom lip is pulled between her teeth. “Would you like to come in, then?”

Stopping by is one thing. Bringing her groceries is another. There is no turning back once you enter her apartment. My conscience is pulling me back by my tie in the opposite direction, yet I find myself nodding and responding with “Sure.”

Lexi backs up, opening the door further to her apartment, and I cross the threshold. I stand there looking around, feeling somewhat awkward. The click of the front door shutting has my throat drying up like the Sahara Desert.

As Lexi appears beside me, she looks back down at the grocery bag. “Do you need to put your groceries away until you leave?”

Oh right. I chuckle softly to myself. “No, these are actually for you.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:58 pm

Lexi cocks her head to the side as she takes the bag in her hands. She glances down at the contents. Now that I am no longer holding the bag, I shove my hands in my pants pockets to keep from touching her. “On my way over, I stopped by the store and grabbed you a few items. There’s soup, ginger ale, crackers, and chocolate. I wasn’t exactly sure what was wrong, so I covered all bases.” My cheeks flush at the mention of the chocolate. I wasn’t sure if she was sick with lady problems or not.

Once again, shock laces through her features. “Wow, thank you. Why don’t I put these in the kitchen.” She points to the open kitchen beside us. “Would you like something to drink?”

Say no. Get back to the office.

“Sure. Water is good.” Lexi nods before turning her back to me and walking the few steps into the kitchen.

I glance around the apartment. I notice the television has an episode of some show I don’t recognize paused on the screen. There is a black, white, and gold WCU blanket scrunched up on the couch. She must have been curled up on the sofa, resting, when I knocked. Nice going, Ben.

The assortment of photos on the wall catches my attention. I don’t mean to invade her privacy, but then again, the images are on the wall for all to see; it’s not like I’m snooping through her underwear drawer. Fuck, my cock likes the idea of Lexi and underwear. Down, boy! I am looking at the colorful wall of photos when I feel Lexi’s presence behind me.

I accept the water from her and turn back to the photos, pointing at one in particular. “Is this you and the famous baseball player Luke Baker?” The smile on her face drops, and sadness fills her eyes.

Lexi brings her water to her mouth, taking a long sip. “Yeah, he was my cousin.”

The news of Luke Baker’s passing was national news and shocked everyone. I didn’t put two and two together, with Baker being a common last name. My heart breaks for her, and I yearn to pull her into my arms. “Well, I’m sorry for your loss.” She nods and gives a soft smile.

She motions to the couch, and I follow her. Lexi quickly reaches for the remote, turns the TV off, and shuffles the blanket off the side of the couch before taking a seat on the cushion furthest away.

“I’m sorry for barging in like this, Lexi. I was just concerned. I know that last night was, well—awkward. I’m sorry about that.”

“Why are you apologizing? You’re allowed to go out on dates. It’s not like...” Lexi stops talking and looks down at the water glass. This conversation just went from awkward to wanting to drown in the eight-ounce glass of water in 2.3 seconds.

“Yeah.” I’m not sure how to respond. “Well, I’m glad to see you’re feeling okay.”

Lexi shuffles on her seat, pulling her legs underneath her. “Ben, I have a confession.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:58 pm

Ben Harrington is in my apartment, on my couch, drinking my water.

The scary part of this is that he looks like he belongs here. To say I was shocked to see him on the other side of the door moments ago would be an understatement.

As much as I love having him here, I'm sure the part of us that isn't just Ben and Lexi but is boss and employee is not going to mesh well when I open my mouth again. Ben drapes his arm along the back of the couch and turns his body to face me, giving me his undivided attention.

"I'm actually not sick today." I love my job and love being a workaholic, but today I needed a break. I'm not sure if it was seeing Ben last night on a date or today marking the first anniversary I moved in here. Yep, it's already been a year since walking in on Dominic in an intimate position with someone other than me. But I just needed a day to me, so I wasted a sick day and planned to spend it curled up on the couch binging episodes of Gossip Girl. That worked out perfectly—that is until Ben showed up.

"You're not sick?" Ben questions, a crease forming on his forehead while he waits for me to continue.

I shake my head and run my fingers through my hair, tossing it over my shoulder. "No, I just needed a day. You know, a moment to collect my thoughts." I swallow deeply, waiting for his response. Is he going to force me to go back to work now that he knows I lied? Is he going to leave?

"Oh, I see."

“Come on, Ben. You telling me you’ve never played hooky before?” I quirk an eyebrow at him.

He runs his palm along his stubbled jawline. “Well, since you confessed to me, I guess I can confess something to you. I can’t say that I have ever played hooky before.”

Wishing I hadn’t brought my drink to my lips while he spoke, I sputter water back into the glass and wipe the excess now dripping down my lips. “As in ever? Not even in college?” I am left speechless. I mean, I’m sure not most people are like Hadley, who believed that each month required a personal day in college to collect your thoughts and recharge, but I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone who has not played hooky, ever.

“What?” He stares back at me.

I shake off the daze and set my drink on the coffee table. “No, nothing. I’m just shocked.” And I mean that. I’m stunned at his confession or that he felt the need to confess that at all.

“Well, my college experience was a little different than other people.”

“What do you mean?” Ben’s features harden, and I wonder if I pushed too far asking that. While over the past few months, we have learned more about each other, it’s been things that are normal for coworkers to know, such as which salad dressing we prefer or how we take our coffee. However, those are all things about our present, not looking into our past.

I’m just about to change the subject when Ben begins to talk. “When I was in my junior year of college, my parents died in a plane crash.”

I gasp, not expecting that. I'm not sure what I expected him to say, maybe that he overstayed his welcome or something about our moment in the copy room, but not that.

"I am so sorry." I reach out and place my hand on top of his.

Sadness clouds his features, and unshed tears fill his eyes, causing my heart to break into a million pieces.

"We don't have to talk about it if you don't want to." My voice is unsteady, and I realize that I am on the verge of tears as well.

He waves me off. "No, it's fine, it was a long time ago." But I can see right through the facade. It's clearly not. "My younger brother was only ten when they died. There was no way I would let him go into the system, so I became his guardian. Balancing school and Asher was... well, rather difficult, but I managed."

I'm at a loss for words for how amazing and strong this man is. I couldn't even imagine being responsible for someone else right now, let alone during college and still managing to graduate on time. A calming silence comes between us, my hand still on top of his.

The silence breaks when Ben's stomach rumbles, and we both laugh. "Well, I better get going." Ben pushes up on his knees to stand, and I follow.

"I mean, this nice guy brought me a large container of soup, if you wanted to stay." As soon as the words are out of my mouth, I regret them. Spending time together like this is definitely pushing past the boundaries of a professional relationship.

Ben checks his phone for a moment before turning back to me. "That sounds nice. Thank you." I try to steady my features to hide my mix of shock, excitement, and

nerves. “Can I help you with it?”

I nod, and Ben follows me into the kitchen. He takes a seat at the island while I pull the container of soup out of the fridge.

* * *

“That was delicious, thank you.” Ben pushes his empty soup bowl forward just as I was finishing my lunch as well.

“You’re welcome. I slaved over a hot stove all day making it,” I joke, and Ben’s laughter fills the small space.” He goes to take my bowl, and I wave him off. “I’ve got this.” It’s not that I mind him finding his way around my house, but I am kind of particular with how I load things in the dishwasher. Hadley makes fun of my OCD.

He gives me a warm smile. “I should probably let Taylor know that I won’t be back in today.” Is he not going back to work? I guess a bit of my bad influence rubbed off on him.

I dramatically gasp in a joking manner, clutching my chest as I finish loading our dishes in the dishwasher. “Oh my God, is Ben Harrington playing hooky for the first time in his life?” Ben rolls his eyes but with a smile across his lips. Pretending I’m giving a speech at the Oscars, I place my hand over my heart and wipe away fake tears. “I feel so honored to be an accomplice in this crime.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:58 pm

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Ben mutters as he stands and grabs his cell from where it sat on the table. He steps over by the large window and makes the call. I try not to eavesdrop, so I pretend to busy myself, wiping down the counter.

My eyes, however, drift to when Ben stands. Even though he is wearing black dress pants and a charcoal-gray dress shirt, there is something different about him. He seems more relaxed, actually the most relaxed since our first night.

Ben claps his hands together, startling me. “So, Lexi Baker, I am officially yours for the afternoon.” My mouth goes dry because all the moisture in my body went straight to my panties. I can think of many ways I want to have him this afternoon—on the couch, in the shower, in my bed, on the counter—but I know that’s not what he meant.

“Lex?” I meet his gaze with one brow raised. I am rendered speechless at how gorgeous this man is in front of me, looking somewhat vulnerable, unsure of how to play hooky from work. I can’t believe that he wants to spend his day with me of all people. But, I have to admit, it’s nice having the company and not throwing myself a pity party for one all day. “So, what was it you were going to do today before I interrupted?”

I take my seat back on the couch, my cheeks warm, knowing the embarrassment coming on with my confession. “Well, I was going to be exactly here, in this position.” My hands moving up and down, confirming the exact position I’m in. “Binge-watching teen dramas, probably all day until my roommate gets home from work.”

Ben slowly nods. I'm sure he wishes he hadn't asked. "All day," he confirms.

"Yep," I respond, smacking my lips together loudly to make the sound. "All day."

He runs his hands through his hair before joining me on the other side of the couch. He reaches for the remote on the coffee table before handing it to me and crossing his right leg over the other, his ankle now resting against his knee.

As the afternoon goes on, the closer we find ourselves on the couch. Before we know it, our knees are brushing each other.

The ending credits of our fifth episode of *Gossip Girl* roll, and Ben leans over, running his fingers through his hair, propping his elbows on his knees. "So the one guy used to date the brunette, but now he's with the blonde, and she's with someone else. And the blonde used to date her stepbrother, but now he's with another chick."

I can't hold back my laughter. "Sure, we can go with that." I guess when you put it that way, it is pretty confusing to keep up with. I'm not sure I could have honestly explained that any better.

Exhaling a loud breath, he keeps his elbows on his knees but turns his head my way, smirking. "I think I'm getting a migraine from trying to keep up. Maybe I regret asking you how you were going to spend your day."

My mouth gapes, and I lean forward, shoving his arm playfully, causing him to falter. With my index finger pointed at him, I continue laughing. "Hey! You have only yourself to blame. You made it five episodes." I hold up my right hand and mouth, "Five." I am laughing so hard now that I never see the throw pillow he grabs and smacks me with.

"Hey!" I shout, our laughter filling the room as I take the pillow and hit him back

with it. However, Ben is quicker than me, knowing my move before I do it because he quickly grabs my wrist as I raise the pillow.

“Now, Lexi.” His firm tone reminds me of the night in the bathroom, commanding my next move. “Think about your next move.”

I close my eyes and hear his words he told me in that same tone. “Spread your legs, Lex. Only I get to make you come.”

When I open them, Ben’s focus is on my lips. I can tell by his tense jaw that he is showing restraint. Where his hand is still holding my wrist, my skin burns from his touch. There is no way he can’t feel it, too.

My chest slowly rises and falls as I try to catch my breath. The world around us fades, and I feel as though we are fully crossing the line, and right now, I just don’t give a damn. Time seems to stop, enclosing us in our own little bubble.

“Ben.”

“Hmm?” Another glance down, and this time, I follow his eyes and find that the side of my sweater has fallen, even more, exposing the top of my breast.

“I need to tell you something.” The air is growing thicker, just like the outline in his pants. Am I really going to break up this moment by talking about what the girls did the other day?

“What is it?” The distance between us is closing by the millisecond.

Ben tugs on my arm, pulling me closer where one leg is straddling him. Ben trails his finger down my cheek and pushes a stray piece of hair out of my face. I shiver at his touch, goose bumps unfolding all over my body and my nipples poking through my

bra. Can he feel them through the material?

This is it. I can feel the shift between us. I run my fingers through his hair, scraping my nails over his scalp. He closes his eyes and lets out a soft moan, his cock hardening even more against my leg.

“For fuck’s sake!” The front door slams, popping our bubble, and we jump apart. “I can’t stand my fucking boss. That guy is such an asshole. Too bad he’s gay and I can’t sleep with him. Oh, wait, that’s your job.” Hadley’s voice fills the apartment. She has her back to us while taking off her coat and shoes.

I begin a fake coughing fit, in hopes that Hadley will notice we aren’t alone and shuts the fuck up. She finally turns around and freezes. Her eyes are wide as she takes in the scene in front of her—me and Ben alone on the couch. “I’m sorry, I didn’t realize you had company. Hi, I’m Hadley.”

Ben rises from the couch and smooths the front of his shirt before extending his hand. “Hi, Ben Harrington.” Hadley knows who he is, and I pray she doesn’t say anything else that will incriminate either of us.

Hadley accepts his hand but continues looking back and forth at the two of us as if her eyes are participating in a Ping-Pong match. “Nice to meet you, Ben. Well, just ignore me. I’m going to go shower and leave you two alone. Just forget I’m even here.” With that, she retreats to her bathroom. I hold my breath until I hear the click of the door shutting. It quickly reopens. “Oh, and Cal is going to be stopping by. He said he left a file here last night.”

Brynn and Cal joined us for dinner last night. He had brought a little bit of work to finish while waiting for me to arrive with the food. I had been slightly delayed after my run-in with Ben and his date.

I slump back into the couch and cover my hands in embarrassment. When there is no dip on the couch, I pull my hands down by my side and open my left eye, peeking at him. He is gathering his belongings.

“Hey, are you okay?” I rise and close the distance, in hopes that now that Hadley is behind closed doors, maybe we could finish where we left things off just moments ago.

“I’m sorry. I should go.”

And there it is, the wall back up, bringing us back to reality. Thanks a fucking lot, Had! She is so getting an earful as to how her plan almost worked, but then thanks to her big mouth, backfired. Was it what she said? Is it her being here?

Ben gives the room one last glance over to make sure he didn’t forget anything. I follow him to the door, then lean against the door as he begins to leave but stops. I still have hope, a small amount of hope, that things have changed. “Thank you for today. I mean it. I’ll see you tomorrow, Lex.” Ben steps forward and places a gentle kiss on the corner of my mouth before disappearing down the hall.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:58 pm

What the fuck was I thinking? Lexi has a boyfriend. She was partially in my lap. I almost kissed her. And I can't even deny that I wanted it. She looked like she wanted it, too. Her body reacted to my touch, just like I had imagined. Thank God her roommate had shown up, and then the ball drop. Cal. The reminder that there was someone else was like jumping into an ice bath, my dick shriveling up.

Did Lexi not have any remorse for what happened?

I couldn't get out of her apartment quickly enough, and then I had to go and do it again, kissing her cheek. If she had turned slightly, our lips would have met, and I would have been a dead man. Now it's time to go back home alone. I have only myself to blame. If I had just stayed at work earlier, I wouldn't have a raging hard-on, but my own punishment will not be jerking off in the shower.

I arrive home to find my brother still at home. That's shocking. Most nights, the only communication seems to be a text alerting me he won't be coming home. Asher is twenty-five years old, and I'm not his keeper, but I appreciate him letting me know so I'm not worried he's lying in a ditch somewhere. He's the only family I have left.

I tease my brother when I see him standing in the kitchen, one leg propped against a lower cabinet as he takes a sip from a water bottle. "Holy shit, I was beginning to think you forgot where we lived."

Capping the bottle, he mocks me before waving his middle finger in the air. "Yeah, well, don't get used to it. I'm about to head out. Going to meet a friend for dinner and then go out."

“What friend?”

“A friend.” He pushes off the counter and strolls to the trash can, dropping the empty bottle in there. “Jeez,Dad.”He rolls his eyes at me.

“I told you not to call me that. I was just curious. I haven’t seen my brother in forever. Sorry for showing any type of concern.”

“I’m fine. I’m not doing drugs, I don’t drive drunk, and I always wrap up my dick before sticking it in.” I inwardly cringe, not needing that last tidbit. “Where have you been? I wasn’t expecting you home this early.”

“I had some work outside of the office today, and I didn’t make it back to the office, so I came home.” That’s the honest truth. I was outside of the office and I did come straight home, he just doesn’t need to know the details in between.

Asher is scrutinizing my every move. He leans over the counter with his chin propped up on his fist and narrows his eyes. “Something is up with you.”

I ignore his comment and grab a tumbler from the cabinet before snatching the bottle of whiskey from the counter. I wouldn’t normally drink before dinner, but after today, I think it’s a necessity.

“So, how are things with the club hottie?” my brother asks from behind my back, and I sputter, spilling a few drops of the amber liquid.

I clean up the mess before assuming the same position I found my brother in earlier. “Things are fine. It doesn’t matter anyway; she’s dating someone else.” I take a long sip.

“Oh, well, her loss.” I nod and hope he doesn’t keep talking about it. “So, then she

has nothing to do with why your date with Vanessa went to shit?”

I scrub my hands down my face, groaning. “Nope,” I lie. “I’m sure she’s a lovely woman. I just wasn’t feeling it.”

Asher’s phone dings, and while his attention is on it, he clicks his tongue against the roof of his mouth. “Well, that’s too bad. Her pussy feels magical.”

Wait—what? I slam my hands on the counter. “You fucking set me up with one of your sloppy seconds? Are you fucking kidding me, Asher?”

He shrugs, not seeing anything wrong with his actions. “What? As you said, you weren’t feeling it, so what does that matter?”

I shake my head, at a loss for words.

“Well, my Uber is here. I’m out. Don’t wait up.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, let me guess, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Asher shoves his phone in his pocket and slaps my shoulder as he passes me.

I exhale, relaxing once my brother is gone. My brain is in overload after the day I’ve had. Playing hooky, spending the day with Lexi in her apartment, almost kissing her, and then to learn that my brother set me up with one of his previous hookups. No wonder she talked about Asher a lot during dinner. Maybe if I had been paying more attention, I would have picked up on that. Well, I guess I can be thankful for Lexi on my brain for saving me from possibly hooking up with one of my brother’s flavors of the week.

I top my drink off before grabbing the ingredients from the fridge for a beef stir-fry.

As I sit alone at the island, eating my dinner, I imagine what it would be like to have someone here with me to share a meal with. Of course, a certain brunette comes to mind first. Fuck that; you had your chance. She's no longer mine to dream about.

Business over pleasure, and now she is getting pleasure somewhere else. I must let her be happy, and today, that moment between us was just in the heat of the moment. I saw her smile the other day when he was around her. I refuse to come between them. It's at that moment that I decide no matter how much it sucks, and my dick might not agree with me, it's time to move on. I need to focus on work. I bought this company to succeed, not to be distracted, and frankly, that is all Lexi is—a distraction.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:58 pm

“You look absolutely gorg,” Hadley says while examining her handiwork. I enlisted the help of the girls to get ready for the Maritime Media holiday party. And when I say I enlisted their help, I mean they told me that this was happening, but who was I to say no? When your roommate is a hairstylist who also does makeup for weddings, why not?

Things had been weird for the last few weeks between Ben and me, and I wish I could understand why. If it’s not discussing work, Ben avoids me. I guess I read all of the signs wrong. Nothing like almost having everything you want only to have it ripped out from underneath you. I think I should be used to that by now, though.

I turn and barely recognize the woman looking back at me. My brown hair is down, draped in perfectly loose curls that frame my face, with a smoky eye perfectly outlining my emerald orbs and a red lipstick that matches the bright shade of my satin off-the-shoulder dress.

“Yes, someone might need to pick up Ben’s jaw off the floor once he sees you.” Brynn smiles, searching my jewelry box for the perfect earrings.

I snicker. I don’t know why they’re trying to push Ben over the edge again—look how well it worked out the last time. Tonight isn’t about him; it’s about me. I didn’t let my failed relationship with Dom ruin my career; I can’t let some one-night stand do it either. Tonight I am going to enjoy the amazing life I have made for myself.

“How about these?” She holds up a pair of diamond studs my father gave me when I graduated college.

I smile, recalling the moment, but the happiness is shadowed by missing my father, who passed away shortly after giving them to me.

“Ah ah.” Hadley waves her index finger in my face. “None of that. I know you and can see that look in your eyes. There is no crying and ruining my masterpiece. Got it?”

I humph and push my shoulders back. I can do this. I’m Lexi Baker, and I’m a badass bitch.

Hadley claps her hands. “Okay, now go get dressed, and we will meet you out in the living room.”

I carefully slip into my dress and heels—my favorite part of the outfit—a glamorous black Christian Louboutin stiletto with an almost five-inch heel. My “So Kate” heels may be the most expensive shoe I own that I bought with last year’s Christmas bonus and have been waiting for the perfect excuse to wear them. The glossy black patent leather, along with the signature red sole, is utter perfection. I’m staring at myself in the mirror when the girls start yelling from the living room. “What’s taking so long?”

“I’m coming,” I shout back.

Eat your heart out, Ben Harrington.

With one last glance at myself in the mirror, moving back and forth, I grab my black Coach clutch and head out before the girls come barreling into my room, wondering what the holdup is.

The clicking of my heels along the hardwood floors of our apartment halts whatever conversation Brynn and Hadley were having.

I run my hand over the soft fabric of my dress. “What, do I look okay? Did I mess something up?”

The look both girls are giving me reminds me of the look Sebastian had in *The Little Mermaid* when he first noticed Ariel on the beach with Eric and Scuttle had to lift his jaw off the rock.

I start to get self-conscious the longer they are silent. I pull my bottom lip between my teeth, thankful Hadley applied a lip stain versus a regular lipstick that I’m sure would be all over my front teeth by now.

“You look fucking amazing.” Hadley beams like a proud mom witnessing her only child headed off to prom.

“Okay, before you go, a quick photo,” Brynn calls out, grabbing her phone from the coffee table.

After a quick photoshoot, my phone pings, alerting me that my car is downstairs waiting.

Brynn is busy typing away on her phone with a smile spread across her face. “Cal says you look beautiful, and be sure to wrap it up with whatever lucky bastard takes you home.”

Hadley bellows out a loud laugh while my cheeks heat in embarrassment, and I shake my head.

Brynn is giggling along with Hadley and holds up her phone. “Hey, don’t shoot the messenger, I’m just reading you what he wrote.”

“Well, tonight is about having fun, not about finding someone to go home with or

making Ben jealous.”

A smug look appears on both of my best friends’ faces, and Hadley purses her lips together. “Yeah sure, whatever you say.”

I roll my eyes. Even if they don’t believe me, that’s what I’ll keep telling myself.

I grab my black coat out of the closet. Once the tie is fastened around my waist, I pull my hair out of the back of the coat and drape it across my right shoulder.

“Have fun,” they both shout.

“Don’t wait up,” I call over my shoulder as I walk out of the apartment.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:58 pm

The ride to the office takes longer than planned. Stupid holiday traffic. 'Tis the season for traffic. One of the things that attracted Paul Jennings to this building is the open space at the opposite end of the seventh floor. It makes hosting smaller events easier. In the past, we have hosted cocktail hours, art galleries hosting local artists, and even once sponsored a matchmaking event. That was different, to say the least.

I spent the morning here helping direct the vendors before heading back home to get ready. There are two bars on opposite ends of the room. An assortment of hors d'oeuvres are being passed out all evening, including the most delicious beef tenderloin crostini with whipped goat cheese and pesto, crab-stuffed mushrooms and Italian sausage, and caramelized leek flatbread bites drizzled in a truffle cream sauce.

As soon as I exit the elevator, the most fantastic aroma hits my senses, and my mouth instantly waters. I can't wait actually to taste the food after selecting the menu. That was another thing—in previous years, I worked closely with Paul finalizing the details, whereas this year, Ben gave me almost full control of my decisions minus needing to remain within budget.

I drop my coat off at the coat check, and a smile forms on my lips as I hear the cheerful sounds of Pentatonix and Whitney Houston's "Do You Hear What I Hear?" playing from the speakers. So I may have flirted a little with him during our consult meeting so that he would play songs by my favorite band.

I glance around the room, taking in all the smiling faces and fabulous decor. I sigh, content with my work.

I can sense him before I see him. My back straightens, along with the little hairs on

the back of my neck.

“It looks great in here,” I say softly, more to myself than him.

“Yes, it’s beautiful.” With my peripheral vision, it’s not the room that I notice Ben looking at, but it’s me.

Ben currently has his hands in his pockets, looking incredibly handsome in his suit—black pants and jacket, a crisp white dress shirt, and a red tie that just so happens to match my dress. Don’t look anything into, Lex. Red is a standard color worn during the holidays.

I turn and give him a bright smile. I swallow thickly as his eyes rake up and down my body.

“Cal is a lucky man,” I hear him say under his breath.

“Excuse me?”

Ben clears his throat. “I just said that Cal is a lucky man to have such a beautiful woman on his arm tonight. Is he joining you?”

Cal? Oh, fuck!

“I have something to tell you.” I glance down at my heels and pretend to push a piece of dirt around. Is this why he’s been so weird? Cal. I’m going to kill Hadley and Brynn for their stupid fucking plan.

“What is it?” Ben gently touches my elbow, pulling me off to the side, away from the center of the room.

Here goes nothing.

“Cal isn’t my boyfriend. My two best friends tried to prove a point that all you needed was a push over the edge.”

Ben’s brows bunch together, and he runs a hand over his dusting of facial hair. “A push.”

“Yes, a push. They thought it would make you jealous, and we would stop playing this game of cat and mouse. But I guess the joke’s on me since I tried to explain that I wasn’t dating Cal twice, and we were interrupted both times. I think it just wasn’t meant to be. We’re better off as only colleagues.”

I can feel the tears threatening to spill over as I say the words I don’t really mean. “Have a good night, Ben.” I brush past him and head straight to the bar.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:58 pm

I had stood behind her, watching as she admired her surroundings. That red dress clung to her slender figure, and those heels had me as hard as the ground we walk on.

It's been two hours after her confession—Cal is not her boyfriend. It was all a fucking setup.

Two hours of watching her mingle.

Two hours of her ignoring me, although I don't blame her. I've been an asshole for the past few weeks—pissed at myself for my stupid rules I set in place when all I wanted was her. I thought I had lost her, but in fact, she was still single. It makes my blood boil when I think about the way he touched her and kissed her as if she were his. I clench my fist at the memory.

I've stood at the bar opposite where she had run off to, chatting with guests and meeting spouses and significant others all night. I chug the rest of my whiskey and set the empty glass on the bar top. I button my suit coat and make my way over toward where Lexi stands with fellow employees. Lexi currently has my back to her, but Ashley and Amy, whom she is speaking with, notice me and greet me with a smile.

"Excuse me, ladies, sorry to interrupt, but I need to borrow Lexi here for a moment." She shivers with my breath against her skin.

"Oh, of course," and "No problem," they respond at the same time while Lexi seems unsure of herself. I place my hand on her lower back and escort her out of the room in the direction of my office. The lights are low, the only glow coming from the night lights. We roped off the office area to keep employees from fraternizing outside of

the party, but fuck those rules. Lexi and I do not need an audience for this.

I ignore her pleas to stop and talk to her. We've beaten around the bush, and now after her confession, I am a man on a mission with one goal in mind—her. Her friends thought I needed a push; well, here goes jumping out of an airplane without a parachute.

“Ben. It's the damn Christmas party. Can't whatever you have to say to me wait until Monday?”

“No, it can't.” I shut the door behind her a little harder than I planned, causing her to jump. I stalk toward her, throwing my jacket on the chair, her eyes following my every move. Even in the darkness, I can see her pulse racing and her chest heaving.

“Well, what is it?” Her voice trails off as I slowly roll up the sleeves of my dress shirt. Her eyes dart to the ink on my arms, and she bites her lip. She backs up toward the window, and I follow like a predator stalking its prey. “What is so important that can't wait until Monday?” She's doing a shitty job at keeping her voice calm. I can feel the need vibrating off her words.

“This.” Before I give her time to respond, I wrap my hand around the back of her head and pull my mouth to hers.

I pinch her bottom lip between my teeth, and when she gasps, I take advantage of her parted lips and slide my tongue into her mouth.

I kiss her as if my life depends on it. As if we were just told that an asteroid was about to collide with Earth, and I want to spend my last waking moments on this Earth kissing her so that her taste is forever branded on my lips.

After a few minutes, I pull back, peppering kisses along her jaw.

“It’s not enough.”

“What’s not enough,” she breathes against my lips.

“Kissing you—it’s not enough. I thought I could satisfy my craving by kissing you.” I press another soft kiss to her lips. “But now that I’ve had a taste, I need more.”

I claim her lips hungrily, desperate to taste her, to have her again. Lexi lets out a soft whimper when I deepen the kiss, and I know I am royally fucked. This one time will never be enough. I grab her waist, pulling her close to me, the evidence of how turned on I am poking her. When I reach under her thighs and lift her, she instinctively wraps her toned legs around my waist. I press her up against the window. She arches off the cold glass, leaning more into my touch.

Anyone could come in search of us, and honestly, I don’t fucking care.

“Do you know how many times I’ve imagined bending you over this desk and burying myself deep between those gorgeous legs?” I drag my tongue down her neck, her pulse convulsing under my tongue, and I can’t wait for her clit to do the same.

“Well, what are you waiting for?”

In a heated passion, I spin us around. With one hand wrapped firmly around her waist, I use my other hand to push everything off my desk. Not giving a shit about the loud crash, I lay her down on the large desk, and she leans back on her elbows. I stand back, taking her in—her lips swollen from my kisses and her skin flushed from her arousal.

She starts to kick off her heels, and I stop her. “No, leave those on. They’re sexy as fuck.”

I trail my hands up her legs, pressing my thumb into her skin, massaging her legs as I reach her thighs, giving her a preview of what I plan to do to her body.

Lexi pushes up on her arms, closing the distance between us. I can feel her warm breath over my lips as I continue to tease her.

“Ben.” I wanted to hear my name on her lips like this. Not in a professional way but in pleasure. Her voice is full of want and need. I crash my lips to hers and pull her to the edge of the desk and flush against my body.

I lace my fingers in her hair and tug. She tilts her head up at the slight pressure, giving a heavy sigh. I take advantage of the new access as I kiss her jaw and down her slender neck. Nipping, licking, sucking—with every intention of making her mine.

“Ben,” she moans again. She continues to press her pussy against the rigid outline of my cock. He is begging to be free, pushing against the zipper of my dress pants. There are too many barriers between us. Now that we have gotten rid of the barrier keeping us apart, it’s time to rid us of these clothes. Her legs wrap back around my hips.

With her dress now bunched up around her hips, her lace panties are on display. Our eyes have adjusted to the darkness, and with the light coming in through the windows from the mood, I can see the darkened spot in the center of the black lace, telling me how bad she wants this to happen, too. Finally, I get to have her and not just the fantasy in my head, with my hand wrapped around my erection wishing it was her, or her mouth or her pussy. I drag my thumb over the damp spot, her juices leaking through the material. I bring the thumb to my mouth, sampling her sweetness. But I’m ready to sample straight from the source.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:58 pm

“Did you not get the memo on the new office policy about panties?”

Her hooded lids widen.

I grip the thin material in my hands. “They’ve been banned.” The sound of the lace tearing, as well as Lexi’s shocked gasp, has me ready to bust before I’m even inside her.

Lexi’s moans fill the room as I slide a finger in her without warning, twisting and turning so that she is writhing underneath me. I insert another finger as my thumb finds her clit, moving in small deep, circular motions.

“Does that feel good, baby?”

“So good,” she pants as she rides my hand faster, seeking her own release. I use my free hand to hold her hips in place. “Lex, remember what I said: only I get to make you come.” I quicken my pace. Her pussy flutters around my fingers, and I need her to come before I bury myself so deep within her that we won’t know where I end and she begins.

As much as I want to savor this moment, tasting her release, I need inside her now.

I undo my belt and loosen my pants. Shit, a condom. I have one in my wallet that’s in my suit coat. “Baby, stay right here. Don’t move.” I quickly grab my wallet and pull the condom out, tossing my wallet to the ground.

Lexi has never looked sexier, spread out on my desk, her wet pussy on display. I

unbutton my shirt as I walk back to the desk. The look she gives me as I reveal my bare, sculpted chest has precum leaking from the tip.

Lexi never breaks our eye contact as I slide on the condom and place my cock at her entrance. I tease her once more, dragging the tip between her folds before slamming into her. Oh, fuck!

Each thrust is making up for every time I wanted to touch her but couldn't. Every time I dreamed of our first night together and woke up stroking my cock.

She runs her hands through my hair and over my shoulders. The muscles twitch under touch as she rakes her nails over my skin, ensuring to leave her mark on me. Little does she know she already has marked me; it's just that no one can see where she's left her mark.

"Ben," she shouts into her fist at the same time there's a soft thud of her head hitting the desk as she arches her back into my touch.

"Lex, look at me," I command as I slide in and out of her slowly.

"Look at how good we look together." We both glance down where the hardest part of me connects to the softest part of her.

I quickly pull out of her and flip her over. She gasps in surprise, gripping the edge of the desk. I begin to fuck her hard. This time I don't stop her when she meets me thrust for thrust, sending us both over the edge.

Lexi collapses on the desk. I drop my forehead to her back, our breathing now in sync, just like our movements were moments ago. Lexi slowly rises, forcing me up as well.

I dispose of the condom, wrapping it in a tissue from my desk and placing it in the trash can beside it.

“I guess we should get back to the party,” she says, readjusting her dress. That’s the last thing I want to do.

My pants are now refastened, and I am working on the buttons of my shirt when I stalk over to her. I press my body against hers and trail kisses down her neck. She squirms in my hold. “What do you say we get out of here and go somewhere private to talk.”

She spins in my arms and nods, but I can sense her hesitation. I brush her curls out of her face and cup her cheek. “Lex, I know I once told you that we couldn’t be us, but I was wrong. I’m all in; it’s you and me, baby.” Once we are both decent, I lace my fingers through hers.

While we wait for the elevator, she wraps her arms around my waist. Looking up at me, she smiles, and I quickly sneak a kiss. I can’t wait to kiss this woman whenever I want.

“I’m all in, too.” I’ve never heard four better words.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:58 pm

I knock on Lexi's door with a bottle of champagne cuddled against my chest and a bouquet of red roses in my hand. Lexi had invited me to spend New Year's Eve with her and her friends. It was considered low-key, yet I was told to wear a tux. I'm not sure what I'm getting myself into tonight, but I don't care either as long as I'm spending it with my girl. In the last two weeks, we have kept our relationship private—sneaking kisses behind closed doors at the office, having “accidental” touches, but out of the office, I savor the moments. It's when we can just be ourselves.

As much as I would rather be able to shout to the world that this woman is mine, I understand her concern about going public. Things could get complicated around the office; people could talk, and why bring unwanted drama into something new like this?

The door swings open to reveal Lexi standing there in a sleeveless, floor-length black dress, dipping low in the front. There is no way she can wear a bra with this dress. My mouth waters and my cock instantly starts to thicken at the view in front of me.

“Hey, babe.”

Her mouth curves into a smile at the use of the new nickname. She steps back and extends her hand, inviting me in. “Come on in.”

I dip down and capture her lips with mine, giving her one hell of a welcome. We break apart to cheers coming behind us.

A blush creeps up Lexi's chest, drawing my attention to her cleavage once again.

I turn to find Lexi's friends, dressed up just as well as we are, cheering our public display of affection.

"These are for you." I hand Lexi the bouquet of roses, and she pushes her lips together, emotion all over her face.

She brings the flowers to her nose and inhales. "Thank you so much."

"This is also for you." I hold up the bottle of champagne. Lexi told me I didn't have to bring anything, "just myself," but my mother taught me not to show up empty-handed.

"I'll take that." Hadley quickly snatches the bottle out of my hand and clings to it as if her life depends on it, a huge smile all over her face.

"Ben, you remember Hadley."

Hadley presses a friendly kiss to my cheek in greeting. "Nice to see you again. And glad you finally got your head out of your ass and got our girl here."

"Had, leave him alone," a deep voice calls from the kitchen. Cal walks toward us and extends his hand for me to shake. "Ben. It's nice to meet you again under different circumstances." After we shake hands, I wrap my arm around Lexi's shoulder, pulling her close to my chest. Am I being territorial? Fuck yes I am. The smirk on Cal's face tells me he knows what I'm doing.

"Yes, not the boyfriend Cal."

Hadley and another brunette I have yet to meet but have seen photos of begin giggling. "Oh man, I can't believe that actually happened."

Lexi wraps her hands around my waist, and I love the feel of her beside me. “No hard feelings. I guess you were right that I just needed a push.” However, because of that joke, I almost gave up on the thought of us, assuming that she had happily moved on.

The brunette stands beside Cal, and he wraps his arm around her, similar to Lexi’s and my stance. Maybe this is his real girlfriend? “Hi, I’m Brynn. I’m sorry if this jackass causes any trouble.”

The apartment is decorated with beautiful black-and-gold decor. Strings of lights hang from the ceiling, and catered food trays line the kitchen. There is a totally different vibe to the apartment this time than the last time I was here. Lexi must take her event planning seriously, not just in her career but in her personal life, too.

* * *

“I’m sorry your brother couldn’t make it,” Lexi says softly, sitting on my lap. My hand is draped over her leg.

I shrug. Asher once again had plans, but I told him he was welcome should he change his mind. It was very sweet of Lexi to extend an invitation to him. He told me that he planned to “ring in the new year between some supermodel’s legs.”

Right now, I don’t want to talk about my brother. “Have I told you how absolutely stunning you are tonight?”

“Maybe,” she teases, “but feel free to tell me again.” She leans down, leaving a soft peck on my lips.

“You, Lexi Baker, lookabsolutelystunning in this dress, although I bet you look even better out of it.” Her breathing stalls, and I would love nothing more than test my theory, but it’s almost midnight and I don’t want to be rude with her friends.

It turns out Cal and Brynn are not together, just childhood best friends. I'm a guy and never notice anything, but I noticed they have some sort of chemistry. Hadley's date, Josh, showed up about an hour ago. He is a bouncer at the club we met at and had to work a little bit tonight but snuck out early.

I trace small circles along Lexi's wrist. I twist her arm over gently, running my thumb over the small infinity symbol tattoo on the inside of her right wrist. "What does that mean?"

"If I tell you what mine means, will you tell me about all of yours?" My sleeves are rolled up, revealing my decorated limbs. I close my eyes as she runs her nails back and forth. That feels good.

"Maybe one day I'll tell you all about them, but I don't think we have all night. But for now, tell me about yours."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:58 pm

“Well, Brynn, Hadley, and I all have the same one. Mine is purple, Hadley’s is green, and Brynn’s is blue. We got it in our junior year at WCU. These girls are my everything. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for them and them for me.”

“Like convince their best friend to pose as your boyfriend and kiss you.”

Lexi buries her face in my neck, her breath tickling the skin. “Ugh, you’re never going to let us live that down, are you.”

I run my hand over her brown hair, tangling my fingers through it. “Probably not, I don’t like to share what’s mine,” I say softly yet in a commanding tone. “But I also love giving you a hard time about it. Your friends clearly care enough to want to see you happy, no matter the cost.” I tilt her chin up so that she is facing me. “And are you?”

“Am I what?” Her eyes search mine.

“Happy.”

Lexi cups my cheeks in both hands and pulls my face to hers. She whispers, “Very,” before kissing me. The soft whimper that leaves her mouth has me needing more of her.

“Lexi,” Brynn shouts, and we pull apart. “Get your ass up here and dance with us.”

The girls have since turned up the music and are dancing in front of the TV, holding their champagne flutes. I have never heard the song playing, but Lexi seems to

recognize it. With one last quick kiss to my lips, she hops up and joins the girls on the makeshift dance floor. Whether it is the champagne or the company, there is no denying the smile on Lex's face. Lexi continues to dance, swaying her hips side to side. She laughs over something one of the girls keeps saying and even spins a few times to face me and serenade me with lip-syncing. The song seems to be a remix of a song I recognize as Elton John's—one of my father's favorites.

If this is the life I have been missing out on, then sign me up.

"Does everyone have a refill?" Hadley asks, walking around with a bottle of champagne in her hands, making sure we all have enough in our glass for the midnight toast.

The countdown begins with the six of us crowded in the living room, Lexi encased in my arms.

"Happy New Year!" The room erupts in cheers as I spin Lexi around and block out the noise surrounding us.

I press a searing kiss to her lips, our tongues tangling and twisting together. If this is any indication of what I can look forward to this year, then fuck yes. With her hands linked behind my neck, she plays with the hair along my collar. I love the way she runs her nails into my scalp. It takes all the strength I have to pull back from her.

"Happy New Year, baby." Last year may have brought me a new town, a new business, and a crazy one-night stand, but it's this year I look forward to most with Lexi by my side.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:58 pm

“Woah, did a hurricane blow through here?” Hadley asks, standing in my doorway, leaning against the jamb. I glance over at her, giving her a death stare. She is dressed in black pants and a black top, her typical uniform, getting ready to head into the salon.

I plop on the bed and fall back onto a pile of clothes. “Ugh, yes, Hurricane Lexi—category five with mass casualties.” I place my arm over my eyes, groaning. Ben should be on his way here to pick me up for our official first date. Yep, it’s nine in the morning, and we are going on a date. Apparently, it’s an overnight date involving us going out of town, but that is all he will tell me. Hence I am tearing my room apart, trying to figure out what to pack.

I was more than happy to just go out to dinner like a normal couple, but I guess nothing about us is normal. He has been tight-lipped about it all week, so he can’t get mad when he shows up and finds my biggest suitcase filled to the brim with different options. In my defense, I have no clue if I need something comfy, something fancy, something casual. I have no idea.

Hadley strolls into the room and peeks into my bag, “Hmm, interesting.” I peep an eye out at her curiously.

“Do you know where he’s taking me?”

A mischievous smile forms on her lips. “Maybe,” she draws out.

“Hadley Eloise Kincaid, I swear to God, I will burn all your vibrators if you are holding out pertinent information on me.”

“Woah, woah, woah! You’re a monster!” She mockingly slaps her chest. “Remind me to lock my bedroom door before I leave, and no, I don’t know shit about your weekend... for the record.”

I sigh. “Sorry about the threat to your pussy posse.” Yes, that is what Hadley calls her collection of vibrators. They all have names, too.

“It’s okay.” She sits down beside me and wraps her arm around my shoulder, pulling me into a side hug. “I’ll forgive you this once.” How either of us is keeping a straight face during this conversation, I will never know. “But in all seriousness, I don’t have a clue as to where he’s taking you or what you are doing. Just relax and enjoy yourself—enjoy him.” She nudges my side and winks dramatically.

“Oh my God, will you get out of here already?” I push her off the bed.

“You know I’m leaving because I need to get to work before Chad finds something else to bitch about. But just relax, okay?” She pinches my chin between two fingers and forces me to look at her. “Okay?”

I nod. “Yes, Mom.”

“Good. I’ll see you when you get back. Have fun.” She blows me a kiss as she exits my room. I hear the front door open followed by Hadley talking to someone. “Lex, Ben’s here.” Shit!

The front door closes, followed by Ben’s heavy footsteps along the hardwood floor. I quickly try to scramble, throwing clothes into the suitcase.

“Hey, ba—holy shit,” he interrupts himself. “What happened in here?” He looks around the room at the complete disarray of my living space while running his hands over his perfectly chiseled jawline.

I try to play it cool. “Oh, you know, just packing for our big trip.” And that’s when I begin to word vomit, like full-blown how many words can I fit in one breath. “I’m sorry, I’m not ready. I know you said to be ready by nine, but I’ve been trying to pack for two hours now, and since you haven’t given me any sort of detail as to what I need to bring, I sort of panicked.” My shoulders deflate as I breathe heavily.

In two large strides, Ben is pulling me into his arms. He first presses a kiss to the top of my head, before stroking his hands down my hand to latch around my waist. After a short hug and my breathing evening out, he cups both my cheeks with his palms and presses a tender kiss to my lips. “Hey, it’s all right. I’m sure whatever you packed will be perfect. Do you want me to help at all?”

I pull out of his arms and wave him off. “You could help by giving me some sort of hint.”

Ben sits back on my bed, resting on one arm, his ankles crossed, hanging off the edge of my bed. “No can do, babe. It’s a surprise.”

“Ugh, fine.” I pout like a child. “I just have a few things left to throw in the bag, and then we can leave.”

Thirty minutes later, Ben is loading my bag next to his in the back of his BMW. I also notice the vast size difference between our bags, but whatever.

“First stop is coffee.” If I weren’t already falling for this man, those words would have done the trick. “I wasn’t sure what you would want this morning since I’ve noticed when you are at the office, you drink your coffee hot; however, when you come back from coffee shops, it’s always iced.”

I’m impressed by his findings. I definitely prefer iced coffee over hot, but whenever I add ice on my own, it always tastes different and waters down faster. I’m sure it’s

really all psychological, but fuck it, that's my theory, and I'm sticking to it.

"Iced is perfect."

Ben pulls into the parking lot of a coffee shop just beyond the city limits. With a quick kiss to my lips, he says he will be right back. While I wait, I pull out my phone to see missed texts from Hadley, Brynn, and Cal.

Brynn: Have a great trip. Do you know where he's taking you?

Hadley: Can you believe this bitch? This morning she threatened to burn the posse because she thought I was holding out on her.

Brynn: Oh, no! Not that! Anything but that!

Cal: What's the posse?

Page 42

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:58 pm

Cal: Oh, WTF?! Brynn just told me what it was. Can't you guys be in your other chat for this? Seriously? I need new friends.

Hadley: You love us anyway, Murphy!

Cal: *Middle finger emoji*

Brynn: Lex has been awful quiet.

Hadley: Must be giving Ben road head. Girls gotta have breakfast, you know.

Cal: *I quit gif*

I can't with these people, especially before I am fully caffeinated.

Me: No, I am not giving a blow job. Ben went in to get coffee.

Me: I'll text you guys with the details later.

Me: And Cal, you could never get rid of us, we know too much. *kisses*

Just as I hit Send, the driver's-side door opens, and Ben appears with two large coffees. I take the iced coffee from him and take a sip. The sweetness of the caramel is a definite wake-up call, almost more than the caffeine itself.

Ben sets his large cup in the cup holder and starts the car. "Ready to go?"

“Yes!”

Two and a half hours later, Ben is pulling off the highway, and a giant wooden sign with CrossRoads Vineyard with black cursive letters appears.

“Oh my God, it’s gorgeous,” I say as I stare out the window at the acres and acres of green fields. We have been lucky that this winter has been a very mild one, almost as if an extension of autumn.

When I look back at Ben, he has a massive smile on his face that matches mine. He knows he did well.

Ben pulls into a spot in the parking lot and leans over the center console. “Was it a good surprise, baby?”

I close the distance between us and brush my lips against his. He coaxes his tongue between my lips, devouring my mouth. When I thread my fingers in his hair, keeping his mouth sealed to mine, he emits a low groan and pulls back, resting his forehead against mine.

“While I would love nothing more than to keep kissing you, I didn’t drive two and a half hours just to do that. Come on.” Ben gets out of the car and comes around my side, helping me out. With his hand still in mine, Ben retrieves the bags from the trunk, his slung over his shoulder and mine wheeled behind us. We take in the beautiful scenes in front of us that look almost out of a painting while we make our way to the hotel on the property. The main building’s architecture resembles that of a castle. Its vaulted ceilings and archways give a regal feel to it.

Once checked in for the night, we are shown to our room. A spacious one-bedroom suite with a bathroom that both mine and Hadley’s could fit in.

The balcony overlooks the vineyard that reaches the far distance—a beautiful escape to the constant busy city life. I am currently perched against the railing, taking in the scenery, when Ben comes up behind me, wrapping me in his arms.

“Did I do good?” he asks, pressing a kiss to my shoulder.

“So good. I never want to leave. I may just have to call my boss and tell him I quit and tell Hadley she’s on her own with the rent.”

His deep laughter vibrates through my body with his closeness. “Hmm, well, I can’t speak for Hadley, but I think your boss has no problem since he would be here with you.” Ben rests his chin on the top of my head. “I was going to take a quick shower, rinse off the drive. Care to join me?”

“Why, Bentley—” I know that he hates his first name, but I think it’s sexy and love the way it sounds. “—I think that’s one of the best ideas you’ve had all day.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:58 pm

The website for CrossRoads Vineyard for sure did not do this place justice. It is more breathtaking than I ever imagined, and the smile on Lexi's face since we arrived made the drive so worth it.

After a supposed quick shower that turned into two orgasms for her and one for me, we are almost ready to explore the property and have a picnic.

The bathroom door opens, revealing Lexi wearing tight black pants, a white top, and an open olive-green button-up shirt. The long, draped necklace brings my attention to her supple breasts.

After our shower, Lexi went searching through her bag, and hot damn, it was like a Mary Poppins bag of never-ending clothes. Was there anything left at her apartment? Maybe she wasn't kidding when she said she was going to move here.

I'm currently perched on the edge of the bed, rolling up the sleeves to my black dress shirt that I have paired with a pair of dark jeans. I know that Lex loves when I show off the colorful designs inked on my arms. I've found her eyes lingering on them more than once, just like they are now. I would definitely feel objectified if it didn't turn me on so much with the way her eyes darken as she wets her lips.

I push off the bed and stalk over to her. Her back is now to me as she applies color to her lips in the mirror above the dresser. I love the way we look together. Her eyes never leave mine as she drags the tiny stick along her lips, leaving a pale pink color in its wake. I can't help but imagine dragging my cock over her lips, teasing her.

"Baby, you better stop looking at me like that, or we're never going to get out of here,

and I'm going to have my dessert first." My voice is low and breathy.

She visibly swallows, and her breathing changes. She spins in my arms and rises to place a kiss on my lips gently and slips out of my grasp before I can deepen the kiss.

"Come on." She tilts her head toward the door.

I adjust my pants and grab the room key from the top of the dresser, shoving it in my pocket before joining Lex by the door.

We walk hand in hand over the property on our way to the barnlike building where the tastings are held and where the bistro café is located. After tasting eight different wines, Lexi decides on her two favorites, a sauvignon blanc and merlot. We purchase two bottles and a deluxe picnic basket, including an assortment of cheese and crackers, two wineglasses, and a picnic blanket.

I carry everything while Lexi searches for the perfect spot.

"Here is perfect." She glances over her shoulder at me.

I arch a brow at her, a playful smile on my lips. "Are you sure because you said that about the last three spots we stopped at?"

Lex gives me a look that tells me I should stop talking if I want to survive the weekend. "Yes, Ben, I am sure," she mocks back before sticking her tongue out at me.

I grab the blanket from the basket and spread it out over the grass before taking a seat. Lexi kicks off her shoes and joins me. I work on getting the wine open while she sets up the food. With it being winter, the grounds are not as crowded as I imagine they would be during warmer months, but the weather is perfect right now. Mother

Nature must have taken the day off because I expected it to be much colder than it is.

Lex accepts the glass before leaning back with her palm splayed across the blanket, holding her up. She closes her eyes and soaks in the sunrays beaming down on her. I am distracted by her beauty and end up overflowing my glass.

My commotion causes her to jerk her head up, and she laughs as I fumble to lick the excess dripping down the glass and clean the mess.

“I can clean you up but can’t take you out, I see.” She giggles, hiding behind her wineglass.

Moments later, I’ve cleaned up my mess and place the wine back in the basket.

“Here, try this.” I turn to find Lexi holding a cracker with a slice of cheese on it.

I open my mouth and accept the snack. “Mmmm,” I mumble with a mouth full of food.

“It’s so gouda, right?” Her whole body vibrates as she laughs at her joke.

Once I swallow the last bite, I wash it down with a sip of wine and wipe my mouth with a napkin. “The snack was delicious; however, that joke was terrible.”

Lexi’s hand flies to her chest as if shocked by my comment. I am used to her quirky humor, but now, it’s rather cute. And it gets even better under the influence of alcohol, so I know that this will not be her only lousy joke of the weekend or night.

* * *

After dinner at the small restaurant on the premises, we work our way back to the

room on the trail lit up with rustic lanterns when we pass the hotel bar. A sign out front reads “Karaoke Night.” I cringe while Lexi’s face beams. Fuck me.

“Oh, come on, Ben, it will be so much fun,” she pleads, batting her eyelashes.

I grumble as I allow her to pull me into the bar. I wince as we hear the sounds of what can only be described as cats dying as we enter the darkened room. The room is no bigger than our conference room. For as empty it was on the premises today, I am shocked to see it busy here. These people must have appeared from nowhere.

I snag us a table and two drinks while Lexi disappeared, claiming that she was finding a restroom; however, the devilish smile upon her face as she sees me afterward tells me that may not have been the case, especially when the guy running the DJ booth calls Lexi to the stage.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:58 pm

After a quick kiss to my cheek, she hurries to the stage like a little kid entering a candy shop.

The TV monitor reads “I Wanna Dance with Somebody” by Whitney Houston. I’ve learned this to be one of her favorite songs even though it is not by her favorite band, Pentatonix, who she listens to faithfully. Her dance moves along with her barely looking at the screen with the lyrics is a dead giveaway that this is her not her first time performing this song. But the crowd eats it up, as do I, and I’ve never felt prouder of her.

Once she exits the stage, I stand, and she jumps into my arms, wrapping her arms around my neck. I bury my face into her neck and lift her off the ground. “Are you a professional karaoke singer or something? I don’t think anyone can compare to you up on there.”

She swats at my chest when I set her back on her feet. “You’re just saying that because you’re my boyfriend and you don’t wanna tell me that I suck.” Lexi laughs as she takes a seat, and I drag her chair closer to mine.

“Baby, I promise to never lie to you, and as much as I love it when you suck—” My pants growing tighter at the very thought of her pretty little lips wrapped around my cock. “—youdefinitelydid not suck there.”

“Will you get up there?” she asks, resting her head on my bicep.

“Oh, hell no, I don’t do that.”

“Please,” she pleads, pursing her lips together in a pout. Whining has always been a turn-off to me, but when Lexi does it, it’s cute. Too bad there is no way in hell I’m letting her convince me to get up there.

By the time we fall into bed, Lexi had me on stage with her singing two duets as well as one by myself. I consider myself rather outgoing, but that may have been the most daring thing I have done in years. Even from the stage, I could see the bright smile on her face as I had the crowd singing along with me with my rendition of “Sex on Fire” by Kings of Leon, which made it all worth it.

I pull Lexi closer, and she wraps her arm around my waist while tangling her legs with mine.

“You know, I’d say that you set the bar pretty high for first dates,” she says, looking up at me.

I think of honestly admitting that I don’t plan to go on any more first dates after this. Instead, I hold her face in my hands and kiss her fiercely. Her lips part, accepting my tongue. Actions speak louder than words, and I plan to show her how much she means to me instead of just telling her. But while I may have set the bar high on dates, she has set the bar high for women. If, God forbid, we don’t work out, I feel that I will always compare the way I feel to the way I feel with Lexi. Every kiss will be compared to the feeling of her lips on mine. Her kiss both drowns me and revives me at the same time.

The next morning, we savor our time together before heading back the real world, where our lives aren’t as simple as they were the past twenty-four hours, where we can just be. But the more time I spend with this woman, the more I know that anything we endure is one hundred percent worth it. This is a risk worth taking.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:58 pm

Is slip out of bed, leaving Lexi passed out. It was hard to go, but I figure this way, I could get some work done and fall back into bed before she wakes. This girl sleeps like the dead, and her postorgasmic coma should have her still out cold for the next few hours.

After we joined her friends for brunch today, we christened the new couch and spent the afternoon getting lost in each other. I carried her to bed once we were spent and passed out with her in my arms.

I reach for the jeans on the floor beside the bed and quietly put them on, not wanting to disturb her, and pad my way down to my home office. We've been splitting our nights back and forth between her place and mine. Asher has been spending more time not home. I want to ask where he spends all his time, but he's an adult, and as he said before, as long as it's not illegal, he's free to do whatever he pleases.

I sit down at my desk, flip open my laptop, and get to work.

A short while later, a shadow in the door drags my attention away from the computer screen. I smile at the still freshly fucked bed head that Lexi has. She rubs her eyes, and I see that she has changed from the camisole top she had on earlier to one of my T-shirts. I wonder if she has anything on underneath my shirt. I adjust in my chair as I continue talking on the phone to Tom Abrams, the owner of Abrams Jewelry downtown and a lifelong client of Maritime. Per their sales rep, Tom had some interest in upping their donation to a sponsorship.

I wink at her before focusing on the screen again, swiveling the chair side to side. The chair jerks around to a stop, and I am met with the most beautiful green eyes looking

up at me. Lexi places her hands on the arms of the chair on either side of me. Her eyes never leave mine as she slowly sinks to her knees.

I cover the mouthpiece on the phone and softly ask, “What are you doing?”

She ignores my question, but a devilish smirk appears on her kissable lips as she reaches for the button of my jeans. I reach for her hand to stop her, but she swats it away.

My jaw clenches as I try to focus on the voice on the other end and not the sound of the zipper unzipping. A blast of cold air forces me to suck in a breath as she frees my already hardening cock from the confines of my jeans. I didn’t bother with putting my boxers on earlier.

It’s not until Tom mentions Lexi that my focus is back on the call.

“Yes, I’m quite impressed with Miss Baker as well. Her skills are a great asset to our team.” Lexi’s eyes brighten at my compliment, and her smirk widens as her tongue skims the underside of my cock before swirling around the mushroom tip. I hiss out a breath, and I relax back into my chair.

Focus, Ben. But whether it’s focusing on the brunette with her head between my legs or on the phone call, trying to secure us a top sponsor for the Best of Willow Creek event, I’m not sure. Both of my heads are battling it out.

“Uh-huh,” I more or less moan, unsure what I am even hearing. All I know is this phone call needs to end.

I run my fingers through her brown locks and pull it away from her face, happy she did not have a hair tie wrapped around her wrist, so that I can watch my cock disappear in her throat. Her cheeks hollow as she moves up and down. A few loose

tendrils fall from my grasp and tickle my lower abdomen. I use my palm on the back of her head for her to take me deeper. Drool drips from her mouth down to my balls as she gags slightly but doesn't pull back. Instead, her lips lock tighter around my shaft as she continues to suck. Lexi Baker is sexy as hell, and having her on her knees like this is a dream come true.

"Hey, Tom, I have another call coming in. Can I call you back on Monday?" I quickly say as Lexi cradles my balls in her hand.

"Yeah, sure. The wife is giving me a dirty look saying we need to leave for dinner anyway!" I hear him mumble something to whom I am assuming is his wife on the other end.

"Great, talk soon." I hang up the phone and toss it on my desk.

I tangle my fingers in her hair and pull her off me with a loud pop.

"Hey, I wasn't done," she whines.

I pull her to her feet and lift her onto the desk. The T-shirt rides up, and as I suspected, nothing on underneath.

"Oh, you're right. You're not done." With my hands still tangled in her hair, I trail soft kisses along her neck. "But now, it's my turn. Spread your legs, Lex. Let me see how much sucking my cock turned you on."

Her green eyes darken from an emerald green to almost jade hue. Leaning back with her palms splayed flat on the desk, Lexi spreads her legs, exposing her bare, drenched pussy, begging for my tongue to taste it.

I crouch down in front of her and inhale her sweet scent. I run my nose along her

outer lips and skim the soft skin above her clit.

“Ben,” Lexi pants.

A smile tugs from my lips as I hook my arms under her thighs and pull her closer. “Hmmm, it’s not so fun to be teased, is it?” My hot breath on her pussy causes her to thrust toward my face.

“Please, baby.”

I drag my tongue along her slit up and down. When I reach her clit, her thighs begin to tremble, and when Lexi tries to close her legs around my head, I force them to stay open.

Her eyes meet mine as I continue to lick and suck.

Her thighs shake, so I quicken my pace and add pressure.

“You’re close, baby. I can feel it. “

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:58 pm

With her head thrown backward, Lex moans, “Yes! Fuck! I’m so close.”

I know exactly how to send her over the edge. I insert my forefinger into her slick opening and pump in and out in a twisting motion. I feel her pussy walls flutter around me.

“That’s it, Lex. Give me what I want.”

Her pants and moans fill my home office as I bring her to climax, lapping up her juices.

Before she gets a chance to come down from her high, I shed my jeans the rest of the way down and slide into her swollen pussy, my own orgasm not far. Lexi reaches up and pulls my mouth to hers. I massage her tongue with mine, and I know that she can taste her sweet tang on my lips.

“Mmm...” she moans in my mouth as I pound harder into her.

“Do you like tasting yourself when you kiss me?”

“God, yes!”

I fuse my mouth back to hers, and with two more pulses, I come undone, filling her to the brim. My orgasm sets off another one from her.

A slight sheen of sweat is now covering our bodies as we both try to recover our breathing.

“You know you potentially cost us a sponsor, right?” I pant, my head resting on her shoulder.

She lifts her head back up, still propped up on her elbows. “Baby, your cock is still hard inside me, and you want to talk about sponsorships?” She arches an eyebrow, but a glint of mischief shines in her eyes. She presses up on her palms so that our chests brush against each other. “I’m sure I can fix any issues that arose during that conversation. Just like you said, Mr. Harrington, I am an excellent asset to the company.” The way she accentuates a rose—just like my cock had—and my name in a seductive manner has my cock throbbing.

I withdraw from her, and with my hands under her thighs, I scoop her in my arms. “How about I show you how much of an asset you really are.” I wink, and she giggles as I make my way back down the hall to my bedroom.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:59 pm

“Hey, Sarah,” I interrupt the administrative assistant, who is currently chatting with two of the art department interns and Amy. “I’m awaiting a delivery from Quarter Moon. It’s the printed invitations for Best Of. When Dana Gallie arrives, can you send her back to my office?” Things are starting to feel more real about the party with the invitations arriving today. Of course, then I have the fun task of stuffing all the envelopes, but when I throw on some Pentatonix and get a system going, it usually goes pretty quickly. Maybe, I can even convince Ben to help.

“Sure thing.” She notes it down on the notepad in front of her.

One of the interns, Josie I think her name is, leans over the counter. “Why don’t you ask her.” She nods her head very obviously, meaning me. I rest my elbow on the countertop.

“Lexi, you seem to be around Ben a lot. What can you tell us about him? Is he seeing anyone?” Sarah props her head on her fists.

I am caught off guard by their questioning. What the hell do they want to know about Ben’s love life for?

“I spend time with Ben at the office, discussing work.” My tone is harsh. “I don’t believe it’s anyone’s business how or with whom Mr. Harrington spends his time with.” These women want nothing more than to gossip, and I refuse to give in to their demands. They can drool over Ben all they want, but he is mine.

A small chuckle draws our attention behind us to find Ben walking toward us with his hands in his pockets. A smug smile tips his lips upward. I swear, I am pretty sure

cartoon hearts float above each of the ladies' heads in front of me. I mean, Ben is swoony as hell.

"I'm sorry, ladies, I didn't mean to eavesdrop," he begins, leaning into the small space between Amy and myself. "To answer your question, yes I have a girlfriend, who I care about very much. Sorry to burst your bubble."

Ben turns to me. "Lex, do you have a moment?" he asks and nods toward his office.

"Of course, sir." I turn back around to Sarah. "Don't forget."

"Yep, send Dana back to your office," she repeats.

Once my back is to her, I can't help but roll my eyes at the snarkiness of her tone. I am sure once I'm out of range, she will go back to her gossiping. Maybe she would be more than just an admin assistant, if she focused more on her work instead of office gossip.

Ben bumps my shoulder with his, bringing my attention to his. "You know, Miss Baker, I have to admit that was rather sexy back there."

"What was?" I narrow my eyes at him.

"You getting all territorial."

Ben shuts the door of his office, and I spin around to face him. "What? I wasn't getting territorial. I just didn't like hearing them talk about you like that—like you're a piece of meat or something."

He takes a seat in his chair and pulls me into his lap. Ben begins playing with the ends of my hair, something I've noticed he likes to do when I'm in his arms. I relax

into his touch. “I’m sorry, I just—”

Ben pinches my chin between his fingers and brings my gaze to his. “I know, baby. I would have loved to mess with them and see the shock on their faces when I tell them that you are the girl I was referring to.”

I love that he gets me. Nothing more would bring me more joy than telling the world that we’re together, but I remember how things got when Dominic and I were together—the looks, the whispers, the rumors, and that was only with the boss’s son. What would they think about me and Ben? Would they accept that love is love, or would they tear us apart?

* * *

“Is anyone else as excited as I am for this?” Hadley asks, leaning forward between the driver and passenger seat of Brynn’s car. In our latest fashion issue of the magazine, we had used photos from a photographer, Aubrey Daniels, who lives a few towns over in River Falls. There was something in her photographs that spoke to me and had me browsing her website. I found images from a few boudoir shots that she had done, and an idea struck. I immediately reached out to her and booked a session. It was a long shot for her having any openings, but luck was on my side since she had a last-minute cancellation. Of course, when I mentioned it to Hadley and Brynn, they decided to make a field trip out of it.

“To see me naked?” I have some of the weirdest friends. I just keep telling myself that I love them.

“No, it’s just you spent three years of your life with Dominic, and never once did you mention something like hey, I’m going to have sexy photos done to give to him for Valentine’s Day.”

“Ben is...” I search for the correct word I’m looking for. “Different. He makes me feel different. I never felt like this with Dominic.” Maybe it was because Dominic and I were both workaholics—not that Ben isn’t, it’s just that Ben convinces me that I need to take time for me as well before I lose my sanity, whereas Dominic was the opposite. He would convince me I needed to work longer hours and harder. Now, I understand it was most likely a reason to keep me occupied and not questioning his “working late hours” with his secretary or whoever else he saw on the side.

“Is it cheesy to say that we see a difference in you?”

“Well, one, it’s nice to have my roommate back—well, sort of,” Hadley jokes. It’s true—while I have been taking time off, not during work hours, but with my overtime, I’ve been splitting my time between Ben’s place and ours. When Hadley sees my smile fade, she places her arm over mine. “I don’t mean that in a bad way. It’s great to see you smile again.”

On instinct, I smile more prominently, and she gives me a look that says *told you so* before she sits back in the back seat with her arms crossed.

It only took us just under an hour to get to River Falls once we got out of the city. We park in an open spot in front of the building. When we knock on the door, it abruptly opens, revealing a tall man a little shorter than Ben, with dark blond hair cropped around his ears. He is wearing a formfitting T-shirt with RFPD on it.

He continues to stare at us, and I glance down at my phone. Umm, maybe we have the wrong address?

“I’m sorry, I’m looking for Aubrey Daniels.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:59 pm

“And what makes you think you’re not looking at her?” His face is stone-cold. Oh my God, is this a scam, and we’re all about to get whacked.

“Are we being catfished?” I hear Brynn mumble softly beside me.

“I don’t know, but if he’s the photographer, I’m getting naked, too.” Seriously, Hadley? I roll my eyes at her before shooting her a knock it off look, which she just shrugs it off.

“Oh my God, Dean, stop it. It’s a client,” a cheerful voice calls out from behind him. “Please ignore my husband.” A short and slender blonde comes into view, carrying a toddler. She matches the photos I’d seen online of Aubrey. Phew. My heart rate begins to slow.

The gentleman smirks as she approaches and places his arm around her shoulders, pulling her and the child into his side. It’s rather endearing, as if he always had to touch her in some way. He places a gentle kiss on her temple.

“Are you Lexi?” Aubrey glances back and forth between the girls and me.

“Yes, hi.” I extend my hand and shake hers.

“Please come on in. I’m sorry, I was just messing with you.” The man—who we now know to be her husband, and also an extremely intimidating guy—moves them to the side, allowing us to enter. When the little girl reaches for him, he scoops her up, and holy shit, I think I need a new pair of underwear because I’m pretty sure my lady bits just exploded. “Daddy’s here,” he coos, rubbing circles on her.

“I hope it’s okay that I brought my two best friends.” I nod toward Hadley and Brynn, who are both still staring at Dean dreamily.

“Absolutely. I want all my clients to feel comfortable when I’m taking their picture. Oh and don’t worry, Dean was just leaving. He just got off duty and came here to grab Savannah.” Her smile widens as she takes in the scene in front of her.

“Yep, we’re out of here.” He kisses the top of his daughter’s forehead as she rests against his shoulder. Will Ben look that sexy holding our child?

Woah, slow your roll, Lex. You guys haven’t even gone public with your relationship, and here you are thinking about kids?

“Say bye to Mommy. Bye, babe, I’ll see you at home.” He kisses Aubrey’s lips gently, before turning to us “You ladies have fun.” And with that, he is out the door, closing it gently behind him.

Aubrey claps her hands together. “Should we get started?”

Aubrey leads me over to the small area set up as the dressing room for me to change. Hadley sets her bag down there and does my hair in simple loose curls and light makeup.

I brought a few different outfit options, one being a dress shirt of Ben’s that I stole from his closet the other day that I’ll pair with a black-and-pink lace bra and matching cheeky lace panties. Hadley suggested a pose we found on Pinterest without the bra and the dress shirt covering my nipples but exposing the majority of my breasts. Another outfit is a purple-and-black lace satin slip dress with matching kimono, and last, at Hadley’s insistence, a sheer black mesh-and-lace baby doll with a red bow in the center, paired with my favorite heels that I was wearing the night of the Christmas party.

I stare at myself in the reflection of the small floor-length mirror in the dressing area, having picked the black-and-red baby doll first.

“Stop staring at yourself,” Hadley shouts, “and get your ass out here.” Her voice turns firm.

“You have a great mom voice,” Aubrey says, and Brynn lets out a loud laugh, the same time I snort.

“Thank you?” Hadley replies, unsure if that’s a good thing or not.

“Lex.” It’s Brynn this time who calls my name as I walk out of the dressing area.

“I’m here, okay? You guys can stop yelling.”

My eyes meet three sets staring directly back at me, and I start to feel self-conscious. I wrap my arms around the exposed waistline, second-guessing this whole experience.

“Oh no, you’re not going shy on me now.” Aubrey tugs on my hand as if she had known me for years. She leads me over to a bed in the center of the room. “Don’t worry, Dean and I haven’t had sex on this.” My eyes nearly bulge out of my head at her comment.

“Why not? If I were married to that, I’d be having sex with him all over the place.”

I whip my head around at Hadley’s comment. “Hadley Eloise Kincaid, you can’t say things like that to strangers,” I scold. I turn back to Aubrey, who is wiping tears of laughter away. “I am so sorry.”

She waves me off. “Oh no, it’s fine. I know he’s gorgeous, and so does he.”

“See?” Hadley exclaims before plopping down on the couch in front of us as if she owns the place.

“Okay, now let’s get you set up.” Aubrey adjusts me on the bed and takes a few test shots before finding the right lighting combination.

“Holy hell,” the girls both say at the same time, looking over Aubrey’s shoulder at the camera.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:59 pm

“You look fucking gorgeous, Lex. You’re going to blow Ben’s mind.” Brynn smiles before looking back down at the camera. “Damn, Aubrey, you’re amazing, I might need to book one of these shoots, too, but I don’t have anyone to show them to.”

“I’ve had clients just do this for themselves before; it’s not a crazy idea.”

Hadley has since returned to the couch and has popped the bottle of champagne Aubrey pulled out. She keeps it on hand to help loosen up the client if they feel nervous. “I think we all know that Cal would love those photos.” She tips her glass in her direction.

As Aubrey goes back to instructing me how to pose, she asks, “Is that your boyfriend?”

Hadley and I snicker while Brynn rolls her eyes.

“No, he’s just my best friend. We’ve been best friends since birth.”

“But they have amazing chemistry—just neither realizes it.”

“You’ve never even thought about it?” Aubrey asks in between the sound of the camera clicking.

“I don’t know. Yeah, he’s gorgeous, but it’s Callum,” Brynn says as if that explains it. “If things went south, I would lose my best friend.” Brynn shrugs before snagging Hadley’s champagne glass and taking a sip.

She is clearly uncomfortable talking about this. I guess I never really thought about what there is to lose. But am I any different? If things were to go south with Ben, would I have to get a new job? Would things be too awkward for us to find a working relationship? I wish I could say that it would be fine, but I might be in way too deep.

“Woah, where you’d go right there?” Aubrey asks as she swaps out the SIM cards on the camera.

“Thinking about Ben, I bet,” Hadley giggles.

“And that’s your boyfriend, right?” Aubrey confirms.

“Yes.” I can’t hide the smile from my face. I love hearing “Ben” and “boyfriend” close together. I would have loved the other day to shock the hell out of the girls, who clearly daydream about him in ways that I actually get to be with him, only behind closed doors.

“And her boss,” Brynn adds.

“They have a secret relationship,” Hadley joins in.

“Oh, I see” is Aubrey’s only response.

“It’s a long story,” I softly say. “I’ve been thinking about it a lot, and while it’s super complicated, I hate hiding what Ben means to me. While I love the bubble we’ve created, I want not to hide when we are in public or at work. I think I want to tell the world.”

“Hey.” Aubrey takes a seat on the bed next to me. “We all have a past, and every relationship brings complications—trust me, I get that.” I can see in her eyes that there is more to her statement, but I don’t push it. “If he makes you happy and he is

worth it, the complications don't matter. Is he worth it?"

I nod, nibbling on my bottom lip. Without a doubt, Ben is worth it. My eyes fill with unshed tears, but I refuse to let them fall, mainly because I don't want Hadley to bitch about needing to redo my makeup and because she is right.

"So how about this? Let's change up your outfit and make Ben lose his mind with the final results of these photos."

Now that's a plan I can get behind.

Page 50

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:59 pm

“Hey, are you home?” Brynn asks before even saying hello when I answer the phone.

“No, I just arrived at Ben’s house, about to walk in now,” I respond. Why is she acting so weird?

The phone goes quiet for a moment. “Brynn, you still there?”

“Yeah, sorry. I’m here.”

I take a seat on the step, and the cold stone through the fabric of my bottoms causes a shiver up my spine.

“Brynn, what’s going on? You’re making me nervous.”

“So Cal and I were out to dinner at Esta Noche, and we saw something—well, more like someone.”

Could she be any more cryptic right now?

“Okay,” I draw out, not knowing where she’s going with this.

She sighs heavily into the phone. “We saw Dominic, Lex.”

Well, that wasn’t the response I was expecting.

“And this is newsworthy why?” I do not understand why this was worthy of a phone call and why she’s acting so strange.

I can hear Cal talking in the background, and all I can make out from what he is saying is, “Yes, it’s definitely them.”

“Definitely who,” I repeat. “Is he with his secretary or something? Dominic and I have been over for a while and I’m happy with Ben. Dominic Jennings is free to do whatever the hell he pleases.” Just saying his name leaves a bitter taste in my mouth.

“He was with Asher.”

Wait. What? My stomach drops. If I wasn’t already sitting down, I am pretty sure my legs would have given out. Asher and Dominic?

“How does he know Dominic?”

Brynn snorts into the phone. “Well, I think you’re asking the wrong person.”

Cal mumbles something again. “I can’t hear what he was saying. Can you put me on speakerphone?”

“No, we’re kind of staking out the bar where they’re sitting.”

Oh, for fuck’s sake.

“Well, get out of there. I don’t need him to see either of you. Asher wouldn’t know you two, but Dom would.”

“What are you going to do?” That’s the million-dollar question.

“I don’t know.” And I honestly don’t. It’s none of my business who Asher hangs out with or associates with; hell, I don’t even know him that well. But I do know Dominic, and I know now after my own experience that he is not good people to

associate with. Of course, while we were dating, I was utterly blind to it. “Wait, how did you know it was Asher with him?”

“Internet stalking, of course.”

I bellow out a laugh. “Of course you would.”

The mood of the call changes drastically. “Well, how else am I supposed to know what he looks like since he’s always too busy to hang out with us. Now we know it’s because he hangs out with can’t-keep-it-in-his-pants Jennings. Lex, do you think he knows about you and Dom?”

Again, another million-dollar question. “I don’t know, but I guess I need to tell Ben about my past before Asher does.”

“Wait, hold up, you haven’t even told Ben?”

“Really, B,” I say, knowing that she hates that nickname. “It’s not like it’s a great bedside discussion. ‘Oh hey, babe, just so you know, before you and I started dating, I was kind of dating the boss’s son. We lived together.’” Fuck, I believed I was going to marry him for God’s sake.

Page 51

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:59 pm

“Yeah, I guess that makes sense.”

My ass is going numb sitting out here. “Hey, I gotta go. Thanks for the heads-up.”

“Sorry it wasn’t better news.”

I shrug as if she could actually see me. “Love you.”

“Love you, too,” she says softly.

I hang up the phone and stare at the ground, trying to gather my thoughts. I am so focused on the pebbled stone that I don’t notice the front door to Ben’s town house open.

“Hey, what are you doing out here,” he asks from behind me, startling the shit out of me.

I clutch my chest. “Fuck, you scared me.” Ben helps me up and places a quick kiss to my lips.

“I’m sorry. I saw you through the glass and was wondering what you were doing sitting out here.”

“Oh, Brynn called while I was walking up the stairs, and I guess I just got distracted for a moment.” He leans in for a second kiss; when I turn, my nose brushes against his skin, and he jumps back.

“Holy shit, your nose is cold. What do you say we get you inside and warm? Dinner is almost ready.”

“So, where’s Asher tonight?” I take a seat at the island stool, and Ben pulls our dinner out of the oven.

“I don’t know. Out with friends, supposedly. He was gone before I got home from work.”

“Have you met any of his friends?”

Ben eyes me curiously as he plates the enchiladas. “Come to think of it, no I haven’t. They don’t spend time here. Mainly out other places.”

An o forms on my lips.

“Why so curious?”

“No reason.” I shrug nonchalantly, hoping that he buys it. “He just never seems to be around.”

“Yeah.” He leans over on the counter. “Sometimes I wish that he had the same drive as you for being so young—that he could focus on preparing himself for the future and not focus on where he’s going to party next or who will spread their legs for him.”

Ben and I both wince. That was definitely more information than I needed, but I see a change in Ben’s stance and behavior as he continues.

“I don’t know. I know that being raised by your brother and not your parents would have its ramifications, I just hope that I wasn’t too hard on him or not hard enough on

him. There wasn't a fucking manual handed when I became his guardian."

I'm off my chair so fast, I wonder how it didn't fall. I spin Ben in my arms and for once cage him in. Of course, our sizes are so different that it's not the same effect as when he does this. "Hey, you did a great job given the hand you were dealt. No one asks for that. You did the best you could. Maybe one day, Asher will realize it, too."

"How did I get such a brilliant girlfriend?" He makes a quick move of swapping our positions.

"You're just lucky, I guess," I respond with the cheesiest smile on my face.

* * *

I'm walking back to my office when I spot Asher walking toward the elevator. He must have stopped by to talk to Ben. Had Brynn and Cal actually seen him with Dominic? Maybe they just saw him with someone who looks just like him. By the time I get to the elevators, the door has already closed. Fuck. I decide to take the stairs, nearly tripping on my way down. I follow them down to the underground parking garage. When I reach the door, I yank it open, partially out of breath. I see Asher is walking towards his Audi.

"Asher," I shout. Maybe I should give him the benefit of the doubt.

"Well, if it isn't my brother's little woman." He leans against the car, crossing his ankles and arms. "What can I do for you?"

"Can I ask you a question?"

"Yes, my dick is bigger than my brother's."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:59 pm

I wince at his comment and fight back the vomit. I hold up my hand. “Please stop. I’m serious.”

He exhales. “Fine, what do you want to know?”

“Are you hanging out with Dominic Jennings?”

He straightens up, and his features tense. “Are you or my brother spying on me?”

“No.” Shit, this is coming out wrong. “Two of my friends were having lunch at Esta Noche, and they thought they saw you with Dominic.”

He cocks his head to the side. “Wait a minute. How would your friends know who Dominic Jennings is?”

Quick, Lex, think on your feet—don’t spill your backstory to Asher before telling your actual boyfriend. “Well, his father used to own this company. He has his face in the Times often, and he is a highly acclaimed attorney. Now, are you going to tell me what you were doing with him or not? He’s not good people.”

He studies me, and I pray he doesn’t ask more. Instead, he presses off his car, stepping into my space. “Well, then I guess it’s a good thing that my life is my business and not yours, little girl. Now run off to my brother and do whatever it is he asks of you.” What is wrong with him? The Asher that Ben has talked about was obviously more concerned with partying, but he never mentioned how cruel he was with his words. What a dick!

A bad taste fills my mouth as I watch him pull out of the garage. I'm not sure what kind of business Asher was doing with Dom, but it leaves me feeling uneasy. The worst part is if I confront Ben about my concerns, I'm worried that he will be wondering how I know so well how horrible a person Dominic truly is.

I exit the garage once his car is out of sight and head back upstairs to the office. This time, however, I take the elevator. Once safely in my office, I rest my head in my hands.

There is a soft knock on my door, and I look up for my eyes to connect with Ben's. The corners of his lipstip upward, and the tension in my shoulders eases as he makes his way into my office.

"Catch you at a bad time?"

I sit back in my chair. "No, not at all, I was just getting a headache. It's been a long day."

Ben scrunches his eyebrows together as if he's trying to decipher if I am telling the truth, but in all honesty, it is the truth. He comes behind me to massage my shoulders. I close my eyes and savor in the feel of his touch. When a soft moan escapes my lips, I remember where we are. Shit. I slip out of his grasp, and when I do, he realizes as well.

Ben clears his throat. "I'm sorry." While we try to sneak touches and kisses in private, my office door is open, and someone could walk past or walk in at any time, so we need to make it look as though we are just a boss and employee discussing work, nothing more.

"I wasn't thinking. Whenever I'm around you, I just want—no, need to touch you. But that was reckless; anyone could have come in. How about this, Lex. Why don't

you head home and relax? You've been kicking ass lately."

"What? Go home? Ben, it's only 2:45. I still have a few more hours left of the workday. Plus, I still need to—"

Ben cuts me off. "Exactly. As your boss, I am sending you home to relax and rest. I know you still have work to do, but if you overwork yourself, then not only am I without an events director, I have a burned-out girlfriend, and we just can't have that. Then when I finish up here..." He leans over me so that it would look as if he is reading something on my computer, and his voice dips. "I plan to bring over a bottle of wine, cook you dinner, and help you relax even more."

The tone of his voice makes me already begin to drip into my panties. I squirm in my seat, adjusting my dress, and Ben chuckles behind me.

I spin in my chair to face him. "Ben, I can't just leave."

He looks toward the door before placing his hands on the arms of my chair and leaning down close enough to where I can smell the mintiness of his breath.

"You can, and you will. Don't argue with me, Lex. I'll see you later." With a quick kiss on my lips that ends just as quickly as it started, he makes his way out of my office. Ten minutes later, when I still haven't left, my cell vibrates with a text.

Ben: I said to go. Now, get your sexy ass home. I'll see you later.

I groan, knowing he won't give up, so I might as well just go with it. An afternoon off sounds nice. I turn my computer off and grab my purse before making my way out of the office. While waiting for the elevator, I text Hadley.

Me: Hey, I happen to have a free afternoon now. Are you free for a pedicure?

Hadley: Oh, hell yes. Guess dating the boss has its perks, huh? *Wink face*

Me: Shut up, or I'll text Brynn, and you can sit home and pout.

Hadley: Okay, okay. I'm just finishing up my last color of the day. My last appt canceled, so I'm done after this. Wanna meet there?

Me: No, I'll meet you at home. I want to change out of these clothes first.

Hadley: Sounds good. See you soon.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:59 pm

“I need to run to the office to take care of a few things. Stay, sleep—I’ll be back in a bit.” Ben presses his lips against mine, not even caring about my morning breath.

His finger drags the silk sheet down, exposing my naked body. “And don’t worry about getting dressed either. One last thing I need to take off before I slide my cock back inside you.”

He presses a quick kiss to my forehead and heads out of the bedroom, closing the door gently behind him. I stretch my arms overhead and roll over to his side of the bed. I pull his pillow to my chest, inhaling his clean soap scent.

Might as well listen to the boss man. I close my eyes and allow myself to succumb to the feeling of contentment. I’m finally putting the pieces of my life back together.

I’m not sure how long I sleep for when I quickly jolt awake with the slamming of the bedroom door against the wall. I shoot up, and the sheet falls, exposing the top of my bare breasts. I am met with eyes I used to get lost in and are now filled with so much hatred.

Dominic Jennings.

“What are you doing here?” I shout, clutching to the sheet to my chest, but the damage is already done. The smirk on his face tells me that he saw my naked body. I try to cover as much as possible with the sheet, but I feel vulnerable.

“Why am I not surprised to find you in your boyfriend’s bed while he is nowhere in sight. You don’t think I didn’t check, did you?” Dominic slowly walks in and drags

his hand along the top of the dresser. It lands on the framed photo from the boudoir shoot, where I was wearing Ben's dress shirt, which is open, exposing my breasts but the nipples still covered. It's my favorite shot from the entire session. Ben called it beauty in art, but the way Dominic is staring at it, licking his lips, makes me feel so dirty—almost as if it were porn.

“Shame you never did anything like that for me. Maybe I wouldn't have gone elsewhere had you done that.” He huffs, setting the frame back where it was before he takes a seat in the chair in the corner of the room. The same chair I rode Ben on last night. If this situation weren't already awkward as fuck, I would almost laugh that he is sitting in Ben's and my dried combined arousal. I know he is not blaming me for his indiscretions. That is one hundred percent on him. There was a time when we first broke up that made me blame myself, but I quickly realized I was never in the wrong.

I feel uncomfortable the way he's staring at me. What is he even doing here?

“So it's true. You're friends with Asher?”

He shrugs, crossing his right leg over the left, reclining back as if this were his own house. I look over to the nightstand, where I typically keep my phone, only to find it gone. Shit, that's right, I left it charging in the kitchen.

“‘Friends’ is such a loose term. How about we call him a pawn in my plan.”

“What does that mean? And what the hell are you even doing here?” I don't bother holding back the anger in my voice.

“So many questions, Lexi. You always were one for details. Too bad you couldn't spot the details of my extracurricular activities, if you know what I mean.”

“I think you should leave.” I hold the sheet tighter to my chest as I try to hurry off the bed without showing any more skin.

“Oh, sweetheart, I think it should be you leaving. I was invited. Asher told me to meet him here before we go to a party being thrown in Manhattan. He gave me the code to the house and everything. It’s a shame that the boy is so gullible. To think I would give two shits about him.” There is only one person Dominic cares about—himself.

“Ben will be back any minute, and he’ll kick you out.”

“Will he, though?” He tilts his head to the side, running his hand over his jaw in thought. “Yeah, I don’t know that he will when he learns of your previous indiscretions.”

“What,” I gasp.

“How you had your eyes set on the boss’s son on the first day of the job only to work your way up the food chain. Once you had the role you wanted, I was tossed to the side.”

“That’s not true, and you know it. You pursued me, you fucking asshole!”

“Ben will see you as nothing but a pathetic gold digger who he fucked in the bathroom of a nightclub. Someone willing to do anything or shall I say anyone to advance her career.”

I shake my head. Ben would never believe that. “Wait, how do you know how Ben and I met?”

“It was rather easy, really. Asher is quite the talker after a few drinks—I just had to ask the right questions.” He adjusts in his seat. “See, I had it all planned out. I was

angry when my father told me that he was selling the company instead of passing it down to me, so I sat back quietly while it took place and did my research on the new owner. I found out that he had a younger brother, who had quite the reputation for partying. I figured I could befriend Asher, get Asher in a compromising position, maybe a sex tape or something. Ben is very protective of his brother, so he would do anything he could to stop it, which is where I could convince him to sell the company over to me.”

Sell the company over? He’s a lawyer—what the hell does he want with a media company?

He claps his hands together. “But then I hit the motherfucking jackpot. Asher invited a few female companions and me over the weekend his brother happened to be away with his new girlfriend, and I saw the photo on the fridge from New Year’s Eve, and it was almost too easy. Getting the company no longer interested me. Why go after Ben, when I could go after you?

“Me? What did I ever do to you? You were the one who cheated on me! You. Cheated. On. Me.” Did he forget that rather important detail of our lives?

“Tsk, ts, Alexis Nicole Baker.” I hate his vile use of my full name. “And here I thought you were smarter than that.”

“It’s your own fault your father didn’t leave you the company. He wanted out—he wanted to live his life in retirement. You chose law, not marketing.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:59 pm

“Don’t you fucking get it? You ruined my life,” Dominic shouts as he rises to his feet. “My father had every intention of giving me that company when he retired. It’s been the plan since he started it. It should have been my goddamn company, but my father said my actions with you cost me everything. That I was an embarrassment to the family and he refused to leave me in charge of his legacy.

“He chose you instead of his own son.” How did I ever love this vile man? The thought makes me want to vomit all over the sheets.

After taking a deep breath, he runs his hands over his clothing as if straightening them out would cause his anger to cease. “So now, my sweet Lex, I get to take something that you want so badly away.”

“Say what you want. Ben won’t believe a single word out of your mouth. He knows what we have is real. I love him.” My hand flies to cover my mouth. Do I love him? Did I really just admit it aloud for the first time to Dominic of all people?

“Shut up.” I jump back as his stern voices fill the bedroom. Is he annoyed because he knows that Ben won’t believe him or that I’ve moved on? “So here’s what you’re going to do—you’re gonna break it off with your boyfriend, breaking his heart.” A smug look on his face tells me he is enjoying this way too much. What happened to the Dominic Jennings I once fell in love with—the nice guy. Was he ever that guy?

“And if I don’t?”

A devious smile takes over both corners of his mouth, reminding me of a villain from a superhero movie. Dominic steps up to me so close that I can smell the coffee on his

hot breath as he leans down to whisper in my ear, dragging his finger along my collarbone. “Well, I’m going to ruin you, him, and the legacy my father built.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:59 pm

When I pull into the driveway and see Lexi's car is still here, I can't hold back my smile. Will I find her lounging in bed still naked? Or possibly on the couch watching one of those silly shows she watches. Somehow, I have let her convince me watch more Gossip Girl; I find it rather entertaining how spoiled those kids are. And how the hell do they spend all their time drinking underage in a bar? Sometimes I feel like I'm looking into the life that Asher must believe he lives in. Plus, it is a little entertaining that I think Cal looks just like one of the characters.

I pull past her vehicle and into the garage. I hated leaving her this morning, but I needed to get a few things done before I sprung my idea of a few days away to Lexi. Something has been bothering her lately; I can sense it. She hasn't opened up about it, but I'm also not pushing her to talk. She has a lot on her shoulders at the moment, with the party quickly approaching, so it could very well just be the stress of that. This is a pretty big deal, and if there are a few things I've learned about Lexi over the past few months, instead of delegating the work, she likes to do it herself.

I grab my bag when I exit the car and make my way up the stairs to the kitchen. I find Lexi sitting at the island with her head down, staring into the wineglass she's swirling. When I drop my bag to the floor, she jumps and turns in my direction.

I had hoped that her face would have lit up when she saw me, but there's something written all over her face. I can tell that something isn't right, something different. I know how to make this better. Nothing a few days away back at the vineyard we went on our first date can't fix.

"Oh, Ben, it's just you." I narrow my eyes at her. Who else would it be? Was she expecting someone else?

I close the distance between us, and she spins around on the stool. I reach for her and pull her to me, pressing my lips against hers. Her body tenses and she hesitates for a split second before kissing me back. After a few minutes, I pull back and stare into her eyes. They are glazed over as if she's been crying. I cup her cheek, rubbing my thumb along her cheekbone, and she leans into my touch. I go to ask her what is wrong, but she cuts me off by crashing her lips to mine again, kissing me passionately. Her moans fill the kitchen when I suck on her bottom lip, bringing it between my teeth and licking the sting away. She grips my shirt in her fist, keeping me to her. Kissing now, talk later. I'll ask her to open up to me over dinner and tell her of my plans. I hate feeling like there are secrets she is keeping from me. No matter what's bothering her, I am always here for her.

"I need you," she whispers against my lips. I need her, too. I lift her in my arms and carry her to the bedroom, never losing contact. While every touch, every moment is meaningful between us, this feels different. A moment frozen in time.

I lay her on the bed and take my place, settling between her thighs. I reach behind my back and pull my shirt overhead as Lexi rakes her nails down my sculpted chest. I love the way she gets lost in her thoughts every time she stares at me.

I kiss her with everything I have and everything I am. She reaches for the button on my jeans and, once undone, slides her hands down to my cock before running her thumb over the tip, smearing the precum leaking out of it.

Once we're both entirely bare to each other, she wraps her arms underneath my arms, and I slowly slide into her. Her head falls back as I am fully seated in her. I take a moment to catch my breath at the immensity of this moment. I begin to move once our eyes connect. We don't speak the entire time I slide in and out of her but never lose eye contact either. This is so intimate. This woman consumes my soul—wow, could I sound any more pussy-whipped? But it's true. I never thought I could feel about someone the way I feel about her.

After her release, I follow right behind her.

Her eyes are still glassy as I slide out of her, and a slow tear runs down her eyes. I lean down to kiss it away.

I love you. Those three words are on the tip of my tongue, wanting to be screamed, but I don't want to ruin whatever this moment was.

I don't even remember falling asleep, but I was content just holding her in my arms that I guess I let sleep overtake me. I think about ordering in from her favorite takeout spot for dinner and maybe finishing the conversation that never happened earlier, first starting with what is on her mind, and hopefully ending with I love you.

I'm thankful I have no other plans for the night other than spending it with Lexi, preferably naked—watching movies, in the hot tub, in the shower, in the kitchen. This will be a stressful week for her leading up to the big event, so the least I can do is take her mind off it and help her relax. I roll over to find the spot next to me cold and empty. I press up on my forearms and look around.

“Lex?”

No response.

I roll back over to get out of bed. I reach for my boxers on the floor when something catches my eyes on the nightstand—a note. Next to the note is the necklace I gave her for her birthday, which also happened to be Valentine's Day—a heart-shaped amethyst at the center of a sterling silver infinity symbol with diamond accents on each side of the heart. As soon as I saw it, I knew that I had to buy it for her. I know how important the infinity symbol is to her.

What the hell? I sit up in bed and look around for any sign of her and come up empty.

I waste no time opening the note.

Is this what has been bothering her? I find the first thing I can reach, which happens to be the bedside lamp, and throw it against the wall. What the fuck?

I grab my jeans from the floor and quickly dress. I race over to Lexi's apartment, ignoring all speed limits and stop signs. Luckily, I make it to her place in one piece—physically, at least. On the entire drive over here, I replayed everything in my head: her actions, her words, the way she clung to me as she fell asleep in my arms. She knew she was going to leave me? My eyes are burning with tears I haven't shed.

My chest gets tighter and tighter, the higher the elevator to her floor.

I rush to her front door and knock profusely. My hand is balled in a fist, getting tighter and tighter with every pound against the door.

"Lexi! Lexi, baby, please open up," I plead. It feels like an eternity until the door whips open in a hurry.

"Lex—" However, to my disappointment, when the door opens, it's not Lexi's emerald eyes I'm met with but Hadley's blue ones. And for a moment, they look as sad as I feel, but she quickly blinks it away.

"Ben, what are you doing here?" Does she really not know?

"Where's Lexi?" I look around the apartment behind her for any sign that Lexi is here but come up empty.

"I don't know. She's not here. I thought she was at your place."

I run my hands through my hair as I spin around. She has to be here. Where else would

she go?

“Ben, you’re starting to scare me a little.” Hadley steps out into the hallway and closes the door further behind her. I want to push her out of the way and search the apartment, tearing it apart, searching for clues—anything to tell me why?

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:59 pm

“Lex?” I shout again. Hadley places her gentle hand on my chest, stopping me.

“Ben.” The tone of her voice tells me she at least understands exactly what is going on. I know she will be on her side and tell me whatever she needs to. There are no limits when it comes to her or Brynn protecting Lex—this situation I would to be no different.

“I just need to know she’s okay,” I plead, ready to drop to my knees and beg.

“I don’t know where she is.” She is blatantly lying to me.

“Hadley, please.” The tears I’ve been fighting to release finally fall, and I don’t bother wiping them away.

Tear filled eyes match my own. “Ben, I’m sorry. I think you should go.”

“I—” I almost admit for the second time that I’m in love with her, but it’s not Hadley I should be telling.

Hadley’s shoulders sag as she takes in my distraught appearance. “I know” is all she says before she walks back, giving my shoulder a gentle squeeze, and closes the door behind her.

I somehow leave the apartment in a total haze, feeling just as broken as I did the night I received the call alerting me of my parent’s accident.

* * *

I hear the front door close and hug the pillow tighter. I felt the heartbreak in his voice as he shouted my name. It was as if someone took a sledgehammer to the already shattered pieces of my heart.

I begin to cry again, a nonstop flow since I walked out of his house. Hadley pulls me into her arms. I rest my head in her lap as she strokes my hair in a gentle motherly manner. She has always been the one to take care of us in our group.

“Do you think I made a mistake?” I ask in between tears. I taste the salty liquid on my lips as I don’t even bother wiping them away anymore.

She remains silent and pauses her movement. I push up to look my best friend in the eye. Her blue eyes are undecided and questioning her next words.

“Had?” Her lack of speech makes me start to wonder.

“All I’m going to say is that you were with Dominic for three years, and I saw the aftermath of what that breakup did to you, and this—” She points to my current state. “—well, it was nothing compared to the heartbreak I’m witnessing right now. That has to mean something, right?”

Hadley is right, though; the pain I felt witnessing my relationship implode before my very eyes is nothing compared to the pain I feel right now. Ben and I may not have been together long, but he weaved his way through my veins and in my heart. A heart that will never feel complete.

But this isn’t just about me anymore. I don’t know the lengths or extremes Dominic is willing to go. If he went public with false accusations that I earned my career by anything other than my hard work, it would bring negative light to the company, tarnish the brand that Paul worked so hard to make, and would make success that much harder for Ben. Maritime Media was built on integrity. Everything it stands for

would be jeopardized. I can't let that happen.

Once was a coincidence, but twice falling in love with my boss—or in Dominic's case, related to—I get how it would look. The long hours, sleepless nights, and dedication to this company and making sure the job is done not only correctly, but well, would no longer matter. I would be ridiculed, forced to leave the company for my own good. No one would ever hire me. My career would be over. But if my relationship with Ben has taught me anything, it's that sometimes there is more to live than the perfect job. But can I manage seeing Ben every day and still do the job at hand?

I adjust, putting my head back into her lap before I let my tears consume me, and her words stay in the front of my mind as I finally drift off to sleep.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:59 pm

“Lexi, we need to talk,” Ben whispers while I’m standing at the coffee maker in the break room. It’s caffeine all day every day to beat the exhaustion. I barely sleep—craving his comfort, craving his touch. It’s taken everything I have within me not to run back to his arms, where I belong.

I have been timing my caffeine runs perfectly for when I know Ben is already occupied, but clearly, fate had a funny way of working just now.

A shadow envelops me as I am adding the last drop of creamer into my coffee. I don’t have to turn around to know that it’s Ben. I squeeze my eyes shut and pray that I can get back to my office in one piece. I know that if I see him, I will fall apart.

“Lexi, can we talk?”

I turn around, and my eyes avoid his gaze. There are still a few employees in the lounge, and the last thing we need is to cause a scene.

“I’m sorry, I’m busy. I have a lot of last-minute work I need to finalize before the big event. Unless it has to do with donations or place cards, I don’t have time for it.”

I try to brush past Ben, but he wraps his fingers around my arm gently. “Lex.” His voice is full of angst and hurt. Hurt that I put there. Hurt that I feel deep down in my soul. Don’t cry. You can’t let him see you cry.

I grab my arm from his grasp.

“Don’t,” I choke out and escape the small room. Surprisingly he doesn’t chase me,

not wanting to cause an even bigger scene. Before turning the corner, I glance over my shoulder to find Ben standing there, running his fingers through his hair, like I used to do. His eyes are full of defeat. As if he could sense me looking at him, his eyes lift, but I scurry away and close the door to my office. I relax against the wooden door and allow the tears to fall.

With every fallen drop, another shattered piece of my heart breaks.

Every knock on the door has my heart jumping, thinking that it's Ben for another face-off, but he never shows. I guess he has finally realized I don't want to talk.

* * *

I am currently drowning my sorrows in a pint of cookies-and-cream ice, cream watching my third episode of *The Originals* on Netflix, when I hear Hadley's bedroom door open and her footsteps down the hallway.

"Okay, that's it. Get your ass up. I've let you mope around for a week, now get up."

"Hadley, just leave me alone right now."

She stands in front of the television with her arms crossed. She makes a better door than a window because she blocks my view of the Mickaelson brothers on the screen.

"No."

"I don't feel like going anywhere." I sulk further into the couch.

"Well, tough shit. Come on; I let you have your time, and now it's time to get back up. Don't make me kick your ass."

She lifts her fists to her face as if she's ready to throw a punch, in two-inch stilettos. I can't hold back my laughter, but then her stance reminds me of how much Ben loved the Rock movies and when he forced me to watch a marathon the other week. The smile fades from my face, and I choke on the tears threatening to spill. I don't even remember feeling this broken when Dominic and I split up.

"Will this ever get easier?" I set the ice cream down on the table.

Hadley takes a seat next to me on the couch, straightening out her romper.

"Lex, I promise it will get easier. Okay? Let's just go out and get some fresh air. We don't have to stay late—just a change of scenery. What do you say?"

A change of scenery? Looking like this? I have only been to the office and back home—and, of course, stopping along at the liquor store to pick up more wine.

"There's no getting rid of you until I agree, is there?"

I look up at her, and she is grinning widely. "Nope. I would then be betraying my duty as a best friend. So come on." She stands and pulls me reluctantly to my feet. "Let's go get you hot." She spans my ass and shoves me toward my room.

As much as I hate to admit it, Hadley is right. I need to get out. I need to move on. But how do I move on when Ben still holds all of the pieces of my heart?

"Now you go shower." She all but pushes me into the bathroom.

"Are you going to watch me shower?"

She checks her reflection in the mirror before leaning against the counter with her arms crossed.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:59 pm

“Are you going to tell me that you’re going to shower and turn the shower on but in reality, as soon as I leave, you’ll either barricade yourself in your room, refusing to come out, or bolt from the apartment?”

They both sound like good plans, but damnit, why didn’t I think of them first. No matter what I say, Hadley will most likely be camped outside the bathroom door till I’m done.

“I’m going to shower,” I say, slowly avoiding my reflection in the mirror because I know I look rough. Enough to scare even Freddy Krueger away.

“Promise?” She places her hands on my upper arms, spinning me around to face her.

“I promise.” I hold my pinky out in front of me and lace hers with mine. We interlock pinkies and laugh. “That was too weird. That was such a Brynn and Cal thing to do.”

“Okay, I’ll leave you to shower. I’m going to finish getting ready. Knock on my door when you’re ready.”

“Yes, Mom,” I joke, pushing her out of the room.

I quickly shower and wrap my hair in a towel along with my body. One of my favorite things about this apartment, besides sharing it with my best friend, is the closet. It is hands down the best thing ever. I search my closet for something to wear. My heart hurts as I pass the dress I wore at the office holiday party where Ben and I got together and the outfit from the night we met. I push them to the back of the closet. Maybe it’s time to go shopping for a new wardrobe. Finally, I settle on a white

lace-overlay dress and a black biker jacket with black booties.

With my hair curled and makeup done, I grab my phone, keys, and a black clutch. I knock on Hadley's bedroom door, and she swings the door open, wearing an entirely different outfit than earlier. I'm not surprised. Hadley is the type of person to try on multiple outfits for an event before deciding on the right outfit. She's now wearing dark skinny jeans, black boots, and a purple sparkly top. Long necklaces of assorted sizes are laced down her neck. I lift a few strands with my finger.

"Umm, excuse me, I'm pretty sure those are mine."

She shrugs, closing her door and locking it. "Yeah, well, it's taken you what, five years for you even to notice, so I'm keeping them." She loops her arm through mine, and we make our way to the elevator. "I called an Uber while getting ready."

"Where we headed?" I ask as the elevator dings on the main floor.

"I was thinking of Eiffel Park." I stop in my tracks. When she realizes I stopped walking, she spins to face me. The color has left my face, and then it hits her why I hesitated.

"Oh shit, I'm sorry, Lex. We don't need to go there."

Would I ever be able to go there again and not think about Ben? Not think about the first moment I felt his hands on me, the first moment his lips touched mine, or the first moment he gave me a mind-blowing orgasm? But more than that, I fell in love with a man who I can never have.

"No, let's go. I want to dance." Dancing sounds like the perfect way to escape my head.

Two hours and an endless number of tequila shots later, Hadley took a break on the dance floor and is now standing by the bar while I remain on the dance floor. I see her looking in my clutch but blow it off when I feel hands grip my waist and pull me against a hard chest.

His hands don't feel anything like Ben's, his scent smells nothing like him, and I welcome the difference. I let the tequila flow through my veins and the music flow through my soul while allowing myself to get lost in his touch.

At least for one night, I can feel something other than heartache.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:59 pm

I try to drown myself in work, but everywhere I go, I'm reminded of her. In the office, I see her around, but even if my door is closed, I remember the times I took her on my desk or against the window. Here at home, I think of the times I held her in my arms in my bed or we laughed while cooking in the kitchen.

"The End" by Kings of Leon, my favorite band, plays in the background while I stare at a blank screen on my computer.

My brother strolls into the office, dressed clearly, ready to go out.

"Still moping around, I see. I don't know how you listen to this depressing shit." He takes a seat across from me and crosses his right ankle over his left knee.

"Fuck off, Asher." I'm not in the mood for conversation.

"You two haven't worked it out yet?"

"Do you see her around here anywhere?" I wave my hand around to the room, where clearly it was just me before he interrupted me.

"Wow, what the fuck happened?"

I lean back in my chair, scrubbing my hands over my face, exhaling loudly. "I wish I knew." I replay the events of that day over in my mind and explain them and the days since to Asher.

His brows scrunch as if he is deep in thought.

“Look, I don’t know if this has anything to do with anything, but that day, I had a friend meet me here. I was running late and gave him the code to get in.” He what? “When I got home, he was walking down the hallway. He had said that he was just using the bathroom, but I don’t know.”

“Who the fuck is this friend? You didn’t think to mention this before?” I don’t mean to raise my voice, but shit like this could have been important.

“Dominic Jennings.”

Jennings? As in Paul Jennings?

What does he have to do with Lexi?

As if the devil himself beckoned her, my phone lights up with Lexi’s name.

“Lexi once tried to warn—” I hold up my hand, cutting him off while I find the strength to read the message.

Lexi:She needs you.

Who needs me? Is she drunk? “The fuck,” I mutter softly.

I stare at her text for a few moments before I muster the strength to hit Send on her contact instead of responding. Someone picks up right away; however, I have to pull the phone back for a second with the loud background noise.

“Hello,” a soft voice says over the phone. Even though I am looking anywhere but at him, I can feel Asher’s scrutinizing and concerned gaze on me.

“Lex? Are you okay? Where are you?” I place my forefinger in my other ear, trying

to hear her talk.

“Ben.” Wait, this isn’t Lexi’s voice. I begin to panic. Did something happen to her?

“Ben? It’s Hadley.”

Why is Hadley calling me on Lexi’s phone?

“Ben?” my brother tries to cut in. I hold up my hand to him so that I can hear Hadley.

“Hadley, where’s Lexi? What’s going on,” I demand. She’s starting to scare me.

“Hold on,” she shouts into the phone. “Let me go someplace quieter.” The background noise grows distant.

“Are... are you still there, Ben?”

I exhale and run my hand over my face. “Yeah, I’m still here. What’s going on? Is Lexi okay?”

“Lexi’s a mess. Ben, sheneedsyou.” Even with everything that happened between us, I hear the desperation in Hadley’s voice. For her own best friend to reach out to me, I have to take that as something. I get up from my desk and leave the office with my brother on my heels.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:59 pm

“Hadley, where are you?”

“Eiffel Park.” I stop in my tracks and close my eyes—of all places, back to the scene of the crime.

I grab my keys off the counter and race down the stairs to the garage.

I open the car door when I see my brother doing the same on the passenger side.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

“I’m going with you. You look extremely distracted, and honestly, I’m a little concerned about you.”

My brows shoot up, insinuating he’s never been concerned about me.

“I thought you were going out?”

He shrugs. “Plans change. Now, are we going or not?”

He’s right. I need to stop stalling and rescue my girl. Back to where it all began we go.

Twenty minutes later, we’re pulling my car up to the front of the club. On the ride over, Asher explained that Lexi had confronted him and tried to warn him that Dominic Jennings was a bad person, but that he brushed her off. Is it possible all of this is connected?

A valet out front tries to stop me. “I’ll be just a minute.”

The young boy hesitates, and Asher comes to the rescue at my side, reaching into his wallet and grabbing a hundred-dollar bill. “Go, I’ve got this.”

I place my hand on his arm. “Thank you; I’ll be right back.”

I race into the club in search of Lexi and Hadley. I find Hadley standing over by the bar, her eyes focused on something on the dance floor. When I approach her, I graze my fingers on her arm to get her attention, causing her to jump.

“Oh, Ben, thank God. I didn’t know what else to do. She’s...” She holds her arm out where she was just staring at on the dance floor, and my blood begins to boil. She’s pressed up against some random guy, dancing, just like the night we met. I can tell she is intoxicated by how her eyes are shut, and she is swaying side to side. I need to get her out of here.

“Come on.” I follow Hadley out to where she stands.

“Lexi, I think it’s time to go,” Hadley shouts over the loud music. Lexi shakes her head no at first.

“I’m fine. You can go,” she retorts. “You wanted me to have fun, so now I’m having fun.” Her hands tighten around the douchebag’s whom she is dancing with.

Lexi finally notices me standing behind Hadley. “What are you doing here?”

“Lexi.” My tone is firm. I wrap my fingers around her slender arm and pull her toward me. As I suspected, she is so drunk she flies right into my hard chest.

“Ooof.” She laughs and pushes off my chest, but I hold on to her tight. Fuck, I have missed her so much. Now is not the time.

“Ben, just leave.”

“No.”

“Hey, buddy, I believe she told you to leave,” the jackass that was just grinding all on her says from beside me.

I turn and stare at him, leaning closer. “Why don’t you back off before I make you. She’s already spoken for,” I growl. Luckily, he takes the hint quickly. I do not feel like getting into a fight tonight, but if it weren’t for her, I wouldn’t hesitate.

“Lexi, come on, let’s leave,” Hadley begs.

Lexi looks between her best friend and me before her shoulders sag in defeat. She takes a step to walk away from us but begins to fall. I reach out and catch her, then wrap my arms under her knees and lift her. Her head rests in the crook of my neck. The way she clings to me is everything I need to know but leaves me more confused than ever. Her body is telling me one thing, but her mouth is saying another.

Hadley and I make our way through the crowd to the door.

Once outside, I find Asher leaning against the passenger side of the car looking down on his phone.

“Asher,” I call out, and he looks up from his phone. I nod for him to open the passenger door for me, and he obliges before stepping to the side.

Page 61

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:59 pm

I gently place Lexi in the passenger seat and brush a stray tendril of hair away from her face. Her eyes are already closed. What did you get yourself into, babygirl? It doesn't matter that she walked away; she's still mine.

Hadley comes up from behind and hands me Lexi's bag. I set it on her lap and shut the door. "Thank you for coming, Ben. Seriously."

"Thank you for calling. I'll look after her, I promise. Do you need a ride somewhere?"

"No, I can just call an Uber." She wraps her arms around her waist, unsure of herself.

"I'll make sure she gets home safely," Asher adds, stepping up beside her. "Hi, I'm Asher Harrington." He extends his hand to her, and she takes it in hers.

"Hadley Kincaid."

"Yeah, sure, Asher, no funny business. Make sure she actually gets home, okay?" My tone is stern, hoping he actually understands what I am saying. The last thing we need is for him hooking up with Lexi's best friend.

"Jeez, Ben, have a little faith in me, and get your girl home."

"I'll be fine, Ben. Thank you," Hadley reassures me.

I nod and go to walk around to the driver's side, but Hadley grabs my arm, stopping me. "Lexi has been hurt enough. Her ex, he was not a good man. She's falling for

you, even if she won't admit it. If you don't catch her..." She pauses. "Well, let's just say that Brynn, Cal, and I will all gladly kick your ass."

Once inside the car, I double-check that Lexi is safely buckled and head back to my place. Hadley's words play over in my head the entire ride. Every so often, I glance over at Lexi. She is out cold.

I park in the garage and scoop her gently in my arms. I make sure not to jostle her too much as I take the stairs. I carry her down the hallway to my bedroom when she finally starts to stir. She nuzzles her head into my neck and inhales.

"Ben."

"Yeah, baby, I'm here."

"I love you." She says it so softly that if there had been other noises throughout the house, I might not have heard it. I freeze. This is the first time she has ever said those words. I know that Hadley said that she was falling, but she just said those three words that I've been begging to hear from her lips.

"Lex? Lex?" I look down and see that she's passed out again.

I gently lay her down on the bed and slide her boots off. I lean over and press my lips to her forehead, lingering a moment longer.

I pull back and back up into the chair in the corner of the room and watch her sleep. I hoped sleep would eventually overtake me; instead, the words "I love you" in Lexi's soft voice play over and over all night long.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:59 pm

Light creeps in through the window, and even with my eyes closed, it is blinding. The worst case of cottonmouth in the history of hangovers is currently taking residence in my mouth. “Hadley, I’m never listening to you again.” I don’t even remember how we got home last night. I groan as I roll over, stretching. When I put my face into the pillow, a familiar scene assaults me, and I realize I’m not in my bed or Hadley’s.

Ben.

I turn over and sit up quickly. I find Ben sitting in a chair with his head resting in his hands. He looks a wreck—just like how I feel.

He finally looks up as if he could sense me staring at him, and his sad eyes meet mine. I swallow thickly. “Do you feel better about yourself,” he asks.

I run my hands through my knotty rat’s nest of hair. “No.” One simple word is all I can manage. How did I get here?

“Lex, you said something last night.” I did? I try to put the piece of last night together. Hadley forcing me off the couch to go out. Shots. Dancing. Ben.

“I don’t get you, Alexis Baker.” The use of my full name stings a little—so formal but also brings an even bitter taste to my mouth, reminding me of Dominic doing the same. “We promised one night. That was it. But then you made your way into my heart, and then you crushed it.”

Tears pool in my eyes. I pull my knees into my chest. “You can have any woman you want out there—don’t waste your time on me. Just like you said, we promised one

night.” I hide my face in my hands to hide the tears falling.

Ben is off the chair so fast I worry I might have gotten whiplash as he pulls my hands down and cups my cheeks. He brushes away the fallen tears with his thumbs.

“I don’t want any other woman out there, Lex. I want you. Don’t you get that? You’ve ruined me for anyone else.” He swallows deeply and glances down at the sheets before his glossy eyes meet mine again. The emotional tension in this room is so thick that I am struggling for air. “Lexi Baker, I love you. I love you so much, baby. Please talk to me and tell me what happened to make you walk away from me, away from us. We can fix this. You and me. With your hand in mine”—he links our fingers together—“we can take on the world.” He presses his forehead to mine. I inhale his scent along with the mintiness of his breath.

He loves me? The words are right on the tip of my tongue, screaming at me to say them. Just say it, Lexi, tell Ben you feel the same. Tell him everything.

“Ben.”

He presses his lips against mine in a searing kiss. One just like the night we met, and it burns me alive. His tongue forces its way into my mouth, and I welcome the intrusion, catching it with my own.

He guides me back against the pillows, settling between my legs.

In between kisses, I catch my breath. “Ben,” I manage to get out as his lips trail kisses along my jaw and collarbone.

“Ben. I... I...” He pauses, and his eyes meet mine. I cup his cheeks and pull him to me. “Bentley Michael Harrington, I love you with everything I have and everything I am.”

He pulls me into his lap. “I’ve never heard more perfect words out of your mouth.” He brushes the fallen hairs out of my face. With one last peck, he wraps his arms around me and holds me. I cling to him for dear life, afraid this moment will slip away.

“Lex, I need you to tell me why you walked away.”

I shake my head. “I can’t.”

“Baby, I can’t do this without you. I need you to talk to me.” I chew on the inside of my lip before pulling my lower lip between my teeth. Using his thumb, Ben pulls it free from my grasp. “No matter what it is.” He takes out joined hands and presses kisses along my knuckles. “It’s you and me.”

I nod. It’s time to tell Ben everything. It won’t change anything, though. Sometimes love isn’t enough.

“I was hired right out of college at Maritime. Paul said that even though I didn’t have the work experience, he saw something in me. On my first day, I met someone.”

“Dominic,” Ben says. How does he know? I nod to confirm.

“We fell in love and eventually moved in together.”

Ben listens to my every word and holds me tighter while I explain our downfall.

When he grumbles a few “that motherfucker,” I soothe him, running my hands down his back in small circles.

“But what does he have to do with us now?”

“It seems as though Paul had always planned to leave Dominic the company when he retired one day, that is until he changed his mind after watching his actions that led to our breakup and after. Dominic acted out and when he learned the new buyer was you, he did research. He befriended Asher in a way to get to you. However, better ammunition was put in his path when he discovered that we were dating. He no longer had his eyes set on you, but on me.”

“So, your ex has been hanging out with my brother this whole time.”

I slide off Ben’s lap, needing the space, but he doesn’t let me go far by pulling me to his side and holding my hand, needing to know that I’m not leaving.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:59 pm

“It seems so.” I look down at my lap before continuing, explaining what happened with my confrontation with Dominic.

Ben jumps off the bed, pacing back and forth. He runs his fingers through his hair, tugging on the ends, leaving it in further disarray than it was. “He was in this house. He was in this room... with you. What the fuck is wrong with my brother for being his friend.”

“Stop.” I slide to the edge of the bed and grab for his arm. “This isn’t his fault. It’s all mine.”

“What?” he screeches. “No way this is any of your fault.”

I look away, ashamed of everything that has brought us to this moment. Had I told Ben from the beginning about my past, could all of this have been avoided?

“Lexi, whatever assumptions you have in your head, stop thinking it. None of this is your fault. Dominic is fucked-up in the head if he thinks I’m going to let him get away with this. I’m going to take that motherfucker down.”

“Ben, I can’t let you do that.”

“You’re not letting me do anything. I’m an adult, Lex, and a man. I protect those I love. And as we’ve already put it out there, I love you. Don’t you get it? There is nothing I won’t do for you, and if that means giving all of this up, I would.”

“No,” I plead. “I don’t deserve you.”

Stepping up in front of me, Ben pulls me against his chest. He draws my attention to his face by cupping my cheeks in his strong hands. “You deserve everything. I love you. I will fix this. You are mine.”

I get lost, staring into his eyes.

“I want to hear you say it.”

“Say what?”

“Say you’re mine and that you love me.”

“Ben, I—”

He presses his finger to my lips. “I only want to hear you say those words. Everything else just leave to me. Okay?”

I hesitate, so he chooses to help entice me by closing the distance between us. When his lips touch mine, the fireworks erupt, reminding me just how much I love this man. “I’m yours. I love you,” I breathe against his lips.

“I will fix this, baby, I promise” are the last words I hear before getting lost in his kiss once again.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:59 pm

It took everything in me not to walk right out of the room and find Dominic and kill him. Well, not kill him because that would definitely keep me away from Lexi with me being in jail, but I would definitely beat the shit out of him. An awkward conversation with my brother took place.

I had to carefully plan his takedown—one that keeps him away for good.

For the past week, I've forced Lexi to focus on preparing the Best Of party to keep her mind off everything. I should be there now; the party starts in just under two hours, but I needed to take care of this first.

"Excuse me, but you can't just barge in here." I ignore the annoying voice of the bleach-blonde female yelling to stop me.

I push open the door of Dominic's office at Burke, Wilson, and Talbot. The knob slams into the wall with a loud clunk. I find him sitting at his desk as if he owns the place, feet perched up, leaning back in his chair, and phone receiver glued to his ear.

"I'm sorry, Harvey, I'm going to need to call you back."

He hangs up the phone and rises from his chair, buttoning his suit coat.

"Bentley Harrington. To what do I owe you the pleasure of this visit?"

"You know what the fuck I'm doing here," I say through gritted teeth. I had planned to keep my cool, but watching him come around the front of his desk, sitting on the edge with both his ankles and arms crossed as if this is a pleasant everyday

occurrence, has my blood boiling.

“Dominic, do you need me to call security?” the secretary asks from the doorway.

“No, Missy, that won’t be necessary. Leave us.” He dismisses her with just a wave. “I figured it was only a matter of time before you came sniffing around here. Come to discuss what it’s like with my sloppy seconds. Or maybe you’d rather have a go at my secretary there. I preferred her over Lexi as well.”

I grind my teeth so hard I may have cracked a molar with my jaw so taut.

I step up to him, gripping his collar in my hands. “Leave Lexi the fuck alone. I swear to God, if you come anywhere near her, me, my family, or my company, I will end you.”

My grip on him tightens as he laughs sinisterly. Does he think I’m joking? I will do anything I have to to protect my family especially from scumbags like him.

“You think I’m scared of your threats? It’s quite perfect, my plan. See, in the beginning I thought having that company would bring me great joy. But all it will take is one little press conference, and I will get to ruin it all, including your precious Lexi.”

Nothing is more satisfying than the sound of my fist hitting Dominic’s face. The crunch of bone breaking and blood splattering. Days of frustration at the world rolled into one justifiable punch. Dominic falls back on his desk, causing a loud banging noise of objects shuffling to the floor.

“You asshole,” Dominic shouts as he wipes the blood dripping from his face. “I’ll have your ass out on the street,” he barks.

“No, you won’t.” The shadow that appears in the doorway is none other than the previous owner of my company, Paul Jennings.

I placed a call to him earlier this week, alerting him of his son’s indiscretions. He was utterly mortified and promised to return from Florida, where he and his wife had retired, to deal with him. However, I couldn’t just sit back and let him do it on his own. Like I told Lexi, I will do anything I can to protect the ones I love.

“Thank you for the call.” Paul shakes my hand. “I believe you have a party to get to, and a girl to claim.” That I do.

He then turns to his son, who is finally collecting himself up off his desk. “As for you, you proved my point. You’re acting like a spoiled child and a pathetic excuse for a man, willing to tear others down because you’re so unhappy with yourself. Your actions have consequences, Dominic. I’ve already spoken to Jason Burke about your actions, and you should pack your shit. You’re no longer employed here.”

With one last look over my shoulder, Dominic begins arguing with his father. I’ve wasted enough time on this sorry excuse for a person. How Lexi could fall for someone that conniving, I will never know, but now it’s time for me to get my girl—before she has my ass for being late.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:59 pm

The past few days have been a clusterfuck of events all leading up to tonight. Today has been nonstop chaos: checking in vendors, showing the winning restaurants where to set up, and trying not to lose my mind. I had about ten minutes to change in the bathroom stall, where I nearly dropped my phone in the toilet. I'd love to say that I am relaxed now that the party has begun, but that would be the biggest lie of the century, especially since I've been running around the ballroom searching for Ben, and he is nowhere. In fact, I haven't seen him all day.

Things have gotten better between us, but since I've been slammed at work preparing gift bags and programs, working late into the evening, we haven't spent much time outside of the office. I haven't heard from Dominic since our confrontation, and I don't know if that should be a good thing or not. Ben told me to trust that he would take care of it, so that's what I'm doing—trusting him. However, the closer we get to his speech and him missing, I'm ready to wring his neck.

Where the fuck are you?

I call his phone once again. "Hi, you've reached Ben..." I hang up, not bothering to leave another message.

"Lex, this looks amazing," Hadley says as I pull her into a hug before doing the same with Brynn and Cal.

"I'm glad you guys could make it," I greet my friends, but my focus is set on looking around the room.

"What's wrong?" Hadley grabs my arms to steady me. I love that she can read me so

well.

I settle the clipboards in my hand against my hip the same I would holding a child. “I don’t even know where to begin. I’m exhausted, the party has only just begun, and oh, I don’t know, Ben is nowhere to be found, and he’s supposed to give his welcome speech in—” I check my phone for the time. “—in just a few minutes.”

“Lex, relax. We just saw Ben at the bar.” Cal wraps his arm around my shoulders and pulls me into his side. He nods in the direction of one of the bars, and I find Ben leaning against the bar with his ankles crossed. I sink into Cal a little bit, knowing that he is here, but still angry at his tardiness. He better have a damn good excuse for not at least giving me any sort of heads-up that he apparently had prior commitments on one of the biggest events of my career let alone his company’s.

“Will you excuse me?” I don’t wait for their answer before I head toward the bar.

Ben catches me walking in his direction, and I see the corners of his lips turn upward while mine stay the same.

“Lexi.” His eyes roam over my dress. No, not even the smirk on his lips can calm me down at the moment. “You know Tom Callahan, our VIP sponsor.” Yes, even after the abrupt-ending phone call, we were able to latch Tom on as our VIP sponsor.

I turn to the older gentleman. “Yes, of course, lovely to see you again, sir.”

“Quite the event planner you have here, Harrington.”

“Yes, I plan to keep her around forever.” Ben beams. I don’t miss the double meaning in Ben’s words.

“Sorry to interrupt you both, but I need to get Ben ready for his speech.” I give a

smile, but I hope Ben can tell from the tone that I'm not irritated at the moment. When I look down, I notice small bruises on his knuckles. Ben, what have you been up to?

"Yes, of course," Tom replies and shakes Ben's hand.

"Have a great night, Tom," Ben calls as I lead him toward the podium.

"Are you fucking kidding me right now?" I whisper so that no one can hear us but loud and firm enough for Ben to.

Instead of turning right toward the front of the room, Ben tugs on my arm.

"Where are we going? You need to give a speech."

"And I'm about to, but I needed to do this first."

Ben hovers his mouth above mine and kisses me, devouring me. His tongue brushes my bottom lip, and when I open, he caresses my tongue with his. When I feel him pull away, it takes a second for me to catch my bearings. My eyes fly open to find Ben smiling down at me.

"You look gorgeous by the way," he whispers in my ear before heading toward the podium just as John, the operations publisher, announces Ben's name.

I run my thumb over my lips.

"That was hot as hell." I jump at Brynn's voice and turn to find all three of them staring at me.

Ben has never done that—kiss me in public like that.

“I guess you two worked things out?” Hadley questions, and I’m not sure how to respond. Thankfully, Ben begins to talk, saving me from that conversation.

“Good evening, everyone. First of all, let me thank you all for joining us to celebrate the Best of Willow Creek.” Ben looks so comfortable with public speaking. His black tux conforms to every muscle. “I will keep this short and sweet, as I know there is plenty of excellent restaurants here sampling their food and a wonderful assortment of vendors who have all donated some fabulous prizes for our silent auction.

“I’d also like to thank my staff, who has welcomed me with open arms the past few months.” Ben finds me in the crowd and gives a soft smile. “Without them, we wouldn’t be able to put on this event. It’s not also on them, but without you—our readers—we would not be able to do this as well. Your support is what brings out the best in us. One employee, in particular, needs significant recognition for her hard work putting this event together—Lexi Baker, our events director.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:59 pm

The crowd applauds, and my friends throw in a few screams. My cheeks flush in embarrassment, and I want to hide behind my clipboard.

“What is he doing?” Hadley leans over, whispering in my ear. I shrug and shake my head because, honestly, I have no clue where he’s going with this.

“Without her, this party would not be what it is today. I watched the countless hours she spent preparing every little detail to be perfect. Lexi is not only important to this company, but she is important to me. I am sure you’re wondering where I’m going with this, and I promise you I’m not crazy. I also promise that I’m almost done and will let you all get back to enjoying yourselves, but I needed the world to know that I am head over heels in love with Lexi Baker, and as long as she will still have me, I am hers for the taking. Have a good evening.”

I can feel everyone’s eyes on me, and I feel the sweat dripping down my back from nerves. Ben Harrington, the CEO of Maritime Media, just announced in front of most of the town that he’s in love with me.

“What the hell are you doing still standing here, Lex, go get your man,” Hadley more or less shouts.

I push through the crowd, making my way to the podium, and end up meeting Ben halfway, where I jump directly into his arms, slamming my mouth onto his.

We ignore the hoots and the hollers around us. All that matters is that he is mine, and I am his.

“What about Dominic and his threats?” I ask when we break the kiss.

Ben brushes the hair out of my face, peppering kissing to my forehead as he sets me back down on my feet. “He won’t be a problem anymore, to anyone. I took care of it. I told you, Lex, it’s you and me against the world.”

I like the sound of that. “Promise?” I press up on my toes, our mouths so close, I can feel his breath on my skin, sending goose bumps all over my body.

“Promise.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:59 pm

“I can’t believe we’re celebrating your engagement on the rooftop of the downtown Hilton. Like seriously, Lex, your fiancé rented out an entire roof bar.” Hadley passes out glasses of champagne from the waiter to Brynn and me, before taking one for herself. “We sure have come a long way from ramen noodle cups in the college dorm.”

I wince, making a funny face; those weren’t necessarily our finest moments. While Brynn and Cal both came from the upper class, they wanted the full college experience or a so-called “normal life,” so Hadley and I went all out to provide it for them by eating ramen noodles weekly.

“I know. I told Ben that it was too much, but he insisted.” I shrug. I don’t need all these fancy events, I just need him, but the food, the view, and the company are spectacular. Ben outdid himself when planning this. I glance over my shoulder and see him speaking to a few of his college buddies and Cal.

“That man is a keeper; you better hold on to him.” Brynn holds her glass up, and Hadley and I do the same, our glasses letting out a soft clinking noise as they touch.

“Oh, I plan to.” When I bring the glass to my lips, the bubbles tickle my nose.

“Don’t look now, but someone seems to have a target on her,” Brynn whispers, her eyes trained on something in front of her.

Hadley and I turn to see Asher leaning against the bar with black dress pants and a white button-up shirt with the top two buttons undone. His dark hair is now cropped around his face, resembling his older brother more and more. His eyes, however, are

trained directly on Hadley. My eyes flick back and forth between the two, using my peripheral vision so that I don't make it obvious what I'm doing.

"Will you two excuse me? I'll be right back." Hadley excuses herself before we can even respond and makes her way over to the bar, but halfway there places her empty glass on a waitress's tray and takes a fresh drink from them.

Brynn and I share a confused look as we watch her approach the bar to his left, her stance mimicking his. He turns to face her and leans down to whisper something in her ear.

"What in the actual fuck are we witnessing," Brynn questions, and I shake my head because I have no idea.

Moments later, Hadley strolls back up with a smile on her face.

"What was that about?" I raise my eyebrows, wondering if there is something my best friend isn't telling me.

She shrugs and glances over her shoulder at Asher, who smirks at us before turning his back to us as he orders another drink from the bartender. "It's nothing." The look in her eye, though, tells me that it very well might be something, but I don't push it.

Changing the subject, my best friend does what she does best—avoidance. "Now, let me see that gorgeous ring on your finger again." Her smile matches my own.

I raise my left hand, flashing the 1.02 carat Tiffany setting engagement ring with a channel-set diamond band.

"Damn." Hadley grabs my hand with such a force that I need to catch my balance as she and Brynn examine the ring for what feels like the millionth time. "That man did

good, even if he didn't let me help."

"Why thank you. I'd like to think I know exactly what my girl wants," a husky voice answers. I feel Ben's presence as he steps up behind me and pulls my back firmly against his front. He places a soft kiss where my neck and shoulder meet, and his breath trails up my neck as he reaches my ear. "Miss me?" he softly whispers.

"Of course. I always miss you when you're gone." I spin in his arms. With my free hand, I wrap it around his neck, while the other holds my almost empty champagne glass. I tip the glass back, downing the rest of the liquid.

As soon as I bring the glass away from my lips, his lips are crashing onto mine. With a swipe of his tongue on my lower lip, I open for him and deepen the kiss. When we break apart, I feel flushed, and I'm not sure if it's the champagne or my arousal.

"You two should just get a room," Cal jokes behind me as he joins our small circle. Bentley Harrington is all I see.

"Well, if you all excuse me, I did come over here to steal my fiancée away for a few minutes. We have some important business to take care of."

"Business?" I mouth, confused. He links his hands with mine and places his lips against the skin on my knuckles. I visibly shiver, and I know Ben noticed when a smirk appears on his handsome face.

I hear Cal say, "I was just kidding," as we pass by, leaving my friends behind. Ben takes my empty champagne glass from my hand and sets it on the server's tray.

"Are we seriously already leaving our engagement party?"

Ben chuckles as he continues to pull me through the crowd. "Oh no, I just want to

spend some quality time with my fiancée.” He glances over at me and winks, and that sends shock waves straight to my core.

“Where are we going?”

“You’ll see.” Ben opens the door that leads to the inside of the hotel and takes a sharp left. The elevators are the opposite way, so I am left confused. With his hand pressed against my lower back, he leads me down another hallway. Where the hell is he taking me?

When he stops in front of a door, I read the sign: Restrooms.

“Are you serious right now?”

“As a heart attack.” He opens the door and pulls me inside. With the click of the lock, Ben has me caged in against the door.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:59 pm

“What are you doing?” I ask as Ben trails his tongue over my pulse point and down my collarbone.

“I’m about to make my girl come. Do you have any problems with that?” His hand dragging up my thighs, hooking one of them around his hip. He pushes my panties to the side.

“In the middle of our engagement party?” I somehow muster the strength and words to ask as my head rests against the door, and my eyes shut.

“I figured it was appropriate since a bathroom was where our love story all began.”

My eyes pop open to find Ben so close I can taste the whiskey on his breath. He is laughing. “So romantic. Can’t wait to tell our kids that story one day.”

“Sounds good to me.” Ben plunges his fingers in and out of me, and I grip his dress shirt so tightly that I might even tear a hole in it. It would be worth it, though.

When I come down from my orgasmic high, I open my eyes to see Ben’s brown eyes staring at me. “What?” I adjust my dress and my panties.

“Nothing. You’re just so beautiful, especially when I watch you fall apart like that.” He steps up to me and brushes the fallen hair from my face. “That night we first met, I knew that you ruined me for all other women, and I promise to love you forever.”

THE END