







# The Billionaire and the Nanny: Part 2

**Author:** *Paige North*

**Category:** Erotic, Romance, Billionaire Romance, Adult

**Description:** The only woman I'm not allowed to f\*ck is living in my house, taking care of my baby...

Zayden

I never wanted to be a father. Never. Then I find out I have to take care of a baby I didn't even know existed...but I won't let it change my life. This baby is nothing but a small blip on my radar. But the nanny...f\*ck, she's hot. And according to her resume, she loves "learning new things." If there's any reason to keep the baby longer than necessary, it's to make sure I see her voluptuous body every day.

The fact that Bailey's more gorgeous than she even realizes, that she looked like a deer in the headlights when I stared her down at her interview, makes my c\*ck twitch. She doesn't even realize her own beauty which is sexy...as...hell. She drives me insane with that innocent, sexy look. No one ever talks to me like the way she talks to me. No one ever challenges me. No one ever looks so f\*cking hot while doing it either. I tell myself it's just infatuation. I can't get involved with her, I know that much. I only want to taste her. And I'm pretty sure she wants to taste me, too. A pretty little thing like her is too good to pass up, especially with that bite of spunkiness in her.

Before long she's mine, her ripe young body responding to my every touch, my every kiss, my every thrust. But the more time I spend with her, the more real it becomes. And the more I see her with the baby, the more I start to think that maybe we could be a real family.

But that's impossible. Isn't it?

Bailey

Together. Me and the billionaire. Sharing this mansion. With his bedroom just down the hall from mine. He's the boss from hell, expecting me to keep the baby quiet at all times. When I explain to him that babies cry, he becomes incensed.

"You have a mouth on you, Miss Rainville, and I have better uses for it."

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:02 am*

Bailey

The big day is here—my first interview as a prospective nanny.

I finally arrive at the law office on the sixteenth floor of this towering Manhattan skyscraper and have to take a deep breath before pushing the door open.

Why is my interview at a law office anyway? From what I've gathered, most nanny interviews are handled at the household...or a coffee shop, at the very least.

As I enter the lobby, several other women all look up at me. It's clear we're here for the same job. The wealthy clients of Le Nanny (the agency who I am affiliated with) can be notoriously picky. So it isn't a given that I will simply walk in the door and snag this cushy gig.

I'm going to have to somehow impress this client, despite the fact that I surely have less experience than all of my competition. My stomach does a flip and I feel sweat break out on my forehead.

Shit. This isn't going to be easy, is it?

But then again, nothing in New York City is easy. If I wanted easy, I could have stayed back in my tiny little town in Ohio and played it safe. No, I'm here to make a go of it in The Big Apple, and I'm not going to let a little competition scare me off.

I give the receptionist my name, take a seat, and pull out my iPad to pretend to read. Truth is, I'm too nervous to focus on any words. I really need this job. For myself, to

prove I can make it in this city, but also to learn, get my feet wet in the world of children and childcare since I don't have much experience.

I haven't received any info about the person hiring, though. The job could be about caring for school aged kids, teens, or it could be for triplets, for all I know. Triplets with powerful vocal chords. All I know is that there's a lot of money involved. I just hope the family is nice and that they want me, despite the fact that I've never done this job before.

After a minute, one of the other girls gets called in, even though I'm on time for my appointment. Clearly, they're running late.

Logging onto the guest wi-fi, I browse articles about self-confidence during interviews. Any last-minute tips would be great. I don't get to read more than three paragraphs of one article when the first girl who got called in comes out the door, eyes rimmed with pink, dabbing her fingertips to the corners.

Shit. That cannot be good.

I try not to care. Maybe she didn't have the qualifications, or maybe she was already having a bad morning by the time she was called inside.

The next girl gets called in and also comes out after only a few minutes, giving us all a pale, frightened look and shaking her head as she quickly exits the lobby.

What the hell?

My stomach gives a nervous twist.

The three of us remaining girls exchange looks, as one gets called inside. The rest of the line-up goes the same way with the next two nannies going in and coming out just

minutes later looking upset, rattled, and shaken. Who the hell is interviewing them—Godzilla?

No matter. I eat monsters for breakfast.

At least that's what I keep trying to tell myself, to pump up my quickly fraying confidence.

Now I am definitely sweating, and my mouth is parched. Why is it that the one place I could use some moisture is suddenly bone dry, and the places I don't want any moisture are basically dripping wet?

Finally, it's my turn. The slinky gazelle-like receptionist leads me to a room, pushes the door open, and announces my arrival. "The last one of the morning, Mr. Hawthorn."

"Thank you," a deep, sexy voice says from inside the room.

My stomach shoots into my throat, but I push away my nerves. I am ready. I am smart and qualified, I am... Holy crap. I nearly falter over a plushy rug at my feet.

There's a man sitting in a rich leather chair and staring at me in a way that I've never been looked at before in my life.

Not just any man—a tall, handsome, well-put-together god of musk and sex in a dark gray suit. The kind of man you never see until you move out of the Midwest and come to New York City for the first time. And even in this city full of the swankiest of the swanky, this guy is on a whole other level.

For one thing, he's hot as fuck.

Striking clear blue eyes hold my gaze. A chiseled jaw with just the right amount of stubble juts confidently, while plush, full lips make me shiver at the thought of feeling that mouth all over mybody...

In that moment, I absorb all sorts of information about him: he's almost thirty, rich, he knows this city like the back of his hand, and...he's been with hundreds of women. I'm not sure how I know these things, except that they exude from his pores. The information leaks from the fibers of his being. There's no way God can grace anyone with those cheekbones, lips, and magnetic stare and not be all those things. There's noway.

Strong, confident, full of himself, powerful. He breaks off that intimidating stare and then glances over my file. "Bailey Rainville?" he asks.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:02 am*

“The very one,” I answer, adding a stifled, nervous laugh. Why did I say that? It wasn’t even funny or witty. “Yes, pleased to meet you,” I add, walking forward and extending a handshake in his direction.

He stands and our hands connect. He’s got big, warm, manly hands. Something about this man’s hands immediately makes me feel small and timid, feminine and meek. His gaze rips right through me, those steely gray-blue orbs, scrutinizing everything about me as though he’s summed me up in mere moments of looking at me.

“Have a seat,” he orders, sitting back down again himself, glancing at my chest for a nanosecond, then back up at my face.

“Of course. Thanks for having me.” I sit and place my hands on my lap, then on the armrest, then on my lap again. I fold them and unfold them, waiting while he reviews my file. My knee begins bouncing, and I force myself to stop.

“Tell me about your experience with children,” he says without glancing at me. “You can’t be more than what, twenty?”

Wait. Is this the guy in charge of hiring? I can’t see him being a Dad, but then again, this is New York City, so anything’s possible.

“Twenty-two,” I correct him.

“Ah. A mere baby yourself.”

He’s trying to rattle me. I can do this. No need to feel nervous. I’ve already been here



longer than the first girl who entered. Obviously, I can't lead with the fact that I don't have much experience with children, so I go with the positives. "I graduated with a degree in Elementary Education, and—"

"Do you have experience with infants?" he cuts me off, marking something on the sheet with his pen.

"No, but I—"

"That will be all. Thank you for your time." He gives me a curt nod, and even though he's definitely handsome, there's a level of intolerance in his face. He doesn't give people much of a chance, does he?

"That's it?" I grip the armrest.

He looks up. "Yes, that's quite enough. The agency should have sent me a more qualified applicant."

"You didn't really let me explain," I say much to my own surprise.

"Why should I let you explain? You don't meet my needs."

"But I do...meet your needs." I swallow softly. "Sir."

A slow, smartass smile unfurls on his face. "Hawthorn. Zayden Hawthorn," he says, pressing a fingertip to his cheek. He's amused and seems open to hearing more of this display of defiance. "Go on, Miss Rainville."

His name sounds familiar though I don't know where I've heard it, and now that I think about it, his face looks familiar, too. I think about what I'm going to say now that I have his full attention. "Yes. I, uh...have a deep desire to learn, Mr. Hawthorn."

You'll find that it's my strongest trait."

This particular combination of words amuses him even more, and I want—to—die.  
"Is that so? Tell mewhy."

"Well, first of all, I'm from a small town nobody's ever heard of. And already I've worked my way through college, and now I'm working my way through New York City. I can only go up fromhere."

His nostrils flare. "Or you could godown."

I swallow hard and feel my nipples stiffen as I try to figure out if he's playing with me. "I don't understand what you mean. Sir."

"I mean, this city has a way of chewing people up and spitting them out. What did you think I meant?"

You could godown.

The phrase has layers of meaning, and immediately I imagine myself wrapping my lips around his cock, sucking, as he forces himself deeper into my mouth, then shooting everything, hot and sticky down my throat...

He snaps his fingers and I startle, realizing I was drifting off into that fantasy, and I lick my lips nervously, then steel myself to meet his gaze. "I won't be chewed up and spit out," I reply with conviction. "I'm going to make it here. I promise youthat."

"Good for you. But again, nothing to do with caring for an infant." He slaps closed the file and shifts, as if readying himself to stand.

I can't let him dismiss me the way he dismissed the others. I have to keep fighting, no

matter what, until he kicks me out of here. “It’s got everything to do with caring for an infant,” I say, eliciting a raised eyebrow from him. Holy shit, he’s hot. Sexy as fuck and knows it. I glance away for fear of losing my train of thought again just looking at him. Already, my hands sweat, my heart pounds, and an unfamiliar tightness tugs at my belly.

“I’m curious to see how you’re going to support your claim, Miss Rainville.”

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:02 am*

Support my claim. He means what does any of this have to do with being a good nanny.

I clear my throat. “All right. How many new mothers know about caring for an infant before they have to? None. They’ve read all the books, like me, read all the articles, like me, and maybe they’ve experienced holding other people’s babies, but that doesn’t mean they’re unprepared for the job. What makes them prepared is that they love children and they aren’t afraid to learn and work hard to be a great mother.”

He says nothing, just watches me closely. “Continue.”

“All it takes is me wanting to meet this baby for the first time more than anything else in the world, and the rest will fall into place,” I add, selling harder. “You’re right, I’m not some old woman with years of taking care of kids under my belt, burnt out and fed up and sure I know it all. Rather, I’m young, motivated, and hungry. I’m well-educated about early childhood development, I am extremely focused and willing to work harder than just about anyone you’ve ever met. I want to do this, I want to be great at it. I want to serve yourneedssir.”

His nostrils flare and his eyes bore into me, seeming to turn black with intensity, and suddenly I know I’ve said the right words. I feel they’re true. How many people have skills but no desire? Experience but no drive? I came to New York City to learn, to grow as a person, and I’m not going to let this man shut me down before I’ve even had the chance to sell myself.

He sits back in his leather wingback chair and takes a deep breath, steeple of fingertips at his mouth and nose. “All right,” he says, and my tummy tugs again.

When he crosses his legs the other way, I catch a glimpse of his legs—thick—his crotch—thicker—and I feel the warmth of my cheeks rising, pissed at myself for having checked him out at a moment as important as this. He notices, and that tiny knowing smirk materializes again. Ugh, now he'll think I'm totally taken by him.

Eyes on the prize, Bailey, not the man.

Suddenly, he presses a button on a speaker next to him. "Carmen, cancel the rest of today's interviews. Inform the agency that..." He looks up at me, that steely gaze burning a hole right into my soul. "I've found who I'm looking for."

Holy. Crap.

I'm incredibly impressed with myself. Somehow, I got this cold, soulless guy to listen. How did I manage it? Biting my inner lip, I try not to give off an air of gloating and await further instructions. "Thank you," I whisper.

"Don't thank me yet," he says, standing and moving past me. In that whoosh of air, I get a whiff of his scent and air displacement. He smells like cleanliness, the woods, and something I can't even name. All I know is that I've never been more attracted to any man in my entire life, not that I've been with any. I hope to God I never see him again after this, lest I risk losing focus. "Come with me," he says.

I follow him out the door, down the hall, to another room where a group of people sit around a conference table. I'm guessing this is where the family is, and Mr. Hawthorn was just a go-between, maybe an attorney, some sort of middle man in this interview process.

Good, because I'm not sure I could deal with seeing a man this hot every single day—

"I want this one," Mr. Hawthorn says, looking at me, checking for my reaction to his

every word. “Miss Rainville, this is social services and that’s my attorney, George Harlin.”

His attorney? Wait, he is the father?

He’s the dad I’ll be working for everyday?

I give a small wave to everyone despite my confusion, but I still don’t understand why I’m here. Where’s the rest of the family in need of a nanny? Is the woman sitting in the corner his wife? My eyes are drawn to the baby in her arms, so soft and tiny and out of place in this cold, gray building. That precious angel should be in a beautiful nursery filled with wondrous sights and sounds, not in the concrete jungle.

“Miss Rainville will be Olivia’s nanny while we sort out this mess,” Zayden tells the woman, and shenods.

“Good, then we can make the transition now, Mr. Hawthorne,” she replies, and now it’s clear she is not the mother at all. Just another member of the team working forhim.

The team of people begin shuffling papers for Mr. Hawthorn to sign, pushing a few documents in front of me to sign as well. “If you’re accepting the position,” the attorney says, looking eager to get this over with, “we’ll need you to sign here...and here...andhere.”

Once I’ve signed all forms, I barely have time to rejoice before the woman in the corner brings the baby closer to me, and in the whirlwind of confusion, I see clearly that Olivia is Zayden Hawthorn’s child. I see it immediately in her gorgeous blue eyes. She’s the spitting image of her gorgeous father.

The child is only about six months old, yet something has happened to put her in the

middle of some legal situation. My heart goes out to her, and I don't even know her yet.

"Where's her mother?" I ask, but nobody answers me.

The woman from social services places the baby in my arms, as Mr. Hawthorn says, "Miss Rainville, you'll begin at seven tomorrow morning, arriving at my home. You'll take care of Olivia twenty-four hours a day, full-time, and I'll provide you with everything you both need. After all," he says, holding my gaze for a long moment. "You are excited about diving right in to learn. Isn't that right?"

"Yes," I say nervously.

Quickly, the baby gets placed in my arms. She's beautiful with pale skin, wide eyes and perfect pouty lips, a gift from the universe, a darling spark of light and love amidst this crazy skyscraper town with fast-moving people. And suddenly, inopportunely, in front of everyone watching, Baby Olivia becomes the loudest crier I have ever heard in my entire life.

Thanks, kid. Way to throw me under the bus.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:02 am*

Zayden

I'm completely taken with this Bailey Rainville—her gorgeous heart-shaped face, her kickass hourglass figure, her blonde pulled-back hair...even her hotheaded little attitude. Everything's fine...up until the baby starts crying in her arms. What in the actual fuck?

She begins bouncing her around, shushing the baby, as everyone watches, and it's like the poor girl is auditioning for America's Got Talent right before Simon Cowell buzzes her off the stage.

Shit. Did I just sign her on without even testing her out?

Was I that blinded by her gorgeous tits, the sexy pouting mouth, those innocent yet sensualeyes?

I liked what she said in the interview room, too. It made sense to me. All you need is a ton of determination, passion, and the rest will come naturally. It's how I built my business from the ground up. I didn't come from a wealthy family and wasn't given a huge business loan. I didn't know shit about the plane rental business. But I figured out my own way. Her words spoke to me. Plus, she looked so fucking cute while making her case, I decided to give her the benefit of the doubt.

But now, watching her crash and burn, I wonder what I've done.

That's the last time I hire someone based on how hot they'd look walking around my house.



I'm ready to take the contract and rip it up, claim temporary insanity when suddenly, Miss Rainville pulls her set of keys out of her purse and begins dangling them in front of the baby. Immediately, the thing quiets down, and watches her jingling with deep fascination. Even I'm watching with deep fascination.

Damn, the kid's eyes. She looks like me. There's no denying that's my kid.

After a minute, she stops crying, and everyone lets out this sort of collective sigh of relief. Maybe Miss Rainville will work out after all.

"I'm sorry," she says, a sheen of sweat forming on her brow. I wonder if the same happens when she's coming like a freight train. She blows away a wisp of hair that's fallen into her face. "Maybe I should've asked before, but could someone explain whose baby I'm holding?"

Eleanor from social services steps forward. "Forgive me, Miss Rainville, I thought Mr. Hawthorn would've explained during the interview..." I give Eleanor the evil eye and she gives it right back.

"This is why we insist on being part of the interview process," she adds, insulting the way I wanted to handle things. Why social services should be a part of interviewing my caretaker for my baby was a mystery to me.

Eleanor clears her throat. "You're being considered for—"

"Olivia is my daughter," I interrupt, turning to Miss Rainville. No one needs to explain this for me. It's my child, my situation, my nanny. "I only found out a week ago. The child's mother, I'm sorry to say, has landed herself in jail for...what is it again?"

"Selling counterfeit purses," George, my lawyer, says, hands in his pockets.

“Selling counterfeit purses,” I echo, facing Miss Rainville’s wide questioning honey brown eyes again. “A repeat offense, apparently. The guy she was with failed the paternity test, and then the woman claimed I was the father...and anyway, none of that is important. All you need to know is that I’ll be watching Olivia while her mother serves her prison sentence, which should be a few months, tops.”

Miss Rainville paces back and forth, still dangling the keys in front of Olivia’s eyes, quite hypnotically. “So you need a nanny temporarily.”

“If all goes well, yes.” I try to smile as if this is all completely normal.

But the truth is, I feel uncomfortable explaining this situation. I barely remember the baby’s mother.

She was the waitress at a restaurant in Atlanta when I was there for business. She assured me she was on the pill, and I had a brief moment of doubt. But sometimes, when I’m on business, and it gets a little lonely, I find companionship.

Or often enough, it finds me.

Either way, I suppose I screwed up and now I’m going to pay for my sins...

I’ve only accepted the baby’s placement with me out of pure obligation ever since the paternity test came back positive. Because the truth is, I don’t like babies, I never expected one to be dropped off on my doorstep, and I plan on avoiding it as much as I can while it’s staying at my house.

The woman to care for her has to be utterly perfect, a baby guru, but soon, the jingling of the keys begins to lose its magic, and soon, Olivia is crying again.

Fuck. I chose too quickly. “Can’t you give her a bottle or something?” I ask.

“I, uh...I think she’s fighting sleep,” Miss Rainville says, switching the baby’s position from cradling to over her shoulder, and the crying hushes down again. Within a few seconds, Olivia is sucking on her hand and closing hereyes.

I’ll be damned.

I have to say, Miss Rainville is two for two. Twice now, the tiny human has been on the edge of losing it, and twice now, Miss Nanny has managed to work some sort of baby sorcery on her. Not bad. Not bad at all. Maybe I did choose well after all, and the pretty face and voluptuous body are only an added benefit.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:02 am*

She'll do fine, I decide.

And in any case, I don't plan on having the baby at my house very long. "Great, now that everything's settled," I say, clapping once and throwing my bag over my shoulder. I check my watch. Time to head back to the office. "You'll report to my home tomorrow morning at seven. These fine people will give you the details. Please be on time," I say then clear the room like a guilty party, entering the hallway while those in the room fall into quiet discussion.

Taking a deep breath, I let out a long sigh.

Damn, I felt claustrophobic in that room. Not a pleasant situation to be in, having to hire someone that both social services and I could both agree on. Having to even think about a baby I never knew a week ago at this time. But my life was thrown off course for a bit there, though I'm glad I can get back on track now that the nanny will start tomorrow.

Some men find the prospect of being a father exciting, but not me.

Too much shit swirling around my brain. Too much heartache I can't even think about, much less face. All I know is that I need to get my car back from the valet, need to speed through the city streets in my Bentley GT, and need to make it back to the office—STAT. The sooner I feel like myself, the better.

My copper number comes speeding out of the garage to a hard stop in the MetroLife driveway, I tip the driver handsomely, and take off, shifting through gears with professional precision. I love driving. I love my car. I love being where I can think

clearly, make decisions, and having people kiss my ass for it.

This curve ball cannot and will not interfere with my life, business, or daily habits not even one iota. I expect Bailey Rainville, the baby whisperer, to ensure of that with her round-the-clock guaranteed service, which is why I'm paying the nanny agency the big bucks. Sure, the child and nanny will have everything they need, and I'll even continue to pay the mother child support once she's out of prison, but that's where my involvement ends. I won't have a role in the child's life beyond my financial responsibilities.

I never wanted to be a father. Never. And I won't.

The last thing I expected was to get some random waitress pregnant, someone I don't even know, which is worse, but I'll pay what I have to pay. It was a stupid move on my part—I'll accept that. As long as they leave me out of getting to know the child, I'll be fine. This baby is nothing but a small blip on my radar.

But the nanny...now she's more my speed. And loves "learning new things." I chuckle to myself. I wonder which new things she's more apt to go for.

I check my side-view mirror before switching lanes.

If there's any reason to keep the baby longer than necessary, it's to make sure I see that fine ass every day. Fine asses are a dime a dozen, but this one was particularly striking because she was determined, too. The other nannies gave up too soon. The moment I told them they weren't right for the job, they started crying and left the interview. Can you imagine them quitting the moment the baby's crying gets out of control?

No, I need someone who won't give up so easily, won't quit or take no for an answer. I like that. Fuck yeah, I do. And she doesn't even realize her own beauty which is

sexy...as...fuck.

Can't wait to see her again at 7 am tomorrow. I should've told her that the house uniform consists of tight skirts, no bra, just for shits and giggles.

I arrive at my building on the Upper West Side, home of JetFlash, my company that rents and sells private jets to the wealthiest of the wealthy. I got here from a middle-class family. From a fresh-faced kid in school to being worth over \$2.5 billion at the age of twenty-nine. Pulling up to the valet, I grab my bag and my wallet from the passenger seat. JetFlash is where my heart belongs, where I feel most in control, where I can breathe once again.

Carlos, my valet, takes my keys with the smile I pay him to give me every day. "Welcome home, sir," he says, taking my car as smoothly as I give it to him.

"Indeed," I push the revolving door into my platinum-lined foyer and breathe a sigh of relief.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:02 am*

Bailey

This is his house?

Seriously???

This is a magazine home come to life. It's the most amazing house I've ever seen.

I'm standing inside the foyer of Zayden Hawthorn's multi-million, ultra-modern home on the Upper West Side in New York City, my stomach jittering like crazy. The place is so fancy, the platinum has platinum on it, the marble has marble on it, and the doorbell alone is nicer than anything I own in my crappy Queens apartment. Luckily, I won't be there for long. A few months to possibly a year at the Hawthorn home, they said.

It all depends on when the baby's mother gets out of prison and when social services allows the child to go home to her.

So sad. It's a good thing the baby, whose full name is Olivia Noelle Bardem, is young so hopefully, she won't remember this confusing time. I fully intend on making her transition here as smooth and happy as possible, and with the credit card Mr. Hawthorn plans on giving me for anything the baby or I should need, that shouldn't be a problem.

After a minute, the sound of airy footsteps comes up to the door. It opens and there stands the sexiest maid I have ever seen. Like something out of fantasy porn, complete with short black skirt and apron. All that's missing are the fishnet stockings.

“Hello, are you Bailey?” At least she’s warm and friendly.

“Yes! I’m here as Olivia’s nanny?” I say brightly, even though she already knows why I’m here, considering she knew my name.

“I’m Vero. I’ll show you to your room.” Vero, slinky cat that she is, lets me in, closes the door, and proceeds to lead the way as though she were modeling a Versace gown down a catwalk in Milano. Every so often, she speaks over her shoulder, lets me know where the kitchen is, where the living room is, where the bathroom is...who that woman is cooking in the kitchen (Mr. Hawthorn’s personal chef, Miss Helga...yes, Helga), but all I can think is that I’m out of place.

Even fish out of water feel at home compared to me.

For starters, I don’t look like the rest of the staff. I don’t exude sex, and my round ass would never fit into a skirt like that. My makeup is from Walgreens, not Sephora, and I got my clothes from the clearance rack at Target. Then again, I’m the one who’s going to have baby grunge on my clothes by the end of the day, so why bother with anything nice? I’m in a class all my own, I decide. I don’t have to look like them.

My room is on the second floor at the end of the hall connected to the baby’s room. Vero says with a breathy, rehearsed, perfect voice, “I will be here until five today. Let me know if you need anything.” She should be in the movies, she’s so gorgeous.

“Thank you. You’ve been so sweet,” I say.

“My pleasure, hon.” Her smile radiates starshine.

I close the door to my room and exhale a huge sigh of relief. Taking a long look around, I notice that my bedspread is gray, my walls are lighter gray, and the furniture is gray antique wood. The rug in the middle of the room is gray, and my



ceiling fan looks like the propeller of a twin-engine plane. “First thing I’m getting with your credit card, Mr. Hawthorn, is a yellow accent pillow and an orange throw blanket.” I laugh to myself. “This place needs brightening.”

“Does it?” The deep, alluring voice of Mr. Hawthorn comes out of nowhere. I whip toward the sound, and there he is, standing in the doorway to the connecting room. Was he watching me all along?

“I’m sorry,” I swallow, palm to my chest. “I didn’t know you were there.”

“It’s my house. I think I’m allowed.”

“Oh! Most definitely! I just...should stay quiet from now on is what I should do.” My smile is forced and full of hesitation. My laughter sounds like a hyena cackling in the middle of The Great Gatsby’s living room. How do I move on from this? “Your house is absolutely beautiful, Mr. Hawthorn. Clearly, you have wonderful taste.”

“Except for the drab gray room?” He stares down into his phone as he talks to me.

“Oh, gosh, no. I was just...I was just kidding. It’s perfect.”

I see the bullshit detector built into his eyebrows when he glances up at me. “Find something you like online. I’ll have it delivered before the end of the day.” He checks his watch and clucks his tongue, like he’s running late.

“Um...thank you. Should I get started right away? Is the baby awake?”

“She arrives this afternoon. In the meantime, prepare her room however you like, purchase bedding, arrange things however you need. Get yourself situated. Just so we’re clear, you are Olivia’s full-time nanny. You’ll spend time with her as you would your own child. More so, because you’re being paid well.”

“Of course. I wouldn’t have it any otherway.”

“You won’t go out. You won’t meet up with friends while you’re watching the baby. And also, so we’re clear...” His sharp eyes mean business. “I don’t want to be taken out of my schedule for any reason unless it’s an absolute emergency. I didn’t ask for this, so I can’t be bothered with questions. Pink or purple, this outfit or that, I don’t care. Use your best judgment. It’s why I hired you. Clear?”

It’s hard to look away from his mesmerizing, cold blue eyes. They’re like ice, so calculated, yet I can see where the laugh lines would go on his face if he were in a lighter mood. “Crystal,” I reply, wondering what the hell I’ve gotten myself into.

\* \* \*

It’s late in the afternoon when baby Olivia finally arrives from social services. By that time, I’ve already made her nursery into a compilation of bright patchwork blended with muted vanilla sheets and furniture, along with a few beautiful hand-crafted stuffed animals and a mobile for her crib. Though it was fun to order furniture from a catalog and have it all delivered and assembled faster than it would take me to dry my hair, I err on the side of sensibility and order nothing for my bedroom, as Zayden suggested.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:02 am*

Because I shouldn't have said what I said.

I was lucky enough to be hired for this position, given room and board and even a credit card for my own personal use. How gray my bedroom appears is of no consequence. Once Olivia and I are finally alone, I sit the baby in my lap in the rocking chair and give her tiny hand a shake.

"Hello, pumpkin. You and I are going to become thick as thieves, we are."

The baby stares at me with big blue saucers, like her father's. A line of drool is poised to fall from her lips. I wipe the sliminess with a burp rag. She makes a soft noise, and I can only wonder what she must be thinking of all this. Where's my mommy? Her wide eyes seem to want to know.

Suddenly, I'm filled with sadness for this precious angel. Criminal or not, her mom is her mom, and they're not together, which breaks my heart. I pluck a fluffy rabbit off the dresser and wiggle it around in front of her, hoping to elicit a giggle or even the tiniest of smiles but—nothing. This cookie is tough to crack. It's going to take time.

I read her the scintillating bestseller, *Goodnight Moon*, then around nine, I decide it's bedtime, regardless of what she's used to, I give her a nice warm bath, put her in soft, fuzzy jammies and place her in bed with her bottle. Oops. She doesn't hold her own bottle yet, so I put her in my lap and give her the bottle of milk myself, rocking her until she falls asleep. If I'm going to be a full-time nanny, I'm going to need personal time no later than 9:30 pm or risk losing my sanity.

Game of Thrones isn't going to watch itself!

Everything is going great so far. The staff has gone home, which makes me feel both lonely in the giant house all by myself with the baby but also relieved that I don't have to talk to lanky giraffe-type women when I'm most tired. Mr. Hawthorn hasn't gotten home yet, even though it's late. I wonder if this is how it'll always be—late nights inside this lonely, dark house.

I shower and dress quickly in case Olivia should wake up while I'm in the bathroom, but luckily, she's still sleeping. When it comes time to blow-dry my hair, however, guess what? Apparently, the slightest noise wakes Olivia up. Within a minute, the little light sleeper is up and wailing. I run in and pat her on the butt, having read somewhere that I shouldn't pick the baby up, or else she'll get used to being coddled. I hate that piece of advice. I feel like a small baby who's going through changes should be comforted.

So I do.

But when the butt-patting clearly isn't enough anymore, I pick her up and try singing to her. The tears rolling off her cheeks are big and fat and full of heartache. "It's okay, baby. I know...I know..." I assure her. I hear the beeping of a door opening and closing somewhere in the house, and my heart leaps into my chest.

I hope it's Mr. Hawthorn and not some other staff member, or worse, a burglar. I catch a laugh in my throat. As if a burglar would get past the state-of-the-art security system of a billionaire. Assuming it's the man of the house, it's going to be awkward living here alone with him. We'll be the only adults around at night. Together. Me and the billionaire. Sharing this mansion. With his bedroom just down the hall from mine.

My mind goes crazy with the possibilities, but I shut them off quickly.

Olivia continues to wail like she's lost it all. Wait, she has lost it all.

Great—just my luck. He couldn't have gotten home while she was sleeping peacefully, could he? No, it had to be during a night terror from the depths of hell. "Shush, little baby, don't you cry..." I sing. Ugh, this will be the second time he'll see me dealing with his cryingbaby.

He appears in the doorway, wearing classic pants, shirt, and tie, leaning against the doorframe in that sexy way male models do, legs and arms crossed to show off healthy biceps. The man definitely works out and takes his vitamins. Good God. Don't stare right at him, Bailey.

"I think you might have overinflated your level of child-rearing expertise during your interview," he says. Damn him, for looking so fine and being such an asshole at the same time. Why can't I tear my gaze fromhim?

"I may have padded the truth a little," I say, looking at the baby instead. "But doesn't everyone when they're vying for a job?" I pace the room back and forth, changing Olivia's position until I find one that seems to calm her down a tad. "Shh....baby...shhhh...."

"Not that I'm aware of," he says flatly. "If you lie to me or stretch the truth again, I'll fire you on the spot and find someone else. Are we clear? I can't have a baby crying in the house when I get home fromwork."

Ugh, what decade are we in—the 1950's? Civil War-era?

My frustration reaches a new high when Olivia begins crying harder, as she desperately tries to fall asleep on my shoulder. "But crying is what babies do half the time," I retort, even though I know I should stay quiet. Just appease your boss, Bailey. But no... "They cry. If you don't want to hear her, maybe you could build us a soundproof apartment on the roof?" I mean it as a joke, but wow am I tired from a full and stressful day.

Oof. What the hell is wrong with me? BUT...it's true! He honestly expects to not hear a baby in his house? A baby who's lost everyone important to her in one week who's just arrived at unfamiliar surroundings without her mother? I don't care if he fires me for the comment. The lack of compassion and understanding being displayed by this man is staggering. I don't care how handsome he is, he doesn't get to be a jerk and expect me to accept it.

A strange smirk spreads across his face. "You like answering back, don't you?"

Erm...mm...

"Only when I find something to be unfair. Sorry, sir. But to be truthful, you also kept details about the job from me until after I'd signed on. I'm good with children; I can do this job just fine. She just needs time to adjust. See? She's quieting down already."

As if on command, Olivia goes quiet and then falls asleep nestled against my shoulder, and I gently place her back in her crib.

Slowly, Zayden steps up to me, gaze fixed and intense. I almost hear my heartbeat pounding through my chest. His stare sears through me like x-ray vision. "You have a mouth on you, Miss Rainville, and I have better uses for it."

There's a fine line between this moment overstepping professional boundaries and being the most thrilling of my life, and the difference is in my reaction. I should be disgusted, but I'm not. Not even close. The man smells delicious, his late-day stubble creates a dark mood over his features, and my body shakes from how close he stands next to me. My breathing trembles, as he hovers.

Is he going to kiss me? What's even crazier is that I actually want him to. The man who hired me, pressing his lips against mine. I wouldn't mind at all. I want this man more than I've ever wanted anyone in my life—but he infuriates me like no one else,

and that sends currents running through mybody.

The balls. The nerve. The cockiness. He thinks it's all about him, doesn't he? I shouldn't be interested in him at all. "I have a tendency to speak my mind," I explain through nervous gasps. "I'll won't do it again. Just had a frustrating first day isall."

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:03 am*

His hand reaches out and one finger traces a line along my jaw, my chin. “If you do, I can do many things to train that mouth to be quiet, Miss Rainville. Many things. And you do like learning new things, don’t you?” He sucks lightly on his bottom lip, as he rubs his thumb across my bottomone.

I can’t move. I can’t speak. Whatever magic he’s working on me, I’m totally under its influence. Completely and unabashedly.

“Yes,” I breathe quietly, closing my eyes, imagining myself being undressed at his hands, bared to him. Naked in front of the master. Bared to the billionaire’s touch.

“You took a late shower,” he murmurs. “Your hair is still damp.”

“Yes,” I say, touching my own hair self-consciously.”

“A shame I missed it. You in your towel, coming out of the shower. Nobody else in the house but the two of us, and you almost completely undressed. Imagine if the towel was to fall off in front of me by accident.”

“That would be...very inappropriate and embarrassing,” I breathe, finally.

His nostrils flare and he seems to inhale my fresh scent. “When I come home tomorrow,” he says softly but firmly, “I want to see you coming out of the shower. Wet hair. Wet towel. Breathless. Sexy. Are we clear?” His fingers trace the edge of my jaw to the collarbone, then the neck of my blouse, above my breasts, his fingertips grazing just above my nipples. I gasp, lungs in my throat, and nod. What is wrong with me? Why can’t I see that this is wrong? Very, very wrong.



“Yes,” I squeak out.

“Yes, what?” His face drops close to mine. I feel the warmth of his breath on my cheek.

I close my eyes and prepare to feel. His lips. His tongue in my mouth. Any part of his body, I don’t care. I’ve never been with a man before, and suddenly, my body is on FIRE to remind me of everything I’ve been missing. The immense insanity of this moment dizzies me. Part of me wonders if it’s all an exhaustion-induced dream.

“Yes, sir,” I say.

He nods. “Good.” He pulls away, leaving a cold spot where he stood just a moment before. I can’t believe he’s going to make me wait twenty-four hours with that vision in my head—of me wet in my towel waiting for him to come home like a good little sex slave. Does he mean every word, or is he messing with me? Is this what I signed up for, or have I somehow gotten myself into the thickest trouble of my life?

Stopping at the door, he turns around. “Get rest. Tomorrow, the baby won’t be the only person you’ll have to take care of.” He gives me a powerful, dark look, and then, without another word, he’s gone.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:03 am*

Zayden

A whole day at work to think about what I said, and I still don't have an answer.

This was the first time I've told any woman working in my house that she better be ready for me when I come home. I don't know why I said that, except that she drives me insane with that innocent, sexy look. No one ever talks to me like that. No one ever challenges me. No one ever looks so fucking hot while doing it either.

Then, there's Bailey Rainville, owning some sort of power over me. It could just be infatuation. It could be over before I know it. Still, I can't get involved with her, I know that much. I only wanted to taste her. And I'm pretty sure she wants to taste me, too. A pretty little thing like her is too good to pass up, especially with that bite of spunkiness in her.

Will she follow through?

I saw the way she checked me out yesterday, the same way so many women gawk at me, except in her case, she tried not to show how I affected her. That whole pride thing where a woman can't give me the satisfaction of showing that she's wet between the legs for me. I get it—stay coy. But it's precisely this that's made me crazy for the new nanny. She's a dichotomy. An enigma.

I work late into the night and come home when, by all rights, the new nanny could claim to be asleep.

Maybe she'll take this opportunity to blow off my instructions, and in a way, I'm

almost hoping she does blow it off.

Because I know in my heart that I can only be bad for this girl. If she can resist me, then maybe I can resist her too...

Inside, the house is dark and quiet. No baby crying. No downstairs lights on. Just the way I asked for. Only thing different is that the hallway closet is slightly open, and inside I spot a baby stroller folded up. I sigh. A baby lives here. I was hoping to forget. Poor thing, it's not her fault I don't want her around. Babies just aren't my thing.

Slowly, I make my way up the circular staircase, heavy on my feet to let Miss Rainville know I'm home. I allow myself to pretend that she's my woman, that I'm coming home to fuck her. Bottom up, Mama—Papa's coming home. On the other hand, part of me wishes she'll be asleep.

I don't know why I said what I did last night, except I was under her spell, and I like causing trouble.

I like opening doors to see where they lead.

When I reach the top of the stairs, I peer into the guest room, now a nursery filled with all sorts of unnecessary colors and patterns, but hey—the baby is asleep and the décor gave Bailey something to do. Maybe she was right—maybe Olivia had a stressful first day away from all things familiar, and that's why she was crying so damn hard.

I move to the next room—Miss Rainville's. I don't knock. It's my door. Turning the handle, I prop it open and let the door fly. It's semi-dark inside, the only light coming from the city lights in the window and a glowing iPad in bed. She's awake, tucked in tight with the sheets up to her chin. Her hair is wet but that's as far as my

fantasygoes.

Whatever. Her loss.

“Wise choice,” I tell her with a smirk. She ignored my request to be waiting in a towel. As disappointing as it is, it’s best for both of us. That way, I’m not tempted, and I can move on to banging safer choices, like the moms down at the park, the women I meet at bars, and all the models and socialites when they’re in town for FashionWeek.

But this was the one I wanted most, my brain says.

“A choice, to be sure,” she says, pulling the comforter aside and stepping out of bed. She’s wrapped in a bath towel. Not only that, but as she slinks closer to me, lips parted, drawing quiet breath from how nervous she is, nimble fingers pull at the overlap on top, and the towel falls away. “Though how wise remains to be seen.”

For several seconds, I take in her naked shape—full-figured with an hourglass and cinched waist. Real. Earthy. I can’t describe it, but you know it when you see it that it’s a real woman’s body. Her tits are round and full, her tummy is totally flat, but her hips are wide, and her legs have meat on them. I’m hard as fuck before I can even check out her legs or feet.

Fuck the legs and feet. I’ll see them later. I step up to her and pull her into me faster than my head can handle. As my body swoons from seeing my nanny waiting for me naked and covered in goose bumps, I take her face into both my hands and drink her in. Sweeter than any fruit I’ve ever tasted in the most exotic lands. Her pouty lips, the taste of her tongue, the scent of lavender or lemon or something on her skin from her shower, her wet hair clinging to her in dark lines. All of it.

Her skin is soft like velvet and my cock is raging hard like never before.

Her body falls limp in my arms, as her hands cling to my triceps, trying to keep herself up. I want to do anything and everything to her all at once. I don't know what the fuck it is, but something overcomes me. It's not like other women, where pure lust overtakes me on occasion.

No, I'm feeling something...more.

I want to fuck her, but I also feel a strange tenderness towards her. A need pulling deep in my chest that I'm totally surprised by.

With Bailey, I want to possess her.

And I also want to lay her on the ground face down and fuck her ass, I want to flip her around and fuck her mouth, I want to pound the shit out of that tight, sweet body and make it meld with mine.

Jesus, dude. Get a grip.

"You don't know what you're doing to me," I tell her through breaths. She pulls away. She's just as desperate to fuck as I am with that yawning, gaping mouth fighting for breath. I push three fingers into her mouth and hold it open, as her eyes widen. "So many things I can do to this pretty little mouth." I plunge my tongue into her mouth and taste her.

"Do it," she says between breaths. "I want this over with."

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:03 am*

Wait, what? Because of how much she's been thinking about me today, the way I've obsessed about her? Yeah, I get it. Trust me. "I will. On the floor, Miss Nanny." I chuckle under my breath.

She gives me a wary look, but her fingers make quick work of my buttons, my dress shirt lands on the floor, and before I can push her to her knees, she reads my mind and sinks, pulling my pants down with her. Sliding my waistband forward and down, she pulls out my cock—bigger and harder than I've ever felt it—and throws herself on it.

Fuck, yeah...

Kneeling on her towel, Miss Rainville sucks on my fat head like she hasn't eaten in days, and I have to hold myself together to not explode in her mouth right then. What the fuck? It's always amazing to me how horny women can get sometimes, and here we men are, thinking we're the dogs. She wants this just as badly as I do, and she's getting off on it, too. After a minute of sliding her tongue up and down my shaft and wrapping her lips around my knob, she opens her mouth wide and looks up at me.

This is so fucking wrong and so goddamn right all at the same time, and I feel like a god and a devil and I'm about to explode.

I swear, it's like she's saying, feed me.

So I do. I slide my massive tool into her mouth, push back on that tightness in her throat, and give it to her nice and deep. Gagging slightly, she uses her hands to guide it back, and my eyes roll back into their sockets. Holy fuck—this woman who looks

so innocent herself—is sucking down my meat. Not only that, but her hand slips down and she begins fiddling with her clit, rubbing it in circles then diagonally.

She's better at this than some of the most experienced, gorgeous models and actresses I've been with—women who definitely knew their way around the bedroom. You'd never know it from how sweet she looks. Yes, I definitely picked the right nanny.

“You love this, don't you? How long have you been waiting for me, Miss Rainville?” I ask, but of course she can't answer. “Oh, fuck. Have I finally quieted that sassy little mouth?” Taking her head, I push her mouth over me deeply, as I feel the buildup starting deep in my body then coursing its way through my balls.

Speaking of balls, and because I don't know if we'll ever do this again, I have to find out what Miss Rainville can do in that department. Pulling my shaft out of her mouth dripping with drool, I drop her shoulders down and slide over her mouth, so she can get underneath. Sliding my balls onto her face, I hope she'll take the hint, and she does.

Her fingers fly faster as she sucks on them. “Did you forget to eat today, Miss Rainville?” I chuckle. “Mouth full of nuts and no sign of stopping. I see this pleases you.” She's still masturbating as she swallows me whole. I can't help it and crouch lower to slide my fingers through her naked cleft. My fingers slide into her slick folds dripping with her juices. I pull some out and open her mouth again with my fingers, slathering her tongue with her own essence. She groans as she sucks off my fingers.

Fuckin' A. She's open to everything, which makes me wonder about her sexual history for a fraction of a second. For someone so young, I didn't expect her to be so experienced. I push that thought away. I don't want to think about her with anyone else. As far as I'm concerned, I'm the only man she's ever been with, though clearly, that's a falsity purely made up to satisfy my ego.

Suddenly, Miss Rainville stops short of an orgasm, gets to her feet and wraps her arms around my neck for a long kiss. And I do, fully and deeply. She tastes delicious, but why did she stop? Her hands stroke my cock together full-fisted, and I reel at the thought of her tiny hands working me that way. “Let’s get it over with, please? Make love to me?” Taking a few steps back against the bed, pulling my cock with her, she lies flat on her back and opens her legs forme.

An amazing fucking view, that pink, wet small pussy pulsating with need. But there’s one problem. “I don’t make love, sweetheart,” I say, reaching for my pants and pulling out a condom. As I work it onto myself, her fingers dip into her pussy for lubrication then work around her clit again. “I only fuck. And I fuck hard. Relentlessly. Unforgivingly. Think you can handleit?”

For a fleeting moment, I see it—the fear in her deep, browneyes.

But look, it’s only fair that I come clean with this news, so she can understand from the get-go that this isn’t going to be some sweet lovemaking bullshit. Romantic affairs and me just don’t mix, in case that’s what she’s thinking.

“Okay,” she says meekly, bracing her legs apart, holding herself at the knees in preparation. I admit, she looks a little funny, and for a split second, I wonder if she’s done this before. But there’s no way a woman can swallow a cock and balls like a gangbang whore the way she did and not have experience.

“Good girl, spread them. Hold them right there just for me,” I say, savoring the view—this pretty little woman with the doll face—completely open and waiting for me to takeher.

My cock twitches, rising and falling, as I step up to her. I hold her knees apart, drag my cock up and down against her wet cunt, and coat myself with those juices. Her tits look too good, falling slightly to either side, and I realize I haven’t even had a



moment to taste them. We started so hard and so fast, neither of us slowing down to savor, so fucking desperate to get into each other's pants.

Falling between her legs, I poise the tip of my cock right at her entrance and lean down to cup her breasts. Squeezing them together, I move my lips from one taut nipple to the other, flicking my tongue on the tiny eraser heads. They're pink and match her pussy and her natural blonde shades, and I want to bite them, suck on them, drive her crazy with my lips and tongue.

But I only suckle on them, and for a minute, I almost forget that I'm ready to fuck her, so drowned in their roundness and softness I am. She lets down her guard, too, wrapping her hands around my hair, digging her fingers into my scalp. She smells so sweet and fragrant, I could fall asleep right against that pounding heart.

Except—my cock is still hard and raging—and I need her. Now.

Suddenly, I rip into her all the way to the hilt of my cock, balls deep, and she screams out loud. I cover her mouth with my hand, only because I don't want her waking the baby and fucking up this perfect thing we have, but she adamantly pushes my hand away and moans nice and loud.

"My God..." she says, her eyes open and staring at the ceiling like I've blown open her body. "Mr. Hawthorn..."

Something about hearing her say "Mister Hawthorn" while I fuck her, so pronounced, drives me even more crazy, and pulling out, I plunge in again harder this time, balls slamming her ass. She moans aloud again, as that buildup of pressure in my body responds. Her hands dig into my back, nearly scratching me, fueling me to pull out and fuck her again—harder. If I do this right, she'll experience both the best fucking orgasm she's ever had. In the morning, she'll realize she got too in over her head. I'm too much for her.

She'll stay away, go back to her normal life.

And I'll move on, having tasted her and warned her at the same time.

"I'm not for you," I mutter against her breasts. "I'm not your sweet boyfriend. I'm a man living with demons, Miss Rainville." I rise up so I can look at her, as I fuck her. For now, she's mine—all mine. Pressing my thumb against her clit, I work it the same way I saw her work herself, and she closes her eyes.

Her face turns to one side, and I know this is it—she's about to come.

"Do it, sweetheart. Come all over my cock," I say, jackhammering into her tight, sweet body, holding onto her ass for the push-in with my other hand, as my thumb continues to fiddle her clit.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:03 am*

“Yes....” She’s breathless, squeezing her muscles against my thighs, and preparing for the blowing of the mind about to come her way. I’m only a moment behind. In a second, I’ll get to hear what she sounds like when she comes. There’s no greater sound in all this world—to hear this innocent woman letting go, giving her utmost love to me—whether I deserve it or not.

And I definitely don’t.

Which is all the more reason I nearly break down when she explodes in waves of electric energy radiating all throughout her body. Her nipples stiffen, and a pink flush spreads over her chest, as she cries out and mewls against the comforter. I fuck her right through it—relentlessly—as promised.

“That’s right. Sassy Miss Rainville, getting fucked by her boss,” I say, attuning my gaze to her breasts again, her pussy spread apart by my cock, and I can’t hold it in any longer.

I come hard and long.

For a moment, there’s no condom, there’s just me spilling my seed deep into her, filling her body, filling her soul. I don’t know why I think of it that way—it’s just sex. Sex like any other I’ve had before, except it isn’t. She looks ethereal, angelic in the soft light of her room. Completely different from any other woman I’ve been with. But why?

When I collapse onto her and curl onto my side, her body melds perfectly into mine. Delicate arms curl around my shoulders, and our breaths combine into one, hearts

slowing down. Holyshit.

“Thank you,” she says into my shoulder with a long sigh.

Something about the way she says it...have I relieved a long dry spell? Or... The dreamy state I was in just now clears away, giving rise to a red flag. I hold my breath. Wait... “What do you mean?”

“I mean thank you,” she says. “That was my first time ever.”

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:03 am*

Bailey

On second thought, maybe I shouldn't have said that.

Zayden Hawthorn, the man I let take my virginity, the man I chose to take my virginity today—gets out of bed, running a hand through his hair and looking as though he's choking to death right in front of me.

Finally, he speaks. "Please tell me you were joking."

I shake my head, not daring to say anything.

"You're a virgin?"

"I was a virgin. Until now. Until you."

With the way sex just ended, the way we were cuddling in bed, he seemed different. He seemed changed from his earlier self. Softer, more approachable and human. I thought he'd be open to the compliment of knowing I'd chosen him. Big mistake. HUGE. "You say that like it's no big deal!" he shouts.

"Shh, the baby," I plead.

"The baby," he grits. "The baby is exactly the reason I shouldn't have done this. The whole reason I'm in this predicament in the first place is because a woman lied to me. Someone obviously wasn't on the pill like she said she was, which is why there's a brand new human sleeping in the room next door." He paces the room. "What the

fuck is wrong with me?” he mutters. “Why can’t I stop?”

Stop? It’s a habit of his, isn’t it? Sleeping with any woman he can get away with. Which means, all those nice gazelles I met earlier yesterday have all been in his pants. I guess I can’t blame them, but it makes me feelsick.

“But you used a condom, so I’m not going to get pregnant. Please, Zayden—uh, Mr. Hawthorn...” Ugh, I have no clue what name to use. Is he my boss right now, or my lover?

“The fact is that you lied.” He throws his hands out, palms up, as he begins fishing around for his clothes.

“I did not,” I nearly shout back. My nerves are already rattled from telling him the truth, from the sex we just had, from the anticipation of waiting for him all day long. Quieter, I say it again. “I didn’t lie. I just didn’t think it mattered.”

“You don’t think your first time matters? You don’t think that perhaps you might have at least mentioned you were a virgin before we fucked?” he asks. In a weird way, I’m relieved that he cared enough about my first time to be this upset. He stops pacing and starts putting on his pants, a relief because it was weird to see a naked man yelling at me. “It shouldn’t have been with me. That should’ve been with someone you know, someone who was going to make it special for you.”

“It was special for me.” It’s the truth. It only hurt a little bit at the beginning but only because I’ve never put anything that big inside me before. I mean, shit, I’ve been using tampons since the age of twelve and way smaller dildos since eighteen. I probably won’t tell him that, though. Enough is enough. That’s what I get for sharing.

“You should have said something,” he insists, zipping up his pants and swiping his shirt angrily off the floor. “I told you no more lies, and that’s twice now, Rainville.”

I can see he's sensitive about lies, though omitting the truth is technically not the same as lying. Fine, maybe I should've told him in advance. But I knew he wouldn't have gone through with it had I told him. I just really, truly just wanted my first time to be over and done with. I'm twenty-two and never had sex, never even had a boyfriend. So after what he said last night about waiting for him with a towel on, it sparked my imagination...and lust...all daylong.

That's what I get for storing pent-up frustration. I choose the first man who came along—though a fine specimen of a man he is, that's for sure.

"I'm sorry," I say, reaching for the towel. Suddenly, I feel so exposed. "I should've told you."

"You bet your ass you should have." Hands on his hips, he looks around and regains his cold composure from yesterday. "You have to go. First thing in the morning." He turns on his heels and leaves the room, and I've never felt more discarded in my entire life.

I can't believe this. I just got fired from my first nanny job. I don't know what I'm more stunned about—that I failed so miserably so quickly or that I loved every minute of it until the abrupt ending.

Crawling back into bed, I think about who I can call or text and cry to about all this, but it occurs to me that I can't mention it to anyone, not even Kaylee, my best friend at Duke. Joanne, my roommate in Queens? My mom?

I slept with my boss on the first day. I let him do things to me that no other nanny would have put up with. Then again, how many nannies have a superhot, ultra-masculine real live calendar model for their boss? I feel so stupid for having told him I was a virgin. It could've been our one-and-only time, and we would've moved on. I would still have a job.

But hindsight is twenty-twenty, and I'm the biggest idiot ever.

\* \* \*

Next morning, I'm packed and ready to go.

Vero is in the nursery with baby Olivia, giving me sympathetic looks as she bounces the baby on her knee so harshly.

I want to take over and show her how it's done.

This is really the saddest part of all this—that Olivia will be changing hands yet again. I'm so sorry, baby. I come up to her and take her little hand. "Goodbye, little one. I'm sorry I can't stay. I'm sorry I let you down."



## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:03 am*

I hold back tears. I don't know why I'm about to cry. I only knew her for a day.

"Miss Rainville?" Vero says, and I look up at her doe-like eyes. "Everything will be alright. I promise."

"Thanks." I fully feel her sympathy and kindness, guilty for thinking that a beautiful woman such as her would be unable to empathize for someone like me.

At the bottom of the stairs, Zayden awaits leaning against the wall, hands in pockets, like the GQ model that he is. Stoic. Hard. Unflinching. I can't believe I slept with him. I can't believe the things we did. I can't believe I'm leaving the house with my tail between my legs, which does not feel anywhere near as good as his cock did.

Shit, Bailey. STOP.

"I was rash last night. Angry and impulsive," he says, flicking something away with his nails. He looks at me, and I can see that something has shifted. It's a new day. "You don't have to leave."

I don't know what to say. In forty-eight hours, I've been rung through the emotional ringer more times than I can handle. My body vibrates with anxiety. "I needed this job," I say, keeping my eyes down. "I shouldn't have given in—"

"I shouldn't have tempted you," he cuts me off. He's willing to take partial responsibility. I can respect that. "However, what's done is done. We can't be physically intimate again. Consider today your first day of official employment."

So that means the sex was off the record. That's what he's implying. Oh, my God, I could die of relief.

Inod.

That should be it—we should go our separate ways. However, I'm torn by his "apology." See, the thing is...he doesn't actually apologize. He merely acts as though this was all some oversight on his part, like the entire thing was mechanical and accidental.

"Go ahead." His fingers whirl, indicating it's time to spin around and head back up the stairs. All I can do is stand there, hurt and confused. It would've made better sense for me to leave, but now I have to see him again, every day, acting like none of this ever happened. I have to pretend that he didn't take my virginity, slide into my body, or lay his head against my chest like a lonely child aching for his mother.

Whatwas that all about? Do all men dothat?

I have to pretend that last night never happened.

Swallowing my pride, I whisper, "Yes, sir. Thankyou."

\* \* \*

For the next several days,I concentrate solely on Olivia, how much better she's getting, how much more she's smiling and how much happier she seems the more time she spends with me. At least someone wants to spend time with me, unlike Zayden who keeps his distance for three days straight. When the house alarm beeps each night, alerting me that he's home, like a ghost, he slips into his room without so much as a hello.

Even though I catch fleeting glimpses of his stare down the hall whenever I'm talking to the baby, he quickly turns and minds his own business. Maybe I'm imagining things, but he seems envious that I get to spend time with her, as if he wants to actually be a daddy to his baby. But hey, he could change that about himself any time. He would really love his own daughter if he would only get to know her.

It's like living with a roommate who only comes late at night to sleep then leaves again in the morning. The staff doesn't talk to me. Maybe they're under direct orders not to interact with me anymore. Clearly, Zayden, Vero, the chef and assistant live in one world, and Olivia and I live in another. Upstairs and annexed in isolation.

"It's you and me against the world," I tell the baby during her night time bottle on the sixth day.

She smiles and gurgles.

"Yeah. That's just fine with me, too," I whisper.

Zayden

Longest week of my life.

Just knowing that Bailey lives with me, so close, yet so far, that I can walk into her bedroom any given night for a repeat performance drives me insane. I've bitten my nails down to the quick, and I don't even bite my nails. Vero and the others get to go home at night. They get to escape me. Not that I was ever really interested in them.

I surround myself with beautiful women because I've always loved beautiful things. I never took any of them seriously.

But something about Bailey...I can't stay away.

Especially since she told me I was her first. I can't believe she's never been with a man before. Why me? What the fuck made her decide—hmm, my billionaire boss—yeah, that's it. He's the one I want popping my cherry? Either she saw Baby Daddy written on my forehead once she found out Olivia is my love child, or she just wanted it over with. I remember feeling the same when I was sixteen, long after my mom left, and Dad took up alcoholism as his favorite hobby, and my mother's divorced neighbor, Cynthia, did me the favor of making me a man.

I haven't talked to Bailey about it, though I'm dying to know why she was okay with losing her virginity to me so quickly.

Though I know I can't talk to her—not about that or anything else.

The less we talk, the better. I won't be able to control myself around her.

Halfway through her second week, I catch onto the fact that she needs to get out. I don't mean another stroll through Central Park or a walk to Duane Reed just to clear her head, I'm talking she needs time away. I've caught onto the way she puts things down quite hard when she's stressed or angry, and according to Vero, she only does it when I come home.

Considering I'm the one who wants to give her more adult time—rated XXX adult time—considering I've been hovering around her end of the house thinking of reasons to talk to her, I think it's best if I give her time to herself for a while. I'm not a total dick.

When I knock on her door late at night, it takes everything in my willpower not to charge right in and pull her into my arms. In fact, I don't even look at her. "Miss Rainville," I say through the cracked doorway.

"Yes?" I see her shuffling in bed with her laptop. Must not have expected me to ever come back to her room.

"I haven't given you any time off. Tomorrow night is Friday. Why don't you take some time for yourself? I'll take care of Olivia." Realizing I sound stupid, since I've never, not once, taken care of Olivia, I add, "I mean she can stay with someone else for a while. Vero or whoever."

"Oh, wow," she says breathlessly, "I really needed a break. Thank you."

"No problem." I close the door quickly before I can see what she's wearing or not wearing. One look at her in a flimsy T-shirt baring any part of her body, and I won't be able to resist. I make it all the way back to my room, bolt the lock, and take out my cock, closing my eyes.

\* \* \*

The next evening, I arrive at home right as she's getting ready to go out. Olivia is downstairs with Helga, which means I see the baby against my will, but I remind myself it's for a good cause.

Miss Rainville doesn't know it, but I can see her leaving down the hallway and staircase through one of my many security cameras, the one I only keep in common areas. From my office, I watch her go. She wears a short black dress and heels, her hair is long and wavy, and she carries a clutch purse. In the foyer, she throws on her orange pea coat and heads out.

Wait.

My spidey senses start tingling.

Where is she going dressed like that?

Could it be that my innocent, virginal nanny has a boyfriend she's going to finally see tonight? Did she have sex with me while in a relationship with someone else? Or is she just looking hot as fuck on a Friday night?

My fingers rap the desk madly, and my knees bounce in measured beats. I can't take this. I have to know where she's going. I grab my hooded sweatshirt and run out of the house, pretending like I'm just going for a walk. But I follow her. I follow Bailey Rainville, even though I shouldn't. I shouldn't care where she goes. It's not my business. Then again, it is—she's my child's nanny. I have to make sure she's not getting into any weird shit—drugs, crime, maybe an underground poker game.

That's my story and I'm sticking to it. Yes, I know I'm acting crazier than I've ever acted about a woman before, but then again, I've been under more stress lately.

She takes the 6 train downtown and gets off at Herald Square. I stay a good twenty or thirty feet behind, and she never knows it. When she finally slips into a cheap bar I'd never frequent to save my life, I pay the admission and wait in the corner, ordering piss beer before settling into the shadows to watch her. Within minutes, I realize she's just meeting up with three girlfriends in the back. All of them about her age and pretty, but none with the ethereal quality of Bailey's dollface.

I feel utter relief and stupidity for having followed her. What I'll do is finish the beer then go home.

The girls laugh, have drinks, and garner a lot of attention from dudes everywhere. How can they not? They're gorgeous, but Bailey especially. Unknowingly, blonde, brown-eyed Bailey has minimum six interested men all in various states of self-confidence contemplating their opening move. One begins his approach.

I order another beer.

"Don't do it..." I mutter, watching the guy near her, moving in with staggered steps. "Don't do it. Ah, fuck, you did it."

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:03 am*

Buzzed Boy approaches Bailey, but it's clear that she's not interested. Good. Buzzed Boy ends up talking with another one of her friends. A woman starts talking to me. I use her as a shield but keep my eye on Bailey. Yes, I know I'm stalking her, but I have to know what she's like. Does she flirt, play hard to get, what? Two more guys come up, and one tries to hit her up, but she's not having it. I like this trend I'm seeing. Maybe I'll be able to sleep tonight afterall.

But then, some dark-haired douchebag comes out of the shadows, his hair all slick like he's trying out for a boy band in the 90s. I say douchebag, but of all the men here, he looks the most put-together. Clearly an executive with cash to spend and a charming smile to match, though misguided on hairstyles he may be, he closes in on Bailey as she's coming back from the restroom, but I'm not worried. She's been batting them off left and right.

Except she's not. This guy she actually talks to. Bailey laughs with douchebag, as her other friends move to other spots in the bar, so she's alone with him. He says a bunch of shit that makes her smile, throw her head back laughing, and something happens inside of me. My blood begins to boil. I don't know why—she's not my girlfriend. Why should I even care? Get the fuck out of here, Zayden, I tell myself. First of all, I followed her out on her only night out and now I'm watching her like I'm her father.

I can't help it, though.

I want to rip Douchebag's heart out through his throat.

Why?



That woman he's talking to was just mine last week. She let me into her room, she let me into her bed, she deemed me worthy of taking her virginity, which still blows my mind out of the water. And then I told her we couldn't do it anymore, so really, it's not her fault if she's talking to another guy. But I can't let her. The more he guffaws with that dorky smile of his, the more I want to make a hole in his face, the more I risk losing her to a loser.

Before I can think about what I'm doing, I'm making a beeline in her direction. She spots me before I even reach her, and her eyes widen gradually with an "oh, shit" expression. "Hey, sweetheart, guess what? It's time to go."

"Zayden, what are you doing here?"

Douchebag turns and gives me that look guys give each other when they're warning you to get the fuck away. He says nothing, though, and I wedge myself between her and him. "You can't be drunk then coming home to take care of a baby who needs you."

"Drunk? I haven't even finished one drink."

"Baby?" the guy says. "Excuse me, buddy, but who are you? Her dad?"

"Her boss, fuckface. What's it to you?"

Bailey's hands push against my arm. I'm riveted on Douchebag's pasty face.

"Seriously?" Bailey says. "You give me time to go out and now you're telling me I have to get back? What kind of time off is that? Bradley, let me talk to my boss alone, please," she says to the guy.

"Yeah, Bradley," I say as he retreats.

Once he steps back to the bar, respecting her request, she closes in on me, her light brown eyes chastising me. “What is this about, Zayden? Mr. Hawthorn, whatever it is I’m supposed to call you rightnow.”

“Bradley?” I snort. “You were talking to a guy named Bradley?”

“You have no right to be here. I’ve done nothing to make you think you can’t trust me, and I barely ever drink alcohol.” She scoffs and surfs through her contacts. “I can’t take this. I have to call the agency and let them know I’m not the right one for the job.”

“No.” I push down her phone with my hand. “It’s all good, Bailey. I just had to make sure you weren’t bringing home some random guy tonight. Not to my home, Olivia’s home. Can’t happen.”

“Are you kidding me ?” Her eyes blast open with an incredulous gaze. “I can’t...I just can’t...” She scans around, and one of her friends catches on to her distress, giving her a silent questioning look. Bailey waves her off as okay then leans into me again. “Please go. It’s been a confusing enough week staying away from you, and now you follow me here, and...and I don’t know what it is you want from me, Zayden. Are you my boss or are you more?”

“I’m your boss and nothing else,” I say.

I register the look of hurt in her eyes, as colorful lights swirl over her face. If that were true, then why would I be here, following her, acting jealous the moment she talks to some other guy? Douchebags named Bradley, specifically? All I can think of is that she’s the closest I’ve ever come to wanting a woman for myself.

Bailey Rainville makes me feel like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.

“I see.” She grabs her clutch, plucks a twenty from her wallet, but I grab her money and throw it back in her purse, tossing a fifty on the table instead. “The beer wasn’t worth fifty bucks,” she snarls.

“No, but seeing you in that fucking amazing dress is. Let’s go.” I pull her by the arm, but she rips herself out of my grasp, charging out of the bar.

“I don’t understand you,” she says when we’re standing on the sidewalk in the cold night air.

“Like I said, I wanted to make sure you weren’t up to illicit behavior. My child’s nanny has to be pure, maternal—”

“Stop with the pure and innocent bullshit. Look, I don’t care if you fire me, but I have to say, this is getting ridiculous.”

“I agree. It’s ridiculous that the first thing you do on your time off is go pick up men.”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:03 am*

“Meet up with friends,” she corrects, giving me a pointed look. “Not that it’s any of your business. If you’re going to be jealous of men talking to me, you have to tell me why. You have to tell me the truth. I see the way you stare at me at home—at your house.”

The truth? She’s delusional. There is no truth. Only this one...

“This is purely a business decision, to protect my investment.” It’s bullshit, and I know it the moment the words leave my lips. I wanted to watch her tonight, to know her outside her role within my home, to see her laugh with friends, how she behaves when she’s free, since I can’t take her out myself.

“Your investment?” she cries incredulously. “Who, Olivia? You don’t even spend time with her. I mean, geez, you couldn’t even spend a few hours with your daughter while I went out with my friends.” She scoffs, kicks a lamppost then turns to me again.

I have to hold my tongue or I’m going to say something I regret.

“You know what?” She hisses through the silence. “I’m not going to let you ruin my night. I came here to see my friends, and I’m going back in there. Goodnight.”

She turns back to the door but I block her path again. There’s something tight constricting my chest. “Olivia needs you back in an hour.”

Her eyes flash angrily at me. “Olivia needs her father!”

Darts. Carefully targeted. Her words pierce through my chest, and anger washes through me, but I don't know who or what exactly I'm angry at. She's done nothing wrong, and honestly, neither has Douchebag Bradley. He's only doing what I do every night of my life when I chat up random women to take home at BarNone.

Only, I don't care about them tonight. I haven't thought about other women in a week. They're the last things on my mind, honestly. More than ever, I want only this woman. She knows me and speaks to me like no one else. Yet I can't say anything, can't tell her that I suspect she's the reason. So I do the only thing I know how when I'm losing control of a situation—give orders.

“Your carriage turns back into a pumpkin at midnight. And then, Cinderella, I want you backhome.”

She gives me a fuck-you look but doesn't say it. And just like that, I'm back in control.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:03 am*

Bailey

Stepping up to the Hawthorn mansion is like returning to the Beast's castle after a dark night in the forest. And then, Cinderella, I want you back home. Who does he think he is? I may be employed by him, but he's not allowed to talk to me that way. As I open the door and enter the house, I see a young woman about my age collecting her purse, as though she'd been waiting forever for me to get home.

A car pulls up behind me, and she brushes past brusquely. "The baby's asleep. She had her full bottle, but it took her a while to go down. I think she's teething. Goodnight."

Zayden hired a babysitter to watch Olivia.

Of course, he did, or he wouldn't have been arguing with me at Griffith's. Amazing that he couldn't watch her himself. He wasn't kidding when he said he didn't want her in his life at all. It makes me so completely sad for her. Could I ever be involved with a man who doesn't love his own baby?

No. Which is why, the sooner I get him out of my head, the better.

I head upstairs to check the baby. Sound asleep. I close her door and glance at Zayden's. Closed as well, though the light of a TV illuminates the polished dark wood floors. I should go over there and tell him I didn't appreciate what he did tonight, but I remind myself how nice it is to have money in my bank account and instead, I change quickly in my room. This has been the second weirdest night of my life.

Unfortunately, I can't stop thinking about the first weirdest.

The weirdest and most pleasurable and then the most devastating...

The heat in the house feels toasty from the cold but it's made me parched, so I open my bedroom door again, looking to see if anyone's around. I'm in my T-shirt and panties, and I know I shouldn't go prowling around the house this way, but it'll be quick—thirty secondstops.

I sneak down the stairs, shuffle into the kitchen, grab a glass and press it against the refrigerator door. Tomorrow, I should order a mini fridge for my room (along with that bright yellow pillow), just so I won't have to run into Zayden anymore. This is a job and nothing else, I tell myself. Take care of the baby, get paid, and get back home all the richer when it's done. I should think of him as callously as he thinks of me.

Standing in the kitchen downing the glass of water, I feel my worries washing away. I refill it and prepare to take it upstairs with me when I hear a voice coming from the darkness of the living room which scares the living shit out of me. "Is that how you walk around all your employers' homes?"

Water splashes over the rim of the glass and trickles onto my shirt. "What the..." I see him, sitting in a leather chair shrouded in darkness like a freakin' mobster waiting for his target in the alleyway. I almost can't speak.

"Oh, I forgot," he drawls. "You don't have much experience. You just pretend to know what you're doing."

"That's not true," I mutter, catching my breath in my throat.

"It's not? You don't think you've misrepresented yourself, Bailey? In all matter of things?" His voice is stern but resolute. Like he's done chastising me, and now he just

wants to tease me. “Comehere.”

I shouldn’t. He’s a wolf in the dark, a predator taking advantage of my weakness. He knows I want him as much as I hate him, and he’s milking it for all it’s worth. Why should I give him the satisfaction?

Because you needit.

The way he commanded your body last time, that’s what you want. What you waited for, Bailey. Boys weren’t good enough—you needed a man. Go tohim.

Even as my brain wants to argue, I take tentative steps toward him, my feet padding on the floor, the glass trembling in my hand. When I’m a foot away from him, I see him more clearly, leg bent in the chair, in the same jeans he wore earlier, his shirt open and unbuttoned. A hand reaches out of the darkness, illuminating in the pale kitchen night light, and takes the water from myhand.

“I said, comehere.”

I come closer. I can’t speak. I can only fall under his spell. Why am I so willing to forgive him for being a dick tonight? Because he was jealous. I believe he was jealous, which means he feels something forme.

When I don’t move quickly enough for him, he reaches an arm out and pulls me by the waist, still holding the glass in his other hand. My knee falls between his on the leather seat for support. Before I can protest, he holds my leg in place and shoves my T-shirt up, exposing my breasts in one swiftmove.

Igasp.

What is this man doing to me? Why can’t I stop what I feel forhim?



My nipples stiffen at the exposure to the raw air. With the glass, he lifts it and lets a few streams of ice cold water trickle down the center of my chest between my breasts. He smiles in the dark and watches as I gasp again. Once more, he sends the ice water snaking over my skin, causing my nipples to harden, and then he sets down the glass and both his hands press against the small of my back.

I'm drawn to him, to his lips, as they close in around one nipple, as his tongue teases and flicks, circles then sucks hard. My God. I want him so badly. I loved watching him charged with energy tonight even as he embarrassed me. I loved seeing him filled with envy just knowing I was giving my attention to some other man.

Moving to my other breast, his hand comes up and squeezes it into his mouth, stuffs it more like it, like he can't get enough until the entire thing is in his mouth and then he sucks and lets out a sigh against my skin. "I've thought about you all week, Bailey. You want to know what I'm thinking. That's what I'm thinking. How I can get you in my mouth again, how I can slam myself into you again. Is that what you want to know?" He grabs my ass with both hands and digs his thick fingers deep into my skin.

"Yes," I breathe.

"We can't do this again, yet I don't want to let you go. I let you leave just a few hours tonight, and look what happened." He lifts the rest of my shirt, and I use both hands to support myself on his hard, wide chest. My tits fall into his mouth, and he takes them in again, sucking harder than before.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:03 am*

Spikes of electricity shoot through me. I'm instantly wet, and my knee presses against his thigh, leaning against his hardness. I've never seen nor felt a cock as big as his before, and suddenly, I need to feel it deep inside of me again. Fillingme.

My fingers need no instruction. They work at his buttons and all the layers of fabric between me and what I want. "What's the rush, Bailey?" he asks cheekily, "Is there something youwant?"

"Something I need," I whisper, dipping low to kiss him, take in his tongue and breathe in his scent.

"Is that right?" He kisses me, still dark and teasing. "Looks like you're misrepresenting yourself again. Earlier you wanted nothing to do with me, andnow..."

"Because you're so hot and cold...I don't know what to think," I say, biting his lip hard, but not toohard.

Angrily, he pulls back, stares into my eyes a moment, then flips me around before I can think about what he's doing. Now my back is against his chest, and my legs are forced apart by his bare knees. The only thing between us is his unbuttoned shirt. "What you should think is that I want you, that every moment of every day, I am forcing myself to stay away fromyou."

With his fingers, he slides down my panties until they touch the floor and then he bends me over. I bite my lip and relish what comes next—a slap to my ass. Then, another one. "And this I've been wanting since day one. Are you going to have this,

too, Bailey?”

Does he mean fucking my ass? Because I’ve never done that, haven’t even considered it, really, and don’t know how I feel about it. “I would have to take it slow,” I say.

He laughs behind me, and another slap vibrates through me. “I wasn’t talking about fucking you, Bailey, although I like how your mind works. For such a young woman, your mind is in the gutter. I can work with this.”

“What did you mean then?” My fingertips touch the floor. My ass is wide and exposed for his viewing pleasure. I’ve literally never felt so open and susceptible.

“I mean take it, slap it, do this to it...” Suddenly, his hot fingers slide into my pussy, and I groan, my sounds echoing through the vaulted ceilings of the mansion. A moment later, his fingers slather against my ass, as he applies my juices to another spot. “And this...” Then, his tongue presses up against me.

My pussy clenches so hard, I could come just from his tongue.

Never in a million years would I let a guy eat my ass out, a guy I barely know anyway, but here I am allowing my boss do it. When I signed that contract almost two weeks ago, I may as well have signed all my powers of regulation away, because I’m losing it quick. I push back against his mouth, as his tongue and lips sear against me. I never thought this would feel so good, but Zayden knows what he’s doing.

“Look at you...” Grabbing both ass cheeks, he squeezes them around his face and presses his mouth into me, his tongue licking up my slit and near my asshole. I could die of embarrassment and come at the same time, I’m right on the edge. “You love me tasting all of you, don’t you?”

“Yes.” I can barely breath, much less speak.

“Thought so.” I can hear him fussing with something crinkly, and I know he’s about to put on a condom, but for some odd reason, I wish he wouldn’t. Maybe not tonight but some other time, if we do this again, if I survive this nanny gig, I want to feel him with nothing on. Just his skin against mine. “What do you want now, Bailey?”

“I want you insideme.”

“You want me to fuckyou?”

“Yes.”

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, please.”

“Yes, sir, sassy little girl.” One hand wraps around, fingers stuffing into my mouth to quiet me. “And just so we’re clear, you are asking me to fuck your wet little cunt and put you out of your misery. Is that right?”

I’m growing more agitated and wish I could turn around and slap him, maybe bite his lip really hard this time for having too much fun with my needs and wants. He definitely loves seeing me in my most helpless state. I hear him chuckle, then I feel his hands gripping my waist. I prepare for the inevitable, and then suddenly, he’s pulling medown.

“Yes,” I groan from deep in my chest.

“Ask and you shall receive, sweetheart.”

Big, fat cock straight up my pussy. I scream and bite down on my lip. So much for taking it slow, going easy on the virgin. Holding onto my hips, he pushes me down further and further onto his cock, and stars explode in my vision when he sits me down all the way.

So utterly amazing. So perfect. Even as I cry out with muted, blissful pain.

Zayden Hawthorn fills me up, and I lean back to feel it all the way. My arms circle around his neck, my head drops back onto his shoulder, and he nibbles at my ear and traces the lines of my neck with his tongue. With all the muscles in his back, he holds me slightly elevated and bangs me ferociously. His other hand works my clit, pats it, and flicks it, working every angle until he finds the right one.

I don't need my hands this time. He's got it covered, and not only that, I'm going to come any moment. "Yes, Zayden..."

"That's it. Me, nobody else. I claimed you as my own and now you're mine, Bailey. Got that? Everything you need, you get it from me." The rhythm of his strokes brings me higher, closer to letting go. For someone so rough and crude at times, his fingers are so delicate, putting just the right pressure on me. I can tell that he can be gentle when he wants. He can make love if he wants, just not tonight.

## Page 19

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:03 am*

At that moment, I resolve to stop at nothing until I see the other side of him. There has to be more. I feel it in his touch, in his kiss, and the way he says my name. He can't help being a man obsessed by a woman who perplexes him, and I'm honored that I drive him mad.

Before I can reach that final high, though, I'm being hoisted through the air, carried all the way to the couch, placed against the backrest, so he can get better leverage. And then, as I brace myself, he fucks me. Fucks me hard. Fucks me like the tease I've been, like the impertinent young woman he's been trying desperately to tame. But I won't shut up. I'll keep challenging him, as long as he keeps saying stupid things that don't make sense.

I don't care how rich he is, I'll keep pushing his buttons.

His fingers press my clit, as he fucks me harder, as he grunts with need.

He thought he was showing me who was boss, but right now, as I feel him building energy, getting closer to what he truly wants, as he slams his cock into me, balls slapping my ass, as I open up and receive him completely, I know the truth. I may have been the virgin last time, but right now, Zayden Hawthorn wants me as badly as I want him.

And that means I have far more power in this relationship than I ever imagined.

We can never do this again? he demanded. Yeah, right.

He's a walking, talking contradiction. He wants me more than he's ever wanted

anything in his life, and I know it.

You couldn't stay away. You had to have me again. You had to follow me. You hated seeing me with another man. You proved that you can't control yourself around me.

I feel a surge of excitement, a thrill at the effect I have over this confident, arrogant, gorgeous billionaire who has intimidated me from the moment I lay eyes on him.

Suddenly, Zayden groans out loud, like being cut with pure pleasure. Maybe he's used to getting what he wants, and in this case, he wanted to have nothing to do with me. But I affect him, I make him angry, I make him uncomfortable. I like that. Very much. And just as he comes into me, pumping his hot seed deep into my pussy, it's enough to send me over the edge.

I let go along with him. Wave after wave of blinding white radiation shoots through me, wracking my muscles and numbing my brain. I love everything this man does to me, even as he drives me in-fucking-sane. I collapse onto the sofa and he falls on top of me, fighting for breath. His mouth is hot against my hair, his heart pounds against my back, and his hands continue to feel my body, even after his cock begins to loosen slightly. But then, he begins to harden again, and I know we could do this all night, but holy shit, I'm physically and mentally exhausted.

After feeling powerless for a week, it feels great having control again. For once, I don't feel unsure of myself.

I just hope the feeling lasts. Somehow, I don't think it will.

Zayden

The sun filters in through the blinds, waking me up slowly. It's hazy in the room. I have to think for a minute about what I did last night, where I went, who did I end up with. That dreaded feeling of looking down to see who's sleeping next to me is replaced with relief.

Bailey.

We did it again.

She shifts around, her long nude body writhing against mine in sleep, then we both hear it—an annoyed, raspy wail from far away. She sits up suddenly, her blonde hair mussed up over her face. “Shit.” Scrambling off the sofa, she nearly trips over the throw blanket's fringed edges, grabs her shirt and panties and runs off without a word.

I lay on the couch looking up while she tends to the baby upstairs.

It's not a terrible feeling, I realize with a shock. Waking up to a woman in the silent aftermath, as she runs off to take care of your child. There's peace and contentment, and for a moment, semblance of a family, but it's not real. It's an illusion. She's the nanny, Olivia is a daughter I never wanted, and the ethereal quality of the morning quickly evaporates.

I gather my shit and head upstairs. No staff is coming by today. I need a shower, a shave, and I should get the heck out of here before I seek out Bailey again. After telling her we couldn't have sex again, we had sex again. And what's more, she



seemed to love every second of it. Like she knew I'd weaken, wouldn't be able to follow through, and I hate feeling thatway.

I stop at the baby's room to peek inside to find Olivia sitting in the same T-shirt in the rocking chair holding the little midget that looks like me. There's something maternal and peaceful about it, I don't know why I've been so scared of the tiny human. She's actually really cute the way she drinks from her bottle and leans against Bailey's chest, probably listening to her heartbeat the way I did last night.

"Looks like everybody wants you," I sigh, leaning against the wall.

Bailey smirks at me. "She was crying a long time," she says in a sexy, throaty voice that's soft with sleep. Her crossed legs bounce to a rhythm for the baby's sake. Gorgeous legs, gorgeous woman. "I'm sorry I didn't hear her in time. We should have a baby monitor downstairs."

We don't. We don't because I didn't want to hear crying in any part of the house, but it wasn't so bad hearing her when I awoke. And what if something had happened to her? We wouldn't have known and I'd have felt guilty if something would've been wrong. "I'll order one," I say matter-of-factly.

Bailey glances up at me with a grateful look. "I thought you didn't want to—"

"I said I'll order one." I glare at her. The baby examines me like I'm a stranger watching her have breakfast. Because I am a stranger watching her have breakfast. I walk into the room and sit on the floor eye level with her on Bailey's lap. Damn, she's not cute, she's beautiful. Of course she is. I mostly only sleep with beautiful women. "I have to say, she's a very pretty baby. Of course, she is, she's got my genes." I try to turn it into a joke as the discomfort ripples through me.

That can't be my child.

Can't be.

Bailey smirks at me. "I'm sure her mama is just as beautiful." Weird of Bailey to defend the mother, even though she knows she's in jail somewhere. I guess that's what I get for sounding smug, though I was kidding.

"Is she?" Bailey asks again, pushing me now.

I don't answer. I don't answer because she's trying to get me to talk about it, but I don't want to. I didn't know Olivia's mother very long, and it still bothers me knowing that she lied. I turn the tables around, let her answer the questions. "The baby's taken to you, huh?"

Bailey stares at me, wondering why I brushed her off. Then she shrugs and gives Olivia an affectionate glance. "Yeah. We were strangers at first, but I think I've grown on her. Now we're thick as thieves. Right, pumpkin?" She tickles the baby who smiles, as she bites on the bottle's nipple.

"You look like you've been a big sister before. Have you?" I ask.

"Never." An air of darkness shadows her face.

"Sorry to hear. I was a big brother once." Wonder if we have something in common. Wonder lots of things about her, actually.

She shakes her head. Olivia reaches out to touch my hair, but I back away. She goes back to holding her bottle. "I'm an only child. My mom...she suffered lots of miscarriages over the years."

"That must have been tough," I offer awkwardly. That must really suck, to hope for the best and life lets you down over and over. I can relate in so many ways, and

there's my common ground with her.

"Thanks, it's okay. She finally carried my little brother to full term, but he died at birth," she says introspectively, still staring at Olivia. For a second, I can't move. We have more in common than I originally thought. Maybe I was drawn to Bailey for more than just her spunk in that interview room.

"So, you're not an only child, then," I say. "You're a big sister who lost her sibling."

She nods sadly. "I guess. And the desire to be a big sister stuck with me, too, which is why I signed up with the nanny agency. Perhaps I thought being around little ones would quell that little nagging voice in my head."

"Wow, that must be tough." I scratch at my eyebrow. I imagine Bailey as a little girl anxiously awaiting the arrival of her little brother only to lose him before she could ever rock the big sister role. Watching her with Olivia, as Olivia finishes her bottle then cuddles warmly against Bailey, memories hit me out of nowhere.

As Bailey goes on talking about friends with large families and how she was always jealous of them and wanted a big family when she grew up, I see my baby brother, Callum, in my mind's eye. Callum was two years younger than me. I adored him. Some kids find their younger siblings annoying, but I was in love with this kid. He had a happy smile and always wanted to show me what he could do.

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:03 am*

Look at me jump, Zay!

Look at me roll, Zay!

You would never be able to tell that inside, he was dying. Literally. Such an active kid, so full of life. Like any normal person, I allowed myself to imagine a future with him, growing up as best friends, always having each other's backs. But it wasn't meant to be. Callum's heart defect took a turn for the worst one night. And if I go there...if I think about it, I'll enter a bad place.

I can't.

"Zayden, are you okay?" Bailey dips her head to look into my eyes. I guess I went away for a second there.

"Yeah, fine."

"You looked like you'd seen a ghost."

Because I had. Callum's bright laugh was the single most memorable thing about my childhood, and for a few moments there, I saw him again. I look down to find my hands are shaking. I can't do this. I can't hang out in this room or come anywhere near the baby. They look so much alike, and that's when I realize it's not me Olivia looks like, it's Callum.

I stand, staggering to my feet, and back into the door.

“Zayden, are you okay?” Her worried eyes are full of concern. I’m confusing the fuck out of her first by coming in to talk, then by leaving quickly. First, I claim her virginity, then I stay away from her, then I follow her on her night out with friends, then I wait for her to come home, then I open up to talk, but now I’m going to run away from it all.

Especially those goddamn memories.

Fuck.

I clear my throat and set my jaw. “I have to go shower and head out is all.” I have nowhere to go, nothing on my schedule for today, but I need to find something, because I can’t hang out at home and see these two interacting. I’ll go hang out at Bar None again, something, anything. Surely there’s a movie premiere or something I can crash.

Breaks my fucking heart. There was a reason why I asked Bailey to stay away from me, and it wasn’t just because Olivia interrupted my life. It’s because the two of them together remind me too much of what I lost.

My mom and my brother. For different reasons, but that’s when my old life ended.

Soon, my new life began, the one of hiding the pain. Of putting all my energies into my work. Full scholarship to Cornell and my plane rental business is what saved me, gave me something to focus on, think about every day. No, families aren’t for me. Been there, done that, and I can’t get sucked into the vortex one more time.

“I hope it wasn’t something I said.” Bailey cocks her head as she studies me.

“It wasn’t.”

She stands with the baby and takes a couple of steps toward me, but I back out into the hallway, away from her. Away from my daughter. Away from the past and the pain.

## Page 22

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:03 am*

Bailey

Understanding Zayden has been a bit like experiencing the solar eclipse we had this August. He's fully bright, radiant, and confident in himself, but then he slowly darkens, grows colder until he's fully eclipsed by the moon, birds have stopped singing, and I can tell something is wrong. I'm guessing he'll come out again at some point, but for now, I've spent nearly a week watching him hide again in eerie darkness.

What was it about that conversation in Olivia's room that sent him running away?

What was it that I said?

I've thought about it so many times, and all I can gather is that he's holding onto some kind of bitterness, maybe from a past relationship gone bad.

He was never married but that doesn't mean someone didn't break his heart...

I've researched Zayden online, but all the articles talk about is his business savvy. One article mentions he came from loving parents who later became estranged, and that's all I have to go on. Add in a surprise baby, and I can see why his life might be a little stressed right now, but I wish I knew what it was exactly that made him swing from one end of the spectrum to the other when it comes to me.

We could talk about it. We have some things in common. It kills me that he puts up these walls when it seems to me that we could get along better if we'd actually interact.

Meanwhile, the time alone has allowed me and Olivia to grow even closer. She sits up now when I come into her room in the bright early mornings and grabs onto the crib railing, bouncing happily when I bring her her bottle. Our walks through the park are one of my favorite times of the day. We can take in the late fall surroundings, pick up pretty leaves, or watch the other children play in the playground.

Olivia looks like she wants to join them. She seems to think her lack of walking skills betray her, as she stares at the kids wide-eyed, awaiting the day when she, too, can climb those monkey bars and slide down those colorful slides.

But there's sadness, too.

Olivia examines faces. Especially those of young women, and I can't help but wonder if she's looking for her mother. Do babies remember their moms after a while? I would think they do, and it breaks my heart that I can't be that person for her.

"Hey, pumpkin," I interrupt one particular staring session at a pretty, dark-haired woman with two toddlers. "It's getting late. Let's get you home for dinner, a nice bath, and bedtime."

Olivia blows bubbles from her shiny, pouty lips. "Bbb-bbb-bbbbzzz-bbbb."

I laugh out loud. She's too freakin' adorable. So much happier than during her firstdays.

A couple of older women walking through the park compliment me on my gorgeous little girl, and I thank them. It's easier than explaining I'm not her mother, only the nanny. Besides, I'm starting to think of myself as her surrogate mom anyway. I know I shouldn't—I'm supposed to stay impartial, detached, according to the nanny training videos they made me watch. And if Olivia's real mom would come home from work every night to hug her little girl, I would have no issue keeping my



distance, but that's not reality.

Reality is: all she has is me.

And I've gotten super close to her because of it.

I'm in too deep and hope I don't experience a full breakdown withdrawal when her mother gets out of prison and comes looking for her little girl. I wish Zayden would talk about her. I wish he would tell me what's going on in his brain.

Stick to the job, Bailey. No more, no less.

Just as I'm walking in, something smells delicious. Helga is at it again, just as Vero pops out of a doorway I've never been through. "Oh, hello, Bailey and little Miss Olivia." Vero nudges her perfect nose against the baby's, but Olivia gives her evil ice stares. "We were just on the roof. Go look at the sunset. It's gorgeous."

The roof? Wow, I've been here two weeks and had no idea there was a patio for sunset viewing. She holds the door open for me. I walk through carrying Olivia, reaching back to grab her blanket off the kitchen counter and notice a circular stairwell leading up.

"Ooo, a secret passageway, pumpkin. Daddy's house is a mystery, isn't it?"

In so many ways. Starting with Daddy.

If it wasn't obvious that Zayden is a billionaire before, it's clear now. Only the richest residents of Manhattan would have a rooftop patio like this. Though it's cold and windy the higher we go, the view is spectacular. The sun hasn't even set yet. I'm amazed that Vero left without waiting for the grand finale. I guess that's what happens when you're used to something—you stop appreciating it.

Oranges and purples streak across a sky painted with thin clouds. The whole city is coming alive with dotted lights, and there's energy I can't even explain. New York City is just wonderful, and now, I'm one of the lucky few who get to experience it thisway.

“Look, pumpkin, a live painting just for us.” I hold her close to me so she'll stay warm. We sit on a lounge chair and watch the colorful collaboration of nature and mankind. Olivia and I keep each other toasty. We both have so much to think about, and I suspect the common thoughts are about her father. If only she could tell me what's in hermind.

Once the sun disappears under the horizon, I clap and whisper into the wind. “Beautiful show. Thankyou.”

I'm about to get up when I hear soft footsteps behind me. Zayden stands there holding a tumbler full of amber liquid. “So you found my best kept secret?” He hands me the glass.

I shouldn't imbibe while on nanny duty and decline it politely. “Thanks. It's beautiful. You're a lucky man, Zayden.” I hope I can call him Zayden and not Mr. Hawthorn. I mean, we've pretty much crossed that line, haven'twe?

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:03 am*

He sits in the chaise opposite mine and folds his hands, looking out over the city. “Luck has nothing to do with it. Hard work, discipline, and a strong desire to stay distracted gave me all this.” He’s contemplative and somewhat open today. Even though I’m freezing my ass off, I think I’ll stay to see if he says anything more.

It’s the closest he’s gotten to me in the last week ever since our tryst in the living room. I’m tired of being kept in the dark. I think, at the very least, I should know a few things about him. And Olivia. “Zayden, if you don’t mind me asking...”

He angles one eyebrow at me.

I know. I know he doesn’t like talking about himself. But I have to know. “When will Olivia’s mom be out of...you know...”

“Jail?” He chuckles then shakes his head. “Uhh...your guess is as good as mine, Bailey. Are you wondering how much longer you have with her?”

Olivia gurgles as though she understands the question. I hold her closer to ward off the chill. “Maybe. We spend every waking moment together, you know. The ladies—Vero, Helga, and the other one...”

“Nance,” he offers.

“They don’t spend too much time with her either.”

“They’re under orders not to,” he explains.

“Why?”

Zayden sighs, sips from the wine glass. “It’ll be easier on everyone when she leaves, Bailey. The one who’ll take it the hardest will be you, but that’s because you have no choice, because...well, you’re her nanny.”

Fair enough.

“What about you? I mean, she’s your daughter. Not to throw it in your face, but doesn’t it bother you that you haven’t gotten to know her?” Maybe that’s going too far, but I can’t let my heart fall for a man who has no desire to love his daughter, and right now, I’m trying to decide if my heart has any say in my life.

“It’s complicated,” he mutters. “Of course I want to know her. Correction. I would’ve wanted to know her had this been done the right way, had I fallen for her mother, but I barely know her mother, and all of this interrupted my way of life.”

“So you can’t love her because she was a surprise?” I’m not sure I can accept that answer. “But she’s an adorable baby. I wish you could get to know her.”

“I can’t love her, because...” His lips press together, as he thinks of the right thing to say. I’m relieved he doesn’t have an immediate answer. Maybe that’s an indication that he’s not sure how he feels. I can accept that. Even as he’s making excuses.

“Because?” I prompt him.

His jaw sets and then twitches before he finally answers. “I know I’ll lose her.”

This makes my eyebrows draw themselves into a knot. He knows he’ll lose her? What makes him think so? “Because you’re afraid her mother will take off with her once she gets out of prison?”

“Not so much that. There’s more. I can’t talk about it.”

Okay... I’m burning to know more about him. Normally, I’d politely bow out, but I’m curious about Zayden’s situation, and God help, but I actually care for him. I think there’s more to him than meets the eye, and I’d hate to think he’s holding back on being a great dad out of fear. “Then, can you tell me about her mother?”

More sighs and shakes of his head. I know I’m pushing the envelope. He’ll soon regret coming out here to talk to me. “I met her on a business trip over a year ago,” he says, standing and walking to the edge of the building, one hand on the protective railing. “She was a waitress, and I was a red-blooded man who’d hook up with any beautiful woman I wanted.”

My insides twist at his words. Does that include me?

He glances back at me. “You want honesty?”

“Yes,” I say. I do, even if it hurts.

“I’m a wealthy man, Bailey, and my kind of money attracts women. The wrong sort, mostly. That’s just the way it is.” He swallows down half his drink. I love watching his lips, the way they smack together. His eyes, the way they gaze into the distance, sucking in what little light is left.

Especially when he’s drop-dead gorgeous, sociable, and smart like Zayden is. I suppose I can’t blame him. “I get it. Go on...about Olivia’s mother.”

“So after work, she meets up with me, and I take her back to my hotel room. Sex was on the menu. No feelings whatsoever, by the way...” He gives me a pointed look, like I’m supposed to feel better because it was only physical. Or is he suggesting that with me, there were feelings?

He continues before I can analyze it.

“Neither of us was cautious, and she assured me she was on oral contraception. Obviously, she wasn’t.”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:03 am*

“Or, she was, and it didn’t work,” I offer.

Mistake. Zayden gives me a look suggesting he doesn’t buy into that theory. “Again, I’m a wealthy man, Bailey. This was deliberate.”

I’m not going to argue. Maybe it was, maybe it wasn’t, but I don’t know Olivia’s mom from a hole in the wall, so I’m going to give Zayden the benefit of the doubt because at least I know him.

“Anyway, we went our separate ways, and that was it. Then, last month, I’m contacted by social services telling me Noelia Bardem claimed I was the baby’s father and I was required to take a paternity test.”

“Noelia...”

“Olivia’s mother. So I did, and paternity was established as positive, and here we are. I don’t know much else. Social services told me I could fight for custody, but I don’t have any intention of doing so.”

“What? But why?” I ask, aghast. “You could give her a much better life than a mom who’s in and out of jail, couldn’t you?”

“Like I said, I’m not good when it comes to losing people. I’m not cut out for this.”

What makes him think he’s not cut out for it is what I want to know. In fact, this whole conversation, Olivia’s enraptured listening to him talk, as she bites down on my hand to ease her teething discomfort. It’s like she knows him, like they’ve been

connected soul-to-soul for quite some time and she's only waiting for him to acknowledge her presence.

"Did something happen to you?" I ask all out of the blue.

It's an out-there question, but something inside me says it's the right question.

Zayden doesn't answer, doesn't even move, as if frozen.

"Did someone hurt you, Zayden?" I follow up.

He stares at me.

"Because I feel like someone did. I can see you've had a hard time." I watch him across the space between us, cold NYC evening air growing uncomfortably chilly. His silver blue eyes gaze at me, brain going a million miles a minute. He's going to get up and leave any moment, watch.

"You're a perceptive one," he mutters, breaking our stare. He downs the rest of the whiskey in one gulp. "But too insistent." And there he goes, leaving the roof, taking his aura of mystery with him.

I struck a nerve. I'm sorry if I hurt him, but at least now I know. Something did happen, and that gives me hope that he's not just a complete asshole. Because who wouldn't love this little girl I'm holding once they get to know her? Nobody.

Olivia gurgles and looks up at me, like asking, Where did he go?

"He's running away," I tell her. "It's a common thing people do when someone calls you out. But I'll get through to him for you, pumpkin. If it kills me. You deserve it." I boop her nose, and she giggles. I hold her closely and close my eyes. If I could make



her father love her, I would do it at any expense.

Zayden

“I’ll be working from home this week.” On the phone with my secretary, I flip a photo of Callum over and over again. I don’t usually pull it out of my drawer to look at it, but oddly, I wanted to this morning.

Thinking about my little brother the other day and seeing Olivia interact with Bailey all week has reminded me so much about him. I’d almost put him entirely out of my mind, forgotten he existed. It’s easier that way. Now, however, I see the resemblance between him and my daughter, mostly around the eyes and smile. Man, if I didn’t know better, I’d say he was reincarnated in Olivia’s body.

Bailey said I should get to know her, that just because she was a surprise in my life doesn’t mean I should ignore her.

I can’t help but think she might be right. Lots of guys keep in touch with their kids even if they live with their mothers. Who’s to say this can’t work? Just the thought of it, though, makes me nervous.

My secretary says he’ll inform headquarter staff and will keep me abreast of any important goings-on in the office. Hanging up, I feel strangely at a loss. I never have the whole day to myself, so I start by telling everyone to go home—Vero, Helga, Nance. That day when Bailey, Olivia, and I were the only ones here in the morning, we almost felt like a family. I want to feel that again, as much as the prospect scares the living shit out of me.

In the kitchen, I’m making a protein shake before working out when Bailey comes

downstairs toting Olivia in her arms. “Oh. I didn’t know you were here.” She backs up two steps.

“I’m going to be home for a few days,” I say. “Working from my home office.”

“Oh.”

“I hope that’s okay with you,” I say with some sarcasm.

“Of course,” she says brightly, heading to the foyer closet where she keeps the stroller. “It’s your house.”

I should ask her if she wants to do something, go somewhere. I want to get to know Olivia a little more, but I don’t want to be alone with her. I definitely don’t think I’m ready for that. Assuming she’d want to go anywhere with me, considering she hasn’t had any contact with me up until now.

I clear my throat. “Going somewhere?” I ask.

“Out and about. Why? Are you going to follow me, then yell at me?”

Man, this girl is cheeky as fuck. And I kind of love it. “Where you headed?”

Her head pops out of the foyer, confused look on her face. “I wanted to find a baby décor store downtown. Someone told me they have unique toys there, and since she’s starting to crawl, I wanted to get something inspiring for her.”

She’s such a good nanny, I swear. I was totally a jerk by telling her she didn’t know what she was doing those first few days. And here goes nothing...

“Do you want company?”

The shocked look on her face alone is worth the weekoff.

\* \* \*

“And here I thought I’d be taking the subway everywhere,” she says later on, as we’re leaving the baby store in my limo. My driver today, Frank, has been a great sport driving us around, going in circles while Bailey shops then we head to the next spot. That way, I don’t have to park anywhere.

“You could ask Frank to drive you anywhere, anytime you need,” I remind her.

“It’s more fun to stroll,” she says. I can’t argue with that. Especially on the kind of days we’ve been having.

Because we took the car, she left the stroller at home and brought the baby car seat instead, which means every time we get out to see another store, she ends up carrying Olivia around. I’m amazed by how easily she hooks the baby on her hip, like she’s been doing it her whole life.

“You’re going to make a great mom someday,” I tell her as we enter a home store filled with colorful weird décor. If it was me, everything would be gray and black all the time.

“Thanks, but...I don’t know.”

I know better than to ask questions, considering I’m the last one to give any details, but what does that mean? That she doesn’t think she’ll ever have kids? Or she doesn’t think she’ll make a good mom? I let it go and try to focus on the moment.

Truth is, I’m having a great time following her around, learning about her tastes, seeing how Olivia clings to Bailey. I love watching them together. They’re like peas

and carrots, like Forest Gump and Jenny, inseparable. However, at one point, Bailey wants to check out a small cabinet with drawers too small to put anything good in them. “Can you hold her a minute?” she says, handing Olivia over to me as if it’s no big deal.

And that’s when I freeze. My chest stops processing oxygen. My limbs go rigid, and my face feels like it’s going to fall off. Olivia and I look at each other like we both know this is not a good idea.

She’s just a baby, Zayden. Don’t be an asshole. Just fucking hold her.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:03 am*

Reluctantly, I take the chunky monkey into my arms. Whoa. She's not that heavy. And she feels...nice. Warm, soft, and I don't know...dependent, but in a good way. I'll never understand how anyone could hurt a baby. With the way she stares at me like counting on me not to drop her or do anything stupid, how could I? Yet I have. By avoiding her, I've been hurting her.

I want to explain to her why I've stayed away, but somehow I don't think she'd care.

It's a good reason, though.

I keep telling myself that...

Bailey smiles knowingly and takes way too long looking at the cabinet, and I know she's drawing this out on purpose. I'll get her back for this. After the cabinet, she checks out the lamps, side tables, and wooden plaques that say dumb inspirational things like "If your ship hasn't come in yet, swim out to it," or "If you can dream it, you can do it."

"Do women really need signs on the walls to remind them to be strong?" I ask.

I expect Bailey to crack a smile, but instead it's Olivia who giggles. She baps her wide-open tiny palms against my face. Now, Bailey laughs pretty hard. "She just slapped you for that remark. Good girl, pumpkin. Good girl." Bailey presses her forehead against Olivia's.

Pumpkin. I remember my mother used to call my brother "angel heart" and me "zombie-Zay." Why he got the angelic name and I got the monster name, I'll never

know, but I still remember it fondly. Those were the good days. Before it all went to shit.

I want to press my forehead against Olivia's but decide against it.

"We better go before I want to buy all these pillows and blankets, and...I guess you noticed I have a thing for home goods." She smiles that naughty smile I love and holds out her arms. "Want to give her back?"

"Nah, I'm good," I say, surprising myself as much as Bailey.

Olivia doesn't throw her arms out to Bailey, which I guess means I'm allowed to hold her a little while longer. When she excuses herself to use the restroom a minute, though, Olivia looks worried. Very worried. "It's okay. Shh, baby, it's okay." I use the same words Bailey's used before to calm her down. She doesn't fret but keeps her gaze expectantly in the direction of the bathrooms.

While she's gone, I call Nance and have her order half the items from this store to all be delivered home by no later than five o'clock tonight. Can't wait to see the look on Bailey's face when they arrive.

\* \* \*

Back home, Olivia goes down for her nap, and in my room, I watch a movie, thinking about how amazingly well that outing went. So normal. What was I afraid of? I still worry. For me, for Bailey. What happens when Noelia gets out of jail and wants the baby back? Should I be allowed to let her? Is Noelia the best parent for Olivia? Who's to say. Lots of people grow up with less-than-perfect parents and end up okay. Look at me.

On one hand, I want the little human to be happy, but on the other, I wouldn't want to

keep her from her mother if she misses her. I don't know what to do, but this is the closest I've ever come to even considering it. A warning bell inside me tells me I need to start reeling back. I'm getting too comfortable with these people who weren't a part of my life a month ago.

When the stuff arrives from the home goods store, I know it's here because Bailey shrieks all the way down the hall. "Oh, my God, you didn't!"

I can't help but smile.

Entering the hallway, I find her at the top of the stairs going through assorted boxes with the biggest, girliest smile on her face. She hugs every item—the weird cabinet thing, the dumbass "If you can dream it" sign, four different throw blankets, a lamp she liked, and...three bright yellow pillows.

"For your boring gray room," I tell her.

"Thank you!"

Then, the unexpected happens. She drops everything and runs up to me, arms latching themselves around my neck. Hugged. I'm getting hugged by Bailey Rainville. I savor the moment and inhale the scent of her skin and hair. I'm not a complete dick in her eyes right now. I can be a gentleman, a nice guy once she gets to know me.

Do I want to, though? Make her happy?

I don't imagine myself in a relationship, but at the same time, I can't imagine this woman with any other man. It's literally driving me batshit crazy this second just thinking that she might hug some other man the way she's hugging me right now. Fuck no. I don't want that, so I have to decide.



My arms instinctively curl around her waist, and I draw her in. She lets me, and the chemistry between us flares up right away. Instant connection. Instant chemistry.

We could slip away into my room right now, while Olivia plays in the nursery. I could let her thank me in special ways. But...I don't want her to think I'm buying her love. I don't expect sex for those things. I bought them because I knew she'd love them. But fuck...she smells and feels so good and tight and small and womanly in my arms, it's hard to pull away. Maybe she'll settle for this instead...

A longkiss.

Deep and soft, a dance between us, exploring and drinking in. I hold her face with both hands and let myself fall into her world. Really get to know Bailey's mouth and lips without taking it to the next level. We've been impulsive. We've rushed to fulfill desires as quickly as possible, but sometimes you just have to slowdown.

Kiss. Taste. Explore.

I push her against the wall and kiss her some more. I can't get enough and my cock agrees. With how hard I've gotten already, I could take her up against this wall, but like good parents, we think about it but can't. A child awaits in the next room. I settle for pressing my body against her, so she knows how I feel.

Olivia makes a shrieking noise in the nursery, and Bailey pulls away. "I have to go," she breathes, her chest heaving, as she fights to regain the air from her lungs. "Thank you for the stuff. It will make my room look really lovely."

"I'll come see it later," I tell her, swiping my thumb across her lips, pressing a kiss into them one last time. And I mean at night, after Olivia's gone to sleep, when it's just us in the house.

“I’ll look forward to it,” she says, pulling away and letting go of my hand, our gazes still connected. “Don’t belate.”

Bailey

Butterflies race inside my belly.

I've never waited with baited breath for a man to come to my room before, and now it's happened twice in a month. When that man is NYC's hottest bad boy billionaire, Zayden Hawthorn, the butterflies are times a thousand. My body vibrates with need just sitting here waiting.

Sure enough, around midnight, he knocks quickly and then props the door open without waiting for me to open it. I know I should be offended at his invasion of privacy, but I also like the way he just takes what he wants. It's not like me to feel that way, but Zayden has taken everything I thought I knew about myself and smacked it hard on its ass.

I honestly don't know who I am anymore. Maybe I never knew at all.

"How do you like it?" I spin around showing him the transformed room. I've put up tiny string lights, the bedspread and pillows are now gray and yellow, and the room looks a million times better than before. I almost feel like I live here, like I'm an accepted member of the family.

"Cute." He eyes me like a wolf searching for blood. He wants nothing to do with the décor. He's only here for me. "Suits you perfectly."

I cringe. "That word—cute. I hate it. When I was in middle school, a boy I knew rated the girls he knew as 'cute,' 'pretty,' and 'beautiful.' Guess which category he

put mein?"

"Insanely sexy?" His eyebrows rise.

"Nope."

"Banging hot ass sexy?" He takes my hand and places it on his shoulder, takes my other hand and puts it around his neck. I'm sure he can feel my heart pounding against his stomach.

I laugh. "Nope. Come on, you can do it."

"Let me guess. He put you in 'cute,' because he was an imbecile who couldn't appreciate the beauty right in front of him." Zayden bends down to kiss me, but I pull away to look into his eyes reflecting the string lights.

"You just called me cute, too," I say.

"No. I called your room cute. You, however, are fucking sexy as fuck. See? I just used fuck twice in one description. That's how hot you are."

I giggle, loving this silly side of him. Wish he would be like this more often. "That'll do." I let him kiss me, and things scorch up very quickly. I've been waiting for him for the better part of two hours now, so I'm wet in no time. Doesn't really take a lot with Zayden.

We stand in the middle of the room, making out, hands all over each other. He inhales a long whiff of my hair. "You showered and didn't wait in your towel for me. Tsk, tsk. How dare you."

"I can shower again." I arch an eyebrow.

He takes my hand, and pulls me out of my room.

“Where are we going?”

“My shower. No offense to your sparkly light palace. Mine’s just better.”

“None taken.” I’ve been dying to see what his room looks like anyway.

Zayden leads me inside, his presence bigger and naughtier than ever before, and I feel like I’ve been let past the threshold of an exclusive club. When we arrive to his gorgeous, sprawling bedroom the size of a small house, he presses a button and the blinds open, letting in the most unreal view of downtown Manhattan I’ve ever seen. “Go get in the shower. Be naked and wet when I get there.”

Dear God...

My insides crumble. Will anyone be able to see me naked when I walk out?

Do I really care?

I do as he says, and after about a minute in the shower, he walks in fully naked, his cock springing out like a massive snake, as he pushes me against the wall. His hands grip, search, and feel, as the solidness of his body presses against me. Zayden’s hand scoops around my head, and his other wraps around my waist, reeling me in. I’ve never felt smaller, more delicate, like a molecule getting tossed around by energetic forces.

I melt into his kiss, because there’s nothing else for me to do but follow his command now, let him sway me whichever way he wants. He’s in control tonight. Me, I’m a rag doll in his hands and it’s better this way. He knows what to do. He’s the one with all the experience, and I want him to lead me. His lips and tongue explore me, as his

hands masterfully mold my neck then my wet shoulders beaded with hot water. My body gravitates toward Zayden, thrusting against him in the building steam of the shower.

I want my neck between his teeth, I want my tits squeezed by his massive hands. He reads my mind and body beautifully, kissing the desperately aching skin of my neck before reaching down to squeeze my tits, searching for a hard nipple to pinch and massage. “Love these,” he mutters against me. “Perfect for sucking.”

When I groan, a moan escapes his throat muffled up against my neck.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:03 am*

His hands are massive and thick, and I love them. One of the sexiest parts of his body. How many women has he handled this same way? Why is he so into me, I wonder? I'm nothing compared to all the socialites he dates, all the hot women worthy of a billionaire's attention. Then I remember that I'm beautiful. And I'm smart. And I like to think I know him, can challenge him.

Still, I'm flattered, because I'm plain compared to them. Zayden could have any woman he wants, he's so incredibly hot. But he wants me.

When his hands aren't enough, I push his body downward, and his mouth slides along my hot, wet chest. He sucks in one nipple, letting it go with a loud pop, flicking it with his tongue, sucking it lightly between his teeth. I suck in a gasp as he takes the whole thing into his mouth. Zayden makes me feel beautiful, forgetful of my surroundings. He drinks in my breasts like they're made of honey. He even gives them a light slap before squeezing them together for one final suck. Then, he points to the built-in shower seat made of tile.

"Put your beautiful ass on there," he commands.

His voice and the way he looks at me makes my insides twist. How long are we going to keep doing this? Sneaking around by night, then pretending we're just boss and nanny the next day? I could do this every night if he's willing, though at some point, I'm going to want to know where we stand.

Sitting on the cold tile, I wait while he aims the shower head all over the seat and heats it up. Then as more imaginary butterflies flit around my body, he slowly kneels on the shower floor, kissing my tummy and digging his fingers around the chunky

flesh of my ass. “I haven’t stopped thinking about you since the moment I saw you.”

I gasp, closing my eyes to feel his thick fingers touching me.

“I don’t know what it is, Bailey. But you make me crazy. I may have to have you every night now.”

“Fine with me,” I breathe.

“Is it?”

For now, I think. I mean, the thought of having mindless crazy sex every night right now sounds utterly appealing, but I know myself, and soon, I’ll wonder if that’s all he wants me for. I’ll wonder how important I am to him. “Yes. I want this. I want you,” I tell him, trying not to take any of this too seriously.

His index finger traces down my center line then slides into my folds. He presses into my pussy, as I gasp, brings his fingertips to his lips, and sucks off the wetness. “I want this, and I want you, too. I want to bury my face in your cunt. I want to taste that goodness.”

“Then, do it,” I tell him, throwing my head back and holding onto his thick, wet hair.

“Spread your legs wider. Show me everything.”

I open up, holding nothing back. Everything is bare and open for him to take. I’m vulnerable and charged and ready for him to do whatever he wants. I may as well be his sex slave, because I have no control right now.

I lean back, powerless to resist him, nor would I want to anymore. I watch as he scoops my ass and breathes in the aura of everything I have to offer. Zayden



Hawthorn's handsome, gorgeous face is between my legs—that fucking amazing mouth kissing me softly at first then licking at the opening of my pussy all the way up to my most sensitive core and swirling it around there until my moans fill the shower.

His mouth breathes fire onto my skin, mixed with the steam and the hot water, I feel like I'm going to faint from how dangerously high I feel in every way. His finger slips inside of me slowly, and I moan and push my cunt into his face harder. He drinks from my body, making every lick and suck of my clit a work of art. His fingers drive into me faster, and every time I look up to see him, adoring my body, knowing that he loves it, that he wants to do this to me every night, I almost reach that point of spilling over.

Suddenly, he pulls away and slides up to my face to kiss me. I taste the sweetness of his kiss mixed with my essence, and it pushes me closer to him, closer to that pure lust I have for him. I'm so drawn to this man, and I don't know why. I don't even care if this is right or wrong anymore. I just want to feel good.

"Let's dry off. It's too hot in here."

"Definitely too hot." I fan myself, totally caught off-guard when he slides his hands underneath me and carries me out into the bedroom. I shriek and he smirks at my inexperienced silliness. I feel so girly with him, like I have so much to learn. And my ass is cold and dripping wet, and that part's not so fun. Luckily, it's warm in his room thanks to the heat and fireplace that's magically turned on in the time we were in the shower.

I won't even ask. Zayden has every techie gadget and control known to mankind.

I'm being carried by a tall, strong man, as we drip water along the floor. I try not to pull myself out of the moment, but there's been so many firsts in just a few weeks, it's hard not to. Zayden lays me down on a shaggy cream rug in front of the fire, and

immediately kneels between my legs, grabbing me by the ass again and sliding me toward him. He presses the head of his cock against my aching, slick folds.

“You know what I love about you?” he asks, and I almost come just from the sexy look on his face. There’s something he loves about me? I raise my eyebrows and bite my lip. “You look so sweet on the outside, Bailey. You say you’re new to this. Yet...you’re such a bad girl. You love everything I do to you. You really are open to learning. Just like you said in your interview.”

He presses the head of his huge cock harder onto me.

I push my fingers into his mouth just to watch him suck on them. My pussy flares up again, pushing me higher. “Guess I needed the right boss to show me what to do.”

“That’s right. I’ll be sure to write Le Nanny a great review letting them know that Miss Bailey Rainville takes orders and is eager to please.” He thumbs my clit with one hand and holds his massive cock with the other. He slides it up and down my slick cunt, and holy shit, I want to feel him filling me up now.

I want him claiming me, taking me for his own.

“And maybe you didn’t know it when you walked into this house, but you needed a good fuck, Bailey. Not just from anyone, but from me. That’s why you chose me, didn’t you?”

“Yes,” I breathe airily. It’s hard to admit, because it’s putting myself out there, but I did need someone. Not just for a fuck, but to show me how it could be between two people. “It had to be you. Slide into me, Zayden. Please. I can’t wait anymore.”

He cocks his head. “Your wish is my command, sweetheart.” Suddenly, he pushes in and slams into me, all the way to the hilt, balls deep, as my head throws back. I

scream out loud. Stars explode in my vision, and I feel his fingers digging into my mouth to stretch it open. “Open that pretty little mouth, that sassy mouth. Cry out forme.”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:03 am*

He fills me so deeply, so good, I feel strangely complete. I've never felt this way before, never knew sex could be like this. I thought it was just bodies building to a release, like a sneeze. I never understood it was more—it's about play, about trust, about souls spiraling upwards together, like a dance with a final crescendo and lift. I love having his cock stretch me out, his fingers flat against my clit, teasing me to the edge. I love that he knows what to do to me, because I sure as hell don't.

He pulls out, taps my clit, cocks himself, then plows into me again. Harder this time, then harder, slamming against my core over and over. The pressure inside of me builds so deliciously, and I know I'm on the edge. Zayden fucks me hard and good, like he said, my boss banging my ass on this rug, expertly fiddling with my clit while he watches my face, intently waiting for the signs.

Holy...

My legs tighten around his waist, as I lock him in.

"Give it to me, Bailey. Give me that sweet cum of yours all over my fat cock. Come on, sweetheart..." Just seeing this normally fine-ass, well-dressed billionaire boss completely naked and now talking about his fat cock is what I need. I can't take it anymore. "Come for me," he demands again.

"Yes, sir," I say instinctively. He's my boss after all.

I come hard, reaching a powerful high, as the pulsing sensation throbs all throughout my core and body, spreading and radiating outwards, warming me all the way through. It's the most intense orgasm I've ever felt, my muscles squeezing endlessly,

as Zayden continues to fuck me through it all.

“You got it...” He groans in his triumph. “That’s it, sweetheart. Do it.”

And right when I think it can’t get any better, he joins me.

With a long groan, he comes right into me, sending himself shooting into my body, filling me up and claiming me yet again. We’re together in this thing. Whatever this thing is. I don’t know if he realizes it, though I just did—but he hasn’t used a condom. I won’t get pregnant, since I’m on the pill. But what does it mean that he didn’t bother to use protection? I hope it means that he trusts me, like I’m starting to trust him.

It should feel dangerous, but it feels right. It feels like this is where we both belong. I shouldn’t think about it so much, but I can’t help it. I breathe in the totality as fully as I can, aware of every breath, basking in the moment.

Dare I say it? This wasn’t like other times. This was something else. This was more.

We made love, and I don’t care if he denies it later—that’s what happened. And we enjoyed every minute of it. He collapses onto my body. I relish the weight of him pressing against me, as he breathes gently into my neck and reaches around for a blanket on the sofa and covers us both. We’re dry by now, the fire having done its job, but I’m shaking and don’t know why.

“Gotta wrap up my Bailey like a little burrito,” he says.

Good Lord. Is this even the same man who’s been torturing me with his hot-cold attitude all this time? He’s happier than I’ve ever seen him.

He takes my face in both hands, presses his beautiful lips against me, and holds me

close. His skin smells so wonderful, his strong chest against mine feels reassuring and delicious. But I can't fall asleep here. "I won't hear the baby," I say, fighting as exhaustion threatens to overwhelm me.

"You will." He points to something on top of the mantelpiece.

A baby monitor. Zayden bought a baby monitor for his room? Oh, my God, my heart is melting. So he does care about her, or he wants me to stay more often in his room? Either way, it's a step in the right direction, and now I don't have any reason to run back to my room tonight.

This may be wrong on some levels, and he might be the most complex man I've ever known, and this may be crazy, but it feels perfect. He's opening up. What does it all mean? Can I handle this when the time comes to question it? Don't think about it now, Bailey, my heart tells me. Think about it tomorrow.

So I enjoy this, whatever it is, for a full minute. Before I fall soundly, happily asleep.

Zayden

It goes on night after night.

After night.

Me and Bailey, hooking up after hours, after the baby goes to sleep. Sometimes it's hardcore. Sometimes it's sweet. Sometimes I leave right afterwards and sometimes I fall asleep in her arms. Those are the most conflicting moments. On one hand, I want to breathe in her skin and stay warm by her chest all night. On the other, I yearn for days gone by, a family torn apart, and paradise lost.

Yes, paradise lost.

We had it all as a family, but Callum's death destroyed it. Some families pull together after tragedy. Some fall apart. That was us. I'd put the death of my brother and family out of my mind and locked it away in a safe, but being with Bailey and Olivia these last two weeks has brought lots of memories back.

Memories I don't think I can handle.

So I drown out the pain with nightly visits to Bailey's room. I'll do this for as long as she'll let me. We don't go out much, and when we do, I keep my distance. I don't want anyone thinking we're a family, because I don't want it getting into Bailey's head. At a café the other day, someone said that she and her "husband" and the baby made a cute little family, and Bailey didn't bother to correct them. I know that being intimate is blurring the lines and sometimes it might be hard for her to remember that

she's the nanny I hired, not my girlfriend.

Of course, if I wasn't damaged goods, she would be my girlfriend. My girlfriend and so muchmore.

Not only is she gorgeous, but she's great with the baby, she's smart as a whip, and she's the only woman I've ever allowed to feel like she's keeping me in line. Whenever she gets sassy on me, I'll smirk, let her get away with it, and that makes her happy. Again, it's all about that smile. I'll do anything to see it everyday.

Almost anything.

While I work from home all day, I can hear Bailey having a tough time with Olivia. Those teeth are coming in something fierce, and the little thing can scream her head off. After she finally falls asleep, I come prowling around Bailey's room. The first few days of this ongoing sex streak, she comes looking for me, all gung-ho into it. But lately, it's been me seeking herout.

I knock and open the door. She's wrapped in a towel. "You lookhot."

She smirks, no smile. Instead, she walks around the room, throwing a brush here, tossing a hair clip there. "I can't find my fucking round brush for blow-drying."

Bailey, cursing? Doesn't happen often. "Why do you need it? You look sexy as fuck just like that with your hair allwet."

Another smirk fromher.

A red flag goes up. Maybe it's that time of the month. "You okay, sweetheart?"

She sinks into the edge of the bed and crosses her arms and legs. Serious shit's



coming. I can feel it. And this is how the honeymoon phase begins to end. “Why do you call me sweetheart?” she asks, a seemingly innocent question—but somehow it makes the earth vibrate beneath my feet.

“Because it’s my name for you, and you love it. You don’t want me calling you sweetheart anymore? Fine, sourheart. Better?” I laugh, but she doesn’t think it’s funny.

“I used to love it,” she says, her foot shaking violently up and down. “I don’t know why it bothers me now.”

“Fine, then I’ll stop.” I walk up to her and brush her hair back behind her neck. She takes my hand, waits a moment while she decides what the hell’s bothering her, then lo and behold...shoves my hand away like it’s a snake about to bite her. “What the fuck, Bailey?”

“What the fuck, Zayden?” She stands and begins pacing. “What the fuck is that we’ve been doing this every night for what? Almost three weeks now? And I don’t know...”

“You don’t know? What is it you don’t know?”

“I don’t know what we’re doing. I mean, is this all there is? You come to my room at night, take what you want, then rinse and repeat?”

“You take just as much from me,” I reply. “Nobody’s forcing you to be with me, Bailey. If you don’t want me coming anymore, I won’t. End of story.” I head out of the room. I don’t need this shit, and this is why I don’t do relationships—complication.

“No, that’s not it. That’s what you don’t understand,” she says, moving toward me. “I do love us spending time together, but we only see each other at night, in private, and

that's it."

I turn and face her, my patience waning. "What do you want from me? I'm a busyman."

She scoffs. "Yeah. Okay."

"You don't believe me?"

"Remember when you started working from home? Remember the day we went out shopping and spent the day together?" Her eyes plead with me to remember. I do. I'm just trying to forget the happiness I felt that day. It was most certainly only temporary. "Why can't we do that again?" she asks.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:03 am*

“So you want to go shopping again? This is about shopping.”

Her face contorts. “Jesus, Zayden, you don’t get it! Didn’t you love that day? Don’t you want to go out again?” She paces again and then she stops, facing me. “I’m starting to feel that you’re just using me.”

“I’m not and you know it.”

“Do I?” she scoffs. “How should I know it? When all the signs point to you using me for sex. You know how I know? Because I won’t tell my parents about you, about us. For weeks, I’ve been wanting to tell them that we’re involved with each other, that I think I’ve met a great guy. Then I stop and think, no I haven’t.”

“Nice. Very nice. Stick a knife in my belly while you’re at it.”

“Truth hurts, Zayden. We haven’t even gone out on a single date. This...you, me...it’s nothing. This nightly thing we’re doing might be fun, but it amounts to nothing in the grand scheme of things.”

I knew it’d come to this. It always does. It’s a shame because I really like Bailey. I run a hand through my hair. Because I know I can’t give her what she wants. She wants a boyfriend. “What you’re asking from me, it’s not possibly.”

“Why not? What’s so bad about going out and getting to know each other—and I mean knowing something besides what turns you on? We fall asleep afterwards. We never talk. That’s not how I was raised, Zayden. I love making love to you, but I need more. I deserve more.”

“That’s not my problem,” I say flatly.

Her mouth hangs open. Yeah, I sound like a dick, but I never told her I was open to “more.” I don’t do “more.” She knew that from the beginning. Why is this such a shock to her? “You know what you were getting with me, Bailey.”

Her eyes are watery now. “That may be true, but I thought maybe things were changing. Don’t you feel them changing? The last few times we’ve been in bed have been...I don’t know...different. You told me two months ago that you don’t make love. That you ‘fuck.’ Well, that’s changed, Zayden. Tell me your feelings haven’t changed. If you tell me they haven’t, then I won’t bring this up ever again.”

They have changed.

Absolutely. And that’s why I didn’t want to get involved. Now, I feel like I’m falling for her, a dangerous result, one I’d warned myself about a dozen times. “What do you want from me?” I ask again. I want to hear it clearly.

“I don’t want to be your dirty little secret anymore,” she says. “That’s how I feel. You come here at night, we do things, and then in the morning, the ladies come to the house, and I’m just a nanny again. Every night, you make me Cinderella. And every night, my carriage turns back into a pumpkin. For just once, I wish we’d go for a wild ride in that damn carriage.”

I thought she was going to say for once, she’d like the slipper put on her foot and have a happily ever after. That, I can’t do. Commitment from me is out of the question. But I can take her on the wild ride. I don’t have a problem with anyone seeing us together. My friends are used to seeing me with different women anyway. I’m allowed to like some more than others.

“Then, there’s Olivia,” she adds before I can get in another word.

“What about her?”

“I want...” She hesitates. “I want you to consider keeping her. She’s your daughter and she’s grown to love you so much. Don’t you see it in her eyes whenever you—”

“No.” This is where I put my foot down. Courting her, taking her on dates is one thing, but turning me into a family man is not something I will ever bend to. I stand at the window staring into the Upper West Side. “I won’t do it.”

Even behind me, I can hear her sigh. “I can’t stand this cold side of you, Zayden. I don’t know why you do this.”

“Well, get used to it,” I say, spinning around and heading for the door. This whole conversation has ruined my mood. “Look,” I tell her, pausing at the door. “You’re not my dirty secret. Let’s take it public, I’m fine with that. But I’m warning you, that’s as far as I’ll go.”

She crosses her arms. “Honestly, with an attitude like that, I’m not sure I even want you to take me out anymore. You’re being a dick again.”

“I’d rather be a dick than a liar. Plenty of guys lie straight to your face then act different the moment you turn around. Look, a few weeks ago, you asked me on the roof if something ever happened to me. I never answered. But you need to understand that some people are fucked up for life, okay? And I’m one of them.”

She stands in the middle of the room hugging herself in the chilly draft. “Whatever you’ve been through can be overcome. People do it all the time. They learn to love and move on.”

“Not everyone. And not me.”

“Will you ever tell me what happened?” she asks, her tone softening.

“Not today. Get to sleep. Tomorrow we have a big day ahead of us.”

“Where are we going?”

“It’s a surprise.” And she’s going to love it.

Bailey

I'm standing on a tarmac. About to get on a small jet plane—a G7.

Had Zayden told me ahead of time that he'd be taking me on a plane ride, I would've locked myself in Olivia's room, handcuffed myself to her crib. When I said I wanted him to take me on dates, I meant like The Cheesecake Factory or a Mets game. I didn't think we'd board a private jet piloted by Zayden Hawthorn himself and fly over the Hudson River Valley.

"Since when do you know how to fly?" I follow him up the aluminum steps. Toward impending doom. I'm going to die today. It was nice knowing everyone.

"I didn't think I should open a private jet rental business without actually knowing how to fly."

"Make sense." I swallow hard, my stomach twisting with anxiety.

He leads me into the cockpit where he turns on a few switches. "I've had a license for eight years now, Bailey. You can relax." The panel has a bunch of controls, buttons, levers, switches, and my stomach starts to hurt. Seatbelts too, which strikes me as funny, because if the plane goes down, I'm not sure how the seatbelt is supposed to help. "Come on, let me show you the back."

He leads me out of the cockpit and into the fuselage. "Holy hell, it's the Ritz Carlton in plane form." My eyeballs nearly fall out. There's leather seats, coffee tables, sinks, sofas, flowers in a vase, and... "Is that champagne?"

“Yes, it is. Would you like some?” He begins unwrapping the bottle and uncorks it like a pro. I cover my ears and shriek like a total girl, as he pours champagne into a glass that probably costs more than my old laptop.

I sip it, enjoying the tickly bubbles under my nose. I’m grateful that Zayden isn’t having any himself, considering he’s going to be piloting this hunk of metal through the air. “Is this a typical plane you rent out in your business?” I don’t know anything about planes, but this one is gorgeous—sleek and sexy. If I was a famous rock star and I was late to my concert in LA, I’d want someone to take me there in this baby.

“Yes, we have G6s and G7s, and some bigger planes for larger groups. Did you want to lounge back here for a while or come with me where the action happens?” he asks. “In the cockpit, I mean.”

My eyes widen even more.

“Do you want to watch me pilot?” he clarifies once and for all. “Come on, dirty girl.” He squeezes my waist, wrapping his arms around me, and kisses my cheek. His warm breath so near my ear makes me wish someone else were piloting so we could fool around in the back and join the Mile High Club.

But considering I nearly accused him of using me only for sex last night, it makes sense that today he’s focused on showing me around. I’m grateful for it, and by the time we sit, put our headsets on, and Zayden says all the things he’s supposed to say to the air traffic controllers to get him ready for takeoff, I’m no longer mad at him.

I’m in awe.

Seeing him outside of the home, in control of this aircraft, really changes things. I’ve been living inside of a bubble for two months now, and sometimes I forget that Zayden has a life outside that bubble. In his nice shirt, jeans, wearing that sexy watch



and pushing all those buttons, he's a man in charge. My life is in his hands.

His hand reaches over and rests on my knee. "Bailey...it's okay. You're safe with me."

I nod. "I know."

Finally, it's take-off, and the engines scream, revving up that potential energy you feel right before you race down the runway on a commercial flight. My nerves are in my throat. I've never liked flying, but I have to push out of my comfort zone and try new things. How many people can say that their boyfriends fly a private jet? Not many. Every so often, I steal glances at Zayden, so handsome and sexy, hands on the controls, eyes vigilant as he controls the aircraft.

Is he my boyfriend?

The status still isn't clear, but at least we're out together.

We soar over the countryside and Hudson River, the hum of the engines a steady ambient white noise. He switches between talking to the air traffic controllers and talking to me, and he tells me when we can speak to each other through the headsets.

"So?" he asks.

"It's amazing. Really amazing. Look at all those houses. Those cars look like little ants."

He nods. "You know my favorite part?" he asks, like a child with a glint in his eyes. "Going through the clouds. It blows my mind every time, that we're that high up, close enough to touch them."

“Please don’t touch them,” I say, gripping the armrests. “Please keep your hands on the steering wheel.”

“On the control wheel,” he corrects. “Here, see this? This is the altitude indicator. And this, these are the navigation controls. This is your radar, this is the throttle, and these are the rudder/brake pedals.”

“What’s this?” I point to a panel in the middle displaying a bunch of graph lines.

“That shows you how hot you think I am. See how the needle keeps going up?” He gives me a slight arrogant smirk. “Damn, slow down, Bailey, or you’re going to start melting.”

“Ah, thanks for clarifying. I thought that was your bullshit meter,” I say with a straight face. “Watch out. It’s going off the charts!”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:03 am*

Suddenly, the plane dips and rights itself again. I shriek, my nails digging into Zayden's jeans. "What'd you do that for? Please, don't. Please don't do that."

"Let's not forget who's in control here."

Yes, it's hard to forget. He pretty much runs the show. My life is in his hands, I get it. He gets to decide if he's going to keep Olivia, he gets to decide if he's going to fire me or keep me at my job, and he gets to decide how far we go in this relationship. What happens if his decisions don't suit me? Do I want to keep having sex with Zayden night after night without delving deeper into a more serious relationship?

How far do we go before I start demanding more again?

I don't want to ask about that now while we're having a good time, but if things get more serious, I'll need to know. I can deal with him not being Olivia's primary caretaker if and when her mother gets out of prison, but I can't deal with him not taking an active part in her life. I don't just mean sending her money either. I mean having a visitation schedule, seeing her regularly, and fighting the courts for more access to his daughter.

This relationship is twisted and unhealthy in some ways, but I can't stop the way I feel about him. Those emotions aren't just physical either. There's something between us that neither of us can fathom or understand. If I tell my friends about Zayden and me now, they'll only say I feel that way because he's my first. They'll say that being Olivia's nanny and being with her father in the same house pretending as though we were a family is dangerous. That I'm only setting myself up for hurt.

Maybe I am.

But that doesn't mean I can just flip a switch and stop either.

About halfway to our destination near Bear Mountain, Zayden says, "Put your hands on the controls like this. You're going to fly."

"What? No way, Zayden!"

"Just do it, Bailey. Nothing's gonna happen. Come on. Like this. Look at my hands." He shows me how to hold the controls and then dips it forward and back again ever so slightly. "Do that and you'll feel the pull."

"Oh, my God, I hate you right now," I say, putting my hands where he tells me and following his instructions. Warm hands rest over mine, showing me how to push forward on the controls. I feel the plane dip then he pulls back again.

"See? You're flying. Still hate me?"

"No. Oh, my God, I can't believe I'm doing this." But I do, and the more I do it, it gets easier and less scary, and besides, it only lasts a couple of minutes. My heart pounds inside my chest but I feel amazing.

When we land, immediately there's a fancy black sports convertible waiting for us. We drive around, ending up at a small town called Cold Spring where we have lunch and walk around. For once, there's no baby between us in public. Just us, buying hot chocolate and checking out a bunch of antique stores along the way. Zayden holds my hand, and for a day at least, it feels like I have a boyfriend.

Dare I say it feels normal? Like we've known each other our whole lives?

How did I live before meeting Zayden? I almost can't remember.

With a guy like Zayden, I'd never get bored. We'd always find some new place to fly off to, have new experiences, and find new things to talk about. I'm usually cautious with relationships and putting myself out there. It's the reason I haven't had a boyfriend yet. But damn, I have to say...if this is how it is? I could get used to it.

\* \* \*

When we finally arrive back home after a long day of plane rides, car rides, and more car rides back to the city, it's nearly midnight, and I'm officially bushed. The babysitter says goodbye, tells us that Olivia's first tooth came in, and that she had a good day. I'm jealous that I wasn't here to see her first tooth come through, then I remember I'm not her mother and don't need to be the first to see her milestones. I'm a caretaker, just like the babysitter.

So why do I feel so envious?

I feel like I should've been the first to see my little girl's tooth come in.

"Let's go see her," I tell Zayden, running up the stairs that are beginning to feel like home to me.

"You can see her. Tell her I say hi."

"Zayden, come on, you're her daddy. It's not going to kill you to check in on her. We've had a great day. Come on, let's end it with some cuteness viewing." I enter Olivia's pretty bedroom and find the chunky monkey asleep in her crib on her side, her cute little mouth slightly open.

To my surprise, Zayden actually listened. He came into the room with me and now

stands by my side, hands in pockets, staring down at her like he's not sure what to think.

I can tell he wants to hold her. I know Zayden more now, and he can be a sweet guy. There's no way he can look at such a gorgeous little baby that's half him and not want to hug her. She's not even mine 1% and I want to. "She loves you, you know," I whisper. "I see it when she looks at you."

"She hates me."

"She does not, Zayden. She's curious because you watch her but you rarely interact. Why not let that guard down sometimes? You'll find that she's a lot of fun to be around." On the wall next to me, I pass my hand underneath the antibacterial gel dispenser and rub it all over my hands. Then taking the tip of my finger, I swipe it inside her mouth lightly to find that her lower tooth has indeed come out. "Look, feel here."

"Nah, I've been touching airplanes all day."

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:03 am*

“Fine,” I say, “but tomorrow, take a look at her tooth. She’s growing up, Zayden. Soon, she’ll be a woman.” I hold back a laugh.

“Off to college,” he says, linking his arm around my waist.

Quiet moments pass. “I had a great day. Thank you, Zayden.”

“My pleasure, sweetheart.”

This feels nice.

Here we are, watching Olivia sleep, talking about her like she’s our own daughter. One day, this bubble’s gonna burst, my conscience tells me. One day, your job here will be over. What are you going to do then?

I shush my thoughts, because I don’t want to deal with them now. I’m having a nice moment with these two and for the first time in my life, things feel complete. I have a beautiful home I get to live in, a handsome, complicated man who’s trying his best despite being out of his comfort zone, and a little baby who may not be mine, but I love her to pieces. My pumpkin chunky monkey.

Some would say I have it all. And I get paid for it.

They would be right. But who knows what tomorrow will bring?

I dip down to kiss baby Olivia on her cheek. Her little lips pout as though she’s drinking from her bottle, and she sighs. When I look at Zayden, he’s smiling. His

hands cradle my face, and he looks into my eyes, and then slowly, he comes in for a kiss.

“You...are the best thing that baby’s ever had,” he says. “We should all be so lucky.”



Zayden

Something has shifted.

I know I'm in too deep, but I can't help myself. It's like an orgasm when it begins. There's a moment where you can catch it, prevent it from happening. Then, there's the moment where someone kicks you over the cliff and it's too late—you fall. And no matter how much you scrabble to catch earth with your clawed hands, you can't stop yourself.

It feels too good.

And so we go out together more often as a couple. In fact, Olivia now sees her babysitter a couple times a week because Bailey and I go out so much. Most nights, we go out alone, checking out new restaurants and bars or just taking walks around the city. Sometimes we go out by car, and I love peeling through the streets in my Bentley, hearing her shriek and laugh her ass off.

I love her laugh.

If there was a sound that could get my ass up out of bed every day and tackle the world when I was feeling depressed, it'd be the sound of Bailey's bubbly laughter. It even makes Olivia laugh, and when the two of them get going, I'm a goner. There's no way I can resist both of them.

“Do you mind if I stop by the office a quick second?” I ask, as we're heading down 7th Avenue on one such night. “We're already here.”

“Fine by me,” she replies.

It’s seven and near dinnertime, but there was something I had to check on for the meeting tomorrow, and there’s a good chance my team is still there working out the kinks. I’ve never brought a girl into the office before, and I’m bound to get some strange looks.

“Welcome home, sir.” Carlos flashes his bright smile, always good to see him, and it’s been a while, since I’ve been working from home. “And the young lady’s name?” he whispers as I’m sliding him his tip and coming around the car.

“Miss Rainville. Bailey.”

“Very well, sir.” He opens up Bailey’s door. “Evening, miss. Have a pleasant stay at JetFlash.” He helps her out gently like the gentleman he is, and together, we walk into the building. I suck in a breath. Here goes nothing.

Everyone says hello, left and right. I realize I’m walking way too fast and too ahead of Bailey. Her heels click clack on the tile floor quickly. I know I need to make a decision here—make it look like I don’t know her that well, like she’s just my nanny who’s come along for the ride—or show the world that we’re together.

This will mean everything.

When I glance back at her, she smiles to show she’s fine but I can tell she’s wondering the same thing. Honestly, I don’t want to get an earful later about how I made her feel like a dirty secret. So I reach back for her hand. Bailey takes it timidly. Almost immediately, I hear the whispers of all the familiar people at the front desk, near the elevators, all the way to the top floor where JetFlash is.

When we arrive, I stop to introduce her to a few people, all whom give me knowing

looks, as if they've suddenly realized why I've been out of the office for so long. Bailey greets everyone with her beautiful smile, even though she's in ripped jeans and obviously wasn't prepared to be introduced to my co-workers and employees.

I actually don't feel nearly as weird as I thought I would, bringing her into my world.

Fuck, maybe people do change...

At dinner, we meet up with Carson and Jackie. This is the first time they'll meet Bailey, and they have no idea she's even coming. When we walk in, they're already sitting at a table. They pause in conversation when they see us rolling up, and Carson has to look twice to make sure it's really me and not some pussified version of me.

"Well, well, well...look what the cat dragged in. Haven't seen you in like practically a month, buddy." He gives me a bro hug, the kind where you pat each other on the back, then he whispers in my ear. "Jail bait? What is she, like sixteen?"

I give his hand a death grip that sends him cursing. Just because Bailey's got a doll face, and Jackie's already showing her age, there's no need to get jealous.

I laugh and greet Jackie who's looking skinnier and more yoga-like than ever. I used to really be into women with bodies like hers. It was almost a goal for me in my early twenties. Hot, athletic, lean. But honestly, I wouldn't trade Bailey's soft curves for anything in the world. I prefer the Baileytype.

"Jackie, Carson, this is Bailey Rainville."

They say hello and make pleasant conversation, and Bailey is doing really well keeping up with the questions about her life, but part of me deep inside is wondering what they think. Is she too young? Do they think I'm robbing the cradle? I mean, she's twenty-two—it's not like she's a baby. Besides, the age gap seems to disappear

when you love someone.

Love someone.

What the fuck is that all about.

I'm going to shelf that for now, because suddenly, my stomach plummets. I don't have thoughts like that—ever. Dinner and drinks go great, and when it's time to leave, Jackie gives me that well-meaning tilt of the head and smile that she usually does when she can't say what she really wants to say, and that's how proud she is of you.

“Zayden, thanks for introducing us to Bailey. She's...so sweet! Hope to see you again, honey,” she tells Bailey, and I almost slap my own forehead. She may as well have said, “Zayden never brings the same girl around twice. We hope you make the cut.”

Carson just gives me that look that buddies do when they know you've been a dog, and you know that they know, but no one's going to mention it in the presence of a young lady. Still, he leans in and says, “Good for you, bro. Good for you.”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:03 am*

I'm simultaneously relieved and mortified at the sametime.

What does it mean that Carson's congratulatingme?

Does this mean I officially have a girlfriend? Isn't there an in-between stage a man can be at where they're bringing a girl around but it's not official and people aren't already saving money to buy you a wedding gift? Wherever that stage is, that's the most I can handle rightnow.

That night,we get home in time to see Olivia getting ready for bed. I have to say, there's something soothing about coming home to that chunky monkey, as Bailey calls her, and squeezing that pudgy baby flesh and smelling her skin when she holds onto your neck so close. Ugh, I fucking knew I shouldn't get to knowher.

Bailey's eyes practically sparkle when Olivia hugsme.

How do I tell this kid that I love her, but I'm scared? That families terrify me. That one thing could come along to ruin anything she and I build, and it could all be over in an instant. Though she hasn't been through it, I have. And I can't do it again.

I love seeing those sapphires light up, eyes so much like her Uncle Callum who no longer exists except in her ethereal smile. "Here—I can't take this." I hand the baby back to Bailey who gives me weird looks while I escape to my room, strip down naked, and slide into bed, staring at the ceiling wondering what the fuck I've gotten myselfinto.

A little while later, Bailey comes in and closes the door. She slides off her pants

down to her shirt and panties and crawls into bed with me. “You okay, babe?” Babe. She’s been calling me that for about a week now. I kind of love it, but I kind of cringe every time I hear it. It’s a slippery slope, and I’m barely hanging on.

“I’m good.” I don’t mention how uncomfortable I felt at parts of the night with my friends watching us so closely. I don’t mention how I’m willing to push through these things, because I think I feel for her and Olivia, too.

Instead, I pull her into my arms to shush her. It’s the only thing I can do sometimes.

Nottalk.

At night, the love we make is slow, deliberate, and powerful. Her curvy fine ass crawls up onto my body and sits itself down on me, riding me slow, building me up gradually to new heights. Slippery slope, Zayden. In too deep. Her breasts, her flat stomach, her round curves, her doll face, that blonde hair falling down her shoulders in waves that make her look like a Botticelli painting. She’s gorgeous, and she’s mine. At least I keep telling myself that she is.

Where did she come from? Is the universe trying to tell me something? Because I’m not sure for how long I can keep this going. She’s already outlasted any other women I’ve dated. I’m good with her sleeping here tonight, every night if she wants to, and I’m good with this thing we got going. But there’s levels to everything. What happens when it comes time for Olivia to go? What happens when Bailey can’t handle it all coming to an end?

Everything’s going to fall apart. If you let it, my inner voice tells me.

If I let it.

I claim to be a man in control. I’ve controlled every aspect of my life until now. I

control my business, my contacts, my social life, my constant stream of women, my finances, and everything under the sun. But I can't control how I feel for Bailey, and I can't control the rate of speed at which I'm falling for her.

I can't control how much I love watching her bare body rise and fall and twist and bear down and take me in and use me, use me good, because it's what I'm good at, making her feel good. Until when, though?

When she comes hard and cries out, there's no sweeter sound in all the world, no more beautiful sight than her head leaning to one side, as she croons out her pleasure, her nipples perking with goose flesh, ripples radiating up her torso. I can't hold out, nor do I want to. I want to feel myself inside of her, spilling thick ropes of seed, coming deep into her, giving her a part of me, giving her everything.

Whatever I have, I want her to take it. I'm out of control. Completely. In love. With her, with Olivia, with this little life we're living, with this semblance of a family that echoes of my own from long ago. And it's terrifying. So fucking terrifying, I fall asleep with her in my arms, wondering how long before the mirage fades. How long before the chemicals even out. How long before the dream fades, and it's back to reality.

Because it will, you know. It will.

It always does.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:03 am*

Bailey

One day,Zayden takes Olivia for a while so I can call mymom.

If I feel any obligation to tell anyone about Zayden and me, it's Mom. Before I call, though, I can't stop smiling. From the office, I see Zayden playing with Olivia in the living room. She's started pulling up using the furniture to hold herself up. She's such a strong big girl, a happy one that lets out a little shriek when she does it by herself.

Zayden claps and smiles down at her. She's enthralled with her daddy.

As she should be. He's really becoming an amazing dad, even though he was stubborn at first. Just goes to show what wonders a little baby's smile can do to your heart.

"Bailey?" Mom answers the phone.

"Hey, Mom. How's it going?"

"Good, we're here getting ready to watch Monday Night Football. Haven't heard from you in a while. How's the nanny job going?"

I tell her all about "the nanny job." How Olivia is a bright little girl, how she seemed sad at first because of her situation but how she's really opened up so much. I feel my pulse racing at the thought of telling her the whole truth.

"Mom, there's more," I say, my stomach crunching into a ball. "I've been seeing



someone, too.”

“Have you now?” she says, the sound of her voice muffling. Then, I hear, “It’s Bailey. She says she’s seeing someone.” I know she’s talking to Grandma.

“Mom, you don’t have to give Grandma the play-by-play. I just wanted you to know, because there’s a good chance I’ll be posting pics online and I didn’t want you to be the last to know.”

“Well, that’s good. You’re thinking of me, for once. So, who is he?”

I watch him lift Olivia into the air, smiling at her even as his gorgeous face gets attacked with lines of saliva dripping from her smiling mouth. “He’s a dad,” I say, smiling at the pair.

“A dad? Bailey, how old is he? You’re very young to be involved with a man who has children.”

“Mom, I never said I was going to marry him. But he’s a father of a ten-month-old baby. An adorable baby girl. There’s nothing wrong with that is there?”

“Well, no, there isn’t. But where’s the mother?” she asks, her voice full of concern.

“Out of the picture, Mom. Obviously.”

“How do you even have time to date anybody when you’re working full-time as a nanny?” Mom is full of questions, a hard thing to juggle when you’re also disseminating information to a third party. “The boy she’s seeing is a father,” she tells my grandmother. “Of a baby. The mother is out of the picture.”

“Mom...stop. I’ll call grandma later and talk to her.”

“Okay, honey, but listen. Don’t get too involved. If it’s just sex, let it besex...”

“Mom.”

“But a man with a child is a tricky situation. You can get shit from the mother, things won’t be pretty, trust me... Besides, you want to be with someone without kids. That way, when you get married and are ready to have your own—”

“Mom,” I interrupt. “Stop. First, I don’t even know that I can...”

I trail off. My mother has phospholipid syndrome, the reason she miscarried when I was younger and lost my baby brother at birth. I’ve never been tested but there’s a good chance I could have it, too, since it’s hereditary.

“Look, I don’t want to get into it right now. We’ll talk later. Football’s about to start.”

Which is good, because I want to end this phone call now, that’s how well it’s going.

But I can’t without telling her. It’s a burning secret in my heart. After accusing Zayden of keeping me as his dirty little secret, I can’t do the same to him.

“How did you meet this man, anyway?” she says, finally giving me the perfect chance to tell her the whole truth.

I close my eyes and sigh. “He’s my boss, Mom.”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:03 am*

Silence, as she processes my words. Slowly, she churns out, “Your boss...the billionaire daddy?”

“Yes, Mom.”

“The one who was rude and mean to you?”

“It’s not like that anymore. He’s changed. We’ve all changed. I’ve been here almost four months. A lot can happen.”

“Bailey,” my mom sighs. I know I’m about to get an earful. “I know you’re feeling lured by the money, but this may not be a good idea.”

“Lured by the money? The money is actually the last thing I ever think about. Yeah, it’s nice to go places, buy things, and not have to worry about it, but he’s the reason I’m with him.”

“Honey, his baby mama’s in jail.”

“So?”

“So I’m just scared of what’s going to happen to you when this fairy tale is over soon, and your heart is broken into a million pieces when it’s time for the baby to leave.”

Inwardly, I chastise myself for ever having told my mother so much about the gig back when I started working for Zayden. “Mom, it’s fine. Everything’s going great. Zayden is a changed man. He’s turned a hundred and eighty degrees.”

“But you made him out to be a monster when you started.”

“I know I did, but things have changed between us. We’re...we’re falling in love,” I say. Wow, it sounds so naïve even to my ears now when I say it out loud, but we are, and I wish my mom would celebrate that fact with me instead of making this out to be a tragedy.

Mom grunts and I can see her shaking her head. What will she tell Grandma when we hang up? I can hear the complaints now. “Bailey, this is all I’m going to say... People don’t change overnight, so be careful. Things might seem hunky-dory now—”

“Please don’t say hunky-dory. It’s so ancient.”

“I may be ancient, the way I talk might be ancient, but listen to your mother—permanent change takes longer. It takes years. And from what you told me, that man doesn’t know what he wants from one day to the next. What if he decides tomorrow that he’s done with you? Done-yun rings.”

“Don’t say done-yun rings either.”

“You haven’t been there long enough to witness real change. Honey, the game is starting. Call me tomorrow, okay?”

“Sure thing.” I hang up, because I can’t take another minute of my mother’s disapproval. And here I was thinking it’d be nice to call her, share some happy news, get unconditional love and approval once she learned that I was finally—for the first time ever—seeing someone.

So much forthat.

I head into the kitchen for a glass of water, and soon, a pair of arms are crushing me

to death. “You okay? Someone looks like they could use a hug.” Then I feel a tiny pair of arms being forced around my neck. “Help me hug her, Olivia. Hug Miss Bailey. Comeon...”

As cute as this kitchen attack is, I want to cry. My mom’s validation was important to me and she made me feel like a fool. Is it true what she said? That people don’t change that quickly? That this whole relationship is just a recipe for disaster? Or is that her old mom mind going into warning mode? I know lots of people who fall in love with single moms and dads. Why would this be any different?

Zayden and Olivia put on a funny show of picking up kitchen utensils and rocking out like they’re heavy metal instruments. Of course, Zayden does all the theatrics for Olivia, while Olivia just laughs her baby butt off at everything Zayden does. And then I see it—the glint of pure happiness in Zayden’s eyes. Those thirty minutes alone with Olivia while I isolated myself to talk to my mom on the phone have opened up a portal of total cuteness in Zayden. He’s in full dad mode, a happy little kid making the most of his time with his daughter. I’ve never seen anyone so content as I’m seeing right at this moment.

And I know my mom is wrong.

Because my mom isn’t there.

She’s not seeing what I’m seeing. She’s thinking about the horror stories she’s heard in her lifetime, not this amazing little family blossoming before my very eyes. She can’t know. She’s in Ohio living her life of Monday Night Football while I’m in New York City falling in love with my billionaire boss and his baby. Our lives could not be more polar opposite.

Zayden gets a call and hands me the baby so he can answer it. I put her on the floor, because she’s antsy and dying to walk though all she can do is hold onto cabinets for

support. I sit on the floor and take photos of her. I plan on putting them all on social media tonight.

Then, as I'm taking a bunch of action shots, an amazing thing happens—Olivia, giving me a look of pure determination—lets go of the cabinet and trickles her little feet my way. She gets about four steps in before she tumbles into my arms with a joyous smile.

“Zayden!” I cry out. “Come see this! Your little girl has just taken her first steps!”

I'm so happy, I cover her with kisses from her head to her chubby toes. I pretend to munch on her toes and she laughs, wriggles her way out of my grasp, and crawls to the cabinet so she can try walking again.

“Zayden!” I call. I'd hate to interrupt him when he's on a business call, but this is an important moment. I'd even be willing to pretend like I never saw it happen so he can witness it. “Zayden!”

“I'm here, Bailey.” His voice is somber. I look up. The look on his face isn't any better.

Right away, I know something's happened. “What's wrong? What is it?” And it has nothing to do with work—I know it in the pit of my stomach. It has to do with us, with Olivia.

“It's Noelia. She's getting released early for good behavior and will be coming for Olivia.”

The blood drains from my face. All my mother's words coming rushing back to me. “What? When?” No. This can't be happening. Not so soon. It was supposed to take a year!

“Nextweek.”

Zayden

“It can’t be.” Bailey’s eyes fill with tears, even as she bites them back.

“It is. I’m sorry.” I give the chunky monkey a mournful look. I admit I’ve grown fond of the kid. She releases her tiny hands from the cabinet and walks toward Bailey in five quick steps before collapsing in her arms.

Bailey is strong enough to force a smile for Olivia, clap and act happy, as the baby toddles toward her, but I can see she’s falling apart at the seams. “There you go...there’s my big girl.” She fights the choking tears in her throat when Olivia walks into her arms, and I have to turn away before I lose it, too.

“Zayden,” her voice breaks. “I know you said not to bring it up again, but this is your last chance...”

“Don’t say it, Bailey.” I shake my head. “You know I can’t.”

“You don’t even know what I’m going to say.”

“I do.” I take a deep breath and let it out slowly. “You want me to fight for custody of Olivia but I can’t. I told you this already. It’s not the life I planned for.”

“Forget the life you planned for, Zayden. Life’s unplanned!” she says, desperation in her voice. I understand what she’s saying, but there’s just no way. I decided long ago that I would never be a father. I’d never bring children into this world then abandon them, leave them to their own devices when things got tough.



“Bailey, we need to dial back and remember the original plan,” I say as calmly as I can. “Olivia needs her mom. Her mom is coming. I warned you not to get attached. Maybe I should’ve hired a more experienced nanny.”

Her eyebrows lower and her lips pinch together. “Are you serious rightnow?”

“I’m serious,” I say quietly. “I don’t mean that as an insult, but someone with more experience would understand that you give kids back at the end of the day. They know that being a nanny always has an ending.”

In retrospect, Bailey’s first nanny job should’ve been with a family who needed extra help, not with a single dad who’d temporarily host a baby who needed a mother. But this was a special case from the beginning, and I needed apro.

“I can’t believe what I’m hearing.” She gazes at me, biting her bottom lip. “After everything we’ve been through these last four months, you can still say you’re not fit to be her dad.” Her fists are balled against the floor, as Olivia goes for another walk, giggling so hard, oblivious to the argument.

“I said it from the beginning,” I tell her again. “I wouldn’t be taking custody of Olivia.”

“That was before!” she yells. “That was before you started spending time with her, before she started looking up to you, hugging you because she loved you, and you started getting to know her. It was all before, Zayden!”

My voice rises as well. “I never wanted those things. I always wanted to keep my distance, and you knowit.”

“Then why didn’t you?” Her voice is sharp and accusing. “Why didn’t you keep your distance? Why have you spent the better part of the last couple weeks bonding

with her?"

"Because you insisted," I say, and immediately regret it.

Her palm presses against her chest. "Because of me? How can I say that?"

"Because it's true."

I sound like a dick right now, but that's what happens when you speak the truth. Truth hurts. And I always knew that getting involved with my nanny and this baby was going to end in pain and suffering.

I tried to avoid all of this, yet here we are...

"You accuse me of making you love your daughter? Of making you accept her hugs and kisses? Seriously?" Bailey's agitation grows. "You did that because you wanted to, Zayden. Not because I made you."

Fuck that. I know that deep down, I have no one to blame but myself. Still, I can't help but blame Bailey for at least part of it, for insisting that I hold the baby, get to know her, give her her bottle, go shopping for her, all things I knew I wouldn't be able to follow through with. "We both knew this day would come."

"You said it would take six months or more..."

"It was an estimate. And besides, what difference would it have made had it been four months, six months, or a year? The fact is, she has a mother, and that mother was always coming for her. The end."

"No, not the end. Her mother is a criminal, and if she cared at all about her baby, she wouldn't be getting in trouble. You have a clean record and the means to take care of

her financially. You could easily win a custody battle. With or without me, Zayden.”

She has no idea if I have a clean record or not. I do, but she doesn’t know. That statement just goes to show me how naïve and willing to give the benefit of the doubt Bailey is, and I love her for it. Still, it changes nothing. “I can’t keep her, Bailey. This isn’t a dog we’re talking about.”

“Can’t or won’t?” Bailey’s tear-filled eyes begin to spill. It’s probably best that Olivia’s busy walking for the first time, because she’s too oblivious to understand that her nanny, her caretaker, is crying. Fuck, it even feels wrong to call Bailey that. For all intents and purposes, she’s Olivia’s mother, or stepmother, at least. She’s raised her for the past four months, and look at her now, she’s got her walking before the year is up.

“I have my reasons.”

“Which you still haven’t shared with me,” she bites back and scoffs. “I don’t know what’s worse—the fact that you won’t fight for your daughter even when you love her, or that you won’t let anyone help you figure out why.”

I never asked for any of this.

I never wanted to feel, never wanted a single iota of love to flow through my heart ever again. I was perfectly fine flitting from conquest to conquest, attending work-related functions, and coming home to a house all my own, sleeping in my own bed.

Damn Bailey for making me into a person I’m not, albeit temporarily.

I’m just as upset by Noelia’s release as Bailey is. I really do love Olivia, but I’m not the right person to raise her. Hell, if I could give her to Bailey to adopt, I’d be good with that, but that’s not a possibility.

This was never supposed to be a real thing—Bailey and I were never supposed to get this serious.

Yet I came around. I insisted. I brought her into my bed and my life.

And now I’m paying the price.

“I take the blame,” I say in a low voice.

“Forwhat?”

“All of it. It’s my fault for insisting.” The sooner I take the blame, the faster we can get through this. I’m tired of going back and forth on whose fault it is that we’re hurting. The fact is, Olivia will be leaving soon. We might’ve gotten off track for a bit there, but now’s the time to get back on it. “You can stay until social services comes to pick up the child, then you may leave.”

My voice is cold. Any kindness from me, and Bailey runs with it, misinterprets, turns this whole thing into an emotional mess. And emotional messes are not me.

“The child?” she scoffs. “And then you may leave? Listen to yourself. Are you seriously talking like this again? I can’t believe what I’m hearing.”

I have to talk this way. It may hurt like a motherfucker now, especially after the awesome day we just had, but one of us has to get back on track. And it looks like that someone is going to be me. “Believe it. Get her to bed, Miss Rainville. I’ll be back to work in the morning and don’t want to hear a fussy baby in the morning hours. Anything you need, you can text one of the girls.” I turn and reluctantly head for the stairs, melted lead filling my chest.

“No.”

“Excuse me?” I turn around.

She’s right behind me, having left Olivia to her own devices in the kitchen. “I can’t let you do this. You’re not thinking straight right now.”

“I’m thinking straighter than ever, as a matter of fact.”

“No. This isn’t you. This is a mask. You’re putting on the same mask again, because

it's easier than dealing with your feelings, it's easier than considering the alternatives."

"There are no alternatives," I say coldly.

"There are! Fight for Olivia. Whatever hurt you, Zayden, it's in the past. We can get through this. You're a new person, and I can help you through this. But don't put on this fake persona. I know you now."

Part of me almost crumbles, part of me wants to believe her. But I can't listen. Can't let the words affect me. It's true that she knows me better than anyone has ever gotten to know me. She's always had that power, but that's exactly the problem—no one should've ever had that power over me. She got pretty close, but no more. "Get her in bed," I say, my voice like ice and steel and rock.

There's no feeling in my voice and I can see it break her as she hears my words.

"And if I won't?" Her steely gaze defies me.

"If you don't follow orders, I'll send for a new nanny in the morning," I tell her and head upstairs, dreading the showdown she's making of all this. Dreading it because of how weak I am around Bailey.

She doesn't follow me up.

And thank God for that. Because if she had, I might have fallen to pieces and given in to her, to Olivia, to everything that's tearing at me.

But alone, lying in bed, I repair the damage and rebuild my walls.

\* \* \*

## Page 41

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:03 am*

Early the next morning, I get up and find Bailey's luggage by the front door. She's fully dressed.

"What the hell's going on?" I say, my chest tightening with dread like I've never felt before.

"I'm leaving," she replies calmly.

"The baby—"

"You'll need to take care of her or find a sitter," Bailey interrupts. "She's not awake yet, but she will be soon."

"And you're not even going to say goodbye? You're not going to stay with her until the transition's made?"

Bailey can't look at me. She shoulders her purse. "She'll need a feeding, but you know how to do that now at least."

"Bailey, Jesus. You're upset, I understand." I can't quite fathom she's going to leave us—me and the baby—stranded like this. Doesn't she know what she's doing? I had a plan. It would be orderly, we would adjust to the new reality. Bailey would eventually calm down, and then...

But looking at her face, I realize she wasn't going to adjust, accept Olivia's departure. She would accept nothing less than my complete commitment to fighting for custody of this child.

And that I cannot do.

I swallow hard, feel the burning pain in my chest, grit my teeth, stuff down the pain yet again. “Okay,” I say.

And then, just like that, she’s gone.



Bailey

I almost forgot what home was like. And coming home at six in the morning doesn't help either. I hardly recognize Perrysburg. Riding home in Dad's car, I stare out the window at our snowed-in town square and small shops on Main Street still asleep to the town. To think this place felt big at one point. Now it seems like a molecule next to the beehive that is New York City.

Leaving Olivia was the hardest thing I've ever had to do. I know I could've waited, but it hurt too much to stay. Even one more night would've driven me crazy, and I know it would've ended in a screaming match.

I entered her room before sunrise this morning, lowered the crib rail, and pressed a kiss against her soft baby cheek. "It was my honor caring for you, chunky monkey," I said, fighting back tears. "Be good."

Luckily, she was asleep, or else I can't imagine how much worse it would've been.

Six hours later, here I am. My dad knows something is wrong but won't pry. He just keeps talking about random things to keep me distracted.

"Joe sold one of his dressers yesterday," he says. Joe is his brother who works with him building beautiful hand-crafted furniture in our garage. Considering few people pass through Perrysburg, Joe selling a whole dresser is a big deal.

"That's awesome. Tell him I say congrats," I mutter, forcing a smile.

I just need sleep. My bed, if my mom hasn't claimed my room for anything. When I left Perrysburg six months ago to rent a room in Queens, I was determined never to come home with my tail between my legs. And I'm fairly certain it would've worked if I hadn't been stupid enough to fall in love with my boss.

Hindsight is a super-sharp 20/20.

It was a bad idea from the very start. Bad, bad idea.

Now comes the worst part of all—admitting to my mother that she was right.

Dad pulls into our little house on Haven Street, and it strikes me just how appropriate that name is. You can barely even see our house on a Google satellite image. We're hidden by trees all the way in the back of a long road and cul de sac. Seeing my house again makes my heart ache. My mom waits at the door, and her eyes light up when she sees me, though her smile is crooked and sympathetic.

Carrying my bag over my shoulder, I trundle through the snow, up the steps and into her warm arms. When I smell her familiar scent, I fall apart at the seams. Mom hugs me and pats my back. Thankfully, she has nothing to say. Now, anyway.

"Is that the only bag you brought, Bale?" Dad asks from the trunk of the car.

"Yes. The rest of my stuff will get shipped." My clothes, my shoes, my toiletries, all the stuff I didn't take when I left. I wonder if Zayden will send me my new bedroom things. Hope not. I don't think I can bear to see them again knowing he gave them to me.

I shuffle down the warm hallway into my room to see it exactly the way I left it. My soul feels heavy but grateful to see its familiar resting space. Clonking down on my fluffy bedspread that smells like home, Mom leaves me to go make breakfast, even

though I told her five times I don't want to eat anything. Regardless, coffee is brewing and something is cooking on the stovetop.

Dad and Mom mumble quietly. I know they're talking about me and my sudden call from the airport telling them I'd be coming home in a few hours. I know they're trying to figure out what to make of me, but the fact is, they don't have to do anything. I'm just going to lay here like a bloated seal on the wharf for hours, maybe days, possibly weeks. They don't have to cook or clean for me, they don't even have to talk to me.

Just being here is enough. There's nothing like coming home when wounded.

This is what happens when you fall in love despite your brain warning you not to, despite your mom telling you not to. Now I have to deal with the aftermath of my stupidity. It's going to take a while, because I fell pretty damn hard.

Not just with Zayden but with Olivia, too.

\* \* \*

Over the next few weeks, I'm in a fog. I wander around wondering why I walked into a certain room. I'm almost sure I went in because the baby called me, but lo and behold, there's no baby, no bottles to warm, no diapers to restock, no floor toys to play with. There's only my mother talking endlessly about football, my grandmother bringing a different flavor pie every day, and my dad quietly nodding at everything being said while staring into his new iPad.

At least he's moved on from a newspaper. I'm proud of him.

Me, I'm practically a mute zombie. Other than the standard no's and yes's to the zillions of questions asked about what I want, what I would like, to eat, to drink, to

watch on TV, to do, I barely speak. The term “depression” comes up a lot behind closed doors. I know I’m depressed, but there’s nothing I can do about it now except wait it out. Because it will end one day. Hopefully. I know it will. I’ve never been this wracked. I know I’ll snap out of it one day, because one thing I’ve never been is beaten.

Bailey Rainville may go down for the count, but she always, always gets backup.

For now, the only thing on my schedule is: paying the price of my stupidity.

Dad comes into my room as I’m looking for another good book to read on my tablet. I’ve already gone through five short horror novels. I can’t read about love.

“Hey, princess.”

“Dad, I’m not a princess,” I mumble without looking up from my screen.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:03 am*

“You’ll always be my princess.” He says this in the most dad way, without fanfare, kisses, or strokes of my hair. Just the same way he might say that a package arrived on the doorstep forme.

I look up at him and crack a smile. “Thanks.”

He sighs, sniffs around like the air in my room is stale. “Joe’s coming over. We’re going to work on a headboard-footboard combo. Want to helpus?”

Ugh. Not really. But I get it—I have to get out of this room and do something with my life. I’m not ready, but I suppose sanding a few spindles won’t kill me. “Sure, be there soon,” I say, but I take my time walking out there.

The nice thing about my dad’s garage workshop is that it’s a toasty seventy degrees all through winter. The house might be frozen, but that’s because my mom and dad agree that most of the heat needs to be where the wood is. Uncle Joe is there, my dad’s hulking huge “little” brother. He gives me a hug and starts asking a bunch of questions about the “Big Apple,” but my answers come out as mostly grunts.

Soon, I’m sitting at a stool sanding wood while my dad and uncle cut the bigger pieces. The repetition of the action feels comforting, actually, and I get lost in my thoughts. They say you shouldn’t distract yourself from your pain, that you should fully embrace it, live in it, own it so you can get over it faster. I know someone whose name starts with Z that could use this advice. Though I still don’t know exactly what made him the way he is, I know that he needs to face it head-on or risk living in pain forever.

Once my uncle leaves, and it's just me and Dad working together, he mutters something about "that boy" being stupid. I half tune in, because I know that they were talking about Joe's ex and I didn't want to hear it, but I'm surprised by my dad's take on the matter.

"Guys can be stupid, Bale. It takes them time sometimes to realize what they got. Youknow?"

Is he talking about me? About me and Zayden? I think he is, and I appreciate that he's disguising it as being about my uncle. I just nod.

"Otherwise, they feel rushed. Pushed into something they're not ready for. That's your uncle Joe alright. A proper moron." He laughs to himself then turns on the buzzsaw, slicing our quiet moment of reflection in half.

Is he saying that Zayden is a moron?

I would have to agree with that.

And that's why I love my dad.

\* \* \*

I've been home six weeks. Now it's mid-March and spring is around the corner. The snow is beginning to melt. I even hear a bird or two outside my window in the mornings. In the evenings, people are actually going back outside to what few bars and restaurants we have in Perrysburg. An old friend from elementary school, Jessie, is in town for Spring Break and calls to see if I want to go out with her and a friend of hers.

I really don't want to, but I know I have to.

I have to prove to myself that I'm capable of healing. Even though I'm still in love with Zayden Hawthorn, still stalking his social media online and scouring for any news or images of him or the baby I can find. Nothing on Olivia. Face it, Bailey, you'll never see her again. It was just a job. The sooner you see it that way, the happier you'll be.

Going out in Perrysburg, Ohio is nothing like going out in Manhattan.

You have two bars to choose from and both of them are mostly empty. You'd never know they're crappy places judging from how much fun the customers are having inside the joint, playing pool and laughing over beers like it's the best thing ever, but I shouldn't judge. At least they're out enjoying themselves, unlike me...

On a barstool, Jessie wants to know all about New York City.

"It's big," I tell her.

"But the men must be hot, aren't they? With their fancy suits and their perfect hair?"

I don't tell her that the guy I "dated" almost fits that description 100%. "They're alright. Too neurotic for me."

"But sexy," she adds with an arch of her sculpted eyebrow.

"Sexy and neurotic. Yep, you got it." I slam down half my beer. I so don't want to talk about this. But too late, because now the bar is starting to fill up some more, and soon, we're surrounded by more of Jessie's friends who just happen to be all guys who clearly don't work out. Not that I'm judging.

One of them, Trace, smiles and inches over to me. He's skinny with loose brown hair over dark eyes and a habit of pushing it back off his face. "You're Bailey, right? I

remember you. I moved here back in middle school. You probably don't remember."

"Oh, right! Hey," I say, but he's right. I totally don't remember.

But the more beers I order, the more Trace keeps talking, the more I nod my head, and by the end of the night, he suddenly moves in for a kiss.

Even as drunk as I am, I manage to turn my lips away so he hits my cheek.

He pulls back to see how I liked it. I shake my head to let him know it's not going to happen, and he shrugs, moving onto someone else.



*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:03 am*

I can't get Zayden out of my head with another guy. But when you're used to mind-bending kisses that weaken your legs and a man who takes control of you like he owns you, a sloppy cheek kiss from Trace isn't going to cut it.

I end up back home early in bed with another book.

"Did you have fun?" Mom wants to know.

"No," I say. Hey, it's the truth.

She gives me a disapproving look then retreats back to where she came from. I know I have to get over this. I know I'm going to spend the rest of my life comparing Zayden to every man I meet, because he was my first. And if he was the best, too, then Houston, we have a problem. Because I won't want anyone else. I want him. I miss him.

Maybe that's the remnants of beer talking but as bad as he was for me, I still miss him.

I miss Olivia, too.

And this night, for the first time in six weeks, I cry my eyeballs out. I cry them out hard, sobbing all baby-like, really owning the heartache and abandonment. I pray that Olivia's mom is treating her right. I pray that the little girl is happy to be reunited, that she's not too confused at all the turmoil going on in her life, and I pray that one day, I can get over this.

Because this sucks.

Massively.

I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy.

Zayden

There's a party in Chelsea this weekend. I'll be there because I can't stay home alone anymore. If I see my empty house, the colorful rooms where Bailey and Olivia slept, I'll fall into deeper depression, and it's bad enough I still have to sleep there. Staying sociable is what's kept me alive. It's an act, I know it is. What used to feel familiar and normal now feels forced.

As much as I've tried to get back into the swing of things, my regular routine, I'm a different person. For one thing, I haven't slept with a single woman since Bailey left, something that infuriates me to no end. Why can't I just go back to who I was before she came to work for me? It's not like someone flickering into your life for five months should make such a difference. You'd think I could've hooked up with someone by now.

But I'm determined to keep trying. I've gotten close, going so far as to bring a woman into my room, hoping to erase the ghosts of Bailey, only to claim that I'm suddenly sick and send the woman home with one of my drivers.

But one way or another, I have to become myself again.

The party is for Ada Benson, one of my low-profile celebrity friends I haven't seen in a while. She just got the lead role for a new Netflix series she can't stop talking about. Maybe when she moves to LA next week, I finally won't have to hear about it anymore.

An older woman with a great rack and red dress has been hanging off of me all night,

talking about her ex, what a jerk he turned out to be, and how she would so engage in revenge sex if she could only find the perfect guy to do it with.

Her smile appears and disappears in my field of vision like the Cheshire cat. I'm half drunk and not listening to her. I nod and pretend to, but I keep scanning the trendy apartment. I know that Bailey would never be here, yet I keep imagining that she is, that any moment, she's going to walk in with that little attitude of hers and I would be so happy to see that. I'd give anything to see her again, even if it's to catch the rage and hate she surely feels for me these days.

Shit, I hate me too. I can't blame her.

My friends Carson and Jackie are there, and Ada announces that something is about to make the night even more special. Then, right there, in the middle of the flowing champagne, endless snaps of Instagram selfies and socialite conversation, Carson takes Ada's spotlight with her full permission.

He gets down on one knee and pulls out a box, and right away Jackie's hands fly to her mouth, and I get a sinking feeling in my stomach. "Jackie, you're the light of my life, the apple of my eye, and the pain in my ass, but I can't live without you. Will you marry me?"

"Don't do it," the woman talking to me mutters behind her wine glass then joins the chorus of cheers and laughter erupting all at once.

I feel myself spinning through my alcohol fog, raising my glass for a toast as Jackie accepts, happy for them but hating them all at the same time. Why does your friends' happiness upset you? This is what you wanted, asshole, I tell myself. Now own it. Love it.

Fuck it.

I stay a reasonable amount of time so it won't look like their engagement sparked my leaving in any way, even though I'm dying to get out of here and erase the pain. "I'm taking off," I tell the woman whose name I still don't know. Better that way. "Do you want to come with me?"

Her green eyes sparkle. "I thought you'd never ask."

After hugging Carson and Jackie one last time, telling them I better be in the wedding party if they know what's good for them, I bolt out of the apartment with red dress lady, slamming back one more drink on the way out. My driver is there, and we crawl into the back seat. "Your place or no place," I tell the woman.

She stares at me strangely, trying to figure me out. If only someone could, I wouldn't be in this state of mind. Her hands are all over my chest, my hair and neck, and at one point, she dips down and reaches for my cock, which is completely dead. Carson and Jackie's engagement left a bad taste in my mouth, though that's a fake reason. I know the real reason and I can't think about it.

"Save it," I tell her, pushing her hand away.

The delay of gratification only makes her more horny, as she bites her lips in anticipation the rest of the way.

Fifteen minutes later, we reach her apartment building, which fucking great—happens to be right across from the MetroLife Building, the same building where I first met Bailey. I ask my driver to wait for me. If I go through with this, it won't take long, because I don't plan on cuddling. He winks and closes the door. Once in the elevator, red dress woman smashes me against the mirror and presses her red wine stained lips on me.

"You're driving me crazy, Hawthorn," she breathes. "But now you're in my

territory.”

If it's possible to feel absolutely nothing when a beautiful woman with a great rack is kissing you, then this is it. I do my best to kiss her back but, no offense to her, it's like kissing an ash tray that's been washed with peppermint water. Great—a smoker. Before even getting to her door, I already know this ain't gonna happen.

“Hey,” I say, regretting that I still don't know her name after spending half the party and a whole car ride with her. “I just remembered I have somewhere I have to be.”

“Can't it wait?” Her hands are now on my ass.

“No, but I can come back later.” I don't know why I say that other than to protect her feelings because now I see the insecure little girl in her starting to creep in. “Actually,” I add, doing my best to stay honest. “I probably won't. I can't. I'm so sorry.” I kiss her cheek and take off down the hallway.

She shouts some choice expletives at me, but I'm too far gone to even care.

Besides, she's right. I am all those things and more. I don't blame her for being angry. I am and always will be the biggest asshole I know. And now I'm the loneliest asshole, too, because as I get to my building and walk in through my door, I can hardly breathe from the emptiness in the house.

The silence screams at me. The bar calls to me. And I can't bear to go upstairs with the darkness looming, all light and love totally sucked out of the bedrooms. You had to do it, I remind myself. To save them from future pain.

But then, as I'm pouring myself yet another drink in the hopes of poisoning myself slowly, I think about the mantra I've been repeating since the day Bailey took off on me, leaving me to spend hours trying to console Olivia when she woke up without the

person she was closest to being there to greet her with familiar routines and love.

## Page 46

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:03 am*

So much love...

Are they really saved from future pain? Is anyone ever really saved from future pain?

So Olivia is now with her mother, but is she spared from pain?

We all live with pain, some more than others. If you're going to have pain, isn't it better to have it while being with someone you love? Someone who can make you smile most of the time, someone who doesn't take that pain and exponentially multiply it?

I slam my ass into the leather chair, drink in hand. I hate myself right now. I hate life, and I hate this situation, but I asked for it. I miss Bailey more than ever. I wish she would materialize in the darkness of this living room like a ghost from the night we made love right in this chair, and the thought turns me hard immediately. See? No problems there.

It's who's turning me on that's the problem.

Because she's no longer here. I ruined any chances I ever had with her, and I did it on purpose. But am I really saving anyone from hurt or am I only choosing not to love? Right now, the only thing I'm doing is reminding myself of my father who'd I'd sometimes find asleep in his leather chair in the morning, his hand down his pants, snores emitting from his nostrils.

After my mother couldn't take the pain and left my father, my dad tried to cope the best he could. He seemed so pathetic to me, that he couldn't brush her aside and go



make a life for himself post-Mom, but who can come back from losing your own child and losing your wife all in the same year? There's only one difference between my dad and me right now, and that's that he didn't have a choice in the matter. My dad was a victim of death and abandonment.

Whereas I made this choice myself.

I may have been a victim once, as a kid, of losing my little brother and then everyone else I depended on.

But I'm no victim now. I did this. I chose this life of sitting around like a sad sack of shit, drunk and conjuring up skeletons from my closet to see me through. Bailey comes to me as a vision in T-shirt and panties, her nipples hardened and her pink lips full. The wet heat between her thighs envelops me and soon she's riding me slowly, deliciously, using my chest to hold herself up. Her hair falls in rivulets, creating blinders that curtain off the rest of the world.

Inside our bubble, it's just me and her and sweet surrender, and it doesn't take long for me to explode, for me to call out her name, for me to give the ghost one last kiss as the vision dissipates, leaving me alone again. A billionaire loser in my fancy house. What good is this fucking life if I have no one to share it with?

Sad sack of shit indeed.

And now I know why I can't go back to being myself again.

Because the man I'm trying to get back to doesn't exist anymore.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:03 am*

Bailey

It's a warm day in Perrysburg. Warm enough for my dad to open the garage and let a little air into the workshop. Which means the house can finally use the A/C unit, and I don't have to feel like a genie in a bottle anymore.

I love my family and all, but I need to get out. Luckily, today's the perfect day, as I have an interview with an elementary school in a neighboring town. Just last week, I was considering moving back to NYC and looking for a teaching position there. After all, I always wanted to live in New York. That is, until he-who-won't-be-named gave me a bad taste in my mouth for it.

But that was then.

It's time to move on.

It was what it was, and yes, it could've been beautiful, but life isn't about what could've been. It's about what you make it while you're here. What it is while you're living it, and for six weeks, I haven't been living. That's not me—time for that to change.

Because the weather's warming, I finally get to wear one of my cute dresses I haven't worn since summer in NYC last year. It's pretty but not too flirty, solid yellow but not too bright for a teaching interview. As I check how I look in my bedroom mirror, I see that the yellow matches the pillow that Zayden bought me, and for a second, I think about changing. When all my items arrived in a big box shortly after moving back home, I nearly threw everything away that reminded me about Zayden, but then

I remembered something...

I'm in control of my life. No guy gets to decide what I keep and what I toss.

And so I kept it all but displayed only a few things—the lights, the blanket, and the yellow pillow.

My hair came out great, thanks to the weather outside, so I grab my portfolio and purse and head for the front door. Mom sees me and smiles. “Well, look at you. Now, that’s the Bailey I know and love.” She comes up to me, examines me as a mother should from head to toe, then kisses my cheek. “Good luck on the interview, honey. I know you’re going to be off the chain.”

“Mom, no one says that anymore.”

“Rock it? You’re going to rock the interview?”

“Mom, just stop, please.”

“Oh, fine, you’re going to do great. That work?”

“Perfect.”

Just as I’m about to head outside, though, I catch a flash of shiny, stretchy black. The kind of black you see everywhere in NYC but is oddly out of place here in Perrysburg. My mom sees it too, and we both fly to the window to peer through the blinds. It’s a car. A limo. And it stops in front of my house.

“Who in the rotten hell?” Mom says next tome.

“Oh, no...”

My heart begins to beat like spring after a long, dead winter. I know who in the rotten hell, and I don't want to be caught standing here staring out the window at him. Can't give him the satisfaction. Assuming it's him, of course. My dad walks out of the garage and stands on the sidewalk. Mrs. Miller across the street comes out in her muumuu, covering her squinty eyes with her hand.

"Is that who I think it is?" Mom moves away from one window and goes to another to see better. That's how long the limo is.

"I hope not," I mutter, a nasty storm brewing inside my stomach.

Suddenly, the side door of the limo opens, and out steps Zayden Hawthorn himself sporting one of his more casual looks—jeans, a black long-sleeved shirt, and a hipster-style blue scarf. It's definitely him—the angles of his face, his strong nose, those eyes...and he's holding pink roses. Shit.

Shit, shit, crap, fuck.

Fuckity-fuck.

I spin, my back to the window. "It's him. What do I do?"

"Want me to get your father's shotgun?" Mom murmurs, narrowing the blinds.

"Not funny."

"I didn't mean it to be. That's the man who put you under for a good two months. I've got no problem letting him know he's an asshole." She heads for the door on a mission.

I appreciate her ferocity but I can handle this. I have to handle this before my dad

does. “He’s also the man who employed me for five. Don’t say anything to him, please. I’ll deal with it,” I tell her, pushing myself into the space she’s occupying and opening the door partway.

Dad’s already talking to Zayden. To my surprise, they’re shaking hands and Zayden’s giving him a big, buttery greeting, though my dad’s not completely buying it. Zayden spots me standing in the doorway, and all time seems to pause like it did when I lived with him. It’s the first time our eyes meet after so much time apart, and my brain splits in half. Part of me wants to run into his arms, but the other half knows better.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:03 am*

“What are you doing here?” I demand, holding the door for balance.

“I came to see you, Bailey.” He holds out the flowers. “These are for you.”

What am I supposed to think? Does this mean he wants to make up, apologize, or what? Resist, Bailey. Don’t fall down the rabbit hole again...

“I don’t want to see you, Zayden. Go home.” I resist the offering, as behind me, my mother advises me not to take the flowers. “Stop,” I murmur over my shoulder.

“I just want to talk to you,” he continues, unfazed by my flat rejection of his offer.

“We have nothing to say to one another.”

“Someone there?” Zayden tries to get a good look behind me. “I just want to talk to you.”

I open the door, so he can see how well he disturbed the ant farm. Not only are my mom, dad, and Mrs. Miller out of the house looking on, but now so is half the neighborhood. “You better make this good,” I tell Zayden. “You have most of the town for an audience.”

Zayden takes a look around at all the faces watching him. “Small town,” he mutters. Taking a few steps all the way up to the stoop, he wisely stops when he sees that I have no intention of taking his flowers nor hugging him. “Bailey, look. I wasn’t ready before...”

Behind Zayden, my dad smiles smugly, breathes on his fingernails and buffs them off on his shirt, like he knew this would happen. Yes, Dad, you told me this is how it would godown.

“Ready for what?” I’m going to just pretend I don’t understand a single thing he’s saying. He’s going to have to do all the work. I hold strong, even though I’m trembling with fear and anxiety.

“Ready for anything. For you, for Olivia, ready for the way I was feeling.”

I tremble even harder now. Something worse than fear and anxiety begins to take over...hope? It’s so easy to build ideas up in your mind, though. So hard to take them down, and I cannot spend another year of my life undoing the damage Zayden does. I push out the door and past him, ignoring the scent of his skin as I do. “I can’t listen now. I have an interview to getto.”

“Bailey, please. Just listen to what I have to say. I promise it will be worth yourtime.”

“My time,” I reply, “has to go to people who will make a difference in my life. People who know they want me, like the principal currently waiting for me at her school. Let me go, Zayden.”

“Bailey, I loveyou.”

His words stop me at my car, my hand curled under the handle. I pause there, processing the words. For months and months, I dreamed about him saying those words to me. I imagined him as a changed man, ready to accept the new emotions he was feeling with me, with Olivia. I wanted it to happen so badly and now it has, only perhaps toolate.

They say putting thoughts out into the universe comes back toyou.

Olivia.

“What about the baby?”

“I love her, too. I wasn’t ready to deal with the loss, and I knew the day would come when I would lose her. So I put up walls to protect my heart. After the hurt I’d been through in my life, it was the only thing I knew how to do, the only thing I could do.”

“Where is she now?”

“She’s with her mother.”

My hope begins to deflate. I don’t know that I could ever be with Zayden if he doesn’t accept Olivia back into his life. “You don’t see her?”

“Not yet. But I’m going to. Bailey, I hired a lawyer. I’m going to fight for custody. I have a pretty good chance, like you said. I know, I should’ve listened to you from the beginning.”

I smirk and back myself up against the car, arms crossed. “Full custody?”

“Well, yes, but the most I’ll probably get is fifty-fifty. Honestly, I’d be happy with anything, but the important thing is that I want to be in her life, I want to be an active father. Bailey, you must understand how it all came out of the blue for me.”

“You came out of the blue for me too, Zayden. Yet you didn’t see me freaking out, turning hot and cold on people, and being an asshole.”

“You’re stronger than me,” he says, and for a whole minute, I get to see a very weak side of Zayden, as he admits that he’s not the big man everyone thinks he is. Not when it comes to feelings, anyway.



“That’s not true,” I mutter softly.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:03 am*

“I lost my baby brother when I was eight, Bailey. My brother Callum.” His throat seems to constrict as if he’s choking on the words. “After he died, I lost everyone else that mattered, one by one. I never talk about it, but that’s the reason I was scared.”

“Scared to lose again,” I echo. Finally, I understand something about him. It all makes sense. He pushed away love, pushed away family, because he was afraid of losing again. I was right when I guessed he was harboring pain.

“Losing is hard.” My mother stands in the doorway, loosening her death grip on the door frame. Both Zayden and I turn to look at her. “I know firsthand.”

“Yes, ma’am, it is,” Zayden tells her.

I’ve been holding it together this whole time, but now I might cry. If my mother can soften up at Zayden, empathize with his emotions, then I suppose I can, too. I let out a huge sigh and roll my eyes to the sky. Don’t lose it, Bailey. “I really need to go, Zayden,” I say, imagining the school principal staring at her clock, taking points off my résumé because I’m late. “Can we talk when I get back?”

“Bailey,” he pushes on, “I didn’t realize the completeness I had when I had it. I’ve spent my life making sure I don’t amass anything important enough to lose.”

Tears threaten to rise into my eyes, but I bat them back. “Yeah, well, you’re not the only one who doesn’t want to lose again, Zayden. I’ve...” Ugh, should I admit to him? “I have not had a good two months. You...you hurt me.”

The tears spill and ugh, I hate myself for showing weakness.

Suddenly, I feel his hand slip into mine, as he lays the bouquet of roses on the roof of my car and lays the other hand over mine. His warm, beautiful hands. God, how I missed them. I hate him for bringing them all the way from New York City. I feel myself getting sucked in the longer he stands here.

“I never meant to hurt you. I was trying to protect you whenever I’d ask you to stay away. In my own fucked up way, I was trying to give you a good life when I disconnected myself. I didn’t think I was worth loving, Bailey. That’s the thing. And I didn’t want you dealing with this fuck-up here.” He points at his face.

“Of course you’re worth loving,” I tell him, touching his cheek.

I’m losing this battle. But I feel what he’s saying and know he means it, considering he came out all this way. Of course, traveling is easy enough for a transportation mogul, since he can afford it. But I don’t think it’s just for show.

“So, when two amazing things came into my life, I freaked out,” he says flatly. “I mean, that’s basically it. I freaked out, Bailey. Please forgive me.”

I can forgive him, even though he was an ass. Especially since he’s spot-on about freaking out. I saw that he was scared when I was living with him, but I was hoping my love would be enough for him to change. I felt defeated when I saw it wasn’t. His rejection really did a number on my confidence.

But it wasn’t me. It was never about me.

He had hurdles to jump over first.

“I’m sorry your little brother died,” I say, looking down at our hands together. They do look nice. Does this mean I’m willing to take him back? Is that what he’s asking of me?

“It’s okay, thanks. It was a long time ago. I could’ve dealt with it had it ended there, but then my mom checked out. She couldn’t handle the pain. And then my dad drank himself to death.”

I gasp. “Oh, my God. How horrible, Zayden.”

He nods softly. “My family fell apart in the most insidious of ways. I should’ve told you before, but I’d pushed it all out of my mind. Everything was nicely tucked away out of my memory before you guys came.”

And there it is. I get it now. Fully and completely. “Of course I forgive you, especially after what you’ve been through. I only wish you would’ve told me all this.”

“I put up walls around my heart. But those walls are shattered now, because guess what?”

“What?” Somehow I feel like whatever he’s about to say will mark the end of this loneliness, this depression.

“I don’t have a heart anymore. You shot down those walls and took off with it the night you left me, Bailey. And you were right to. But I’m here to bring them both back—yours and mine.”

Zayden

Hereyes.

In them, I see all the atoms and molecules that make up her soul. I see them crashing into each other, out of control, and hating me. But I also see how she's spinning and dancing, relieved that I came back for her. I'm a smart guy. It may take me a while to figure shit out sometimes, but eventually, I do figure it out.

And I'm not making this mistake ever again. I'm going to assure her of this.

"Zayden," she takes my face in her hands, looks me in the eye, then holds me close, "I hear what you're saying, and I appreciate it, but...I have to go. The interview..."

"Don't go to it," I tell her.

"What?"

"Don't go to the interview. Call and tell her something came up."

"Zayden, I don't have that kind of luxury. I have to work for a living."

"You don't have to go. In fact..." It's now or never, buddy. Just do it. I reach into my pocket and pull out the box that's been burning a hole in my pants since I left the airport. "You don't have to work ever again, Bailey."

"What do you mean?" Her eyes flit to the box then my face again with a

panicked look.

Dropping to one knee, there in front of her parents and all these weird neighbors checking us out, I take her hand and look up at her pretty brown eyes. My brown-eyed girl. “Bailey...”

“Zayden? What are you doing?”

I open the box, showing her the five-carat diamond solitaire surrounded by tiny diamonds and emeralds. “What I mean is...you don’t ever have to work ever again, unless you want to. If you still want to open that home décor store, we can do that, but don’t work because you have to—work because you want to. I got you covered, sweetheart. Don’t go to the interview. Stay here with me.”

Her other hand dabs at her lips. She can barely breathe. “Zayden...why are you doing this?”

What am I doing? My hands shake totally uncharacteristically, and I almost don’t recognize my voice. Who knew I’d ever be down on one knee like this? That’s what a good woman does, I guess. “Because I’m asking my favorite person in the world if she’ll do me the honor of marrying me.”

She doesn’t answer right away. Her fingers tremble, and tears glaze her eyes. I hear her mother gasp, “Oh!”

“Bailey?” I say. “That’s you, baby. My favorite person in the world is you.”

She lets out a raspy laugh. “Oh, my God, I can’t believe this is happening. I can’t believe this...” She rambles. “Are you sure?”

I admit, I have to laugh at that. I shake my head at this crazy, amazing, beautiful

woman. My knee down on this broken asphalt driveway is killing me, but it doesn't matter. I'd go through it a thousand times more for her. "Positive. You brought love into my life again. You showed me what having a family could feel like, and yeah, I was scared at first, but life's too short to live in fear, Bailey. I gotta have you. Please marry me."

"Say yes!" someone shouts from down the street.

Everyone around us breaks into laughter, a good sign. I've been worried how her family was going to take this, but then Dad says, "The man's waiting for an answer, Bale."

I glance over my shoulder at him with a look of gratitude.

Bailey lets out a breath through rounded lips, looks up at the sky as if her final answer were there, then looks down at me again. For a second, I think she's going to turn me down. She'd be smart to, but God, I hope she doesn't. Then, slowly, she nods. "Yes."

Holy fuck, that was close. A rush of air escapes my lungs. Taking out the ring, I slide it onto her pretty finger, and it fits perfectly. She's mine. This woman is mine. Finally, I stand and take her face into my hands. "Thank you. You won't ever be sorry you said that." I kiss her and take in what it feels like to be the luckiest bastard in the world.

All around us and down the street, Mom, Dad, and others cheer. My driver got the whole thing on video. I'll have to give him a nice tip for doing that, since it totally flew my mind. She said yes. Bailey Rainville is now my fiancée. I knew she loved me, but I was worried the whole way over that she'd be too pissed at me to ever forgive me.

But she did, surprising me yet again.

Because that's the kind of woman Bailey is.

\* \* \*

A funny thing about small towns—there are no hotels, and I don't feel right staying at the Rainville's home, per Bailey's mom's invitation, knowing fully well that I plan on banging the shit out of my woman after months of not seeing her.



## Page 51

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:03 am*

So we take off and stop at a bed and breakfast in a cute nearby antique town. On the way, Bailey calls the school to tell them she won't be coming in, but thank you for the opportunity, and I hear the principal tell her, "Oh, that's a shame. You were quite the candidate. Good luck with everything."

She hangs up and looks at me. "That's that," she sighs, looking back at her ring to admire it. I would've put a 40-carat diamond on her finger if it would've made sense, but somehow, I think she loves this one just fine.

"You're mine now," I tell her, giving her sideeye.

She bites her lip, looking so coy and pretty in that yellow dress, it sends shivers through my body. I've waited for her this whole time. No one else even comes close. "You're going to have to talk to me, you know."

"I know."

"And you're going to have to fight for Olivia. Whether you win or lose is different, but you have to fight for her."

"Already in the works, babe," I say. "If I could take her back full-time, I would. Together with you, I know we can do it."

"You could've done it without me, too," she says.

"But it's more fun with you." I smile. She smiles, too.

As she stares out the window with a wholly satisfied grin on her face, I get a call. I told the office not to bother me, that I'd be doing something important and couldn't be interrupted, but I'm surprised to find it's social services. I hadn't expected to hear from them in a while. The woman on the other end begins to tell me something...

Bailey's face turns back to me, questioning if I'm alright.

I hold up a finger as I listen.

Noelia and her boyfriend have done it again. Except it's much worse than fraud this time. She's really gone off the deep end, full-fledged into drugs, and while they were hoping she'd recover and fall back into her role as mother, it seems she's gone and committed armed robbery this time.

"Quite a tragic situation," the woman says, "and so we're going to need you to come in and sign some papers, Mr. Hawthorn. I'll follow up with your lawyers in the morning, but considering the baby's mother will be in prison for a very long time, it would appear that Olivia will be residing with you indefinitely."

"Not a problem," I tell her, my chest expanding with a new type of fear and exhilaration I've never felt. I'm going to be a full-time dad. Olivia's going to come home. "I'm ready immediately, so please let me know if there's anything I can do to speed up the process."

The woman explains that they will be moving as fast as possible to have Olivia transferred—yet again—one last time.

Back where she belongs...

Hanging up, I sigh and Bailey asks, "What was that?"

“Olivia’s coming home for good,” I say, and my voice is hoarse with unexpected emotion.

It’s hard to decide if a shriek is loud or not when your eardrums are getting blown out by your fiancée’s happiness. Octopus arms encircle me, and my face becomes a blank canvas for a new type of lipstick kiss art. Which I’m goodwith.

I explain the whole situation to Bailey, and we both agree that while it’s tragic, it’s the best course of action for Olivia. Hopefully, she’ll never remember this back-and-forth custody thing and she can begin a normal, healthy and fulllife.

At the bed and breakfast, first thing I do is take Bailey back to the small but cozy bedroom and rake her into my arms. Between the happiness and stress, we kiss, tumbling over our feet, shoes, and clothes, and I swear, it’s like coming home and checking my stress at the door. I’ve been away atwar.

At war with myself, that is, but the war isover.

I need this woman by my side forever—to kiss, to ravish, to play with, to raise Olivia with, to care for, to buy things for, to spoil, and spoil I will, because she deserves it. Anyone who can completely change my life course deserves a fucking medal, and I’ll spend the rest of my life making sure she getsit.

But for now, she’ll be getting somethingelse.

Wherever she wants it. However she wantsit.

Because I love her, love making love to her, and want her to come at least three times before we head back out into the world.

Laying her down on the comfy bed, it’s hard to delve into foreplay and wait before

the hardcore action, but luckily, she doesn't want to wait either. It's been too long for both of us. She pulls me into her body, wrapping her legs around me and holding me tight, like she's afraid I might get away from her again, and I plow into her.

As always, she's wet and ready, her sweet core flowing, inviting me into her world. I fall into it whole-heartedly. I've missed her. I've been existing, not living. I've been working, not enjoying life. This. This is the final piece.

We fit perfectly together. We always did.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:03 am*

Our love is different this time—it's purposeful, possessive. It's like what I imagined wedding-night sex used to be in the old days—more of a ritual for the purposes of consummating the marriage. Well, we're consummating this alright, making it real and official, and it feels amazing.

"You're mine, sweetheart," I tell her over and over. "Mine. I love you so much, Bailey."

She throws back her head, arching her body into me, as I drive into her, claim her, and make her come hard against my hip bones. "All yours," she says, surrendering. "I've missed you, I've missed you...." Her muscles grip me tightly, drawing me in deeper.

I hold onto the headboard with one hand and drive deeper into her. "I won't let you go again. Ever." She feels so good around me, like the earth grounding me and the air allowing me to fly all at once. No flight in no airplane ever felt so right.

"I won't let you," she says, gripping my hair.

Hearing her voice again in my ear drives me crazy, and I slam my hips into hers, building up my longing to a fever pitch. It doesn't take long. My body's been calling out to her since the night she left, I've been holding my breath ever since she left me in the dark, and now it finally gets to see the light again.

I look into her eyes, kiss her cheeks and eyelashes, beautiful eyelashes of my woman. My Bailey. I could cry but I won't. Instead, I come into her, wave after wave of spilling my seed into her, and I don't care if she's on the pill, and I don't care if I'm

not wearing a condom anymore. If we make a baby, I'm good with it. And if we don't, because her body inherited her mom's disorder, I'm good with that, too. Somehow, we'll figure it out. Because it's Bailey. My Bailey. My woman. We'll talk about it and take whatever steps we need to succeed.

I lie beside her and breathe in our energy in silence.

Our breaths are in unison.

Together with Olivia, we'll make a family. We'll erase the past. We'll create a new future, because guess who's in control? We are. We get to decide. Ghosts are just ghosts. They can't hurt us. I mourn the life I used to have, sure, but it's not here anymore. We are. We're here, and we get to decide. I'll spend the rest of my life making sure my girls are happy.

As long as they'll have me.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:03 am*

### Epilogue - BAILEY

When you have two little girls and another baby on the way, your third store location opening up in the City, and a cookout to get to at your parents' in Connecticut, it can feel like your breath has been taken away. But that's how it's been ever since Zayden came back into my life—busy, busy, busy.

CEO of the ever-growing JetFlash and other new companies, Zayden still lives in the fast lane, is super driven and uber successful, and we go along with him everywhere. We fly, we drive, we move around with Daddy, and every so often, Daddy stays home for a month or two. Daddy is never too far, because Daddy adores his family, as I knew he would.

I love Zayden so much. He's everything I could've ever hoped for. And more.

Home Sweet, my chain home goods store, caters to the average working family clientele and has taken off like I never would've imagined. We offer stylish and unique kitchen, bedroom, bath, and living room items, all in modern colors and styles at affordable prices. I don't make the same income as Zayden, but hey, he's been doing it longer, and wait 'til all these kiddos are in school together—then I'm really going to give him a run for his money. I'm going to rule the world! It'll be interesting to see who's more successful—me or him.

Not like I'm competitive or anything.

Granted, it's easier to own a business when you have the money to invest, and for that I'll always be grateful to Zayden, but I've still had to put tons of hours of work, all

while raising two little girls, and being a kickass mom. In case you're wondering—no, I don't use a nanny. Not that there's anything wrong with hiring a nanny, I just love being a full hands-on mom too much. I love the challenge of trying to balance it all. I'm a perfectionist that way. Sometimes I recall how I almost took a teaching job in Perrysburg and told Zayden "no" to this beautiful life. One inch to the left, and life works out one way. One inch to the right...

I often think about what made me change my mind that day, and I'm pretty sure it was instinct. Pure instinct. I just knew he was a good man in his heart. I knew he was telling the truth that day in my parents' driveway, and most importantly, I knew he was ready for change.

Anyone looking back at our situation five years ago would've told me, like my mom tried to warn me, that Zayden wasn't for me, that he was a tortured man who had to figure himself out first before he could be anyone's knight in shining armor. That we were co-dependent in our ways, and sometimes we still are. Life's not perfect; we still get into arguments, but we always solve them together.

Zayden's been attending therapy every week since that day and has never missed a session. Sometimes, I'll sit in—just because. It's good to understand what he needs, so I can try and be there for him. He can't do it alone. But holy crap, is he dedicated. That's the word to describe my husband—dedicated. To his work, his wife, our family, my family, our beautiful daughter, Olivia, the precocious five-year-old who stole my heart almost five years ago, our three-year-old, Brooke, and now our little boy, Rain, on the way. Seven months pregnant and dying to see my precious boy already, I cannot believe my good fortune in life.

The landscape zips by, as Zayden drives, the backseat filled with giggles of two silly girls. I sit here smiling, because I can't believe it. Sometimes, I'm fully in the moment with ketchup stains on my shirt while two little girls hover in the bathroom doorway singing Moana songs while I try to pee. Other times, I sit in the passenger



seat of our Lexus and stare at my life, wondering, How did this happen???

Zayden glances at me and smiles. “What? What’s that goofy facefor?”

“We did it. Look at our life, babe. We didit.”

He nods, hands on the wheel as we pull into my parents’ driveway. They moved to Connecticut to be closer to us and their grandchildren, and like us, never looked back. “It’s pretty awesome, isn’tit?”

“It is.” It’s not just awesome. It’s miraculous that we’re even here. There was so much going againstus.

We get out of the car, and I unbuckle Brooke while Zayden gets Olivia. Our children even look alike, with striking blonde hair and Zayden’s blue eyes. Olivia knows she has a mommy who will see her again one day, but right now is “away.” No more, no less. She knows I’m her stepmom and calls me Mimi, because it sounds like Mommy but with a twist.

“Yay, Nana and Pa’s house,” Olivia sings and runs to the front door of the white colonial with the red door. She wears her Moana tapa and pandana skirt complete with her Heart of Te Fiti shell necklace. Though she looks nothing like Moana, try telling her that. With the way she sings her heart out daily and ties her hair into a knot, she thinks she isMoana.

Already, we smell the BBQ smoking up the backyard. My dad’s left the garage open to showcase his beautiful handmade furniture to passersby, and the front door is, of course, open.

Olivia strolls in like she owns the place. “Nana! Pa! I’mhome!”

Zayden and I laugh. Each of us holding one of Brooke's hands, we walk up to the house and enter to the joyous sounds of my mom cracking up as she lifts Olivia into the air and hugs her. "There's my little girl!" Mom smiles. I love how she's never treated Olivia any differently than she does her own flesh-and-blood children and grandchildren. "Where's my other princess?"

"Brooke's the princess," Olivia corrects her. "But I'm the chief!"

"Oh, how can I keep forgetting?" Mom pretends to be forgetful, and the girls laugh. Brooke runs up to Nana and hugs her legs then together, then my little girls run to the back of the house. As we follow them and Mom talks to me about the food and the weather and how she thought it was going to rain but thank goodness it didn't, it quickly becomes apparent that we're not just here for aBBQ.

The moment we step out the back French doors, everyone already here yells, "Surprise!" Blue streamers fly our way and blue balloons bounce in the September breezes. It's a baby shower...forus!

Dad comes up and gives me a bear hug like I'm not even pregnant, then everyone else follows suit. My aunt and uncle are here, Grandma's here, cousins I haven't seen since last Christmas, our friends from the City...everyone. I'm overwhelmed with emotion. Even though it's not my first baby shower, it feels like it. Everyone's so excited that we're having a boy, it may as well be a brand-new experience.

Zayden hugs and talks to everyone like they're his family. Like they're his own family. You'd never guess that he married into mine, because he blends in like nobody's business. He gets along better with my cousins than even I do. My dad and uncle spend the entire BBQ baby shower chatting it up with Zayden, while I hang mostly with my mom and college girlfriends.

"I love the cowboy theme," I tell Mom even though Zayden and I decided on a

Noah's ark theme for the baby's room. But I still love it because she put so much effort into it.

"You like it? Grandma helped me. So did Vero."

"Vero's here?"

Zayden's maid from back in the day no longer works for him, but from the moment I came back to live at the house, she was by my side, helping me with everything and even became one of my best friends. I haven't seen her since she moved to LA to pursue her acting career.

"Yup. Right over there." Mom points to a svelte, sexy woman hanging out in the corner surrounded by her husband and some of Dad's friends. She's always been a man magnet, that one.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:03 am*

I head over to say hi, and she gives me a big hug. I don't know why I ever felt threatened by her. She was always so nice. It was just me in those early days, scared of my surroundings and insecure around all of Zayden's women.

There are so many reminders of how far I've come—Zayden talking to my family, beer in hand, red and blue cushions from my very own store dotting the outdoor furniture, me and Vero talking like old friends, my own baby Brooke chasing her sister all around theyard...

To think we almost lost Olivia five years ago. To think she could be living a life of uncertainty and maybe even pain had she stayed with her mom while her mother goes through tough times. Never do I want to eliminate Olivia's relationship with her mother. Never do I want to completely replace her either, but it finally became important enough to Zayden that we keep full custody of her, that we give her the best life we possibly can.

And so here we are.

I watch it all unfold like I'm behind a sheet of glass.

Life could not be better. Inside of me, Rain wriggles around, a sweet reminder that life goes on.

I cannot believe I found my soul mate in the weirdest of ways. Who knew, when I walked into that MetroLife Building, that it would yield me this? That five years later, I'd be married to my boss and we'd have three beautiful children. Who knew that my parents would live closer to me, and that Zayden and I could ever be this

happy?

Glancing across the yard, I see him watching me. Zayden. He knows I'm thinking about it all, because this happens to me a lot. I get emotional, especially during this pregnancy. I fade away, step out of myself, and contemplate it all with childlike wonder. His smile tells me he feels the same. His eyes crinkle with dusty blue, and I know that if he had to do it all again—the pain, the loss, the heartbreak—just to reach me and the girls again, he'd do it.

'Cause that's what you do when you adore who you're with.

You walk through fire time and time again just to meet them again.

And once you have them close, you hold on tight and never let go.

THEEND