



The Forbidden Billionaire Attorney

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Category: Romance, Billionaire Romance, Adult

Description: I never expected my dream job at Cole & Sterling to land me in my worst nightmare: working for Adrian Cole – billionaire, single dad, and the infuriatingly gorgeous man who’s ten years my senior.

That boy from those childhood summers at our parents’ backyard BBQs has grown into something dangerous.

He’s devastatingly handsome in his custom suits, with a smile that promises sin.

Now he’s my impossible-to-please boss, and the way he looks at me across the conference table makes me forget every rule I’ve ever made.

One forbidden late-night encounter shatters all my boundaries.

Now I’m carrying the heir to the Cole empire.

But my surprise pregnancy isn’t the only secret about to explode.

When I discover Leo Sterling is plotting Adrian’s downfall with me as his scapegoat, I have to convince a man burned by his ex-wife’s betrayal to trust me before we both lose everything.

In the ruthless world of Los Angeles law, the most dangerous contracts aren’t signed in ink—they’re sealed with forbidden passion.

Total Pages (Source): 65

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:45 am

Chapter one

Isabella

“That meeting,” I groan, tossing my leather-bound notebook onto my new desk as my secretary, Kate, takes the seat across from me, “was officially the worst experience of my life.”

“Come on; it couldn’t have been that bad, ” says Kate, but her smile tells me she’s just trying to keep things light.

“Bad?” I scoff. “Try catastrophic. Adrian Cole might be a legal genius, but his people skills are in the negative.” I tick off on my fingers for emphasis. “He bulldozed every question I had, talked over me, and don’t even get me started on how he handled the client. It was like watching a car crash in slow motion, if the car was made of arrogance and expensive suits.”

Kate chuckles, the sound bright and tinkling like a bell. “Sounds like you’re getting the full Adrian experience. He operates ... differently than his dad did.”

“Differently?” I snort. “Thomas Cole was diplomatic ... charming, even. Adrian is more like a storm in a boardroom, leaving a trail of chaos and bewildered faces.”

“Six years.” Kate’s voice is tinged with nostalgia. “I’ve been here for six years. Started out as Leo’s PA; now I’m wrangling lawyers. Still, not a day goes by without some new drama.”

“Six years,” I echo, mind spinning. Kate’s seen the evolution of this place and survived the regime change when Adrian took over two years ago after the sudden death of his father. There’s history etched into the lines of her smile, with stories buried beneath her carefully filed documents.

“Today was supposed to be monumental for me.” I lean back, staring at the ceiling as if it holds answers. “My big break, proving myself to the legacy of Cole & Sterling. But no. Instead I get AdrianfreakingCole steamrolling my moment.”

“Hey, Ms. King,” Kate’s voice pulls me back, her gaze soft. “You’ll get your chance to shine. Just might have to weather a few storms first.”

“Storms? With Adrian, it’s more like a perpetual hurricane.” I stand up, rolling my shoulders to shake off the tension. “But you know what they say about hurricanes, right?”

“What’s that?” Kate asks, curious despite herself.

I cross over to my mini-fridge and retrieve a water bottle, cool to the touch. “Sometimes they clear the path for something new,” I reply, a smirk playing on my lips. Despite it all, I can’t help but feel a thrill of challenge at the thought of facing off against Adrian Cole again. Bring on the hurricane.

“Adrian Cole is the epitome of—”

“Ms. King.” Kate’s voice slices through my rant, her eyes flickering past my shoulder with an urgency that suggests this is not just a casual interruption. But I’m on a roll, the litany of grievances pouring from me like lava from a too-long-dormant volcano.

“Seriously, the man thinks that—” My tirade falters as an unmistakable sound cuts the air, a throat being cleared with the precision of a courtroom gavel demanding

order. The hairs on the back of my neck stand to attention as I slowly pivot on my heel.

And there he is. AdrianfreakingCole. Standing in my doorway. Arms crossed over his chest, a thundercloud brewing in the stormy depths of his dark brown eyes. He's infuriating, yes, but as I take in the sight of him, I can't deny the annoying little flutter in my stomach. Tall and imposing, he carries the kind of presence that commands attention without even trying. His hair, always that perfect balance between meticulous and effortlessly tousled, catches the light in a way that highlights shades of espresso and mahogany.

"Isabella," he says, and oh, it's not a greeting—it's a summons.

"Mr. Cole," I manage, cursing the slight quiver in my voice. I hate how just the sight of him can send my senses into overdrive—the cut of his tailored suit accentuating broad shoulders and a frame honed by what I assume are very expensive gym memberships.

"Office. Now." The words are clipped, a no-nonsense command that has me shooting a glance at Kate, who offers a sympathetic grimace.

"Sure thing," I say, my tone drenched in a sarcasm that I hope masks the sudden dryness of my mouth. As I stride toward what I mockingly dub "the lion's den," I remind myself that I'm here because of Thomas Cole—Adrian's father—a man whose belief in me had been a beacon throughout my career.

"Okay, Isabella. Let's see if you can survive the hurricane," I mutter under my breath. Because one thing is for sure: If I'm going to make it through this, I'll need every bit of the tenacity that got me here in the first place.

The scent hits me first on our way to his office, that intoxicating blend of vanilla and

tobacco. Under normal circumstances it might have sent a shiver up my spine. But it's wafting off Adrian Cole, so instead of a shiver, I get an involuntary eye roll as I trail into his office.

"Take a seat," he commands without looking up, thumbing through a stack of papers on his desk.

I do, crossing one leg over the other and sinking back into the plush leather chair.

"Isabella," he begins, the sharpness in his voice slicing through the room, "this morning with Mr. Henderson was ... an embarrassment."

An embarrassment? That's one way to put it. I huff softly, disbelief coloring the sound. Mr. Henderson loved my pitch. What I'm not loving is this lecture on the "Cole & Sterling" way of working, which apparently translates to "Adrian's way or the highway."

"Look," Adrian says, fingers steepled like he's some kind of legal deity, "your approach wasn't entirely wrong, but here we value—"

"Let me guess," I interject, unable to keep the sarcasm from my tone, "a more soul-sucking, rigid protocol that sucks all creativity out of the process?"

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:45 am

He doesn't even flinch, just continues that stare-down like he's trying to communicate with me telepathically. If only he knew telepathy wouldn't penetrate the fortress around my brain when it comes to him.

"Isabella," he repeats, slower this time, as if speaking to a particularly defiant child, "we have a certain standard we abide by. And that standard results in wins for our clients. I'm not sure where you learned how to—"

"Stanford," I interrupt, leaning forward with a pointed look. "Ever heard of it? That's where I graduated from—the top law school in the country. The same one your father went to."

Adrian snorts, a sound that reeks of old-money arrogance and Ivy League rivalry. "Tied for number one, actually." His correction comes quick, sharp like the edge of his tailored gray suit that does little to diminish the impact of his dark hair. Even his tie is a perfect shade of blue, bringing out those deep brown eyes that are currently fixed on me with a mix of irritation and something else I can't place. It all makes him look more like a GQ cover model than a cutthroat lawyer.

"Of course you'd say that," I scoff, the words rolling off my tongue with ease. "Yale boy through and through. Can't stand the thought of being anything less than top dog, can you?"

The corner of his mouth twitches as if he's fighting back a smirk or maybe a snarl—it's hard to tell with Adrian.

"Anyway," I continue, brushing aside his competitive jab, "to answer your question,

your father was the one who taught me everything I know and apply to this day.” I lean back now, crossing my arms over my chest.

A flicker of something passes through Adrian’s eyes—surprise, maybe accusation, but it’s gone before I can dissect it.

“Thomas Cole was a mentor to me.” I let the words hang in the air between us for a moment. “He believed in my approach, and I’m pretty sure he’d agree with how I handled things today.”

“Is that so?” Adrian leans back in his chair. “You think because my father spent a few hours indulging your questions back at USC while you were an undergrad, you have insight into how he would conduct business?”

“More than a few hours,” I retort, standing my ground. “He made time for me because he saw my potential. He wasn’t just a brilliant lawyer, Adrian—he was a great teacher too.”

“Was he, now?” The words are clipped, his jaw tightens, and I know I’ve struck a nerve. Good. Maybe it’ll knock some sense into that thick skull of his.

“Absolutely,” I insist, my own determination mirroring his stubbornness. “And unlike some people, I appreciated his guidance.”

Adrian’s gaze narrows, and he opens his mouth, no doubt ready to launch another counterargument, but I’m not done yet.

“Maybe if you weren’t so busy trying to step out from his shadow, you’d see that.” The challenge in my voice is clear, and it’s satisfying to see him pause, caught off guard by my audacity.

Adrian's hand comes down hard on the mahogany, a sound that might've made me jump if I weren't so pissed. "You think you know my father from a few chats in his office?"

I'm on my feet now, my chair scraping back with an aggression that mirrors my mood. "He was more than willing to share his wisdom with someone who actually wanted it," I snap back, letting the sting in my voice show.

I don't miss the way Adrian's nostrils flare, the muscle in his jaw ticking like a time bomb.

"Unlike some people in this room," I add, feeling a flicker of satisfaction when his eyes flash with something fierce. He looks like he might explode, which, honestly, would be the cherry on top right about now.

My gaze drifts to the silver frame on his desk, the one holding a photo of Caleb. The kid's got his dad's dark hair, but thankfully not the scowl that seems etched onto Adrian's face these days. I've met the little guy a few times when Adrian bothered to show up to my family's annual Christmas party. He's cute and sweet, the total opposite of Adrian.

"Thomas Cole was an exceptional lawyer," I continue, locking eyes with Adrian, making sure every word hits home. "An even better person. Can't say the same for you."

His reaction is priceless—eyes wide, mouth opening and closing like a fish out of water. It's almost enough to make me smile. Almost.

"I sincerely hope Caleb doesn't grow up to treat you like you treated your dad." I toss the words like a grenade, watching as they land with precision.

For a moment, all the air in the room feels sucked out, leaving only the tension that crackles like static. Then, without another word, I whirl around and storm out, letting the door slam shut behind me as I leave Adrian Cole speechless.

Take that, Mr. Billionaire Lawyer.

I barrel into my office like it's the last safe zone in a game of tag. The door slams shut with a thud, and I lean against it, trying to catch my breath. My legs feel like they've been put through one of those noodle-makers—twisted, stretched, and way too wobbly.

“Great job, Isabella,” I mutter to myself. “First day on the job and you’ve already committed career hara-kiri.”

I shuffle over to my desk and sit back in my chair. I'm dead meat. Adrian Cole, the man who turns boardrooms into battlefields, is probably drafting my execution order right now.

“Stanford didn't prepare me for this,” I groan, staring up at the ceiling tiles as if they hold some sort of escape hatch from my current predicament.

The silence in my office is deafening, my own thoughts bouncing around like ping-pong balls.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:45 am

A sigh slips past my lips, heavy with the weight of what-ifs. Finding another firm like Cole & Sterling? It's like looking for a needle in a haystack. A needle that doesn't judge you for quitting your last job because your boss couldn't keep his handsto himself.

I might have pushed too far this time, but damn it, if anyone can hold their own against Adrian Cole, it's Isabella King. Even if he looks incredible in a tailored designer suit and smells annoyingly irresistible.

Chapter two

Adrian

Islam my hand against the desk, a perfect imprint of frustration on the mahogany. Isabella just marched out of here like she owns the place. She has some nerve trying to tell me she was using my father's tactics back at the meeting this morning. And what was all that about me desperately trying to escape his shadow?

Isabella King is a clueless buffoon. I'm starting to think it was a mistake asking her to join my firm when our last corporate finance lawyer retired.

If she wasn't always quoting the damn employee handbook, I might actually let myself appreciate the way her white blouse and black trousers fit her. Like they're tailor-made to trace the lines of her curves, which ... crap, I really shouldn't be thinking about.

And if I'm being honest, if it wasn't for her insistence that she knew my father better

than me, we just might get along. It's not like I've forgotten how stunning she looked last Christmas—or was it the year before?—all festive and fiery. But now? She's even more infuriatingly beautiful—if that's possible—each button of her blouse a taunt, each crease in her trousers a challenge.

I rake a hand through my hair, catching a glimpse of her in my mind again—the way her long brown hair falls over her shoulders, bangs framing her face like some sort of siren's call. It's ridiculous. There's a heat to those thoughts, a dangerous kind of spice that should come with a warning label.

“Off limits,” I mutter to the empty air, shaking my head as if I could dislodge the image of grabbing onto those locks.

The sharp rap on my office door is like a starter pistol, snapping me out of my Isabella-induced daze. I don't even get the chance to call out before Leo Sterling—partner in crime and actual business—saunters in with that all-too-familiar cocky grin plastered across his face.

“Run into a hurricane on your way here?” he quips, shutting the door behind him. His eyes are dancing with curiosity, not missing a beat.

“Something like that,” I reply, leaning back in my chair and trying to regain composure. “Isabella just has a unique way of turning discussions into ... well, tornadoes.”

“Ah, the meeting this morning?” He chuckles, taking Isabella's recently vacated seat, which still seems to hold the electric charge of our confrontation. He leans forward, elbows on thighs, looking far too amused for someone who didn't have to endure the whirlwind himself.

“Let's just say the rookie has a knack for pushing buttons she shouldn't even know

exist,” I grumble, my attempt at nonchalance probably failing miserably.

“Give her time,” Leo advises with an easy shrug. “She’ll adapt. Or combust. Either way, it’ll be entertaining.” He flashes a grin that tells me he’s only half-joking.

But before I can decide whether to laugh or launch into a rant, he shifts gears.

“Speaking of entertainment,” he says, his smirk widening, “Aurora Tech rang. They want us for the merger with NexGen Industries.”

I sit up straighter, any irritation from earlier dissipating like mist in sunlight. This is the kind of news that could turn a bad day into a champagne-worthy one.

“Seriously?” I ask, the prospect already igniting a familiar thrill in my veins. “That’s huge. We nail this, and we’re golden.”

“Golden, platinum, diamond—pick your precious metal, Adrian. If all goes well, we’re on the Forbes cover by next quarter,” Leo says, the excitement in his voice mirroring my own.

“Damn right we will be,” I say, already mentally rolling up my sleeves. This is the game I live for—the cutthroat, high-stakes dance of corporate mergers. And I intend to lead.

“Your father would be proud.”

I glance down at my desk and nod. “I know.”

Admittedly, I was shocked when Dad left the firm to me in his will. I was almost certain he would leave it all to Leo, who’s been his partner for almost twenty years. Isabella is right about one thing—I wasn’t a good son to Thomas Cole. I was

rebellious and cold. I even married Colette against his warnings that she was trouble. And boy, was he right.

I've spent the past three years since his death trying to make up for it all and managed to turn his multi-million-dollar firm into a billion dollar one in the process. But this merger? The big leagues.

I clap my hands together, the sound echoing off the glass walls of my office. The thrill of a new challenge is electric in my veins. "Leo, this one's mine," I declare with a grin that feels like it could split my face in two.

"Adrian, you sure? I can handle the initial correspondence if—" Leo starts, but I wave him off.

"Appreciate it, but no thanks. You know how I am with contracts—I want to be in the trenches." My fingers tap an eager rhythm on the mahogany desk. Meticulous, precise—that's how I work best when it comes to the delicate dance of mergers and acquisitions.

He sighs, resigned. "Alright, man. Your show."

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:45 am

Our moment of corporate glee is cut short by the buzz of my phone. It's Hannah, my nanny. I brace for impact. "Hey, Hannah. What's up?"

"Mr. Cole, I'm really sorry, but I've caught some sort of stomach bug. I don't think I can work this week," she says, her voice weaker than usual.

"Take the time you need. My mom can tap in for a bit. She's been dying to spend time with Caleb recently." I keep my tone light and reassuring. No need for her to worry about us.

"Thank you, Mr. Cole. I'll keep you posted on how I'm feeling. Oh, and don't forget about Caleb's dentist appointment at one o'clock."

I eye the clock on my wall. It's 12:20 already, so I should get going.

"Thanks for the reminder. Get some rest, Hannah. And fluids. Lots of fluids." I end the call and look up at Leo, who's watching me with an amused eyebrow raised.

"Kid duty calls?" he asks, smirking.

"Yep. Caleb's got a dentist appointment. Wouldn't miss it for the world," I reply, shoving my laptop into my leather bag with more force than necessary. As I snap the bag shut, Leo chuckles.

"Attentive single dad and a billionaire? How do you keep the ladies at bay?"

"Trust me, between boardrooms and bedtime stories, there's no room for any

playdates of my own.” I grab my keys, spinning them on one finger, the metallic jingle punctuating my point.

Sure, before Colette turned my life into a courtroom drama series, I played the field. But now? My heart’s got trust issues thicker than the Sunday Times.

“Later, Leo.” I nod at him, and he nods back, the unspoken language of lifelong friends and business partners.

“Later, Adrian. Don’t let the kiddie germs bite.”

“Ha-ha,” I deadpan, and push through the door.

“Suzy,” I call out to my secretary as I pass her desk, “hold down the fort. I’ve got a client dinner at Bistro Laurent tonight, won’t be back in.”

“Will do, Mr. Cole,” she replies efficiently, not missing a beat as her fingers fly over the keyboard.

“Thanks,” I say, already halfway to the elevators, my mind shifting gears from contracts to cavities. Welcome to my world—where the battles are fought with legal briefs and dental floss.

Fifteen minutes later, I arrive at the front office of Laurel Heights Preparatory, waiting for Caleb to be pulled out of class.

“Adrian Cole,” I hear a voice behind me as I wait.

Sam Velasquez, the slick lawyer from Davidson & Harte, greets me with that too-perfect smile as he leans against the receptionist’s desk like he owns the place. “Here to pull your kid out of class? Or are you just trying to steal our negotiation tactics?”

“Sam,” I retort, my voice laced with mock seriousness, “if I wanted to learn how to lose clients, I’d just read your firm’s Yelp reviews.”

We share a chuckle, the kind two rival gladiators might before they enter the arena. But then the double doors swing open, and there’s Caleb, his bright eyes zeroing in on me. He’s walking alongside Elizabeth, Sam’s daughter.

“Hey, champ!” I scoop him up, my adversarial shell melting away faster than ice cream on a summersidewalk.

He clings to me, all gangly limbs and gap-toothed smile, and suddenly, I’m not Adrian Cole, billionaire lawyer—I’m just Dad.

“Ready to go?” I ask, and he gives me a nod. I rise, still holding Caleb in my arms as I turn to Sam. “Velasquez, it’s been a pleasure.”

He gives me a curt nod as he takes his daughter’s hand in his. “Always, Cole.”

“Daddy, is Hannah gonna be okay?” Caleb’s question comes muffled against my shoulder as we head out to the car.

“Yep, buddy, she’s tough. Just caught a little bug.” I retrieve the key fob out of my pocket and unlock my black luxury SUV, securing him in his car seat in the backseat. “Grandma Macie will hang out with you for a bit until I get done with work today.”

“Okay,” he nods, his face serious. “Sounds like a plan.”

“I appreciate the approval.”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:45 am

Once he's all fastened in, I shut the door and make my way into the driver's seat.

"Does it hurt to get your tooth pulled out?" His little voice trembles.

"Just a little bit, I won't lie to you. But afterward—video games and ice cream. How's that for a brave-boy reward?"

"Can you play Genshin Impact with me?" Caleb's eyes hold hope, and who am I to deny him?

"Until Grandma swoops in," I confirm. "Then I've got a client dinner at Bistro Laurent."

"Okay," he sighs, resigned but understanding. It's our thing—this balancing act of business and bedtime stories.

"Hey, Dad?" Caleb pipes up again, still a touch anxious about his appointment.

"Yeah, Caleb?"

"Can we get strawberry shortcake ice cream?"

"Strawberry shortcake it is, bud." I shoot him a wink in the rearview mirror before driving off.

The drive back from the dentist is a quiet victory lap, Caleb's bravery certificate in the form of strawberry shortcake ice cream in tow. We pull into the driveway of my Beverly Hills home, where my mother's gray sedan is already parked.

"Did you see how she yanked it out?" Caleb asks. He's animated now, the fear replaced with the kind of glee only an eight-year-old can muster over a lost tooth.

"Like a pro," I say, ruffling his hair as we approach the front door, the familiar digits punched into the keypad without a second thought.

As we step inside, Macie Cole, my eternal lifeline and mother extraordinaire, greets us with that knowing smile. "Let me see, champ." She bends down to Caleb's level, her eyes full of grandmotherly warmth.

He opens his mouth wide, pointing to the gap left behind. "It's gone!"

"Looks like you'll be getting all your big boy teeth in no time," she says, her voice as comforting as warm milk. But Caleb's grin falters, his brow creasing with new worries.

"What if the other kids laugh at me? They all have their adult teeth already."

"Hey," I kneel down to meet his gaze, my hand on his shoulder. "It's not your fault you had one stubborn baby tooth. It's just temporary, bud." The reassurance feels thin, even to my ears, but it's the best I've got.

He nods, the sadness lingering in his eyes making me want to punch that baby tooth if it were still around. "You know what will make you feel better? Setting up Genshin Impact for a co-op session with yours truly."

His face lights up like I just told him Christmas came early. "Really? Even though

Grandma is already here?”

“I’ve got time to spare. Go on, get it started.” I give him a gentle nudge toward my office where the gaming PC awaits.

“Okay!” he shouts, already halfway there, worry forgotten in the face of epic digital battles.

I stand up, watching him disappear around the corner, and there’s this moment—a fleeting second—when everything else fades away. The million-dollar deals, the office politics, Isabella’s infuriating perfectionism—it all pales in comparison to Caleb’s excitement over a video game.

I watch Caleb’s back as he dashes upstairs, little legs pumping with the kind of energy I wish could be bottled and sold. Turning to Mom, I can’t help but let out a sigh that feels like it’s been building since Colette left.

“Am I awful at this?” I ask, my voice trailing off. “Colette could always just ... make him smile.”

Mom snorts, her disbelief ringing clear in the quiet of the foyer. “Oh, please. That woman—” She waves a dismissive hand. “If she was ‘Mother of the Year’, she wouldn’t have jetted off to Paris faster than you can say ‘au revoir’ as soon as the ink dried on your divorce papers.”

“Mom ...” I start, but once she’s on a Colette rant, there’s no way of stopping her.

“She calls, what, once or twice a month? That’s not motherhood; that’s barely an acquaintance. Doesn’t she miss her own son?”

The bitter taste of reality is one I’m familiar with, but it still stings. “She never

wanted to be a mom. She did it for me.” My voice hardens. “Well, mostly for my money.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:45 am

“She is the fool then.” Mom shakes her head, her eyes softening. “You’re doing great, Adrian. And if you ever need a break, remember this bored retiree is more than happy to step in.”

“Thanks, Mom.” I manage a chuckle, feeling a weight lift, even if just a little. “You might regret that offer when you realize how often I’ll take you up on it.”

“Try me.”

“Alright. I’m going to game with Caleb for a bit before I head back to work.”

With a grin, I turn to follow Caleb’s path, ready to lose myself in a world of fantasy battles and quests. It’s easier there—no heartbreaks, no custody battles—just me and my boy taking on dragons.

Chapter three

Isabella

I push the last bite of my well-dressed salad around the plate, eyeing it like it’s a legal brief I can’t figure out how to close. Amelie is sipping her wine with that air of French nonchalance she wears better than her Hermes scarf.

“So,” she prods, circling back to the conversation we’ve been nibbling at all evening, “let’s get back to why on earth Adrian Cole would hire you if you two mix like oil and water?”

“Masochism?” I offer, dumping my fork alongside the wilted greens. “Or maybe because his dad would’ve snapped me up in a heartbeat, had I not been a year into law school when he passed?” I shrug, battling the unease that tickles my spine whenever I think about the job offer that came out of nowhere.

“Adrian’s partner Leo emailed me out of the blue,” I continue, swirling the dregs of my Chardonnay in its glass. “Just a few days after I quit my first job. It was serendipitous. Tooserendipitous.”

“Or,” Amelie counters, her brow arched in that way that says she’s about to lay down some truth, “he knows you’re brilliant. Even a place like Cole & Sterling doesn’t hand out jobs to just anyone—friend of the family or not.” She pauses, a smirk playing on her lips. “Though, from what you’ve said, Adrian does sound like an insufferable jerk.”

“Insufferable is putting it mildly,” I scoff, grateful for her support but not ready to let Adrian off the hook that easily.

We laugh, sounding like a couple of hyenas cackling, over the absurdity of my professional life, and decide to call it a night. Bistro Laurent’s ambiance fades as we step into the brisk evening air, heels clicking on the pavement like a time bomb counting down to tomorrow’s dread.

“Speak of the devil,” I murmur as we round the corner, because there he is—Adrian Cole, in all his tailored suit glory. Except now that evening has rolled around, he’s now donning a black coat and red scarf. He’s standing outside the restaurant, looking infuriatingly handsome with his laptop bag slung over one shoulder and a phone pressed to his ear.

“Is that him?” Amelie’s eyes widen just as Adrian turns around.

Call me crazy, but I think I might spot the faintest hint of a smile when his eyes fall on me.

“Great,” I mutter under my breath. I try to focus on how much I loathe him, using it as a shield against the fact that, without the confines of the office walls, he actually looks ... no, I refuse to go there.

“Let’s get out of here before I’m tempted to commit a crime,” I whisper to Amelie, half-joking, half-serious. The less I have to deal with Adrian Cole outside of billable hours, the better.

“Evening, ladies,” he says, ending his call and slipping the phone into his pocket. I force myself to ignore the dimple that dares to make an appearance when he smirks—it’s probably patented anyway.

I nod curtly. “Mr. Cole.”

“We’re outside of work. You can just call me Adrian.” His eyes flick to Amelie. “Is this your friend?”

“Oh, right. Amelie, this is Adrian, my new boss. Adrian, this is Amelie, my best friend.”

Adrian extends his hand for Amelie to shake. “Pleasure to meet you.”

“Pleasure’s all mine,” Amelie replies, but there’s a hint of sarcasm in her tone that, as her best friend, is difficult to ignore. “So, Isabella. Did you still want to get drinks?”

“Honestly, I’m so beat. I could sleep on a bed of nails.” I stifle a yawn with the back of my hand. The last thing I need is alcohol blurring the edges of my already frayed nerves.

“Suit yourself. It’s not like you have a big day tomorrow or anything—” Before Amelie can finish, Adrian chimes in, that infuriating smirk playing on his lips.

“Actually, she does. The Henderson case, remember? Or do you not check your messages after work?” His tone is casual, but there’s an undercurrent of ... something. I squint at him, suspicion pricking my skin.

I dig through my purse, pulling out my phone. Sure enough, there’s a message from Adrian, timestamped an hour ago, announcing he’s passing the Henderson case to me. “You’re giving this to me?” My voice is a mix of disbelief and quiet gratitude.

“Hope you don’t mind,” he says, as if he’s doing me a favor.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:45 am

“Mind? No, I—thank you.” The words taste strange, foreign on my tongue. Thanking Adrian Cole isn’t in my usual repertoire.

“Great. So no drinks then,” Amelie interjects, her words laced with humor.

“Actually, I’ll need the case files for tomorrow,” I muse aloud, more to myself than anyone else. “I left them in my office.”

“Of course you did.” Adrian rolls his eyes theatrically. “Come on, I’ll walk you to the office.”

“Are you sure, Isabella? I can go with you instead. Our Uber’s going to be here in less than a minute,” offers Amelie, concern creasing her forehead.

“Positive,” I assure her, though I’m not sure I am. Being alone with Adrian is like juggling knives—exhilarating until you get cut.

She gives me a skeptical look but nods as her Uber stops at the curb. “Be safe then. Text me when you get home. Adrian, great to meet you again.”

“The pleasure is all mine,” he counters, mimicking her sarcasm from earlier.

Amelie’s cheeks flush a shade of rosy pink as she gets into the backseat of her Uber. The traitor.

The Beverly Hills sidewalks are almost deserted, the click of my heels a staccato rhythm against the pavement. Adrian walks beside me, his hands shoved into the

pockets of his tailored suit pants.

“Why the Henderson case?” I blurt out, unable to contain my curiosity any longer. “I mean, this morning you practically chewed me out for less.”

Adrian’s gaze doesn’t waver from the path ahead. “I was harsh,” he admits with a sigh. “First days can be brutal. There’s a lot you’ll need to learn about how we do things.”

I duck my head, cheeks warming with a mix of pride and embarrassment. My fingers twitch at my sides, resisting the urge to fidget. “I’ll get the hang of it. I’m not afraid of a little hard work.” That’s an understatement—I thrive on impossible challenges.

“Clearly.” His tone is dry, but when I glance up, there’s a hint of something softer in his eyes.

The night air is crisp, making me pull my coat tighter around me. In response, Adrian exhales loudly, as if my attempts at warding off the cold are personally offensive to him. He unwinds his scarf—a luxurious blend of wool and cashmere—and drapes it over my shoulders without asking.

“Los Angeles may not freeze over, but it gets colder than most people expect come nightfall,” he lectures.

The scent of tobacco and vanilla wraps around me, both comforting and unnerving. I should thank him, but instead, I bristle. “For your information, I am 27 years old. Not seven. I know how to dress myself for the weather.” The words snap out sharper than I intend.

He raises an eyebrow, clearly unimpressed by my outburst. “Of course you do.”

I don't wait for any further commentary. Pivoting on my heel, I stride toward the office building with renewed purpose. It's not just the cold I'm trying to escape—it's this confusing proximity to a man who oscillates between infuriating and ... whatever this new, scarf-lending behavior is supposed to be.

I clutch the fabric, fighting the urge to toss it back at him, and press forward. The sooner we can get those files and go our separate ways for the night, the better.

"Is this a filing system or a crime scene?" Adrian quips, surveying my scattered papers and opened law books with mock horror as we stand in my office.

"Mind your business, Cole," I snap, heat creeping up my neck.

He laughs, a deep rumble that makes something twist uncomfortably in my stomach. "Your business is my business," he reminds me, smugnessoozing from every syllable.

"Ugh!" Frustration surges, and I pivot too quickly, my heel catching on the edge of the rug. Time slows as I start to fall backward, but Adrian's reflexes are quicker, his arms wrapping around me, stopping my descent.

"Clumsy," he murmurs, but there's no bite to it.

"Overbearing," I retort, our faces inches apart. Then, as if pulled by some magnetic force beyond my control, our lips crash together. It's rough, hungry, a clashing of wills, and I'm lost in the storm.

I can't stop myself. My hands, traitorous and eager, slip into Adrian's suit jacket, pushing it off his shoulders. He shrugs it away without breaking our kiss and it lands on the floor with a soft thud—a casualty of our sudden, unexpected passion.

My fingers trace the contours of his chest through the crisp white shirt, and I'm rewarded with the solid feel of muscles that have only ever been outlined by tailored suits until now. Curiosity had gnawed at me about what lay beneath his professional armor. And damn, reality does not disappoint.

With an ease that sends a shiver down my spine, Adrian lifts me by the hips, his touch scorching through the fabric of my skirt as he sets me atop the cold surface of my desk. The papers underneath me crinkle in protest, but I couldn't care less.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:45 am

My legs circle around him, pulling him closer, and I can feel him—hard and insistent against me. A moan escapes my lips, low and needy, as he trails kisses down my neck, each one a promise of things to come.

“Adrian,” I gasp out, half in warning, half in plea. But who am I kidding? There’s no turning back.

Button by button, he opens my shirt, his fingers brushing against my skin, leaving a trail of heat in their wake. He presses a kiss to my chest, just above the swell of my breasts—a tease, a torment—and then his mouth is on mine again, demanding, commanding, drawing me deeper into this whirlpool of want.

In retaliation, or maybe desperation, I reach for his shirt, fumbling with the buttons. My fingers shake with a mixture of anticipation and something else—something wild. Finally, the shirt parts, and I push it from his shoulders, adding it to the heap on the floor.

“God, Isabella,” he growls against my lips, and there’s a hint of surprise in his voice, as if he can’t quite believe we’re doing this either.

“Shut up, Adrian,” is all I manage before our mouths collide once more, in a kiss that feels like it’s been brewing since the day we met—a clash of every heated glance and sharp word we’ve ever exchanged.

His fingers trace the clasp of my white lace bra with an infuriating precision, flicking it open as if he’s practiced this sleight of hand a thousand times. The fabric falls away, tossed carelessly to the floor. His mouth is on me then, hot and insistent,

drawing moans from deep within my throat that I'm powerless to stifle.

"Adrian," I breathe, but it's lost in the warmth of his mouth as he worships my skin.

Then, his arm sweeps across my desk, sending pens and paper clips flying in a metallic hailstorm.

"Hey!" I protest, but he's unrepentant, the corners of his lips turning upwards in a devil-may-care smirk.

"It was a mess anyway," he teases, and there's that charm, that damn irresistible charm.

I want to argue, to tell him off for being such an overbearing Neanderthal, but his hands are already deftly unbuckling my trousers, sliding them down my legs, and any thoughts of reproach evaporate like mist in the heat of his gaze.

"Spread your legs for me," he commands softly, and I do, because my body seems to have signed a treaty with the enemy.

His lips press a path down my stomach, setting every nerve ending alight, leaving a trail of shivers in their wake. He kisses along my thighs, and by the time he reaches the edge of my panties, I'm practically squirming beneath him. The fabric is a barrier he wastes no time in discarding, peeling them away to reveal my aching center.

"God, you're so wet," he observes with a mixture of awe and satisfaction. I flush, but there's no denying the slickness he finds there, evidence of my traitorous desire.

He starts at my clit, rubbing in torturous circles that have my hips chasing his touch. And when his mouth finally closes over me, his tongue swirling in a rhythm that should be patented, pleasure rockets through me, sharp and sweet. I cry out, hands

fisting in his hair, urging him closer, deeper.

“Adrian,” I gasp, my voice a blend of frustration and ecstasy as his fingers slide inside me. They move with a skill that suggests a man who knows exactly how to play the human body like a virtuoso. It’s maddening. It’s perfection.

“Relax,” he murmurs against the sensitive flesh before his tongue flicks out, teasing and tasting, coaxing my body into a state of delirium.

I scoff inwardly. Easy for him to say.

“Right there,” I urge, my breath hitching as he hits a spot that sends stars dancing behind my eyelids.

“Like that?” he asks, voice laced with smug knowledge as he curls his fingers, relentless in his pursuit of my undoing.

“Exactly like that,” I admit between uncontrollable moans, teetering on the edge of a precipice that promises oblivion in its depths.

Each stroke of Adrian’s tongue and fingers is precise, each swirl calculated to drag out the sweet torture. My climax builds, threatening to consume me whole, until it crashes over me with the force of a tidal wave. I’ve never come this hard, body shaking, voice rising in a pitch that could shatter glass.

“Damn ...” is all I manage to gasp out as he plants an approving kiss on my trembling center.

He leans forward, his lips meeting mine in a kiss that’s all heat and promise. It’s a seal of satisfaction for the pleasure he’s just wrung from my body. As he rises to his full height, there’s a fluid grace to his movements, the kind you wouldn’t expect from

a man who spends his days in a courtroom. He unbuckles his belt with a practiced ease, suit pants following gravity's call to the floor.

I sit up, hands eager to explore what I've only admired from a distance wrapped in tailored fabric. His black boxer briefs prove no match for my curiosity, and they're gone with a swift tug. My palm meets the heat of his erection, and I can't help but marvel at him—hard, imposing, and all mine for the taking. A soft groan escapes Adrian as I tighten my grip, slow strokes drawing out the anticipation.

“Protection?” I ask, my voice strained with restraint.

He nods once, then reaches for his pants on the ground. “I have it.”

I huff. “Of course you do.”

He retrieves his wallet and takes out the condom package, still perfectly intact. “It's important to be prepared for such a situation. Don't you agree?”

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:45 am

I rub my temples, chasing away the ghost of her curves pressing against me. This is ridiculous; I never lose control like this. Women, negotiation deals, courtroom battles—I handle them all with the same cool-headed precision. But last night? That was ... what was that?

The thought of texting her bubbles up, weighing heavier than any brief I've ever drafted. Maybe just to see her. Maybe just to—no. My thumb hovers over her contact, itching to type out a message, but I jam it back in my pocket. I'm 36, not a teenager anymore. I should have more self-control than this.

Isabella is off-limits. Employee. Boundary line drawn in permanent marker. Considering how she left her last job, I should have had way more self-control.

Knock, knock.

"Come in," I call without looking up.

Suzy enters, remaining in the doorway with her hand on the knob. "Mr. Cole, you have that meeting with Mr. Sterling and Ms. King at eleven."

"Thanks, Suzy." I glance at the clock. 10:45. Jesus—time's a thief.

"Anything else you need?" There's a slight hesitation in her voice, as if she's expecting me to be more frazzled.

"Get me a large coffee, would you? Black, like my mood."

Suzy chuckles. “Sure thing, Mr. Cole.” She closes the door with a soft click.

I dive back into the documents, words becoming soldiers I marshal into order, the familiar rhythm of work steadying the currents trying to sweep me away.

When the clock strikes 11, I’m already seated at the head of the conference table, papers meticulously arranged in front of me. Control, that’s the game today. The door swings open, and they filter in—Leo with his stoic calmness, Isabella with her ... everything.

“Morning,” I mutter, my voice a notch too casual. Nobody needs to know my heart’s staging a coup against my ribcage.

“Morning, Adrian,” Leo says, taking the seat adjacent to me.

“Good morning, Mr. Cole,” Isabella greets, her tone professional, but there’s something else there—a flicker of last night that sends a jolt straight through me. Stop it, Cole.

“Isabella, you’re glowing today,” Leo points out, and immediately, there’s a blush creeping on her cheeks.

She clears her throat, her eyes sweeping over to me before she sits up taller. “Must be the face mask I used last night.”

Leo shoots her a playful wink. “You’ll have to share your secrets with me.”

“Now’s not the time, Leo,” I say without looking up.

He gives me a mock salute. “Got it, boss.”

“Let’s get started,” I say, clapping my hands together like a coach at halftime. Leo nods, Suzy perches on the edge of her seat with her notepad at the ready, and I can’t help but notice how Isabella’s skirt hugs her just right. Damn khaki, blending professionalism with sin.

“Understand the significance here—we land this merger, and we’re not just talking about a win for Aurora and NexGen. We’re talking about putting us on the map for future Fortune 500 clients,” I stress, planting the flag on this hill of ambition.

“Agreed,” Leo chimes in, his voice steady as ever. “We need to be especially on point for this one.”

“Ms. King, you’ll spearhead the financial arrangements and compliance with securities law,” I announce, my decision sounding more like a royal decree than a simple delegation of duties.

“Of course,” she replies, chin lifted, her green eyes catching mine with a fire that could burn down empires—or at least my resolve.

“Leo and I will be overseeing every step with Aurora and NexGen. Intimately.”

“Intimately” hangs in the air longer than intended, and I swear her eyebrow arches in silent challenge—or is it invitation? It’s probably the fluorescent lighting playing tricks on me.

“Suzy, could you coordinate with both companies to schedule our initial meetings?” I ask, turning to safer waters.

“Will do, Mr. Cole,” she responds promptly, tapping away at her tablet.

“Thank you,” I manage, trying to sound like I haven’t just been mentally grappling

with the idea of Isabella and intimacy in the same sentence. “I think that’ll be all for today. Let’s adjourn and get back to work then.”

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:45 am

“Sounds like a plan to me,” Leo says, a determined smile on his face. He loves the challenge of securing a new client.

As the meeting wraps up, papers shuffle, chairs scrape, and everyone exits with an efficient bustle. Except Isabella seems slower to gather her things, deliberate even. I feel the weight of her presence like a verdict waiting to be read.

“Adrian—” she starts once it’s just the two of us left. “Can we talk about last night?” Her voice cuts through the tension like a knife through butter, and I swear my pulse kicks up a notch.

“Isabella,” I start, my tone firm but fair—or so I tell myself, “what happened was a one-off. A slip. I assure you—I hired you for your qualifications and skills, and I promise it won’t happen again.” I keep my gaze on her, trying to read her reaction without giving away mine. It’s like playing poker with all your cards facing out.

She bristles, and I wonder if I could’ve handled that with a bit more finesse. Who am I kidding? I’m about as subtle as a sledgehammer.

“I agree ...” she spits out, the words sharp enough to draw blood. “But you don’t have to be so ...clinicalabout it.”

“Got a better script for this conversation?” I challenge, raising an eyebrow. It’s not sarcasm; it’s self-preservation. Because if I stay any longer, I might forget why this is a bad idea.

She opens her mouth, maybe to argue or suggest something, I don’t know. But

patience isn't a virtue I possess right now, and I need distance between us before I do something stupid—like reach out to her again.

“Isabella, we're two consenting adults who acknowledged that we made a mistake last night. Is there really anything else we need to discuss?”

She lowers her head, opting to play with her hands. It's odd confronting her without her usual sass, but I suppose this situation is a bit too vulnerable for the both of us.

I exhale. “Look, for what it's worth, I enjoyed it. But it simply wouldn't be appropriate for us to be anything more than boss and employee. Especially after—” But I pause before I say it, remembering the promise I made to Isabella's mother. Do not, under any circumstances, let Isabella find out I know about her boss making a pass at her.

She blinks, confusion etching her features. “Especially after what?”

“Listen, if you don't get back to work now, I'll have Suzy write you up.” I pivot on my heel and head for the door, feeling her eyes burning into my back.

“Write me up? Adrian!” Her voice follows me out, a tether I refuse to let pull me back.

I brush past Suzy at her desk, offering a tight smile that doesn't reach my eyes, and make a beeline for my office. The click of the door closing behind me sounds like sanctuary. Or maybe a cell locking. Hard to tell the difference these days.

I slump into my leather chair, the weight of the morning's tension still clinging to me like a second skin. My phone buzzes from its place on the mahogany desk, a welcome distraction from the replay of Isabella's indignant face that's stuck on loop in my mind.

“Adrian, do you need me to pick up Caleb from school?”

I tap out a quick text in response, “No, I’ve got it. Meet us at home later?” The thought of escaping to my son’s innocent world is suddenly the lifeline I’m grasping for.

“Sure, see you then,” Mom replies, her words softening around the edges, probably imagining me buried under a pile of paperwork rather than emotional turmoil.

The office suddenly feels more claustrophobic than commanding. I spin in my chair, letting out a long breath and staring out at the cityscape. Working from home isn’t just an escape; it’s a strategic retreat. Away from the “mistake” that has Isabella’s curves permanently etched into my brain.

Mistake? Who am I kidding? That’s like calling a hurricane a slight breeze. Last night was ... electric. The way she responded to me, the sparks that flew—it was anything but wrong. And if I had any sense, I’d want to avoid repeating it.

Except, I don’t. Sense has left the building along with logic and, apparently, my self-control. Because more than avoiding a repeat, I find myself wanting to dive back into the eye of the storm.

“Working closely” doesn’t begin to cover what this merger means. It’s like being marooned on an island with your biggest temptation and only a spoonful of willpower for sustenance. And Isabella King? She’s the kind of temptation that could make a saint swear.

“Focus, Adrian,” I mutter to myself, powering down my computer and grabbing my briefcase. Home. Work. Caleb. Safe topics, safe zones. But as I lock my office door behind me, there’s no denying the truth.

I'm not just worried about what this will mean for the merger. I'm worried about what it will mean for me and Isabella—the fiery-eyed siren masquerading as a lawyer who's already turned my world upside down with just one kiss.

Chapter five

Isabella

Two Months Later

Sunlight streams in through the half-open blinds, painting my bedroom with a glow that feels too cheerful for the way I'm currently clutching at my stomach. The weekend is finally mine—no emails, no calls, just sweet, uninterrupted rest. Or so I thought.

I stretch, rolling out the stiffness from another night spent curled up with files instead of pillows. But as I rise, nausea hits me like a sucker punch. I stumble to the bathroom, barely making it to the toilet before last night's takeout makes an unwelcome encore appearance. Fantastic.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:45 am

“Food poisoning,” I groan to myself, rinsing my mouth and glaring at my reflection. My usually sharp green eyes are watery, and my hair, which I like to think falls in a cascade of professional prowess, is sticking out in all directions like I’ve been electrocuted. I’m a vision, truly.

Ginger tea. That’s what I need. The thought has me padding barefoot to the kitchen, flicking on the kettle, and willing my stomach to settle down. As the water starts to boil with a soft rumble, my phone decides to join in with its own shrill symphony.

“Hey, Mom.” My voice comes out strained, holding back another wave of queasiness.

“Isabella, dear, how’s the new job going?” It’s the familiar cadence of concern from my mom, Susan King, matched by the silent, supportive presence I imagine my dad, Roger, has, hovering in the background.

“Great, really great.” I lie through the teeth I just brushed twice. “Just busy, you know? Mergers don’t orchestrate themselves.”

“Of course, sweetie. We’re so proud of you,” she says, and I can almost hear her smile over the line. “You work too hard, though. Don’t forget to eat properly.”

“Will do,” I assure her, although my stomach argues otherwise.

The kettle gives a final shout, demanding attention.

“I’ll go ahead and let you go. Come over for dinner soon, okay?” Mom’s voice is both an invitation and a gentle command. It’s her way of saying she misses me

without actually saying it.

“Absolutely,” I reply, cradling the phone between my shoulder and ear as I pour the ginger tea. “I’ll text you once I have a handle on this chaos they call a schedule.” We exchange goodbyes with the kind of warmth only parents can give, and I’m left staring into the murky depths of my cup, hoping for some relief.

My plans today with Amelie, to lounge at the spa and pretend life isn’t a juggling act, seem like a distant dream now. I thumb my phone, about to raincheck our day together, but fate, in the form of a doorbell chime, interrupts me.

“Coming!” I call out, not bothering to hide my irritation. Swinging the door open reveals Amelie, all bright-eyed and bearing gifts—hot coffee that smells like my salvation and a bag from SinfulDelights, the cookie boutique that could probably solve world peace with their double chocolate sea salt wonders.

“Amelie, what are you—”

“Surprise!” She barges past me, apology written all over her face. “Sorry for being early, but I couldn’t wait.”

Someone let her in? In my upscale West Hollywood building, that’s practically a security breach. But looking at Amelie, with her eager-to-share goodies, I can’t muster up the lawyer in me to care.

“Let me guess, someone just happened to be leaving?” I ask, already knowing the answer as I rub the sleep from my eyes.

“Exactly!” She sets her to-go cup down on the counter and flips open the box of cookies as if unveiling treasure. “With your crazy hours lately, I figured you deserved a treat. And here I thought auditors had it bad during tax season. You win, hands

down.”

“Trust me, it’s not a competition I wanted to win.” My sarcasm might be the only thing keeping me upright at this point.

We share a laugh—the kind that acknowledges life’s absurdities—and I’m reminded why Amelie’s impromptu visits, even under less-than-ideal circumstances, are a welcome intrusion.

Amelie’s fingers dance over the assorted cookies like she’s playing a game of eeny, meeny, miny, moe. “Salted caramel macadamia or raspberry white chocolate cheesecake?” she asks, her voice laced with the kind of enthusiasm usually reserved for winning lottery numbers.

“Neither,” I say, pressing a hand to my stomach which continues to churn in protest. “I think I’ll have to rain check our spa day.”

“Isabella, you look pale.” Amelie’s eyebrows knit together in concern as she slides onto a bar stool, her CPA brain probably already diagnosing me with some obscure deficiency. “Talk to me. What’s going on?”

“Ugh, I don’t know.” My voice is a groan as I lean against the cool granite of the kitchen island. “I’ve been queasy all morning and—” I cut myself off, not wanting to dive into the graphic details of my rendezvous with the porcelain god.

“Sounds like food poisoning,” she says, the cookie momentarily forgotten.

“Or maybe the flu ...” I add, trying to convince myself more than her. The thought of being sick over the weekend is about as appealing as a root canal without anesthesia. “I’ve felt off for a week now.”

“Off how?” She tilts her head, her eyes scanning my face like she’s looking for clues in a mystery novel.

“Fatigue, nausea, and if we’re sharing, my period is late.” I rattle off the list, each symptom echoing louder in my head than the last.

“Have you had sex recently?” The question hangs in the air, and suddenly the room feels ten degrees hotter.

“Define ‘recently,’” I hedge, avoiding her gaze.

“Isabella.” Her tone suggests she won’t accept any lawyerly dodging.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:45 am

“Fine.” I exhale, taking a seat at the bar stool. “There was an incident ... in my office. With Adrian. You remember that night at Bistro Laurent?”

Her jaw practically unhinges. “That was what, ten weeks ago?”

“Ten weeks and three days, but who’s counting?” I bite down on my lip, feeling the first stirrings of panic setting in.

“Ten weeks,” she repeats, her eyes wide, probably doing the same mental math I’ve been avoiding. “And you’re just telling me this now?”

“I wanted to bury it so deep into my subconscious that even a psychiatrist couldn’t find it.”

“Wow,” she murmurs, still in shock, no doubt calculating probabilities, risks, and outcomes in her methodical mind.

“Wow” doesn’t even begin to cover it.

And then, Amelie is on her feet without so much as uttering another word.

“Where are you going?” My voice is more of a croak as I trail after her.

She’s already halfway to the door, determination etched into her every move. “To get you a pregnancy test,” she throws over her shoulder.

“What? Why would I need—” But she’s turning on me with that “are-you-serious”

look, and I'm suddenly aware of how ludicrous I must sound.

"Isabella," she starts, ticking off my symptoms like she's reading a script for a pharmaceutical commercial. "Nausea, exhaustion, mood swings, and you had sex over two months ago. Is that not enough evidence that you might be pregnant, Ms. Lawyer?"

"Objection," I mutter, but it's feeble even to my own ears. Amelie just gives me a look that could quell a courtroom and heads out, shutting the door with a firm click that seems to echo in my suddenly silent apartment.

I slump against the cool wood, the reality of the situation seeping in. There's no way I can be pregnant. Adrian and I used protection. But then again ... sometimes it fails. Just my freaking luck. Leave it to me to hit the statistical jackpot.

"Great, just great," I groan aloud to my empty living room. If I am pregnant, what am I supposed to do? Walk into Adrian's office and say, "Congrats, you're going to be a father—again"? Or maybe I'd play it cool, serve him with a subpoena: "You are hereby summoned to fatherhood."

I shake my head. My life isn't some courtroom drama, and this isn't an episode where the plucky lawyer heroine has a tidy resolution in under an hour. This is messy, unplanned, and completely at odds with my meticulously charted life plan.

No kids, no marriage—not until I've made partner and proven myself. That was the deal I struck with myself long ago. Now, here I am, potentially carrying Exhibit A that I've broken my own rules.

"Exhibit A"—now there's a name for a baby born to two lawyers. I snort at the thought, a humorless puff of air that does nothing to lift the weight pressing down on my chest.

Ten minutes later, Amelie bursts through the door—this time without knocking— and was let in, again?! Her arms are laden with an arsenal of pregnancy tests.

“Seriously, Amelie?” I eye the heap of boxes as if they’re live grenades about to detonate my future.

“Trust me, you’ll be sending me thank you cards.” Amelie dumps them on my kitchen table like a dealer fanning out a deck of cards at a high-stakes poker game.

She snatches a box, flipping it over. “Here,” she says, thrusting it toward me. “Pee on the stick and wait for the lines. Or plus sign. Or happy face. Whatever twisted symbol they use to announce your womb’s occupancy status.”

“Huh?”

“You’re 27 years old, Isabella. You really don’t know how to use a pregnancy test?” She shakes her head in mock disappointment as I retreat to the bathroom.

“Never had the pleasure,” I call back, voice dripping with sarcasm.

“Clearly, you haven’t lived much, have you?” Her voice follows me, threaded with humor that fails to mask concern.

“Ha-ha,” I retort, eyes rolling so hard I’m afraid they might stick that way. I take a deep breath, do the deed, and lay the test on the counterlike it’s a fragile relic. I open the door, signaling the end of my solo performance.

“Okay, now we wait,” Amelie says, leaning against the sink. “So, what’s the plan if you’re—”

“Shh!” I interrupt. “Let’s not put the cart before the ... positive pregnancy test.”

“Fine, but if you are, will you ...” She trails off, biting her lip.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:45 am

“Go the abortion route? And not tell Adrian?” I finish for her.

“Or tell him so he can support the abortion ... financially or otherwise?” Amelie ventures, eyebrows raised suggestively.

“Amelie!” My laugh is sharp, a brittle sound that doesn’t quite reach my eyes. “Let’s just wait for the grand reveal, shall we?”

We both stare at the test as if it holds the secret to life, the universe, and everything—which, in a way, it does. My fate, distilled into two little lines—or one, or a smug smiley face—waiting to emerge.

The timer dings, and I swear my heart stops. “Time’s up,” Amelie announces as if we’re on some sort of twisted game show.

“Fantastic,” I mutter under my breath, a frosty sarcasm coating each syllable. I reach for the stick with a trembling hand. My eyes flicker down, and there it is—a plus sign so bold it might as well be flashing neon.

“Is that ...?” Amelie’s voice trails off, her usual bravado deflated like a punctured balloon.

“Yep.” The word falls flat in the sterile silence of my bathroom. Pregnant.

The room starts to spin, or maybe that’s just me, unmoored from reality.

“Let’s not trust a piece of plastic. Round two?” I say, grabbing another test.

“Sure, because the first one could be a fluke,” she agrees, but her tone says she knows better.

We wait again. Same result. It’s like déjà vu with a side of impending life crisis. I take a third one because why not? Third time’s the charm, right? Wrong. It’s a hat trick of destiny.

“Three for three.” Amelie’s whisper feels like a eulogy for my meticulously planned future.

“Shut the front door,” I manage to say, though my voice sounds like it’s coming from someone else—someone who doesn’t have a ten-point plan for the next five years of her career.

“Isabella, seriously. What are you going to do?” Her question is a gentle prod, but it feels like a sledgehammer to my chest.

“Open a daycare apparently,” I quip, trying to keep the mood light even though my insides are as heavy as the law books on my office shelf. Adrian Cole, the man who can negotiate mergers in his sleep, the boss who doesn’t know the meaning of losing a case, is about to face his toughest opponent yet—me, armed with a positive pregnancy test and a boatload of conflict of interest.

“In all seriousness, Amelie, I don’t know. I mean, it’s Adrian. He’s my boss. He’s got Caleb to think about. And I have my career, my plans ...” My words trail off into the abyss of uncertainty. “Plus, how does ‘single motherhood’ sound with a side of ‘office scandal’ for the woman gunning for partner before thirty?”

“Life has a funny way of throwing curveballs, huh?” Amelie says, her attempt at comfort is awkward, yet admirable.

“More like a fastball to the face.”

“Whatever you decide, you’re not alone, okay?” Amelie reaches out, and I’m grateful for her touch, grounding me when it feels like gravity has left the building.

“Thanks,” I say, and it’s no joke this time. Because while I might be staring down an unpredictable future, having Amelie by my side makes it seem like I won’t have to face it solo.

Chapter six

Adrian

The elevator dings its usual cheery chime, mocking me as I step into the sterile halls of my own damn firm. It’s too early for this. Work’s been insane ever since merger negotiations began two months ago, and it doesn’t help that Isabella and I have been clashing ever since ... well, things got complicated between us.

Suzy’s voice cuts through the morning fog in my head as I make my way to my office. “Mr. Cole. You’ve got that meeting with Aurora later, remember? To go over the financial projections.”

“Thanks, Suzy,” I mutter, offering her a ghost of a smile. The reminder is both a blessing and a curse; I can’t afford to screw up these negotiations. “Can you grab me a coffee, by the way?”

“Sure, Mr. Cole.”

My jacket comes off once I step into my office and I’m business casual in seconds flat. However, there’s nothing casual about the mess waiting for me on my desk. Isabella’s financial projections—or rather, the incomplete mockery of them—sit

before me, taunting me with their inadequacy. My brows knit together, confusion morphing into annoyance faster than I can say “missing data.”

“Seriously, Isabella?” I grumble under my breath, shoving back from my desk with enough force to send my chair rolling away. I make the short journey to her office, my stride a little too forceful, my knock a little too sharp.

“Come in,” she calls, the warmth in her voice at odds with the cold fury building in my chest.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:45 am

I step inside ... and damn it all if Isabella King doesn't look like a siren dressed in corporate silk. That teal-blue blouse of hers makes her eyes pop—a stormy green sea I've drowned in before. And that skirt, hugging her like it's privy to secrets I've only begun to uncover.

“Isabella,” I start, clenching my jaw when her name leaves my lips. It's like tasting a forbidden fruit—sweet yet bound to end in disaster. But there's no time for hunger now, only the bitter taste of frustration. “Several of the projections we discussed in our last meeting are missing. Please tell me you just misplaced them and didn't decide to play hide-and-seek with crucial documents.”

Her eyes narrow, a silent challenge. “I finished every last one of them and gave them to you, Adrian. If anything's missing, it's not on me.”

“Could've fooled me,” I shoot back, the heat of our proximity igniting a fire I have no time to put out. “Because unless they're playing invisible, those numbers aren't where they should be.”

“Maybe you need glasses then,” she retorts, her spine straight as an iron rod. She's got nerve, I'll give her that.

“Or maybe,” I say, leaning forward, my voice low, “you need to double-check your work before handing it over.”

“I gave everything I drafted to you.” Defiance sparks in her gaze, and for a moment, I almost admire her tenacity. Almost.

“If you’re so sure, come to my office. I’ll show you the gaping hole where those projections should be.”

Besides, I can barely stomach the thought of lingering in her office—a space tainted with memories best left unvisited during working hours—so I usher her out, needing the sanctuary of my own four walls.

We walk in tense silence, the distance between us crackling with unsaid words and regrets we’d both rather not acknowledge. As soon as we cross the threshold into my office, I gesture toward the chaos of papers on my desk with a flourish.

“See for yourself,” I challenge.

Isabella’s eyes scan the desk, and she frowns, plucking the stack of documents with an efficiency that irks me. She flips through them with the precision of a surgeon, then points to the gap where several pages should nestle.

“Adrian, these aren’t even in the correct order that I turned them in. You clearly lost them. Just admit it.”

Her accusation slices through the air, leaving a trail of indignation in its wake. “I did no such thing. They’ve been here on my desk all week.”

“Well, maybe Suzy—”

“Leave Suzy out of this,” I snap, “you’ve been nothing but careless since this whole merger started.”

“Careless?” Isabella scoffs, lips curling in disbelief. “Your standards aren’t just high—they’re perched on top of Everest, and even then, I doubt they’d be satisfied.”

“Maybe so,” I concede. “But for now, all I need is for you to draft a new set of documents. Replace the missing ones.” When she doesn’t say anything, I lean in closer. Probably too close. “Redo them. Now.”

The fury in her eyes would be enough to set the room ablaze if looks could ignite. She whirls around, her skirt swishing in silent reprimand, and storms out of my office like a tempest in red-bottomhigh heels.

“Damn it,” I mutter under my breath, watching the door slam shut behind her with a force that mirrors my pounding headache.

I’m pacing in my office like a caged animal when Suzy waltzes in, the scent of Arabica in her wake. “Your coffee, Mr. Cole,” she chirps, oblivious to the storm clouds brewing over my head.

“Thanks,” I grumble, still simmering from Isabella’s latest “contribution” to our shared misery. I seize the moment to vent. “You won’t believe the mess Ms. King has made—missing projections, documents amiss ... it’s like working with a tornado these days.”

Suzy sets the cup on my desk, her brows knitting together in a way that spells trouble. “But didn’t you take those documents home Monday night?”

I freeze, mid-rant, the heat climbing up my neck. “What?”

“I recall you took the financial projections home to look over because your nanny couldn’t stay past 4 p.m. It seems like you might have only taken half of the stack home with you.”

Right. I had brought them home but never looked at them. Caleb had a science project due the next morning, so those documents have been sitting on my dining

table ever since. The mistake is mine, not Isabella's.

"Should I let Isabella know she doesn't need to redo them?" Suzy's voice is soft, tinged with sympathy I don't deserve.

"Ahem." I clear my throat, already weaving my web of self-justification. "No, no. Let Ms. King flex those organizational muscles, it'll be good for her."

Suzy eyes me, a flicker of skepticism in her gaze, but nods all the same. She exits, leaving me alone with my bruised ego and a coffee that's suddenly lost its appeal.

My pride, stubborn as it is, seals my lips. Let Isabella think what she wants; I'll handle my mistakes in silence.

Later that afternoon, I stride into the neon-lit arcade, Caleb's hand in mine, my mind still a tangled mess from the morning's fiasco. He'll be spending the weekend at my mom's, though, and I want to get a little father-son time in with him before he leaves.

The place is buzzing with the sound of video games and children's laughter, a welcome distraction from the endless paperwork and bruised pride waiting back at the office.

"Can we play the racing game first?" Caleb's eyes are wide, his excitement contagious.

"Sure thing, speed demon," I reply, ruffling his hair as we make our way through the maze of arcade cabinets.

We spend the next hour jumping from one game to another, sinking tokens into machines like they're going out of style.

Eventually, we land in a booth with a greasy pizza between us. Caleb takes a bite, cheese stretching comically from his mouth to the slice. He says through a mouthful, "Dad, my tooth still hasn't come out."

"Let me see." I peer into his mouth, noting the stubborn angle of the baby tooth. "It's just taking its sweet time because it knows you're tough. But if it starts acting up, Dr. Gomez can show it who's boss."

He nods, looking slightly reassured, then hits me with a question that has me choking on my pepperoni slice. “Are you gonna be okay by yourself this weekend? You always say grown-ups get lonely too.”

“Lonely?” I chuckle, masking the sting of truth in his words. “I’ll have my hands full with work all weekend anyway. I’ll miss you like crazy, but I won’t have time to be lonely.”

He tilts his head, frowning. “But my friends’ dads have wives. Don’t you want someone to hang out with?”

“Kid, I’ve got you. That’s all the company I need.” I grin, but there’s an ache in my chest that wasn’t there before.

Caleb smiles, and I feel a little less adrift.

“Okay, let’s finish up. We still have to pack before I drive you to Grandma’s for the weekend.”

Caleb nods. “Okay, Dad.”

As he devours the last of his slice, I watch, my heart swelling. This boy is the best thing I’ve ever done, even if I’m flying solo on the whole parenting gig.

Life might be a complicated mess of work and responsibilities, but moments like these—they’re pure and simple. Just me and my boy against the world.

A half an hour later, we pull into the driveway. Mom’s car is already parked, of course.

“Grandma’s here!” Caleb calls out as I kill the ignition.

Before I even open the car door, Caleb's already unbuckled and halfway out of his seat, eager to run inside.

When we step into the living room, Mom's sitting on the couch, already surrounded by Caleb's weekend bags like she's gearing up for a full-scale military operation.

"Hey, Mom," I say as we step inside, my voice echoing off the walls of the house that suddenly feels too big, too empty. "I told you I was going to drive him to Pasadena."

"I was already in the area. Went shopping on Rodeo."

I breathe out a laugh. "Then why don't you just move back to Beverly Hills?" But I know her answer is already no. She'll never move from the house she and my father lived in for over thirty years. "Thanks for packing his stuff, Mom. We were going to do that before you got here."

"Of course, honey," she replies, her eyes scanning my face with that unnerving parental x-ray vision. "Wanted to save you some time."

"Appreciate it." I peer down at Caleb. "Ready to go, little man?"

"Yep!" He beams, and we walk outside where I help him into the backseat of Mom's car, my hands lingering a second too long on the seatbelt.

"Adrian," Mom starts, leaning against the car door as if bracing herself, "I've been talking with Margie—you remember, my friend from bridge club? Her daughter, Elise, just got back from competing. She's single now, quite a catch ..."

"Mom—" I start, but she barrels on.

"25, an Olympic gymnast, and she thinks you're handsome!" She looks at me

expectantly, as if she's just handed me a winning lottery ticket rather than a potential dating disaster.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:45 am

“Listen, Mom,” I sigh, my patience thinning like worn-out fabric. “After Colette, I’m not jumping into anything. I’m good on my own, really.”

Her shoulders droop a smidge, and I feel a tug on my conscience. “It’s been three years, Adrian.”

“When I’m ready, I promise I’ll find someone. On my terms,” I add, softer this time. “Thank Margie for me, but tell them I’m not interested.”

“Okay, honey,” she says, but her eyes are clouded with concern I don’t want or need.

“Bye, Dad!” Caleb calls from the backseat, breaking the tension.

“Bye, buddy.” I lean in, kiss the top of his head, and it’s like pressing pause on all my worries for a split second. “Be good for Grandma.”

“Always am!” He grins, and I chuckle, shaking my head.

“Thankyou again, Mom. For everything.”

“Anything for my boys,” she replies, her smile warming the chill from my bones.

As they drive away, the house swallows me whole. Trust is a currency I can’t afford anymore; every investment has gone bust. Love’s become a luxury item, and I’m not shopping for that kind of heartache again.

Sure, I always wanted two kids, a wife who loves me for who I am—not how much

money I have or how handsome I look—and hell, maybe even a cat, but that dream’s collecting dust on the highest shelf, far out of reach.

Maybe someday I’ll take it down, give it a once over, see if it still fits. But for now, I’ve got a son who lights up my world, and a job that consumes every spare thought.

I lock the door on the quiet house, on the quiet life, and let the silence settle around me like a familiar, if not entirely comfortable, blanket.

As I make my way into the kitchen to whip up a whiskey sour, my mind wanders to Isabella. It’s been two months, and our encounter in her office is still lingering in the back of my mind like an itch I can’t scratch. Would she be open for a round two?

Stop it, Cole. Cannot go there. I take a sip of my drink as if it’ll chase down the thought.

This is why single dads should not be left alone for an entire weekend. Lonely, huh? Caleb just might be on to something.

Chapter seven

Isabella

The clock on my office wall ticks louder than a time bomb, mocking me as it hits 8 p.m. My fingers fly over the keyboard, the last of the financial projections blurring into an angry dance of numbers and dollar signs. Adrian’s documents are spread out like a shrine to my wasted Friday night.

“Redone. As requested,” I mutter to myself, hitting save with more force than necessary. He wants precision? I’ll give him perfection wrapped in spite.

I pull out my phone, snapping a quick video to prove my diligence. The clip shows each page, crisp and error-free, ready for his royal inspection. With a few taps, I send it off to Adrian, along with a text that might as well read, “Here’s your precious paperwork, Your Highness.”

A sense of satisfaction bubbles up at the thought of leaving early, too—just like he did. But before I can savor the moment, my phone vibrates with his reply.

“Hand-deliver them. To my home.” His message is accompanied by a digital pin-drop that might as well be a middle finger from the universe.

“For real?” I scoff at the screen, half-tempted to print out the text just so I can shred it.

Instead, I gather the documents, stacking them with a slap against my desk. A bitter taste coats my tongue, the flavor of resentment mixed with the ink of freshly printed pages.

“Fine. If it’s a personal delivery he wants, it’s a piece of my mind he’ll get.” I snatch my workbag, slinging it over my shoulder like a medieval flail, ready for battle.

As I march out of the office, my heels click a rhythm of impending confrontation. I’m not just going to drop off these papers; I’m about to deliver a monologue worthy of a courtroom drama. Adrian Cole, prepare to meet your match.

The moon is casting a golden glow over the manicured lawns of Beverly Hills as I drive through Adrian’s gated community ten minutes later. His neighborhood is as posh as they come, with sprawling estates that scream old money and new Botox. My finger hovers over his contact in my phone before I press it, voice steady, “It’s Isabella. Open up.”

“Coming right up,” his smooth baritone replies through my car’s Bluetooth, and the iron gates swing open like arms welcoming me into the lion’s den.

I pull into the driveway, my modest sedan dwarfed by the grandeur of Adrian’s understated mansion. It’s beautiful in a way that makes me want to roll my eyes—modest for a billionaire, yet still a testament to his success. The lawn is a shade of green that’s probably patented, and I can’t help but grudgingly admit that he keeps his property looking good. Probably has an army of gardeners on speed dial.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:45 am

Gathering my bag and the cursed documents, I kill the engine and step out, heels clicking on the stone driveway. I make my way to the front door, my pulse a mix of anger and anxiety. I press the doorbell, listening to the echo of some classical tune that probably costs more than my rent.

Adrian opens the door, tall, dark, and infuriatingly handsome. He scans me from head to toe, a hint of something suspicious in those deep, dark eyes. “Isabella. Come in.”

“Hmph,” is all I muster, striding past him with the type of confidence I reserve for work. But as soon as I enter, my bravado wavers. His home is stunning—modern furniture that screams expensive, walls adorned with art that’s probably not just for decoration. Every piece is upscale yet functional, and the place gives off an aura of warmth that unsettles me.

This feels like a home, not just a house. And it’s the last thing I need when there’s a tiny, unplanned Cole-King merger happening under my blouse.

I’m still fuming about this morning’s showdown. He implying I wasn’t up to snuff on the merger—that stung more than I care to admit. And here I am, in his fortress of solitude, clutching the fruits of my labor like an olive branch I never intended to offer.

“Nice place,” I say, unable to stop the words from dripping in sarcasm. “Did you decorate it yourself, or is there a secret interior designer you keep chained in the basement?”

Adrian closes the door behind us, a smirk playing on his lips. “Thanks, I’ll take that

as a compliment, regardless of how hard you tried to make it sound otherwise.”

I don’t bother responding. Instead, I stand there amidst the plush surroundings, holding onto my paperwork like a shield, ready for battle but secretly wondering if this could have been something else—if circumstances were different, if we were different. The thought irks me more than I want to admit, and I push it aside, locking it away.

“Let’s just get this over with,” I snap, the weight of the documents in my hand feeling heavier than ever.

“Want something to drink?” Adrian’s voice pulls me back from the edge of my spiraling thoughts.

“Planning to bribe me with alcohol now, Cole? Nice, but I have to drive home.” And let’s not forget the whole being pregnant thing.

He raises his eyebrows, a half-smile quirking up. “I meant like, water. Or juice. I have a lot of boxed juice.”

“Water’s fine,” I mutter. The image of flinging water in his face if he pushes my buttons too hard flickers across my imagination, offering a brief, satisfying distraction.

He saunters off to the kitchen, and I’m left alone amidst the opulence of his living room, which is as tasteful as it is infuriating. It feels like him—understated on the surface but screaming success and power underneath. I shift uncomfortably, feeling out of place yet oddly drawn to the warmth radiating from the sleek furniture and artful decor.

“Where’s Caleb?” I ask as I take a seat on the smooth leather of the sofa.

Immediately, my eyes catch on a pile of work documents casually strewn across his coffee table. And there they are. The original documents I had slaved over for hours—no, days—just sitting there as though they’d been waiting for me all along.

“With my mom for the weekend,” Adrian calls out from the kitchen. “She picked him up about an hour ago.”

The blood in my veins turns to ice, then fire. When Adrian returns, holding out a glass of water with that infuriatingly charming smile, something inside me snaps.

“Seriously?!” I explode, shoving the papers at him. “All those extra hours! For what, Adrian? Your little power trip?”

“Isabella, let me expla—” He starts, but I can’t, I won’t let him finish. Instead, he simply sets the water down on the coffee table beside the documents as I give him a taste of my mind.

“Save it. You wanted to see me dance, is that it?” I can feel the heat rising in my cheeks, my anger boiling over, unchecked and fierce.

And then, without warning, he steps closer and kisses me. It’s impulsive, unexpected—a collision of lips that sends shockwaves through my system.

When he pulls away, my eyes widen in disbelief, staring into his dark ones that seem just as stunned.

“Sorry,” he breathes, the word vibrating against my mouth, “I just ... didn’t know any other way to make you stop talking so you could hear me out. I—”

But before he can say another word, something inside me flips. Anger, frustration, weeks of pent-up tension—it all morphs into a wild, reckless energy that propels me

forward. I kiss him back with an intensity that surprises us both, the documents long forgotten between us.

Heat pulses between us, a tangible thing that wraps around my senses, drawing out the anger and replacing it with raw need. Adrian's lips are insistent against mine, his hands firm as they press me into the wall of his living room.

"Adrian," I gasp, but it's less of a protest and more of an acknowledgment of this uncontrollable force between us.

One of his hands slides under my blouse, and I shiver at the contact, my skin burning where he touches. His body is firm against mine, and I can feel him—hard and wanting—as I hitch my leg around his hip, inviting him closer.

The scent of him floods my senses, and it's intoxicating. It's been two months since I've allowed myself to even think about being this close to him again. But here we are, and damn if I'm not going to take my time savoring it.

In a show of strength that sends another thrill through me, Adrian lifts me effortlessly. The world tilts as he carries me upstairs, each step he takes hammering in the reality of what's happening. We're going there again—crossing lines, breaking rules. And as much as my mind screams that this is a bad idea, my body isn't just on board; it's leading the charge.

We reach his bedroom, and any thoughts of protest evaporate. It's sleek, modern, probably costs more than my entire apartment, but right now, it's just the backdrop to whatever this is between us. He sets me down on the bed, a soft landing that contrasts with the urgency of our kisses.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:45 am

“Isabella,” he breathes, a sound that is both a question and an answer as he crawls over me, his weight a welcome pressure. “You’re too sexy for words.”

I wrap my legs around him, pulling him closer still, deepening our kiss until it’s all I can taste, all I can feel.

His hand finds its way through my hair, tangling in the long strands as if he’s trying to memorize the texture. My own fingers trace the contours of his back, feeling the muscles flex beneath his shirt.

“I need you,” I whisper against his mouth, my voice a mix of desire and a warning. But who am I kidding? The only thing I’m warning him against is stopping.

“I’m all yours tonight,” he growls as my fingers fumble with the buttons on his shirt, more than eager to get rid of the fabric barrier.

The shirt falls away and I toss it aside without a second thought. Our lips crash against each other again, the urgency undiminished. My hands roam over his chest and abs, tracing the lines of muscle that I’ve limited to only visualizing under his tailored suits these past ten weeks.

“Your turn,” he murmurs against my lips, his fingers already working the buttons of my blouse with deft precision. It slips off along with my skirt, leaving me in my mint blue bra and panties; thank god for matching sets. My pride in my appearance flares briefly before being drowned out by the heat of his gaze.

It’s like we’re doing this frantic dance of push and pull, and I find myself on top,

straddling him as I help peel off his pants. They join the growing pile of discarded clothing. Now he's down to those white boxer briefs that leave nothing to the imagination, and honestly? I'm not complaining.

Adrian's hands are everywhere, mapping my body with an eagerness that sends shivers up my spine. He caresses my ass, hips, waist ..., and I throw my head back, enjoying the hell out of the feel of his touch. "I love how you touch me," I admit, breathless.

"I won't stop then," he teases, and damn him for making me want to laugh at a time like this.

His fingers slip around to the clasp of my bra. In one swift motion, it's undone, and the cool air hits my skin as my bra joins the rest of our clothes on the floor. His mouth descends onto my newly freed breasts, suckling and licking, sending waves of pleasure through me. Every sensible part of me has checked out for the night, leaving only raw need in its wake.

"Off," he commands softly, assisting in sliding my panties down my legs. I should feel vulnerable, bare before him, but there's no room for insecurity when his dark eyes are alight with desire.

"Sit," he says, that one word laced with a promise. And who am I to deny him—or myself?

I position myself above his face, and the moment his tongue meets my clit, a moan rips from my throat. My hands find the wall behind him, pressing against it for support as waves of pleasure begin to build from where he's focused all his attention. This man knows exactly what he's doing, and I'm just along for the ride—a ride I never want to end.

His fingers dance inside me, a perfect rhythm with the relentless flicks of his tongue. My face presses against the cool wall, my breath comes in ragged gasps. It's as if every nerve ending is concentrated right there, where his mouth works its magic.

"Keep going," I manage between moans, my words dissolving into the thick air of the room. "Just like this."

He hums against me, the vibrations sending another jolt through my body. "I want you to come for me, Isabella. Come hard." His tone is both commanding and reverent, like he's both king and worshipper at the altar of my pleasure.

And I'm about to make a generous donation.

My climax barrels toward me like a freight train, no brakes, full speed ahead. Adrian doesn't falter, doesn't tease, just drives me home until the world blurs, colors burst behind my closed eyelids, and I shatter spectacularly. The waves of pleasure are so intense, I'm pretty sure they've reached tsunami status.

"Oh, god ... Adrian, that was ..."

"It was something, wasn't it?" he pants.

As the tremors fade, I collapse onto him, but not before catching that smug, self-satisfied grin with a sloppy kiss. We're a mess of tongues and lips, a tangle of limbs fueled by pure, raw chemistry. Or maybe it's just leftover adrenaline. Either way, I'm not done with him yet.

"Your turn," I pant, reaching down to slide his boxer briefs off with a swift tug. They join the rest of our discarded clothes on the floor, casualties of our little war of lust.

There's nothing quite like the feel of him, hot and hard, in my hand. I give him a few

experimental strokes, earning a groan that could either be from pleasure or the realization that I've got him by the ... well, you know.

“Now it's your turn to come hard,” I whisper, stoking the fire, watching him unravel under my touch. And if I'm being honest, I can't wait to watch him lose it, to see that composed exterior crack just for me. Because, damn it, I might hate how much I want him, but I absolutely love making him fall apart.

Chapter eight

Adrian

I'm barely holding on to reality, the sensation of Isabella's mouth on me sending me close to the edge. She's got skills that could turn a saint into a sinner, and I'm no saint. The way she works me—holy hell, it's like she's got a PhD in pleasure. I groan, my head hitting the pillow like a sack of bricks as her tongue does this thing that should probably be illegal.

“Isabella,” I manage to gasp out between ragged breaths, “as much as I enjoy your current ... uh, position, I need you to stop.”

She looks up at me, her green eyes glinting with mischief and not a hint of innocent confusion. This woman knows exactly what she's doing to me. With deliberate slowness, she releases me from the warm haven of her mouth, and I swear I nearly see stars.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:45 am

“Come here,” I say, half-command, half-plea. I reach over to the nightstand, my fingers fumbling for a second before they grab hold of the foil packet. It’s a miracle that I don’t rip the damn thing to shreds as I roll the condom onto my cock, which stands at attention like a soldier ready for battle.

Straddling me, she positions herself above me, and I can’t help but assist, guiding her hips until I’m sinking into her. There’s a tightness in my chest that matches the one where we’re joined.

“Jesus, you’re—”

“Biggest you’ve ever had?” I finish for her, a cocky smirk playing on my lips. I can’t help it; her awe strokes more than just my ego.

“Shut up,” she retorts, but there’s a breathlessness to her words that tells me she’s not really annoyed. “It feels ... so good.”

“Trust me, the feeling’s mutual,” I assure her, and I mean it. Every inch of her envelops me like I’m made to fit inside her, and maybe in this moment, I am.

“Then let me make it feel even better,” she challenges, as if she’s daring me to doubt her ability to rock my world. I chuckle because she clearly doesn’t know who she’s dealing with—or maybe she does, and that’s why she’s here.

“Go ahead, impress me.” I lay back, hands behind my head as I admire the view.

Her body is something else, curves that make my palms itch to touch, to explore. But

I resist because this—watching her take control—is a rare and beautiful thing.

“Ride me until you come again,” I instruct, or maybe plead—it’s hard to tell when my thoughts are fogging up like a car window on a cold day.

Isabella doesn’t need telling twice. She finds a rhythm that has both of us gasping for air, and I think this must be what heaven feels like—if heaven comes with a side of sin and sweat-slicked skin.

Her hips move with a rhythm that has me nearly spellbound. My fingers trail up her stomach, lingering on the softness there before reaching the swell of her breasts. Her skin is like silk under my touch, and I’m half convinced she’s some sort of sorceress, because every move she makes has me more entranced.

“Adrian,” she gasps, and the way my name sounds on her lips is better than any symphony.

“Turn around for me,” I growl, my voice rough with need. She doesn’t hesitate, adjusting herself with a fluid grace that makes it clear she’s as into this as I am. Now she’s facing away, riding me reverse cowgirl, and damn if the view of her round ass isn’t a vision straight from my wildest fantasies.

“Feels even better,” she cries out, and I can hear the pleasure in her voice, thick and undeniable.

“Don’t stop,” I command, not above begging if that’s what it takes to keep this moment going.

Her moans fill the room, a sweet chorus that’s music to my ears. “Adrian!” she screams as she rides me, and hearing her cry out my name is a rush of power and pleasure that I can’t get enough of.

We're in sync now, chasing that edge together, and when we come, it's like an electric current passes between us, binding us together in the most intimate of ways. She collapses onto my legs, and I can't help but give her ass an appreciative rub—god, she's incredible.

“Come here,” I say softly, helping her up and laying her down next to me. We kiss, fervently, like we're trying to memorize the feel of each other's lips, and I'm not thinking about tomorrow or consequences or anything past this room and this woman.

I rise to take care of the condom, a brief interlude in the bathroom, and when I return to bed, I pull Isabella close. Her eyelashes flutter against her cheeks, the picture of serenity.

“Stay the night?” I ask, almost holding my breath for her answer.

“Yes,” she murmurs, her eyes already closing. I wrap my arms around her tighter, marveling at how right it feels.

And then I'm drifting too, pulled under by the weight of sleep and the warmth of Isabella beside me. It's been too long since I've felt peace like this. Maybe I could get used to it.

Sunlight trickles in through the blinds, casting a warm glow on the tangled sheets. I blink awake and immediately feel the soft weight of Isabella's arm draped over my waist. It's a strange sensation—comforting yet disconcerting. For years, my mornings have been about as peaceful as a courtroom brawl. But here she is, her breath a steady whisper against my skin, stirring something in me that feels a lot like tranquility.

I carefully slide from under her arm, half-expecting to wake up from this anomaly of

a morning. As I stand beside the bed, I can't help but watch her sleep—a little creepy, sure, but I'm too caught up in the unexpected softness of the moment. There's no trace of her usual firecracker energy, just the gentle rise and fall of her chest. All I can do is smile at the sight.

Trying to shake off the sentimentality, I head into my walk-in closet to retrieve a pair of joggers and a white T-shirt, then pad into the kitchen. The sizzle of bacon hits the pan, eggs follow suit, and I'm slicing avocado like some sort of brunch maestro. Brewing coffee fills the silence, its rich aroma wrapping around me. Seriously, since when do I play breakfast chef for anyone? My ex-wife would've keeled over at the sight.

But Isabella isn't Colette. She doesn't throw fits over me not wanting an abundance of staff or pout if I work late. And she certainly doesn't need me to take care of her—hell, she'd probably argue that point until we're both blue in the face. Yet, here I am, wondering how Isabella would react to more mornings like this. Would she laugh it off? Raise an eyebrow with that “Are you serious?” look of hers?

As I lay out our impromptu feast, I can't shake the feeling that I'm standing at the edge of a cliff. One wrong step and I'm free-falling, no legal strategy or boardroom maneuvering to save me. I should probably get my head checked for even considering this; perhaps Isabella King might be the one person who can handle the plunge with me.

Just then, Isabella steps out from the hallway, her arms outstretched as she yawns. She's got nothing on but one of my old T-shirts that she must have found somewhere in the pile of laundry I've been meaning to fold. It's oversized on her tall but delicate frame. And she looks sexy as hell.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:45 am

I lean against the kitchen counter, spatula in hand, and try to appear nonchalant as she blinks away the remnants of sleep. “Morning,” I say. “Hope you’re hungry.”

She joins me at the kitchen island, glancing around with the kind of surprise that’s usually reserved for discovering you’ve won the lottery—or that your one-night stand can actually cook.

“Adrian, what are you doing?” Her voice is groggy but incredulous.

“Breakfast,” I announce, as though it’s the most natural thing in the world. “Go on, have a seat. I’ll serve you.”

“Shouldn’t I help?” Isabella peers up at me, and I can’t help but notice how the morning light dances along her hair. With no makeup and drenched in a mixture of both our scents, I don’t think anyone can be any more beautiful.

“Nonsense,” I tell her. “You don’t have to do a thing. Just enjoy what I make you.”

“Can I at least make your coffee?” Her offer is almost challenging, like she’s daring me to let her contribute.

“That you can do. Help yourself to whatever you like in the fridge. I’m a cream and sugar guy.”

“Actually, I don’t drink coffee,” she says, and it’s like she suddenly just remembered.

“Really? But I’ve seen you drink it at work,” I counter, my lawyer instincts kicking in

before the sun's even high.

"Oh, um." She scratches the back of her head. "I meant I don't drink it anymore. Trying to cut back."

"Fair enough. I'll still take mine with cream and sugar."

"Fine," she relents, her movements still a little sluggish as she pads barefoot to the coffee machine. "I guess it's juice for me then?"

"How about orange? It's the most mature juice I have."

She nods once. "I'll take it."

"Coming right up." I pour her a glass, watching as she adds cream and sugar to my coffee with precision. There's something about watching her do something so ... domestic that gives me a thrill I didn't expect.

"Here you go," she says, handing me the mug before taking her seat at the table, the bedsheet draped around her creating a statue-like silhouette.

"Thanks." I set plates down, piling them high with bacon, eggs, and avocado toast—my impromptu attempt at culinary romance. Serving her first feels strangely significant, like I'm honoring some ancient rite of passage.

"Wow, this looks amazing," she says, genuine appreciation in her eyes. And I can't decide if she's more impressed by the food or the fact that I'm the one who made it.

"Enjoy," I tell her, sliding into the chair opposite her. We eat mostly in silence, the simple sounds of cutlery and chewing filling the kitchen. It's comfortable, easy, like something we've done a thousand times before—even though we both know that's

not the case.

As I watch her sip her orange juice, sunlight catching those green eyes, I find myself caught up in a moment I never anticipated. For a man who prides himself on being ten steps ahead, Isabella King keeps tripping me up in ways I never see coming.

The final forkful of avocado toast disappears into her mouth, and she's eyeing the last piece of bacon like it's the holy grail. I can't help but chuckle. "You're quite the food critic. Should I be worried about my Yelp review?"

Her laugh, light and surprising, fills the space between us. "Five stars for the chef," she says, a playfulness in her tone that's as refreshing as it is disarming.

I lean back in my chair, the weight of the morning pressing against the silence that follows. There's a warmth here, something palpable and unnerving in its intensity. I take a breath, feeling like I'm on the edge of a cliff, toes curling over the precipice.

"Isabella," I start, and the words are there, ready to leap. "How would you feel about keeping this ... thing between us going? Casually, of course."

She raises an eyebrow, green eyes sharp as ever. "Casual?" There's a skepticism in her voice, but it's not unwelcome. It's Isabella, through and through.

"Absolutely. No strings." I run a hand through my hair, suddenly aware of how absurd this must sound. "You've got your career path bulldozed straight ahead, and me—well, let's just say I'm not exactly keen to dive back into the deep end after the matrimonial belly flop."

She dabs the corners of her mouth with a napkin. "But we work together. You're my boss. Things could get really ..."

“I know. Don’t think I haven’t considered all of that. Even though I’m your boss, I’m also just Adrian. We’ve known each other since we were kids. Our dads have been best friends long before the thought of either of us was even conceived.”

“You’ve known me since you were a kid. I’ve known you my entire life,” she points out. Right. The nine-year age gap. Now that she’s 27, it hardly feels like the monumental difference it did when we were younger.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:45 am

“Maybe it’s only me, but when we’re together ... it just works. And the sex. It’s—” I shake my head, unable to even describe how incredible the sex is. “I don’t think the English language even has a word for how good you make me feel.”

“If we’re going to do this, don’t you think we need to set some boundaries?” She’s folding her arms now, lawyer-mode in full swing.

“Fort Knox levels of boundaries,” I assure her. We both know we’re treading on a minefield, yet neither of us seems willing to step away.

“Fine. But the moment it gets complicated, we end it. Agreed?” The firmness in her voice doesn’t match the curiosity dancing in those emerald depths.

“Agreed.” It’s a pact made on a foundation of mutual self-delusion, but hell, it’s a pact nonetheless.

We finish our meal in quiet harmony, the unspoken agreement hanging in the air like a dare. As I clear the plates, I’m drawn to her by some magnetic force I can’t deny. I press my lips to hers, a soft claim that tastes like promise and warning all at once.

She responds with a heat that ignites a fire within me, and our kiss deepens, fueled by a passion I didn’t know we’d been stoking. Her fingers thread through my hair, pulling me closer, and I’m lost in the sensation of her, the very essence of Isabella King.

We pull apart, breathless, our gazes locked in silent conversation. Words are unnecessary; the electricity between us speaks volumes. And as our lips meet again, I

can't shake the feeling that we're diving headfirst into uncharted territory—with no map, no plan, and absolutely no idea what we're getting ourselves into.

Chapter nine

Isabella

I stride into the office lobby on Monday, my stomach performing circus tricks. The memory of Saturday night with Adrian lingers like a too-sweet perfume; it's intoxicating but leaves a cloying aftertaste of what-ifs and whys.

The battle in my head rages on—to tell or not to tell him about the baby. When he suggested keeping it light, I read between the lines: family life isn't on his menu. And despite my plans for a child-free climb up the career ladder, the thought of ending the pregnancy feels like trying to fit a square peg in a round hole—it just doesn't sit right.

“Isabella, can you come to my office?” Adrian's voice breaks through the intercom, pulling me from my internal tug-of-war.

“Sure,” I reply, hoping my voice doesn't betray the nervous tremble I feel.

I make my way to his door, rehearsing neutral expressions in my mind. But the moment I enter, his smirk unravels all my prep work. It's infuriating how that one facial twitch can send my pulse into overdrive.

“Close the door, will you?” he says with that commanding edge that somehow also suggests he'd be just as comfortable leaning back with a glass of whiskey in his hand.

As soon as the click of the latch sounds, Adrian crosses the room in two strides, and his lips find mine with an ease that screams he's done this a thousand times—though, I'd wager, never quite like this. His kiss is a mix of power and tenderness, a

contradiction that epitomizes the man before me.

His hands roam, tracing the curves he's familiar with, and I can't help the moan that slips out. It's involuntary, a testament to his skill, and absolutely mortifying.

"Adrian," I gasp, shoving at his chest. "What are you doing?"

"Reminding you of Saturday," he murmurs, that damn smile still playing on his lips while he effectively pins me against the door with his body.

"Is this why you called me in?" My voice is steady, but inside, I'm a tornado of conflicting emotions.

Adrian laughs, the sound rich and somehow reassuring. "Actually, no." He straightens his tie with a quick flick of his wrist. "I need you to join me for a meeting with Aurora and NexGen. It's about the merger."

I blink, processing the request. Kate informed me Leo is supposed to be his go-to for these things, but Adrian's eyes are earnest. "You want me there?"

"Your financial expertise," he says, brushing his hand along my stomach then down to my hips in a way that's both distracting and strangely comforting, "is exactly what we need for this discussion. And between us, I think you'll really impress them."

The compliment hits me like a shot of espresso—unexpected, potent, and leaving a warm glow in its wake. Pride swells within me, and for a moment, I forget about the secret pressing against my conscience.

"Thanks," I manage, trying to sound nonchalant, but there's a smile tugging at my lips, betraying my pleasure. "My only concern is how unprepared I am."

“Already had Kate create a PowerPoint for you.”

I raise my brows. Now I’m the one who’s impressed. “Well then, I suppose I have no more objections.”

“Then it’s settled.” He leans in, and his lips capture mine again, a soft demand that sends my heart racing.

“Adrian,” I murmur against his mouth, even as part of me wants to sink into the kiss.

“We should go. Now.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:45 am

Just then, Adrian's phone rings, shattering the calm. As soon as Leo's name pops up on Adrian's CarPlay screen, he sighs.

"Yeah, Leo. What's up?" he answers.

"Why wasn't I invited to the meeting? Kate had to fill me in." Even over Bluetooth, Leo's irritation is obvious.

Adrian's eyes sweep over to me, then back to the street ahead. "Leo, it was strategic, alright?" His words are clipped, his jaw working overtime. "We needed a financial shark in there, not another suit."

I'm squirming in the passenger seat, trying to shrink into my coat. Is this what betrayal feels like? Because I've never been a fan of office politics, but I seem to have landed smack in the middle of them anyway. I should feel guilty, probably, except I'm too busy being impressed with myself for how well the meeting went.

"I swear, it's nothing personal, Leo," Adrian replies, his jaw tight. "It made sense for me to handle this one solo. Fewer lines of communication."

"It never is, is it?" Leo shoots back, skepticism clear even through the speaker. "But next time, I want in."

"Understood. We'll keep you in the loop."

The call ends with a click and Adrian lets out a frustrated sigh, running a hand through his perfectly styled hair. It's a rare glimpse behind the curtain—Adrian Cole,

untouchable CEO, ruffled by his own partner.

“Sorry you had to hear that,” he mutters, eyes fixed on the road ahead.

“Leo always that charming?” I ask, unable to resist poking the bear.

“Since my dad passed, yeah. He’s got this idea we’re co-captains of this ship.” Adrian’s gaze flicks to me, humorless. “But Dad left the firm to me. Leo was supposed to be support, not competition.”

“Sounds complicated,” I say, because what else is there to say?

“Complicated doesn’t begin to cover it,” he admits. “He worked as my father’s partner, but he and I clash far too much.”

There’s a silence then, stretching out until it’s nearly tangible. I can feel the shift in him, a deliberate lightening of the atmosphere as he glances at me again, that signature smirk playing on his lips.

“Hey, want to come over tonight? Caleb’s on spring break, so my mom begged to have him over for a couple more days,” he says, dropping the offer casually, as if it’s no big deal. As if my heart isn’t doing an impromptu salsa in my chest.

“Can’t,” I reply, with a nonchalance I don’t feel. “Got a doctor’s appointment and Amelie’s playing chauffeur.”

“Ah,” he nods, accepting the decline with a grace that’s annoyingly attractive. “Is everything okay?”

“Just a check-up.”

He raises a brow. “But you need Amelie to go with you?”

Damn it. I said too much. I clear my throat. Very smooth, Isabella. “She’s getting a check-up too. We like to go together.”

Adrian nods, but I can tell by his expression that he’s still confused. “Another time then.”

“Another time,” I echo. Although, if I do tell him about the baby, will there be another time?

Only time will tell.

The sterile smell of the doctor’s office is a slap in the face to my nerves, which are already doing somersaults. I’m sitting on the crinkly paper that lines the examination table, pretending that I’m anywhere but here. Amelie’s hand finds mine, her grip reassuring.

“It’s going to be okay, Isabella. I’ll be with you every step of the way.”

“Isabella?” My doctor strides in with a smile that’s probably meant to be comforting. She glances at her clipboard and then at me. “Congratulations, you’re pregnant. Your estimated due date is September 10th.”

“Great,” I manage to say, though what I really mean is, “Oh god. How am I going to handle this?”

“Everything looks good based on your physical exam. We’ll schedule a follow-up. Here are some resources, per your request. Tons of info about classes we recommend,

and doulas—”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:45 am

“No need for anything extravagant,” I tell her as she hands me a stack of pamphlets that feel like bricks in my hands. “Thanks.”

Even Amelie’s eyes widen at the sight. “Would you look at that? You’d think you were joining a cult, not having a baby.”

“Real supportive, Amelie,” I tease. “Shall we go?”

Outside, the chill hits me as I reach for my scarf. Right. Not here. It’s still in Adrian’s car, probably soaking up his cologne.

“I’ll take you back to your office then?” I start, already picturing the traffic we’ll have to navigate.

“Don’t worry about it,” she interrupts, slipping on her sunglasses. “I’ve got plans to grab drinks with some girls from work. It’s just a block away.”

“Drinks? Without me?” I feign indignation, placing a hand over my heart.

“Last time I checked, pregnant ladies don’t double as drinking buddies,” Amelie retorts with a smirk. “Had to find a new crew.”

“Traitor,” I mock-accuse, but there’s a grateful lilt in my voice. Amelie has always been my anchor, especially now, when I feel like I’m adrift in uncharted waters.

“Call me later?” she says, hugging me quickly before sauntering off toward her newfound friends.

“Will do.” I watch her go, her laughter mingling with the city sounds. Then, turning on my heel, I walk to my car, the weight of the future heavy in my purse.

Traffic isn’t too bad, and I’m back at my West Hollywood abode in under fifteen minutes. Just as I arrive on my floor, I notice someone standing right outside my door in the hallway. Speak of the devil and he shall appear—it’s Adrian, holding my scarf out like some kind of peace offering.

“Hey,” he says, and I’m too busy trying to shove the pregnancy pamphlets deep into my purse to remember how to form words as I approach him. “You left this—”

Then disaster strikes. My purse spills open, pamphlets cascading to the floor like confetti. In my rush, I end up pushing them further across the floor rather than scooping them up. My heart races, and I can’t tell if it’s from the bending or the panic.

“Isabella?” Adrian’s tone changes.

He’s seen them. Of course, he has.

“Are you—?” He doesn’t finish the sentence; he doesn’t need to. His eyes lock onto mine, dark pools of concern, curiosity, and something else I can’t quite name.

I look up at him, my throat suddenly dry. I want to say something witty, something sarcastic. But nothing comes out. Just an inaudible gasp, a silent admission. And there we are, in the eye of the storm, waiting to see which way the wind will blow us.

Chapter ten

Adrian

I shuffle in behind Isabella, the door to her apartment clicking shut like the final verdict in a courtroom. The irony isn't lost on me—I spend my days fighting battles with words, yet now, I'm rendered mute by the weight of impending fatherhood. It's a whole different kind of life sentence.

“Make yourself comfortable,” she says without looking back, leading the way into the living room with that commanding stride I know all too well. Comfortable? If only. My gut is twisted tighter than the lid on a jar of pickles nobody can open.

Her couch looks inviting, but I perch on the edge like it's a hot stove.

“Look, Adrian,” she starts, breaking the silence with her sharp-edged clarity, “we were careful. But apparently, condoms have a vendetta against wallet storage. Who knew?”

“Clearly not me,” I mutter, feeling the sting of responsibility. “If I had known—”

“I believe you.” She crosses her arms over her chest, and it's as if neither of us can bring ourselves to look each other in the eye.

“How long have you known?”

“Just a little over a week.” She takes a deep breath, and I brace myself. Her eyes, those green pools of resolve, lock onto mine. “And I've made my decision: I'm keeping the baby.”

The words hang there, and suddenly, Isabella King, the woman who argues with the ferocity of a pit bull, sounds almost ... vulnerable. She lays out her fears like evidence on display but stands firm in her decision. No backing down. Classic Isabella.

“An abortion—it doesn't feel right for me,” she continues, her voice steady as a

heartbeat. “And I can do this alone.”

Page 27

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:45 am

“Adrian?” Mom’s voice pulls me from my daydream. “Everything okay?” She leans against the doorframe, eyes soft with concern.

“Perfect. Just reliving Caleb’s greatest hits.”

“That’s sweet, honey. We can all take a look after we eat. Dinner’s ready,” she says, smiling.

“Great, I’m starving.” I shut the album with a snap, decision heavy in my chest. It’s like deciding to jump out of a perfectly good airplane—thrilling and terrifying.

Walking towards the dining room, the corners of my mouth lift in a private smile. Decision made. But for now, it’s mashed potatoes and spending time with the two people who matter most—for now.

Chapter eleven

Isabella

The elevator dings its arrival on the executive floor with all the subtlety of a trumpet blast, and I shuffle out, still trying to figure out if my stomach is tangled in nerves or last night’s Thai food. I glance up, and there he is—Adrian Cole, looking like a GQ cover model that got lost and ended up in a law firm. Our eyes snag, but he’s quick to break away, striding into his office without so much as a nod.

“Great,” I mutter under my breath, adjusting my grip on my leather briefcase. “Ignore me. That’ll make everything better.”

I keep my head high, ignoring the persistent throb behind my eyes—a souvenir from last night’s cryfest. I had gone full-on Niagara Falls after dropping the baby bomb on Mr. Emotional Fort Knox. Sure, I laid it out all cool and detached—I’m good at that—but a tiny, ridiculously hopeful part of me wished for ... what? A hug? A “we’ll get through this”? Instead, I got the emotional equivalent of a brick wall.

“Composure, Isabella,” I remind myself as I push open the door to my office. “You’re a shark, not a goldfish. Be a shark.”

Settling into my chair, I eye the fresh stack of papers right in front of me—updated merger financials courtesy of Kate, my lifesaving secretary.

“Need anything else, Ms. King?” Kate pops her head in, her tone bright enough to give me a sugar rush.

“Nothing but a time machine and a bottle of wine,” I say with a half-smile. God, I miss wine. “I’m just diving into these financials.”

“Added them to your desk five minutes ago,” she says, proud as if she’d just solved world hunger.

“Thanks. You’re the best,” I reply, though I can’t help thinking that instead of numbers, I should be crunching prenatal vitamins and nursery color schemes.

“Let me know if you need anything else,” she offers before slipping out, closing the door with a soft click.

“Thanks,” I sigh, staring down at the papers as if they might contain a hidden message on how to navigate impending motherhood with the stoic Mr. Cole. At least I have my first Lamaze class in the afternoon to look forward to. Alone, most likely.

Chuckling dryly, I brace myself for the day ahead. Whatever Adrian decides about being involved with our kid, I know one thing for certain—I’ve faced down tougher opponents than parenthood. At least, that’s what I keep telling myself.

I flip through the papers, my brain already fried from the numbers swimming before my eyes. I’m looking for the cost projections from Aurora and NexGen, but no dice. I shuffle through the other stacks of documents on my desk. Perhaps Kate didn’t bring everything out after all.

“Kate,” I call out as I step into the hallway, my voice echoing off the walls a little more sharply than I intend. She looks up from her desk, her expression morphing into concern.

“Those projections from Aurora and NexGen seem to have sprouted legs and walked away,” I say, trying to keep the edge out of my voice.

She furrows her brows, a clear sign she’s taking this personally. “I triple-checked everything when I printed them out. Everything they sent us is all there.”

“Maybe our friends at Aurora and NexGen decided to play a little fast and loose with their numbers,” I suggest, though I’m not quite ready to let them off the hook.

“Should I dig through the emails again?” Kate offers, already half-standing, eager to fix what isn’t her mistake.

“Stay put,” I tell her, waving a hand dismissively. “I’ll take this up with Mr. Cole. We’ll need all hands on deck if we’re going to make sense of this mess.”

With an encouraging nod to Kate, I make my way to Adrian’s office. The door is slightly ajar, and I push it open without knocking—because formalities are overrated.

“Enter and close the door,” he says without looking up from his computer screen, his voice smooth like whiskey and just as dangerous.

“Um ... right. Missing documents,” I begin, cutting straight to the chase. “We’re short a few key figures from Aurora and NexGen.”

“I’ll have Suzy take care of it.” He doesn’t even flinch, just keeps typing as if we’re discussing the weather.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:45 am

Adrian leans in closer, his voice soft but playful. “As long as I don’t end up doing downward dog in the delivery room, I’ll let gravity take the lead.”

I smirk, leaning into his side. “Deal.”

“Your child is going to have such fun with you two,” the instructor observes, her eyes twinkling. “Laughter is the best medicine, after all.”

Adrian gives me a pointed look, and I can’t help but roll my eyes. But inside, the tension unwinds a notch. This back-and-forth—it’s our weird rhythm, and it steadies me more than any breathing technique ever could.

Because even though we can’t agree on the little things, when push comes to shove—literally—we’re on the same page. And that’s what matters.

Finally, the Lamaze instructor announces the end of the session, and I can’t help but feel a weird mix of relief and disappointment. Adrian’s been surprisingly supportive—well, in his own sarcastic, Adrian-like way.

“From now on, I’m coming with you to these things,” he declares as we stand up, folding the yoga mat like he’s negotiating a business deal. “And the doctor’s visits.”

“You sure?” I arch an eyebrow, unable to hide my surprise. “You want to be involved?”

“Yes, Isabella,” he says, his voice serious for once. “I think we’ll make good partners.” My heart skips at “partners,” but then he adds quickly, “Co-parents, I

mean.”

“Right, co-parents.” But secretly, I down a flutter of something that feels dangerously like hope.

We walk out of the building and into the crisp air. The evening sun casts long shadows across the parking lot as we head to his SUV.

“You’ll take me back to my car, right? I’m parked in the firm’s lot.”

“Actually, let me take you home. I want to see where our kid will be living,” he decides, like it’s the most natural thing in the world.

“Fine,” I consent, too tired to argue.

His SUV purrs to life, and soon, we’re pulling up to my apartment building. We ride the elevator up in silence, but my curiosity is piqued and loud in my mind. Adrian really wants to raise the baby with me. Yesterday, I was certain I would be doing this solo.

Stepping off the elevator, I lead the way to my door and unlock it. I step inside, with Adrian close behind.

“Two bedrooms,” he murmurs, more to himself than to me, as he begins his inspection tour. He pokes his head into my home office, seemingly already envisioning it repainted in pastel colors and filled with stuffed animals and storybooks.

“This will be perfect for the nursery,” he says, making mental notes. “The dimensions are perfect for a toddler’s bedroom.”

“I know,” I reply, arms crossed over my chest. “I’ve already thought about it.”

“Of course you have,” he nods. “But we’ll need to make sure everything is top-notch. Safety first.”

“Adrian, we’re not decking out a royal nursery here,” I snap, trying to keep my cool. “Let’s just stick to the essentials.”

“Isabella.” He turns towards me, eyes meeting mine, “I don’t skimp on two things—legal cases and family. We’ll get the best for our kid.”

“Great, can’t wait for the diamond-encrusted crib,” I mutter under my breath, rolling my eyes.

He chuckles, unfazed by my sarcasm. “Don’t worry, I won’t go overboard. But if it’s a choice between fancy and safe, we’re going with safe.”

“Fine,” I concede, knowing there’s no point arguing with him on this. “But don’t expect me to start getting used to luxury.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” he grins, and starts listing baby items like he’s reciting court evidence. It’s meticulous, thorough, and so very Adrian.

And, if I’m being honest with myself, maybe it’s also a tiny bit endearing. Just a tiny bit.

“Is that all then? Did everything pass your inspection?”

“Shouldn’t we check the bedroom too?” Adrian’s casual suggestion reverberates in the hallway, and I’m tilting my head at him, eyebrow cocked in suspicion.

“Why?” I challenge, half expecting him to spout something about crib placement or square footage.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:45 am

“Acoustics,” he offers, a sly grin playing on his lips. “Got to make sure the baby can’t hear us ... talking.”

“Talking,” I say, the word dripping with disbelief. But curiosity—or maybe it’s just the magnetism that always seems to draw me toward him—prods me forward. We’re in my bedroom before I even know what I’m agreeing to, and then his hands are on my waist, pulling me close with an urgency that sends my heart into overdrive.

His lips crash against mine, the kiss igniting sparks that flicker through my veins like a live wire. We’re against the wall, his body pressing into mine, and the world narrows down to the feel of him, the taste of him, the undeniable heat. My fingers tangle in his hair, which is as perfectly disheveled as ever, holding him to me because, for all my sarcasm and self-control, I can’t seem to let go.

“Bed,” he mumbles between kisses, his voice husky. “We should ... check the bed.”

“Quality control?” I gasp out, trying to keep a shred of levity while my senses are drowning in Adrian Cole.

“Absolutely,” he says against my neck, his breath hot on my skin. “Need to make sure it’s ... suitable for when I stay over.”

“Practical,” I manage to say, half-laughing, half-moaning as he steers us toward the bed. Because apparently, this is happening—we’re doing this very thorough inspection of sleeping arrangements.

“Always,” he replies, but there’s a twinkle in those dark brown eyes that tells me

practicality is the last thing on his mind. And honestly? Right now, it's the last thing on mine, too.

He takes a seat at the foot of the bed, but I'm already eager to get him out of his clothes. His shirt falls to the floor, a casualty in our silent war of desire. He watches me with those dark eyes, daring me to bare myself to him. I rise, my movements deliberate as I tug my shirt over my head and let it drop.

"Your turn, counselor," he teases, his voice low. "I can't believe you wore that to class."

"Hey, if I'm going to be spreading my legs in front of a bunch of parents, I should at least be comfortable."

"But you're spreading them for only me now. You don't need anything to do that."

I kick off the sweats without grace but with a hint of defiance. "Next?" I ask, pretending this is just another negotiation, another dance where I know all the steps.

"Surprise me."

Challenge accepted. The bra goes first, the clasp giving way under my fingers. His gaze is nothing short of devouring, and it sends shivers down my spine.

I step into his space. "Assistance, please?" My voice is a mix of sass and silk.

With a smirk, Adrian peels away the last barrier, my panties joining the rest of my discarded armor. Now it's just us, raw and unshielded.

"Leg up," he commands, and I comply, resting my foot on the plush duvet. His touch is like fire and ice as he traces my thigh, sending anticipation skyrocketing. He's at

my mercy when he looks up at me like that, and I'm at his when he whispers those words, "You're so wet."

"Need you," I admit, because there's no point in lying, not when every cell in my body is screaming for him.

His finger slips inside, and it's everything—too much and not enough all at once. I bite my lip to keep from crying out because if I start, I might never stop.

"More," I gasp, the edge of pleasure sharpening with each movement of his fingers. He obliges, and another digit joins the first, stretching me deliciously.

My muscles clench around him, and I lean heavily into his solid chest—my anchor in a sea of sensation. His hands are magic, commanding responses from my body I didn't know were possible.

I arch against him, breath hitching. "I want all of you," I manage to say, every nerve ending begging for more than just the tease of his fingers.

He pauses, the question heavy in the air between fast breaths. "You're certain?" His voice is rough like gravel, coated with concern and desire.

In response, I nod fiercely, unable to form words as moans take their place. With a final caress that almost undoes me, he withdraws his fingers. I nearly whine at the loss until I see him rise before me, an Adonis in my storm-tossed sea.

Eager to assist, I reach for his waistband, fumbling with the button on his pants. They drop to the floor with a soft thud, followed by his boxer briefs, and suddenly there's nothing left to hide the raw hunger we have for each other.

"How do you want me?" Adrian's voice is low and steady, an anchor in the

whirlwind of my thoughts.

Without a word, I lie down on my side, eyeing the expanse of the bed invitingly. I pat the space beside me, and he catches the hint like it's a lifeline. "Exactly like this?" His body aligns with mine, the heat of his chest searing against my back.

"Exactly," I whisper, and then add with a reckless abandon only this man can draw out of me, "And no condom."

He doesn't hesitate, entering me gently from behind. The sensation rips a cry from my lips, a stark sound in the quiet room. He starts slow, but even his gentlest thrusts are enough to stir the storm inside me again.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:45 am

“Hey, buddy. It’s Dad. I heard about what happened.” When he doesn’t respond, I keep going. “You know, Caleb, those kids are just a bunch of insecure—” I start, ready to impart some fatherly wisdom about bullies and their own insecurities.

But Isabella cuts me off with a gentle hand on my arm. “Adrian, let me try?”

I step back, giving her space. Part of me wants to argue, to say that I’m his dad, I should fix this. But another part of me—probably the smarter part—knows that Isabella might just have the right touch for this. So I nod, swallowing the lump in my throat, watching as she kneels by the stall door, her voice low and soothing.

Isabella crouches down, her eyes level with the tiny gap beneath the stall door. “Caleb,” she says, and it’s like she’s got this superpower to make her voice sound like a warm blanket—something I’ve never managed. “It’s Isabella King. You remember me, right?”

“Yes,” he whimpers. “What are you doing here?”

“I work with your dad. We just got out of a meeting when your teacher told us what happened. Say ... did you know that your missing tooth makes you unique?”

“Unique” is not the word I’d use. Heck, I was about to launch into a lecture on bully psychology. But Isabella’s got the floor now.

“Like a superhero?” Caleb’s voice wobbles from behind the metal door, his words bouncing off porcelain and tile.

“Exactly!” Isabella claps her hands once, her excitement echoing in the small space. “And do you know what’s cool about being different?”

“Nothing,” he mumbles, but I can tell he’s listening. Kids always have a soft spot for superheroes.

“Everything, Caleb. It’s what sets you apart from the crowd.” She leans in closer, as if sharing a secret. “Sometimes, people don’t get that. But who wants to be boring and the same as everyone else?”

“Well, I don’t,” he whispers, and I’m starting to see the light at the end of this crappy tunnel.

“Right. So, when someone tries to make fun of you for it, instead of getting upset, throw them off with a joke. Show them it doesn’t bother you.”

“Can I do that?” His voice is so hopeful it punches me right in the feels.

“Of course, you can.” Isabella’s tone never wavers. “When I was your age, I was taller than all the other girls in my class. They used to tease me about it until one day, I just started laughing along and made jokes about how I could reach things they couldn’t.”

“Really?” The skepticism in Caleb’s voice matches the raised eyebrow I can imagine him sporting.

“Yep. And because I didn’t let it upset me, they had nothing to tease me about anymore. You see, bullies—they’re insecure. Your dad’s right about that.” She taps the stall door rhythmically, adding, “If you show them you’re proud of what makes you ‘you’, they can’t touch you. What do you say? Do you want to give it a try?”

“Okay ... I’ll try.” That’s my boy.

“Great! Now, how about we get out of this bathroom and back to class? You’ve got a superhero image to maintain, kiddo.”

The lock clicks, the door swings open, and there stands Caleb, one tooth short of a full set, looking up at Isabella like she hung the moon. I lean against the wall, arms crossed, a prideful smirk playing on my lips that has nothing to do with me and everything to do with the woman who’s just talked my son out of a bathroom stall with nothing but a few kind words and an anecdote.

Caleb’s little face breaks into a grin, shining with relief. “Thank you, Isabella,” he chirps, sounding nothing short of grateful. He shuffles out from the stall, looking at her like she’s just pulled off some sort of Houdini act. “I’m glad my dad has such a cool friend.”

“Anytime, champ,” she says, ruffling his hair in a way that makes him beam even wider.

Mrs. Warner reaches for Caleb’s hand and leads him back towards the classroom. I hang back, watching them go, feeling this unfamiliar tightness in my chest loosen a bit. Isabella just defused a crisis that would’ve had me fumbling for a playbook that didn’t exist.

“Thanks,” I say as we start back toward the car, the sun warm on our shoulders. “Truth is, I would have been lost in there without you.”

She gives me this half-smile that’s all modesty and no ego. “You’re doing fine, Adrian. You just need to speak “kid”, that’s all. Even the best lawyers have to adjust their arguments for the audience.”

“Kid language, huh?” I muse, unlocking the car with a beep. “Guess I have to work on that.” My smile feels shaky because it’s new territory—admitting my shortcomings doesn’t usually sit well with me. Caleb’s always been intelligent. It’s easy to talk to him like a little grown-up most of the time. Maybe that’s where I’ve been going wrong this whole time.

“Kids are quite brilliant,” she continues, sliding into the passenger seat as I hold the door open for her, “but their emotions are straightforward. They don’t do hidden agendas or read between the lines. Not yet anyway.”

As I close the door and circle around to my side, I can’t help but think how effortlessly maternal she seems. Here’s Isabella, who could argue the sky down from the heavens if she wanted, revealing a side softer than any courtroom could handle. And damn if it doesn’t suit her.

Settling behind the wheel, my thoughts drift unbidden to the future. I imagine Isabella, not just as Caleb’s champion in bathroom standoffs, but as someone I wake up next to, someone who challenges me over breakfast and backs me up in life.

She’d make a hell of a mom, that’s a given. But a partner? A co-conspirator in the grand heist of living happily ever after? The idea doesn’t sound so far-fetched—not anymore. The question now is whether I’m brave enough to cross that line.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:45 am

“Ready to head back?” I ask, starting the engine, the low rumble grounding my wayward thoughts.

“Let’s do it,” she replies, her focus already shifting back to business.

But in that split second, I catch something in her eyes—a flicker of something more—and it’s enough to stoke the embers of possibility.

Chapter thirteen

Isabella

I kill the engine and sit for a second in the driveway, the fading Friday afternoon sunlight casting a soft glow on the two-story house I grew up in. It’s got that middle-class Pasadena charm—neat lawn, a porch that’s seen better days, and shutters that probably needed a fresh coat of paint last summer. Home.

Before I brave the familial chaos, I rummage through my bag, fishing out the phone. Adrian’s name lights up the screen and I can’t help but grin like an idiot.

“What are you up to?” he writes.

“Having dinner with the parents,” I text back, thumb hovering over the send button. “Why do you ask?” I add.

“Would’ve been nice to see you tonight.” The response pops up almost immediately, and I let out a giggle that’s embarrassingly high-pitched for someone who’s

negotiated multi-million-dollar settlements without breaking a sweat.

“Is this guy for real?” I mutter under my breath, shaking my head. But there it is—that flutter in my stomach that feels suspiciously like butterflies. Or food poisoning. Definitely one of the two.

Reluctantly, I type a sad face emoji—because apparently, we’re teenagers now—and drop the phone into my purse.

I step out of the car, heels clicking on the concrete as I approach the front door. It’s still got that old brass knocker from when I was ten and thought it was the height of sophistication. With a quick press of the doorbell, I brace myself for Mom’s inevitable third-degree about my love life—or lack thereof.

The door swings open and there’s Dad, looking like he’s just stepped out of one of those commercials where the father is inexplicably grilling in a sweater vest. He sweeps me into a hug that says I’m still his little girl.

“Isabella! Come in, come in,” he ushers, warmth blooming around us. “I hope traffic wasn’t too bad getting here. You come straight from Beverly Hills?”

“Yep, fresh from work. It’s been a long week.”

Stepping over the threshold, I’m hit with the comforting scent of home-cooked meatloaf—a throwback to every Friday night of my childhood. But as I shed my coat and kick off my heels, a familiar timbre weaves through the aroma of herbs and spices, tugging at my senses. A voice I would recognize in the midst of Armageddon—and sometimes wish I could forget.

“Is somebody here?” I ask, but Dad’s already back in the living room, relaxing before dinner.

I cross toward the living room, the archway to the kitchen framing the most unexpected scene. Adrian Cole, Mr. Tall-Dark-and-Infuriating, is manning the wooden spoon like it's his scepter, standing next to Mom by the stove.

"Seriously?" My eyebrows shoot up so high, they're one surprise away from leaving my forehead entirely.

Adrian catches my look and offers up a wave that's more smug than friendly. "Hey, Isabella. You made it."

"And apparently so did you."

"Purely coincidental," Adrian assures with a grin that tells me it's anything but. "Had some work nearby and thought I'd drop in." His eyes glint with mischief, and oh, how I want to wipe that smirk off his face—with a skillet, preferably.

"Adrian, here, was just showing me a new way to sauté vegetables," Mom explains, oblivious to the silent Mexican standoff happening right under her nose.

"Is that what they call it these days?" I quip, arms folded as if they might shield me from whatever game Adrian's playing.

The timer on the stove goes off, and Mom claps her hands together. "Dinner's ready! Isabella, darling, can you help set the table? Adrian, go sit down. You've been such a great help already."

"Actually, I don't mind—" Adrian begins, but Mom cuts him off with a practiced maternal "no-nonsense" look.

"Go on, take a seat. Isabella can handle it."

“If you insist.” He holds my gaze for a second longer than necessary, a silent challenge before he turns and saunters off. It’s a look that sends an uninvited shiver down my spine, heating my blood in a way that has nothing to do with the kitchen’s oven.

“Right,” I mutter, grabbing plates with a clatter louder than my racing heart. “Setting the table. I can do that without any ... distractions.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:45 am

“Go enjoy your evening with your parents, Isabella. I’ve got this,” Adrian says, his sleeves rolled up to his elbows.

“I can do it.”

“The mother of my child shouldn’t be doing manual labor,” he whispers. “It might harm the baby.” The smirk on his face is too smug, too “Adrian,” and I’m torn between wanting to wipe it off with the soapy sponge and leaving him to his domestic martyrdom.

“Sure you don’t need an adult supervisor?” I tease, but he shoos me away with a flick of his wrist. Shaking my head, I leave him to clink and clatter among the porcelain and stainless steel.

I’m about to sink into the plush comfort of the living room sofa when Mom’s hand on my arm stops me. She has that look—the one that means she’s about to drop a truth bomb.

“Isabella, honey, don’t be mad,” she starts, her eyes pleading for understanding before she even tells me why I might want to strangle her.

“Spit it out, Mom.”

She takes a deep breath. “After you got fired from your previous firm ... I gave Adrian a call. I told him about your employment status. Asked if he’d be willing to put in a good word when you started applying to firms again.”

My chest tightens with a cocktail of shock, embarrassment, and a strange sense of betrayal. “Mom ...” I can barely form words, my thoughts tripping over each other like clumsy toddlers.

“He said he’d hire you instead. Without a second thought,” she rushes on, as if the faster she speaks, the less time I have to get angry. “When I told him about what happened with your old boss, he just offered you the job.”

“Wait, what?” I turn to glance at Adrian through the archway; he’s elbow-deep in suds, oblivious to the bombshell being dropped mere feet away. He’s known about my former boss making a pass at me, all this time?

“Adrian respects you, Isabella. He said you were cut from the same cloth as his father.” She beams with pride, but all I feel is confusion swirling with the leftover annoyance from our first day at the office. Was that all just an act? Him pushing my buttons, challenging every statement I made?

“Your father and I are so grateful to him, Isabella.” Mom’s voice softens, and suddenly her meddling doesn’t seem quite so egregious.

“Grateful enough to invite him for dinner without telling me?” I ask, half-joking, half-serious.

“Seemed like a good idea at the time,” she admits with a sheepish shrug.

“Fine,” I sigh, conceding defeat to maternal machinations. “But next time, warn a girl, will you?”

“Promise.” Her eyes crinkle with relief as I fold her into a hug.

“Thanks, Mom,” I murmur, because despite the unexpected way things have turned

out, I am grateful—both for her unwavering support and for the job that’s become more than just a paycheck.

“You aren’t mad then?”

I shake my head. “Let me help Adrian finish up,” I say, pulling away from the embrace with newfound resolve.

It’s almost endearing, the idea that he saw something in me because of his father. But then again, this is Adrian. He’s as enigmatic as they come. Yet, I’m drawn to him like a moth to a flame. A small part of me is warning me that this is bad, but an even more influential part is begging for me to explore the possibilities.

The idea of a future with Adrian. Not just as co-parents, but the whole thing—a family, tied with a pretty bow called commitment.

Would he be game, though? Judging by the way he’s acted tonight ... I’m starting to think he might.

Chapter fourteen

Adrian

I’m wrist-deep in suds when Isabella saunters up to the sink, a playful glint in her green eyes that spells trouble—or maybe assistance. “Need a hand, or are you planning on sprouting an extra one? Turn me down, and you’ll have dishpan hands forever.”

I let out a chuckle that doesn’t quite mask my relief. She’s here, elbow to elbow with me, and suddenly this chore feels less like a task and more like ... camaraderie.

“Slide those over,” I nod toward the dishes awaiting their rinse as we fall into a rhythm. The soapy water swishes between us, the clink of porcelain a surprisingly pleasant soundtrack. It’s the kind of domesticity that used to be a minefield after Colette, but with Isabella, it’s like slipping into a warm bath—unexpectedly soothing.

“Mom mentioned how I landed the job at the firm ...” she says, breaking the silence. My heart does a little salsa dance of panic—I’d rather wrestle a bear than tackle this conversation.

“Isabella, listen. I don’t want you to feel like I hired you out of pity, because—” My voice is firm, but there’s an edge of desperation I can’t quite hide. I want her to know her worth, independent of any handout accusations.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:45 am

Isabella scoffs at this, but keeps her lips sealed.

“Then it got worse. When I dropped the bomb on her that I didn’t want anything to do with my father’s firm—thus wouldn’t be inheriting it when he retired—she dipped. Thankfully, she had no problem agreeing to give me full custody of Caleb. Colette was smarter than she let on, though. She managed to convince the court that our prenup was unfair due to her being left with pretty much nothing. Ended up walking away with ten million dollars.”

“Ten million? Jesus, Adrian ... I had no idea.”

“Nobody does. Not even my mother.” I shrug, trying to act nonchalantly. “When my father passed and I inherited the firm, I made the money back, and then some. But Colette made me question if anyone could be trusted, if love was just a fairy tale spun to sell diamonds and lace.” My laugh is hollow, the sound of a man who’s seen the puppet strings behind the magic show. “I became a master at keeping people at arm’s length, making sure no one could get close enough to pull a Houdini on my heart—and bank account—again.”

Her hand on the steering wheel is steady, but her silence is heavy with something I can’t quite name. When she finally looks at me, there’s no pity in those striking green eyes, just a depth of understanding that knocks the wind out of me. In that look, there’s a bridge being built over the chasm I thought was impassable.

“Thank you,” she says simply. “For trusting me enough to share all that with me.” But it’s not simple, not really. It’s acknowledgment and acceptance all wrapped up in two words that seem to lift the weight from my chest—one I wasn’t fully aware I’d

been carrying.

“You don’t think any less of me for putting myself in a situation like that?” I dare to ask. Because if this was a client of mine, I would have told him he had it coming.

She shakes her head. “We all make mistakes. You have a good heart and wanted to see the best in someone you love. The mother of your child. Could you really fault yourself for that?”

I huff. “I suppose when you put it that way ... not really.”

Isabella smiles. “Good. Because you shouldn’t feel bad about trying to make your marriage work.”

The night air is cool against my skin as Isabella parks in my driveway. The familiar sight of my house, with its dark windows and silent facade, feels different tonight—less solitary, more inviting.

“You can come in,” I mention, my voice threading through the quiet as I unlock the door. “Caleb’s at my mom’s tonight.”

“Convenient,” Isabella teases, following me inside with an easy grace that makes the space feel suddenly less mine and more ... ours.

In the kitchen, I gesture towards the fridge. “Want something to drink?” Habit, nothing more.

Her answer is simple, “Plain old water is fine.”

I chuckle, shaking my head at myself as I pour her a glass. “Sorry, force of habit.” I hand her the water, our fingers brushing in the exchange, sending a jolt of something

electric up my arm.

She tastes a sip as we enter the living room together.

“Come here,” I say, patting the couch next to me after taking a seat. She complies, the faint sound of her sigh reaching me as she settles in.

My hands find her shoulders, kneading the tension I find there. She moans softly, and I can’t resist—the urge to taste her skin wins over. My lips press against the back of her neck, feeling her pulse jump under my mouth.

“Thought this was just a standard massage,” Isabella teases, turning to face me with a playful glint in her eyes.

“For my favorite customer?” I quip, meeting her gaze. “I might be persuaded to throw in a little extra.” Our laughter mixes, a light, easy sound.

Then, we’re kissing. It’s not like before, those hurried, heated clashes of lips and teeth. No, this one’s got layers—like peeling back the wrapping on a present you didn’t expect to get. It’s full of affection, charged with intimacy, and it hits deeper than any of our previous make-out sessions. This isn’t just chemistry; it’s alchemy, transforming everything we thought we knew about us into something richer, something golden.

“Bedroom?” I murmur against her lips, my heart a jackhammer in my chest. She nods, and I’m up, tugging her hand as we navigate the stairs.

The door swings open to reveal a path of roses leading to my bed—a cliché gamble that feels like throwing dice on a Monopoly board. Her gasp tells me I’ve hit Park Place.

“Confident, aren’t you? Thinking I’d just waltz over after you crashed dinner?” Isabella’s eyebrow arches, but there’s amusement in her voice.

“Guilty as charged,” I admit with a half-grin. “But it paid off, didn’t it?”

I light the candles, their flickering glow casting dancing shadows across the walls, adding a dramatic flair to my already questionable interior decorating skills. With the overhead lights off, the room becomes an intimate stage set only for us.

Turning back to her, we’re drawn together again, our kiss reigniting with a passion that could set the room ablaze—if not for the fact that I’m suddenly hell-bent on savoring every second of undressing her.

Once we’re down to only our final layers, her fingers work at my boxer briefs. I chuckle and say, “Eager, are we?”

“Only fair,” she shoots back, her green eyes sparkling with mischief.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:45 am

“Fair enough. You first,” I say, my voice low.

I peel away her bra and panties with deliberate slowness, each kiss I place on her exposed skin an unspoken promise. The air is thick with desire, scented with roses and the warm wax of candles. My hands memorize her curves, mind already etching this moment into memory—where the armor falls away, and all that’s left is Isabella: fierce, vulnerable, mine.

“Yes ...” she whispers, and even her voice feels like silk against my skin.

I guide her onto the bed with a tenderness that belies my pulse racing beneath the surface. There’s a reverence in the way she lies back against the pillow, her hair fanning out like some sort of medieval halo. I open her legs with a careful curiosity, exploring the territory as if I’m charting new lands—lands where the treasure is the hitch of her breath and the soft gasps that escape from her lips.

“Adrian,” she warns, a playful threat in her tone that makes me grin, but I’m not deterred.

“Patience,” I murmur, kissing around her navel, her hips, the insides of her thighs, anywhere but where she’s dying for me to be. It’s all about the build-up, the anticipation—drawing out her pleasure until she’s practically vibrating under my touch.

With a devilish smile, I let my fingers dance across her clit, light as a tease. She moans, and it’s music, really—the best damn symphony to play in the background of this moment.

“Your pussy is beautiful,” I say, half in awe, half because I know it’ll make her blush even in the dim candlelight.

“Adrian ...” she groans, half exasperation and half pure need as I drop my head down and replace my teasing fingers with my tongue. The flick of my tongue elicits a sharp cry from her, and I can’t help the smugness that swells within me.

“Good?” I ask without stopping, the vibrations of my voice adding another layer to the sensation.

“God, yes,” she breathes out.

Her body squirms, and I hold her thighs steady, grounding her as I add a finger into the mix.

“Oh, fuck,” she cries out, and I can’t suppress the thrill that rockets through me at her raw pleasure.

“Enjoying yourself?” I quip, though it’s clear she’s miles beyond words now. Another finger joins the first, and I watch—fascinated—as she plays with her breasts, her movements growing more frantic, more urgent.

“Please don’t stop,” she pleads, and I have no intention of doing so.

Her walls begin to tighten around my fingers; I can feel the build-up of her release, a ticking time bomb of ecstasy. I pick up the pace, eager for the explosion, and when it comes, it’s cataclysm.

I slow my fingers, still inside her, prolonging the aftershocks of her orgasm as I gently suck on her clit. Her breaths are soft, contented sighs now. With a final kiss against her sensitive skin, I withdraw my hand and climb up her body, hovering over

her.

“Come here,” she murmurs, pulling me into a kiss that’s all heat and gratitude. She tastes herself on my lips, a hint of salt and sweetness, and there’s an edge of pride knowing she savors it. Slipping my wet fingers between us, Isabella licks them clean, eyes locked on mine, and damn if that isn’t the hottest thing I’ve ever seen.

With careful precision, I align myself with her welcoming warmth, pushing into her slowly, savoring the moment. Our foreheads touch, breaths mingling in the tiny space between us. Each thrust is met with a soft moan from Isabella, a sound that stirs something deep within me.

“Yes, yes, yes,” she gasps, and I can’t help but answer with a groan of my own as I lift her legs onto my shoulders, delving even deeper. The new angle has her back arching, our cries mingling in the candlelit room. Pleasure coils tight in my gut, and I know we’re both close.

“Isabella,” I groan as she clenches around me, her second orgasm rippling through her. It’s enough to send me over the edge, and I follow her into blissful oblivion.

As we come down, our laughter fills the room—a private joke about how well we play each other’s bodies like favorite instruments. We meet in another kiss, softer this time, lingering. There’s an unspoken truth hanging between us, a depth to what’s happening that goes beyond physical satisfaction. And while neither of us may be ready to voice it, it’s there, undeniable and growing stronger with every shared breath.

Chapter fifteen

Isabella

The sun is throwing a party in the sky, all bright and cheery, and I'm strutting into the office riding that same high vibe. Last night's dinner with Adrian and my folks? A hit. We're talking home runs, fireworks, the works. And here I am today, floating on cloud nine because this whole unconventional family unit might not be headed for a spectacular nosedive.

I breeze past Kate's desk, her smile mirroring mine, and my heels click-clack a rhythm that says, "Girl, you've got this." But then there's Adrian, Mr. Play-It-Cool, leaving our relationship status dangling like a participle. Makes a girl wonder—if he's really into me, wouldn't he be pulling out all the stops instead of playing hot potato with the commitment grenade?

Shaking my head as I step into my office, I resolve to keep my eyes on the prize. Today is about wins, not what-ifs. So what if Adrian's acting like he'd only shack up with me because I'm carrying his surprise bun in the oven? Forget labels. We're good. Great, even.

"Focus on the now," I mutter to myself, tossing my bag onto my desk with more sass than necessary. Just as I'm about to dive into the day's legal jungle, my phone decides it's the perfect moment to burst my bubble—chime!

"Breaking news" flashes across the screen, and it's not the latest cat video going viral. Nope, it's about the merger. The financial docs I tagged last week as MIA are officially making their debut all over the press like they're strutting down the red carpet.

"Those documents were leaked? But how?"

Page 40

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:45 am

My pulse goes from chill beats to heavy metal as I realize those traitorous sheets were sent from Aurora and NexGen straight to us. The leak's an inside job. A mole in our midst.

Betrayal stings like lemon juice on a paper cut, and I can feel the sting all right. Here I am, busting my tail to prove I belong at a firm as prestigious as Cole & Sterling, and someone slinks around planting landmines at my feet. With a heart that feels like it's pounding its way out of my chest, I shove back from my desk, my chair rolling away like it's as eager to escape this mess as I am.

"Adrian," I say, the name a call to action. Time for damage control.

I march to Adrian's office with a purpose, my heels clicking on the marble floor like a metronome ticking off my escalating pulse. I rap sharply on the door, ready for battle, but he whips it open before my knuckles can fall a second time.

"Isabella," he says and yanks me inside, his eyes darting down the corridor like we're in a spy thriller. The door shuts with a definite click, sealing us in his domain of leather and mahogany.

"So you know?" I hold up my phone, but judging by his tense jaw, there's no need to even show it..

"News travels fast," he says, a hand raking through his perfectly styled hair. Despite the chaos, he manages to still look annoyinglyimpeccable.

"Like wildfire," I reply, keeping my voice even though I'm anything but calm.

“Under our watch, Adrian. How?”

He paces, a lion in a cage, his movements precise as if he’s calculating his steps. “We need to be careful,” he starts, finally facing me. “Let’s not jump to conclusions just yet.”

My frustration simmers. “Not jump? Adrian, this is serious.”

“Of course, it is.” He speaks slowly, deliberately. “But consider this—maybe it’s someone from Aurora or NexGen. Tensions are high with the merger. There could be someone internal within one of the companies who isn’t too thrilled about the way things are moving.”

“Or maybe it’s someone here,” I shoot back, folding my arms. Yes, it’s possible, but I’m not buying what he’s selling—not all of it, anyway. “Someone who knows exactly what they’re doing.”

Adrian nods, conceding the point. “How about this: we keep future documents between us three—just you, me, and Leo. Until we sort this mess.”

“Fair enough,” I say, but my mind is already racing, a dozen strategies unfolding. Whoever did this, I’ll find them. They messed with the wrong lawyer.

“Thanks, Isabella,” he adds, his gaze searching mine. “We’ll handle this together. Try not to let it stress you out too much. Not if it’s at the risk of the baby’s health.”

“Of course,” I reply, though part of me wonders how much “together” will mean in the days ahead.

Just then, the door swings open, and Leo walks in. His eyes flick between me and Adrian, and it’s clear he’s annoyed that we started this little emergency meeting

without him. “Did you see the news?” Leo asks, though the question is laced with sarcasm. He knows we’ve seen it.

Adrian nods, straightening. “Isabella and I agreed to keep all correspondence between the three of us going forward.”

“No secretaries?” Leo asks, his voice tinged with disbelief.

Adrian shakes his head. “It would be best not to involve them. We wouldn’t want them getting blamed if Aurora and NexGen decide to point fingers. If anything, I’ll take sole responsibility if things go south.”

“Adrian—” I start, but Leo cuts me off, turning to Adrian.

“Shouldn’t it be the two of us going down together? We’re partners, after all. Should Isabella even be in the room?” His words are sharp, and it’s hard to miss the implication simmering beneath the surface.

Adrian doesn’t hesitate. “She’s here because she saw the news and came straight to my office. Plus, those documents were supposed to go to her.”

The awkwardness sits heavy in the room, and I shift uncomfortably. “Should we call Aurora and NexGen? Just to stay ahead of things?”

Leo glances at me, then offers, “I’ll make the call.”

Before he can reach for his phone, Adrian’s rings. He checks the caller ID and raises a hand. “It’s NexGen. I’ll handle this.”

As Adrian answers, I watch Leo’s jaw tighten before he turns and storms out, leaving me standing there, feeling a weight settle on my shoulders. Adrian is now absorbed in

reassuring NexGen that the firm is taking every measure to prevent further leaks. His voice is calm and steady, but I can see the strain in his eyes.

I let out a quiet sigh of my own, realizing there's little more I can do here. "I'll see myself out," I mutter, and with that, I slip out of the room, feeling the pressure of the unfolding situation pulling at me from all sides.

I stride back to my office, the whispers of the staff and my colleagues hitting me like a humid breeze. I pretend they're just discussing the weather or last night's game—anything but the elephant in the room that's wearing my name tag. The leaks.

Back in my office, I slide into my chair, trying to muster the cool composure of someone who's not imagining her career teetering on a high wire. The computer screen greets me with its glow, then winks out like it's in on some cruel joke. Flickers once, and boom, darkness.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:45 am

“Really. That’s so sweet,” Isabella adds.

“Love always finds a way to work its magic. I can see it in the way the both of you look at each other.” The father-to-be leans in closer like he’s about to reveal the secret of the Universe. “He looks at you like he’d give you the moon if he could.”

A blush creeps up on Isabella’s cheeks, and she glances down at the linoleum floor before I can catch anymore of her reaction. Is she uncomfortable, or flattered?

“Thank you,” I reply, tugging at the corner of my mouth in what I hope passes for a smile.

Isabella stands beside me, her shoulders squared with joy that doesn’t quite reach her eyes, tinged with an awkwardness that speaks volumes.

The mom-to-be eyes Isabella’s belly. “How far along are you, Isabella? You’re hardly showing.”

“Twelve weeks. I’ve taken to wearing loose clothing. It’s going to become more obvious within the next few weeks, I think.” Isabella places a hand on her stomach, and my lips part when I catch the hint of a baby bump. It’s small, but her belly is sticking out a bit more than usual.

I turn to the couple. “Is this your first?”

“Nope. Third time’s the charm, right?” her husband says, chuckling and patting his wife’s bump.

“Or third time’s for bravery awards,” I quip, earning a light chuckle from the couple. But as they beam at us, I catch the flicker of something in Isabella’s gaze—something like longing or maybe just a pang of fear. I can’t decide which, but either way, it has me questioning if she sees a future with us beyond baby boot camp buddies.

A knot tightens in my chest, one that’s becoming all too familiar. I shove it aside and focus on the here and now—the way Isabella’s hair catches the light, how it makes her green eyes pop. If only she knew I’d give her more than a co-parenting contract; I’d write her a blank check for her heart if she’d let me.

“Any tips for surviving the first year?” Isabella’s question snaps me back to the present.

“Stock up on coffee and concealer,” the mom-to-be says, pointing to the dark circles under her eyes like battle scars from sleepless nights past. “And maybe earplugs, depending on your tolerance for the midnight symphony.”

Isabella lets out an almost inaudible laugh, and I bask in the sound, even though it’s brief and fleeting.

When the conversation lulls and the couple mingles with another group of parents, I seize the moment for a gesture that’s been simmering in my mind.

“Hey, before I forget,” I say, pulling out my phone with a casualness that belies the thumping in my chest. “Let’s add our locations to each other’s phones.”

“Location?” Isabella asks as we make our way out of the building.

“Think of it as a digital umbilical cord,” I quip as we amble toward the parking lot, my phone in hand. The sun is high, casting long shadows on the pavement that seem to reach out like fingers trying to trip us up.

Isabella's stride falters for just a second, her sharp gaze locking onto the screen as I navigate through the settings. She arches an eyebrow, the corners of her lips twitching with uncertainty. "Isn't this a bit ... much?"

"Emergencies come in all flavors," I reply, shrugging as if sharing locations isn't a big deal—though it's about as subtle as a billboard declaring "I'm into you."

"You know, in case you ever need to find me in a crowded bookstore because I got lost in the thrillers section."

It sounds ridiculous even to my ears, but there's a truth behind the humor that I hope she hears.

Her hesitation is brief, almost imperceptible, but it's there. A moment of vulnerability where she lets herself rely on someone else. It's a leap for Isabella King, whose independence is as much a part of her as her relentless ambition. But then she nods, and I can practically hear the "what the hell" she's thinking.

"Okay, Adrian. Just in case of emergencies," she concedes, and there's a smile there, private and small, that tells me it's not the inconvenience she's worried about—it's the connection. And it's getting harder by the day to pretend I don't want that connection to turn into something more tangible.

She passes her phone over to me so I can work my tech magic. When I'm done, I hand her phone back, and the slight curl of her lips feels like a win. I pocket my own device, pushing down the urge to make a bigger deal out of this than it is. Colette would've taken a mile if I'd given her an inch, but with Isabella, every inch feels like anegotiation.

"Your chariot awaits," I say, gesturing grandiosely towards my SUV before going around to open the passenger door for her.

She rolls her eyes, but her smile only grows bigger as she slips inside.

Traffic is a snail-paced monster, but I let the car idle in the afternoon crawl, stealing glances at Isabella as she scrolls through her phone. There's a certain calm that's settled over us since the class ended, something unfamiliar and not entirely uncomfortable.

"Caleb won't stop talking about you, by the way. He keeps asking when he'll see you again. Says he wants to thank you for helping him a while back," I say, breaking the silence. A smile tugs at my lips as I watch her reaction.

Isabella looks up, clearly surprised. "Really?" she asks, her voice tinged with something like wonder.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:45 am

“Yep. Thinks you’re some kind of superhero.” I chuckle, but it’s true. Caleb has taken a shine to her, and I can’t blame him.

Isabella’s face softens, a smile spreading across her features. It’s moments like these when I catch glimpses of the person beneath the no-nonsense lawyer. “I’m flattered,” she says. “He’s a great kid. Maybe we can arrange something.”

My chest tightens at the sincerity in her words. They bounce around the car, too significant to ignore. “How about we pick him up from school together? Maybe grab an early dinner?”

“Sure,” she replies, and I can hear the smile in her voice. It’s a simple yes, but it feels like a win.

As we inch forward in traffic, I find myself fantasizing about dinner—Caleb’s laughter mingling with Isabella’s, the easy conversation, the way they might look sitting together. It’s a dangerous path for my mind to wander down because it leads to places that I’ve told myself are off-limits.

But screw it—I’m secretly thrilled she agreed. Not just because it means more time with her, but because I’m curious to see how Caleb views her outside of his persistent inquiries. Does he see what I see in her fiery determination and hidden compassion?

“Sounds like a plan,” I say, masking my eagerness with casual indifference. Inside, though, I’m all drumming fingers and restless energy, like a kid before Christmas. Only this gift isn’t wrapped in shiny paper—it’s the possibility of a future that looks nothing like I had planned but everything I might want.

The clatter of silverware and the hum of conversation create a lively backdrop as we settle at our table at The Belvedere. Since we picked him up, Caleb's been animatedly telling us about his schoolyard soccer match. It has Isabella laughing, her green eyes crinkling at the corners in genuine amusement. It's infectious, that laugh, and I find myself grinning like an idiot.

"Then, Miss Simmons said I could be captain next time if I keep up the good work!" Caleb exclaims, puffing out his chest with pride.

"Looks like we've got a natural leader on our hands," I say, winking at Isabella.

She nods, her smile lingering on Caleb just as the waiter arrives to take our order.

With menus tucked neatly under his arm, the waiter turns to us. "Good evening," he says, smiling as he hands out the menus. "May I get you started with any drinks or are you ready to order?"

I glance at Isabella and catch the slight smile on her face. "I already know what I want," I tell the waiter, leaning back in my chair.

"Me too," Isabella chimes in, her voice steady, though I can see her eyeing the appetizers list briefly.

Caleb perks up beside me, already bouncing with excitement. "Can I get the gnocchi? It's my favorite!" He beams up at the waiter.

I smirk, nodding. "He's a regular here, so yeah, he'll take the ricotta gnocchi."

The waiter nods, jotting it down, and then turns to me. "And for you, sir?"

“Dry-aged ribeye, medium rare,” I say, almost before he can finish asking. I glance at Isabella, raising an eyebrow. “Let me guess—something light and dainty?”

She rolls her eyes, not taking the bait. “I’ll have the wild mushroom risotto, please. Since you’re paying, right?”

“Good choice,” the waiter says with a smile before walking off.

I chuckle as I turn back to her. “Risotto? Really branching out there, aren’t you? I recall you always preferred lots of protein and low carbs.”

She shrugs, unfazed. “Things change. Not all of us need steak to survive.”

Caleb giggles, and I just shake my head, smiling despite myself. She knows how to keep me on my toes.

The food arrives in about ten minutes, and the waiter sets each plate down with a flourish. The aroma of my ribeye is mouthwatering, and Caleb’s eyes light up as his gnocchi is placed in front of him. Isabella smiles politely at the waiter as her dish is set before her.

We start eating, the conversation flowing naturally—light, easy. Caleb happily digs into his gnocchi, telling us about a new game he’s been playing at recess. Isabella listens, laughing delicately at his enthusiasm, and I catch myself watching her more than I’m paying attention to the story.

“This steak’s perfect,” I say between bites, looking over at Isabella. “How’s the risotto?”

She gives me a quick smile, taking a bite. “Delicious. You should try something other than meat next time. You might surprise yourself.”

I raise an eyebrow, smirking. “Me? Go without meat? I’ll leave the experimenting to you.”

Caleb giggles, his plate half-finished. He’s in high spirits tonight, enjoying the back-and-forth between us, when suddenly, out of nowhere, he drops a bomb neither of us sees coming

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:45 am

“See you there,” comes his swift reply.

I make it home with minutes to spare, my mind racing faster than the city traffic. Pulling into the parking lot, I spot him leaning against his car like some ad from a high-end fashion magazine, except he’s holding two slightly crumpled Target bags instead of a designer briefcase. Adrian Cole, in his tailored pants and crisp shirt, shopping at Target? The image is absurd enough to coax a smile from me.

“Didn’t peg you for a bargain hunter,” I say as I lead him upstairs to my apartment.

“Surprise, surprise, Isabella. I do own clothes that aren’t custom-made.” He grins, revealing nothing but charm and secrets.

“Could’ve fooled me,” I retort, unlocking the door and ushering him inside.

We settle onto the couch, and he hands me a stuffed giraffe, some pastel-colored onesies, and a pack of impossibly tiny socks. I can’t help but laugh. “You shopping in the baby aisle is not a scene I ever pictured.”

“Life’s full of surprises,” he quips back, a twinkle in his eye that suggests he’s enjoying this as much as I’m bewildered by it.

“Clearly.” I nod, still chuckling at the thought.

The laughter fades as he leans closer, the air between us charged with an energy that’s become frighteningly familiar. When his lips find mine, it’s like a switch flips inside me, everything sharp-witted and cautious giving way to something more

primal.

His kiss deepens, and soon, he's hovering over me, the softness of the couch clashing with the hard lines of his body pressed against mine. My breath catches, but then reality intrudes as I remember the miles Amelie and I covered today.

"Wait," I gasp out, placing a hand on his chest. "I feel like I've trekked through the desert. I'm not exactly the poster-woman for pleasure right now."

"Nothing a shower can't fix. Why don't we take one together?"

I nod. "Sounds like an offer I can't refuse."

"Shower it is," Adrian murmurs against my lips, the smile in his voice impossible to miss. His hands roam over my sides, pulling me closer until I'm practically perched on his lap.

"Careful now," I warn, trying to sound stern and failing miserably as another kiss steals my resolve. "I might hold you to that offer."

"Promises, promises," he teases back, lifting me up effortlessly as if I weigh nothing at all. He carries me to the bathroom, where the white tiles and chrome fixtures gleam under the bright lights. He sets me down and I get to work setting our shower up.

"Try not to scald us, okay?" he says with a wink, while I fiddle with the shower dials, aiming for a temperature that won't leave our skin lobster-red.

"Please, you act like women only bathe in volcanic water," I retort, giving him a playful side-eye glance that makes his grin broaden.

"Wouldn't put it past you," he chuckles, watching as steam begins to rise from the

showerhead, misting the air with warmth.

“I think it’s perfect for both of us,” I announce as the sound of cascading water fills the room. But before I can make a move toward the shower, Adrian spins me around with an unexpected eagerness that sends my heart racing.

His hands are gentle but firm as they slip beneath my sweater, lifting the burnt orange cashmere up and over my head. It floats to the floor, forming a soft puddle of fabric that’s quickly forgotten as his mouth finds my neck, planting kisses that send sparks down my spine.

“Adrian ...” I moan, and it sounds like a plea for more. My fingers work at the buttons of his shirt, clumsy with haste, until the garment joins mine on the tile.

“Isabella,” he breathes out, his lips now tracing a path to my collarbone, then lower, till they encircle a nipple, drawing it into the warmth of his mouth.

My response is instinctive—a head thrown back, a silent cry for the ceiling, and hands that tangle in his hair, urging him closer, deeper.

“Keep going,” I whisper, each word punctuated by a caress, a bite, a lick. He obeys, and I wonder how someone who can be so infuriatingly smug at the firm can also be this ... mind-blowingly attentive.

He eases me back onto my feet, his hands steady and sure. My heart hammers against my ribs like it’s trying to break free—as if it could ever outrun the whirlwind of emotions he always seems to stir up in me. With deft fingers, he peels away the last barriers of my trousers and panties, while I work on helping him shed his own constraints.

“Ready to go in?” he asks, his lips tracing a path down my neck, his breath hot

against my skin. I can't help but notice the obvious confirmation of his readiness pressing against my thigh.

"Seems you are," I quip, a smirk playing on my lips.

We step into the shower, and it's like entering another world—a steamy, intimate cocoon where droplets of water cling to our skin like tiny diamonds. He backs me against the cool tiles, the contrast to the warm water sending shivers down my spine that have nothing to do with cold. His mouth is everywhere—neck, chest, breasts—each kiss a spark threatening to ignite something unstoppable within me.

"Turn around," he whispers into my ear, and damn him, his voice alone is enough to make me weak at the knees. I comply with a smile, already intoxicated by the anticipation of what's to come.

Page 47

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:45 am

The moment he slides inside me, a gasp tears from my throat. It's a perfect fit, like the missing piece of a puzzle snapping into place. He starts slow, but each thrust is deeper, more insistent, as if he's reaching for something far beyond the physical connection between us. My fingers dig into the wall, desperate for an anchor.

"God, Adrian ..."

The words are part groan, part plea, and all Isabella.

My moans ring out, unrestrained, filling the space with the raw sound of desire.

"Harder," I pant out, the slick tiles offering no purchase as my breath hitches. He doesn't need to be told twice. He braces himself, his movements becoming a relentless rhythm that drives me to the brink.

"Can't ... hold on ..." he grunts, each word punctuated by the slap of skin on skin.

"Then don't," I gasp out, teetering on the edge of oblivion. "I'm right there with you."

With a few more powerful thrusts, my world fractures into blinding pleasure. A cry rips from my throat, echoing off the shower walls as I shatter, waves upon waves of intense satisfaction rolling through me.

He follows closely behind, a low groan vibrating against my back as he finds his own release. For a suspended moment, we're nothing but tangled limbs and ragged breaths in the humid air.

Eventually, he spins me around, and his lips find mine in a kiss that's somehow both

searing and tender. He pulls back, a mischievous glint in his eyes, and reaches for the shampoo. “Your turn to play hairdresser,” he quips, handing me the bottle.

“Only because you’ve absolutely ruined mine,” I retort, though I can’t hide the affection in my voice. We take turns lathering, rinsing, and teasing—his fingers expertly massaging my scalp, eliciting involuntary moans that have nothing to do with what just happened ... or so I tell myself.

“Conditioner next, or are you going straight for body wash?” he asks, already anticipating my needs.

“Both. And stop acting like you know my routine,” I chide, even though he clearly does by now.

Once we’re squeaky clean and still chuckling at our inside jokes, I give him a playful shove towards the shower door. “Out. I need to shave.”

“Really? After all we’ve done, you think leg hair is where I draw the line?” He raises an eyebrow, clearly amused.

“Out, Adrian,” I insist, unable to suppress a smile. “Or are you volunteering to help with that too?”

“Fine, fine. But only if I get to stay the night,” he bargains, stepping out onto the bathmat.

“Deal,” I say quickly, almost too quickly, because the truth is, I want him to stay more than I care to admit.

The scent of lavender from our earlier shower still lingers as I'm draped over Adrian's chest, his heartbeat steady under my ear—unexpectedly soothing.

“Did you know,” he starts, an idle finger drawing lazy loops on my arm, “that babies can recognize songs they heard in the womb?” It's so random, it almost makes me laugh.

“Are you planning to serenade my belly with legal briefs?” I quip back, unable to help myself.

“Only the most influential cases,” he replies without missing a beat. He's trying to keep it light, but there's a weight to his words as if he's laying foundations for something life-altering.

I shift, feeling the gentle swell of my stomach against the soft cotton of my shirt. It's a tiny mound, barely noticeable, but to me, it's as monumental as Everest. My hand instinctively covers his, pressing it to the proof of our complicated entanglement.

“Isabella,” he breathes out, and the way he says my name feels like a caress. “We can't keep this quiet anymore. You're already in your second trimester.”

“Time flies when you're having fun,” I say dryly, though my heart trips over itself. Fun isn't the word I'd use for the rollercoaster ride of emotions I've been on since that fateful night.

“We need to tell everyone,” he continues. “Our parents ... and Caleb.” His voice is firm, but there's a tremor there—one that speaks of the fear of turning his private life public again after the mess his divorce left in its wake.

I nod, because what else can I do? This isn't just about us anymore. “You're right.” The words are heavy, tasting of change and the unknown.

“Tomorrow,” he says, decisive. “We’ll sit them down and explain everything.”

“Everything,” I echo, half-questioning. Because how do you explain the unexplainable? Us?

“Everything,” he confirms, sealing the promise with a kiss that feels like both an ending and a beginning. And for the first time, I realize that we’re stepping into a future neither of us can fully control.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:45 am

I clear my throat. “Isabella and I ... we agreed to keep our relationship casual.”

Mr. King’s eyebrows furrow. “What exactly does casual mean? That you’re sleeping with my daughter without any plans to commit to her? Are you doing this with other women as well?”

Eyes widening, I shake my head. “No, no, Mr. King. It isn’t anything like that. Your daughter is the only woman I’m seeing.”

“Before I told Adrian about the baby, we agreed that we would see one another while keeping commitment off the table,” Isabella finishes. And even I know it sounds bad. Suddenly, this is starting to feel like a teen pregnancy with the way our parents are grilling us.

“I believe the term the kids use these days is situationship,” Mrs. King informs her husband and my mother.

The word dangles awkwardly between us, like a piñata nobody signed up to hit. I shoot Isabella a look, eyebrows raised. She mutters under her breath, disbelief and amusement mingling on her tongue, “How do you even know what that means?”

I clamp down on a chuckle. Wrong time for laughs, but damn, if humor isn’t a life raft in this sea of tension. “Mr. and Mrs. King, Mom. Isabella and I simply agreed to take things slow and see where it goes.”

That opens the floodgates. Concerns rain down like we just announced we’re starting an alpaca farm. “How will you raise a child if you’re not committed?” Mr. King

probes. “What if things go wrong between you?” Mom chimes in. “This isn’t exactly traditional, you know.” A chorus of tradition and commitment and every expectation under the sun.

Glancing around, I notice Isabella’s mother is conspicuously silent, sitting back with an expression that’s half Mona Lisa, half poker champion. It’s just Mr. King and my own mom lobbing the questions like grenades.

As the interrogation intensifies, Isabella’s resolve starts to crumble. She stands suddenly, a silent white flag raised, and exits stage left to her childhood room.

With her gone, guilt gnaws at me like a dog on a bone. I square my shoulders, facing our parents like I’m about to enter the courtroom. “Listen, I get it, your concerns are valid, but you should know something—I’d marry Isabella in a heartbeat, right here in this dining room, if she said the word. But it’s her call.”

Just then, I hear what I can only assume is Isabella’s door slamming shut upstairs. I wince, then turn back to our parents.

Silence blankets the room, thick enough to suffocate. I press on, “With that being said, my feelings for her are legit. This isn’t a ‘situationship’ to me,” I say, my voice unwavering. “We’re just navigating one day at a time. And I’ll be by her side through it all. It’s a shame all of you can’t do the same.”

I rise and trudge up the stairs, each step heavy with the kind of dread that usually precedes a root canal. At the top, I pause, pressing my palms against the cool wood of Isabella’s childhood bedroom door before pushing it open.

She’s there, a small, tight coil of despair under floral bedspread. Her body rises and falls with silent sobs, and it’s like watching Superman get taken down by a piece of kryptonite.

“You okay?” I ask, knowing the answer is a universe away from yes.

A sharp shake of her head sends waves through her long hair, and the dam breaks. Tears stream down her cheeks, painting paths of vulnerability she’d rather die than show to anyone. “Why can’t they just be supportive? We’re both adults.”

“Isabella,” I start, my voice a sigh of resignation, “parents have this built-in worry chip. It’s like they get a software update the second you’re born—‘Congrats, here’s your bundle of joy, now commence lifelong anxiety.’”

She props herself up on one elbow, swiping at her eyes. “I knew this would happen—the judgement. That was always my biggest fear.”

Instinctively, I wrap an arm around her, pulling her close. She leans into me, a rare moment of surrender. “Listen, they’ll come around. What matters is we’re committed to this tiny human we’ve created. And hey, if nothing else, we’ve managed to unite our parents in confusion and concern. That’s got to count for something, right?”

Her laugh is watery, but it’s there, a testament to the resilience I admire so damn much.

“Ready to make our escape?” I ask, voice low, as if we’re plotting a jailbreak.

She nods, her eyes still red-rimmed but fierce—like she’s ready to take on the world if it means getting out of this awkward family dinner turned interrogation session. I help her up, keeping my arm around her waist longer than necessary. It’s both a comfort and a shield, because right now, she needs both.

We shuffle into the makeshift playroom where Caleb is engrossed in building some sort of Lego fortress that defies the laws of physics and good taste. He looks up, his little brow furrowing when he sees Isabella’s puffy eyes.

“Isabella?” he breathes, and I can hear the concern in his little voice.

I gesture toward the hallway with my chin. “We’re going to cut out early, buddy. Let’s say goodnight and thank Mr. and Mrs. King first.”

The kid doesn’t say a word, just rises and slides his hand into Isabella’s like he’s the protector here. It’s a gesture so full of empathy, it almost makes my chest tight. I ruffle his hair, proud as hell of the little guy.

The descent down the stairs is quiet, too quiet, like someone hit the mute button on a remote. When I announce we’re heading out, there’s an almost palpable collective exhale.

Mrs. King materializes from nowhere, pulling me into an unexpected hug that smells like vanilla and concern. She whispers close, “Take care of her, Adrian. She’s tougher than she looks but softer than she seems.”

“Cross my heart,” I whisper back.

Page 50

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:45 am

As she lets go, her eyes lock with mine—a silent pact between us. It’s a look that says, “I know you’ve got this,” and for a second, I feel like maybe I do.

“Let’s go,” I tell them, scooping up jackets and keys with more finesse than a Vegas card dealer on a hot streak.

We step out into the evening air, the door closing behind us with a click that sounds like a period at the end of one very long, run-on sentence. And just like that, we leave the chaos inside, our own little unit—imperfect, untraditional, but somehow exactly right.

Chapter nineteen

Isabella

Itap away at my keyboard, the clack-clack echoing in the quiet of my office. It’s been a week since the whole “surprise, we’re having a baby” debacle, and my work has become my sanctuary. Mom called, her voice a mix of excitement and worry—standard mom cocktail. Dad, on the other hand, is still processing the idea that his daughter is not walking down the aisle anytime soon—if at all.

As I bury myself further into the legal briefs, trying to ignore the lingering sting from Adrian’s words at my parents’ place, a gentle rap on my door pulls me from my refuge of legalese. The door opens, and there he is—Adrian Cole, in all his infuriatingly handsome glory. He shuts the door with a soft click, trapping us in the silence that follows.

“Hey, what’s going on?” I ask, feigning nonchalance while my heart does a little tap dance.

“Checking in on you,” Adrian replies with that easy charm that should be illegal. “How are you holding up after last week’s baby reveal fiasco?”

“Doing okay,” I lie smoothly. His eyes drop to my stomach, and without asking, his hand follows suit, resting gently on the curve that’s started to form. It’s a bold move for someone who hasn’t quite figured out where we stand, but then again, Adrian’s never been one to shy away from bold moves.

“Got an appointment today,” I say, shifting under his touch. “To find out if it’s team pink or blue.”

“Ah.” Adrian’s brow furrows, and he’s got this look like he’s about to deliver bad news. “I’ve got a meeting I can’t miss. Think you can hold off on finding out the sex? We could look at the results together later.”

“Sure, why not,” I nod, because what’s one more secret between us?

“Great,” he says, smiling that smile that both melts and maddens me.

The moment his gaze snags mine, I know I’m in trouble. There’s that all-too-familiar twinkle of mischief in Adrian’s eyes—like he’s got a secret joke only we’re privy to—and it’s heading straight for me. He closes the distance between us with a few purposeful strides, leaning down for a quick peck that’s supposed to be just that, quick. But like most things with Adrian, it escalates fast, the kiss deepening into something that probably has no place in an office environment—or any professional setting, really.

I giggle, pushing him back slightly, though my hands betray me, pulling him closer

once more. “You do realize this is wildly inappropriate for office hours,” I tease, attempting a stern look that doesn’t quite make it past the flutter in my chest.

“Only if we get caught,” Adrian counters, grinning that damned irresistible grin. He’s unfazed by my accusation, and why wouldn’t he be? Rules have always been more like suggestions to him.

But our playful banter is rudely interrupted when the door swings open so vigorously it practically bounces off the wall, and there stands Kate, witness to our current lapse in judgment.

“Oh my god, I—sorry!” she exclaims, her hand flying up to her mouth as her face turns a shade that would give tomatoes a run for their money. She whips around to leave, but I can’t let her flee—not without damage control.

“Kate, wait!” My voice comes out a little too shrill as I beckon her back. Flustered, cheeks burning hotter than the Sahara at high noon, I try to salvage what’s left of my dignity. “We can explain.”

“Are you two ... a thing?” Her voice is tinged with hope and a hint of scandal, like she’s stumbled onto the set of some torrid soap opera.

Adrian and I exchange a brief glance—a silent conversation in a split second—and I decide to take the plunge. “We are,” I admit, feeling the weight of our secret tighten around me. “But it’s more than that.” I suck in a deep breath, bracing myself for the shockwave. “I’m pregnant—with Adrian’s baby. We’re keeping it under wraps for now, so—”

Kate’s eyes widen, then her entire face lights up. “Oh my god, congratulations!” she says, her excitement bubbling over as she glances between Adrian and me. “I’m so happy for you two! And don’t worry—I won’t say a word to anyone. Your secret’s

safe with me.”

Adrian chuckles softly beside me. Honestly, her enthusiasm is contagious. “Thanks, Kate. We really appreciate it.”

Kate nods, still beaming. “No problem! Seriously, I’m rooting for you guys. You make a great team.” She raises her fist in a playful little fist pump, and I can’t help but smile at how genuine she is. “You’ve got this,” she adds with a wink, then pivots on her heel and strides out of the office, probably cataloging this moment for future water cooler gossip—but at least we can trust her.

As soon as the door clicks shut, I let out a breath I didn’t realize I was holding. “Well, that went better than I expected.”

Adrian leans back against my desk, his smirk telling me he’s just as relieved. “Yeah, no drama. I’d call that a win.”

I smile, the tension in my chest easing a little. “At least we don’t have to worry about her spilling the secret. Hopefully the rest of the firm has similar reactions.”

We exchange a glance, and a quiet laugh escapes me, the weight of the moment feeling just a little lighter now.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:45 am

The envelope with the gender results feels like a brick in my purse as I tap my foot, waiting for Amelie outside the bistro in West Hollywood. Since Adrian's still in his meeting and I have a couple of hours to spare, I arranged a late lunch with Amelie before heading to Adrian's place.

My phone's battery icon flashes red, a pathetic 2% staring back at me—a fitting metaphor for my patience level at this point.

“Come on, Amelie,” I mutter under my breath, flicking my gaze across the street to kill time.

And that's when I see him—Leo. He's all cozy with a slick-suited guy at an outdoor café, looking more like they're plotting a bank heist than enjoying lunch. Curiosity nips at me, replacing my impatience. I debate whether to stroll over and play the “fancy seeing you here” card, but my gut tells me to play it cool. So, discretion wins.

I slip into a seat behind them, my own personal stakeout spot, and angle my ear toward their murmurs. They're speaking in those hushed tones reserved for secrets or surprise parties—and knowing Leo, this isn't about cake and balloons.

“Once we pin the leak on Cole & Sterling, the merger is as good as ours,” Suit Guy whispers, his voice a low hum of conspiracy. “You'll have your partner position guaranteed.”

“Equal partnership?” Leo clarifies, his voice tinged with the kind of caution you'd use picking up a snake.

“Absolutely,” Suit Guy assures. “At our firm, we’re all equal partners.”

My heart kicks against my ribs, a frantic Morse code confirming my suspicions. Leo’s not just behind the leaks; he’s orchestrating a corporate coup. The baby flip-flops inside me, either in agreement or because it’s sick of the cappuccino fumes wafting from the café.

My thumb hovers over Adrian’s name in my contacts, the air around me thick with espresso and intrigue. I shoot off a text, trying to sound as casual as a cucumber in sunglasses: “Leo with you today?”

The reply is immediate just as my phone drops down to 1%, “Nope, he’s meeting with his wife today to work out all the marriage stuff.” Marriage stuff, my left foot.

“Of course,” I mutter under my breath, fingers still itching for proof.

Just as I’m about to go to my voice notes app and hit record, the battery icon blinks its final, pathetic goodbye before the screen plunges into darkness.

“Seriously?” I whisper-yell at the inanimate traitor in my hand.

Defeated tech in pocket, I’m stuck in my seat like gum, the corners of my eyes gluing themselves to Leo and his suit-clad sidekick. Their handshake seals whatever devilish deal they’ve cooked up just as Amelie waltzes in.

“Isa—”

“Shh!” I cut her off with a finger to my lips, my eyes screaming volumes of “sit down and zip it”. She plops beside me, all silent questions and eyebrows that are practically reaching her hairline.

Once Leo and Mr. Suit have vanished like magicians after a trick, Amelie turns to me. “Okay, spill. What’s the 411 on this situation?”

“That’s Leo, Adrian’s partner. He’s been sketchier than a two-dollar bill lately,” I start, keeping my voice low, “said he was patching things up with his wife. But Adrian just confirmed he’s not where he claimed to be, and I just caught him red-handed making deals that smell like trouble.”

“Wow,” she says, her face mirroring the shock waves rippling through me. “And here we thought the most drama we’d have today was finding out if you’re having a mini-you or a mini-Adrian.”

“Life’s full of surprises,” I say, but really, this is one plot twist I could have done without.

Amelie’s nod is slow, thoughtful. “This all makes sense, if you think about it. Adrian wouldn’t suspect a thing if Leo played the ‘troubled marriage’ card,” she muses, her fork idly pushing around the remnants of her salad. “Nobody wants to meddle in someone else’s relationship mess.”

“Exactly,” I agree, tapping my fingers on the table, impatient and restless. The envelope with the gender reveal sits like a hot potato in my purse. I’ll share it with Adrian later, along with this whole twisted saga. “I’m seeing Adrian after work to find out if we’re pink or blue brigade. That’s when I’ll drop the bomb about Leo.”

“Will he believe you, though?” Amelie’s eyes are saucers of concern, scanning my face for doubt. “If he and Leo are partners, he may have a difficult time without tangible proof.”

I shrug, trying to appear more confident than I feel. Adrian didn’t want to believe that someone within the firm would leak those financial documents either. Amelie may

have a point.

“Who knows? But staying silent isn’t my style. Especially not with stakes this high.”

“True. You’ve never been one to zip it and sit pretty.” She smirks, but there’s an edge of admiration there. I’d preen at the compliment if I weren’t so wound up. “And how exactly do you plan to prove all this?” Her voice drops to a conspiratorial whisper.

“Working on that bit.” I glance across the now-empty street where Leo’s duplicity had unfolded. “Gotta catch him with his hand in the cookie jar, don’t I?”

“Or any jar at this point,” she quips, raising her coffee cup as if toasting to my future detective endeavors.

I take a deep breath, letting it out slowly. “Nothing like a side of corporate espionage with your baby news, right?”

“Spices things up, I guess,” she says dryly.

“Right,” I say, standing up with a renewed sense of purpose. “Don’t mean to cut this off early, but I should get going. Got a traitor to catch and a baby daddy to inform. You know, just another day in the life of Isabella King.”

Chapter twenty

Adrian

“Do you think she’ll like them, Dad?” Caleb’s practically vibrating with excitement, clutching the box of cupcakes like it’s the last lifeboat on the Titanic. He picked them out himself, a celebratory treat for the gender reveal that’ll be taking place any minute now.

“Isabella’s got a sweet tooth that could rival Willy Wonka’s,” I assure him, ruffling his hair. “You did good, kiddo.”

The doorbell chimes and Caleb dashes off, leaving me to open the door. There stands Isabella, but she’s not her usual firecracker self. It’s like someone sucked the air out of her, left her standing tense and wound up tighter than a coil. Something’s brewing; I can tell.

“Hey,” I start, but she cuts through it like a hot knife through butter.

“We need to talk,” she says, and damn if those words don’t send a shiver down my spine. They’re never followed by anything good.

“Sure,” I say, keeping my voice even. I gesture toward Caleb, who’s eyeing us with an unease that mirrors the tightness in my chest. “Buddy, why don’t you go finish your math homework. In my office.”

“Okay, Dad,” is all he says before he slinks away.

Isabella and I sit, and I brace for impact. She’s a hurricane in a pencil skirt, and I’m pretty sure we’re heading straight into the eye.

Isabella perches on the edge of the couch, her fingers laced so tight they’re bloodless. I lean back in my armchair, trying to appear calm despite the fact that my stomach is doing flips. Her eyes—usually vibrant—are clouded over with worry.

“I think Leo is the one who leaked the confidential documents,” she says, each word dropping like a lead weight into the silence.

The room spins for a second, and I swear I can hear the distant sound of my trust in people shattering. Leo? He’s practically an institution around here, as much a part of the firm as the gilded scales of justice hanging in the lobby.

“Come again?” My voice sounds foreign, like it belongs to some other guy who hasn’t just had his world rocked.

She repeats herself, slower this time, as if that might help the absurdity of her claim make sense. “I overheard him. A conversation between Leo and another man. They were discussing a plot to sabotage the firm. To hand over the merger ...”

“Stop.” I hold up a hand, the other balling into a fist. “You’re telling me that Leo, the man who practically helped raise me, is now our own Benedict Arnold?”

Her nod is slow, deliberate. “I know how it sounds—”

“Like a conspiracy theory.” I cut her off, not ready to entertain this scenario where Leo goes from mentor to menace. “You have to be mistaken,” I say, trying to keep the frustration from boiling over. I run a hand through my hair, which probably looks like I’ve been caught in a wind tunnel now. “Look, Leo’s got more loyalty in his pinky than most have in their entire body. He was my father’s right-hand man.”

“Adrian,” Isabella starts, but I’m already shaking my head.

“Leo wouldn’t do that. He’s been with me through every high and low tide this firm has seen. Hell, he’s the steadfast ship in the storm.”

“Adrian—” She tries again, but I’m on a roll.

“Always had my back. Even sat through every single one of Caleb’s school plays—and let me tell you, those are a test of endurance.”

“Adrian!” she snaps, finally snatching my runaway train of denial off the tracks. “I saw what I saw. Heard what I heard.”

I study her face, searching for any hint that this is all some elaborate prank. But nope, there’s only the grim set of her jaw, the earnest plea in those usually fiery eyes now dimmed by concern. It’s enough to make me want to believe her, but doing so means admitting to a betrayal that cuts deep. Too deep.

“Isabella,” I say, my voice barely above a whisper, “if you’re wrong about this ... we’re talking decades of trust between Leo and my family here.”

I lean back against the couch, arms crossed as if they could shield me from Isabella’s next volley of words. The cupcakes sit forgotten on the counter, their cheerful sprinkles mocking us.

“I know he’s been loyal to you, but that doesn’t mean he’s not capable of betrayal.”

The air feels thick, like I’m trying to breathe underwater. Her words hit a nerve, and it’s like an electric current zaps straight through me.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:45 am

“Spill it,” she orders, crossing her legs and giving me her full attention.

“I broke things off with Adrian last night.”

Amelie’s jaw drops. “Seriously? Did you tell him about Leo?”

I nod. “He didn’t believe me. We ended up arguing about it. One thing led to another, and it hit me that Adrian doesn’t trust me.”

“What makes you think that’s true?”

I shrug. “If he trusted me, don’t you think he would have taken my word for it?”

“Not necessarily. Leo’s been partner for what, ten years? If this is the first time he’s acted shady, it might be a difficult thing for Adrian to believe at first.”

“It still bothered me, Amelie. The two of us could never work if the trust isn’t there. And I told him that. I asked him if he could ever fully trust me, he said it was complicated.”

“Complicated?” Amelie’s brows furrow.

“I want commitment,” I admit, my voice coming out all creaky and vulnerable, like a door that hasn’t been opened in years. “But I think Adrian only wants to marry me because of the baby.”

“Is that all he said?” Amelie presses, leaning closer, her eyes sharp and searching.

I shrug, a mix of frustration and exhaustion knotting in my chest. “I slammed the door before I could hear more. But come on. Adrian’s as subtle as a sledgehammer. If he had more to say, he would’ve said it.”

“Right,” she says, but I can tell she’s not buying what I’m selling. Maybe because I’m not quite sold on it myself. She leans in, her expression all therapist-mode, like she’s about to drop some profound life truth that’ll make my mascara run even more. “Look, Adrian might be direct in a lot of things, but after his messy divorce, he’s probably just as scared as you are about this.”

“Scared? Adrian?” I scoff at the thought. Mr. Tall-Dark-and-Commanding, scared of anything? Please.

“You need to talk to him, Isabella. Tell him how you feel.” Her voice is gentle, but it carries the weight of an undeniable truth—one I’m not sure I’m ready to face head-on.

My heart thumps against my chest like it’s trying to escape. The idea of baring my soul to Adrian, only for him to confirm my worst fears ... “It could ruin everything,” I whisper, thinking of the fine line we’re already toeing between professional and personal.

“Isabella, you’re on the brink of having it all—a successful career and a family. Don’t let fear make you throw it away. You owe it to yourself to find out how Adrian really feels.”

“But it isn’t part of the plan,” I cling to my last defense, the plan being my meticulously constructed roadmap to life, where love slots in neatly after career milestones, not before.

Amelie smirks, her eyes twinkling with that “I know better” glint.

“Isabella: fuck the plan. What you have with Adrian—it’s a dream, too.”

A dream? More like a high-stakes gamble where the house always wins. But then again, what if—just what if—it’s a dream worth betting on?

I relax my back on the armrest, the fabric of the couch catching slightly against my sweater. The silence in the room feels like it’s pressing against me, filled with Amelie’s unspoken “I-told-you-so’s.” My head is a mess of thoughts, each one more petrifying than the last.

“Okay, so what if I’m wrong?” The words slip out before I can corral them back into the safer confines of my mind. I’m speaking to the potted plant on the windowsill, rather than to Amelie. It’s less intimidating that way. “What if he only wants to stay together because of the baby?”

I flash back to Adrian’s face, trying to decipher any hidden meanings behind his stoic expressions. All I come up with is the mental equivalent of static noise.

Amelie doesn’t miss a beat, her answer slicing through my tangled thoughts. “Then you’ll know.” She says it like it’s the most obvious thing in the world. “But right now, you’re only guessing. You can’t make a decision based on half the truth.”

I let out a huff, not quite a laugh but too bitter to be a sigh. “Half-truths, huh? Feels like I’m living on a diet of those lately.”

There’s a truth there, lurking beneath Amelie’s matter-of-fact tone. The only thing scarier than knowing is not knowing. And boy, do I excel at scaring myself out of my wits.

The buzz of my phone interrupts the silence like an unwelcome guest. I squint at the caller ID—Kate, my secretary—and my gut twists into a knot that sailors would

envy.

“Isabella, you got a minute?” Kate’s voice is all business, but there’s an edge to it, like she’s trying not to let her words trip over each other.

“Depends on the crisis level,” I reply, bracing myself.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:45 am

“High. The IT guy stumbled across some weird files on your computer,” she says, and just like that, I can feel every muscle in my body tense up.

“Weird how? Spyware? Someone’s manifesto on why pineapple does belong on pizza?” I try to keep the mood light, but my heart’s racing like it’s got a finish line to cross.

“Can’t say for sure. Something is just off about them. He thinks you should take a look ASAP.”

“Define ASAP.” I glance at Amelie, who’s raising an eyebrow so high it could get altitude sickness.

“Yesterday,” Kate deadpans, and I know that whatever this is, it’s no laughing matter.

“Alright.” I push off the couch with a sigh. “I’m heading to the office now.”

“See you there.”

I end the call and meet Amelie’s gaze—the same “I told you so” look she reserves for when I ignore her advice and it backfires spectacularly.

“Trouble?” she asks, though from her tone, it’s clear she knows the answer.

“Potentially the kind that makes lawyers break out in hives,” I admit as I snatch up my keys and bag. “Which, considering our usual stress levels, is saying something.”

“Keep me posted?”

“Of course. And hey,” I pause at the door, turning back to her with a half-smile that feels more like a grimace, “thanks for the pep talk. We’ll resume our regularly scheduled existential crisis tomorrow.”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world,” she quips, but there’s a warmth there that’s as reassuring as a shot of bourbon on a cold night.

With one last shared look—a silent exchange full of “be carefuls” and “what the hells”—I step out into the early evening, determined to unravel this latest mystery without losing any part of my already precarious sanity.

Chapter twenty-two

Adrian

I swirl the bourbon in my glass, the ice cubes clinking like a chime of regret. There’s a silence in the house that Caleb’s snores from down the hall barely dent. It’s nearly 9 p.m., and here I am sitting solo in the semi-darkness, letting the shadows play on the walls as the fight with Isabella plays on a loop in my head.

Work issues—that’s how it all kicked off, but damn if it didn’t spiral into something uglier, something personal. She wants the whole package: love, commitment, the white picket fence. And honestly? So do I. But I hesitated, one stupid moment of doubt, and now she thinks I’m not all-in for her or the baby.

We didn’t even get to the gender reveal.

The liquid fire in my glass does little to warm the chill of loneliness creeping up my spine. Then the door swings open, no knock—because who needs courtesy when

you're family—and there stands my mom, eyes wide at my disheveled state.

“Adrian,” she starts, voice laced with that maternal brand of worry, “what happened?”

“Isabella and I had a disagreement,” I mutter, the taste of understatement bitter on my tongue.

“Disagreement?” She arches an eyebrow, folding her arms. “That’s why you’re drinking? Over a disagreement?”

I offer a shrug, the gesture feeble even to me. “It got ... messy. We dove headfirst into some deep stuff. Commitment stuff.”

Her gaze is all laser focus and silent “go on”.

“Let’s just say, she might have the impression that I’m not serious. About her. About our future.” The words hang there between us, heavy and sour.

“Adrian Cole, since when do you let a good thing walk out of your life without a fight?” Her tone suggests she’s ready to ground me, and hell, I’m thirty-six years old.

“Since I turned into a walking cliché, apparently.” I lift the glass, eyeing the amber liquid like it holds some kind of truth serum. “Tonight’s special feature: successful lawyer, single dad, clueless with women.”

“Enough with the self-pity,” she says, voice sharp enough to cut through my bourbon haze. “What are you going to do about it?”

“Right now?” I glance at the clock, considering another drink. “Drown in this rather than my thoughts?”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:45 am

I slump further into the couch, my mother's silhouette framed by the dim light of the living room lamp.

"Have you even called her?" Her voice slices through the fog of self-loathing that's settled around me.

I shake my head, staring at the half-empty glass cradled in my hand. "Why bother?" The words fall flat, defeated before they even hit the air. "She's not going to believe me. She'll think I'm only backtracking because of the baby."

"Adrian," she starts, and there's that tone, the one that used to send me straightening up in my high chair. "When you want something, you go after it. You're straightforward, determined. But now, suddenly, you're a mute?"

"Mom, it's complicated," I try, but she's having none of it.

"Life's complicated. You still have to deal with it." She stops pacing and faces me, her eyes like twin lasers boring into mine. "You need to tell her how you really feel."

"Feelings," I scoff, swirling the drink. "Since when did they ever simplify things?"

"Since always, if they're true," she counters, unflappable as ever.

"Colette happened," I remind her, and the name tastes like stale coffee on my tongue.

"Isabella isn't Colette," she fires back with surgical precision. "That woman was a walking red flag. Hell, she led the parade. Isabella is—"

“Nothing like her,” I admit grudgingly, the truth of it settling in my chest. It feels like a kick to the gut.

“Exactly.” My mother nods, vindicated. “You’ve known Isabella since you were ten. She’s seen you with food poisoning, bad haircuts, and through your ‘experimental’ music phase in college. If that’s not love, I don’t know what is.”

“Experimental phase” is putting it lightly. I wince at the memory of my first and last rave.

“Point is, she’s in love with you, and you’re head over heels for her,” she continues. “Don’t throw that away because you’re scared.”

“Scared?” I echo, trying to inject some bravado into the word.

“Terrified,” she corrects, and damn it, she’s right. Because underneath all the sarcasm and swagger, there’s a part of me that’s absolutely petrified of messing it all up again. “Do you think your father jumped right into marriage with me? He had cold feet about commitment and family. It wasn’t ‘part of his plan.’”

“What changed his mind?”

“Knowing I wouldn’t wait for him. When I showed him that I’d walk away if he kept stringing me along, he finally came to his senses. He admitted that he wanted marriage, too.” She smiles to herself now. “Before he died, he said deciding to start a family with me was the best decision he ever made.”

“Love makes fools of us all,” I say, trying for a philosophical note and failing miserably.

“Then be a fool,” she challenges, her eyes softening just a touch. “But be a fool who

fights for what he wants.”

I look down at the drink in my hand, the liquid courage that suddenly seems more like cowardice. And then at my mother, the epitome of tough love standing before me.

“Go talk to her, Adrian. Before it’s too late.” Her voice is steady, but there’s an undercurrent of urgency that I can’t ignore.

“Alright,” I concede, pushing myself up from the depths of the couch. “I’ll go.”

“Good,” she says, satisfaction coloring her words. “Now put that glass down. You’ve got work to do.”

I place the glass on the table with a clink, the sound of a starting bell for the fight I should’ve been waging from the beginning.

The corners of Isabella’s image in my mind start to sharpen, each line drawing her further away from the ghost of Colette. Isabella, with her relentless logic and that infuriatingly endearing way that she scrunches her nose when she’s deep in thought. Always pushing forward, always honest. Honesty—a concept Colette treated like an optional accessory.

My contemplation is shattered by the jarring buzz of my phone. Sam Velasquez’s name lights up the screen, and confusion sets in. We’re friendly, sure, but our conversations usually don’t go beyond “Your kid just spilled his juice” at parent-teacher conferences.

“Adrian, listen,” Sam cuts in before I can even get a “hey” sideways. His voice has that edge, the kind that says this isn’t about juice stains or bake sales. “I need to tell you somethingveryimportant.”

“What is it, Sam?”

“Leo’s gone rogue,” he says, dropping it like a hammer. “I overheard a conversation between him and my boss earlier today. He’s planning to take down the merger, and he’s doing it with my firm—Lancaster & Rowe.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:45 am

I can almost hear the ice crackling in my abandoned drink, the cold seeping into my veins. Isabella had suspicions—correction, she had facts—and I dismissed them. The guilt piles on, heavy as the last word in an argument you know you’ve lost. “What did you hear?”

“About how they’re set to move to the next phase of their plan—pin the media leak on someone in your firm.”

My stomach does a flip that could compete in the Olympics. “Did you hear who?”

“It was a woman’s name. I think Isabella? I walked away right after that so they wouldn’t catch me. Adrian, my career may be at stake for telling you all this, but it doesn’t feel right to stay quiet. You need to stay a step ahead of them.”

“Already am. Thanks, Sam,” I manage, voice sounding like I’ve gargled gravel. He’s putting his neck on the line for this call. “I owe you one.” Or twenty.

“Stop them, Adrian,” is all he says before hanging up.

“Stop them” sounds like a tall order when your trust has been doing the limbo under betrayal’s stick. But Isabella had been right all along. And I? Well, I’d been spectacularly, monumentally wrong.

It’s time to stop playing defense with my heart as the penalty. Time to step up my game. Because if there’s one thing I know, it’s that Isabella King doesn’t deserve to be collateral damage in a war she tried to warn me about. And if I have to climb through the trenches to make it right, then so be it.

My heart's not just racing; it's sprinting like it's got a finish line to cross. The buzzing in my ears isn't just from the shock of Sam's bombshell—it's pure, unadulterated guilt. I've been a first-class idiot, letting my misplaced trust in Leo blind me to Isabella's sharp instincts. Mom's voice slices through the fog of betrayal, "Adrian, what's wrong?"

I wave her off, fingers fumbling over my phone screen to text Isabella. I need to tell her right away. But there's no answer, no comforting "ding" to signal she's heard me. Tapping into my overly concerned baby daddy skills, I check her location. Bingo—she's at the office. She didn't come into work today, though. Why would she suddenly be there now?

"Mom, can you watch Caleb?" My voice comes out more desperate than I intend. "I need to go see Isabella."

"Of course," she replies, eyes narrowing in concern. Mothers—gotta love their built-in worry radar.

I'm all thumbs as I snatch my jacket, keys jingling a frantic melody as I scoop them up. If I were a superhero, my superpower would be screwing things up at light speed.

"Adrian," Mom calls after me, her tone laced with a mix of caution and care, "be honest with her."

"Plan A," I mutter, because let's face it, Plan B is basically "Adrian screws up again."

The night air slaps me awake as I stride to the car. It's time to put on the charm, unleash the wit, and for once, get real with the one person who's seen through my polished facade. As I peel out of the driveway, I can only hope that Isabella's still willing to listen, and that I can fix the unfixable before it's too late.

Chapter twenty-three

Isabella

I breeze into the office, my heels clicking a steady rhythm against the polished floors. The entire floor is dark and quiet, but there's a knot in the air, one I can't quite untangle. Then I spot them—Kate, Leo, and Jordan the IT guy huddled together like they're plotting to steal the last cookie from the jar. And wouldn't you know it, Jordan gives this tiny nod, so small you'd miss it if you blinked. Great, the IT guy's in on whatever this is.

"Is everything okay? Did you figure out my Roblox login?" I say, more to break their weird little pow-wow than anything else.

They turn, and Leo's face has that look, like he just won the lottery but lost the ticket. "Isabella," he starts, voice dripping with fake concern, "we need to talk." Oh, do we ever.

"About?" I cross my arms over my chest.

"Found something interesting on your computer," he accuses as I edge closer, my heart doing an unwanted salsa in my chest. I shoot a glance at my desk, expecting smoke or fireworks, but nope, my computer sits there, innocent as a cat next to a spilled vase.

"Jordan found documents that prove you've been hiding liabilities related to the merger," Leo continues, throwing his words like daggers.

"Excuse me?" My eyebrows shoot up so high they could apply for orbit. Hiding liabilities? In what universe?

“Seems like sabotage to me,” Kate says, her normally kind demeanor suddenly dissipated.

“What’s the matter, Isabella? Adrian not giving you enough attention? You had to go and leak significant files to the media?” Leo smirks, and oh, it’s a punch straight to the gut.

Betrayal seeps into my veins like poison. Kate, of all people—my confidant, my lunch buddy, the keeper of my biggest secret: Adrian and me. She must’ve spilled it all to Leo, served it up on a silver platter with a side of backstabbing.

“Wow, Leo, did you come up with that zinger all by yourself or did you have to Google ‘how to be a grade-A jerk’?” I manage, even though my voice quavers with anger.

But inside, I’m reeling. Because if they know about Adrian, what else have they dug up? And just how far are they willing to go to take me down?

Chapter twenty-four

Adrian

The last cop opens the door with a nod, his badge catching the glint of the dying fluorescent lights. “Thanks for your cooperation,” he says, and I can’t help but think it’s the nicest way to say “sorry for the chaos that’s been brought into your night.”

Isabella’s beside me, her posture rigid with the kind of strength that’s seen her through more than a few boardroom battles.

“We’ll keep you updated,” the officer informs us. “Have a safe night, you two.”

“Will do,” I reply, giving him a two-finger salute as they head out.

With the police gone, the silence is almost deafening. The tension that’s been clinging to the air like bad cologne starts to fade away, and I find myself exhaling a breath I didn’t know I was holding.

“Come on. I’ll take you home,” I murmur, reaching for Isabella’s hand. It’s not exactly protocol, but then again, neither was having our office turned upside down by detectives on a Friday night. She lets me lead her outside, and I’m hyper-aware of the warmth of her fingers against mine.

I usher her into the passenger seat of my SUV like she’s made of glass, or dynamite, or maybe both. The engine hums to life, and we’re swallowed by the comfortable leather seats and the quiet of the ride. The city lights blur past us, painting streaks of

gold and red in the night.

“Mom, yeah, it’s me,” I say into the car’s AirPlay once we’re halfway to her apartment, both hands on the wheel. “Something came up tonight. I’m going to stay at Isabella’s tonight.”

“Is everything okay?” Mom asks.

Isabella’s gaze is fixed out the window, but I can see the reflection of her eyes flicker to me when I mention staying with her tonight. I keep my voice steady, explaining the debacle with Leo, how his deception was more twisted than a pretzel in a knot-tying contest.

“I can’t believe Leo would do something like that,” Mom finally says, her voice tired, but shaken. “It’s such a relief the both of you made it out alright.”

“Everything’s under control now,” I add, which is rich coming from me, but Mom doesn’t need to know that my pulse is still playing hopscotch.

“Adrian, did things work out between you two?” Her voice crackles through the speaker, concern woven through every syllable. For a second, I hesitate, because “working out” is the understatement of the century for what’s happening with Isabella and me.

Glancing over at her, something clicks—an alignment of desire and opportunity so clear it could be in neon. “Working on that one,” I say, and damn if my heart doesn’t decide to skydive at that moment. There’s a beat of silence from Mom’s end before she gives a soft, knowing chuckle.

“Good,” she says, and I can hear the smile in her voice. “Take care of each other.”

“Always,” I promise, and mean it more than she knows.

As the call ends, I let the silence stretch between us like a bridge, waiting to be crossed.

I park the car with a precision that would make a driving instructor weep with pride, or at least give a begrudging nod. We head upstairs to Isabella’s apartment, and it feels like we’re shedding the weight of the world one step at a time. I reach for her hand as we step into her living room—it just feels right—and the air greets us, lighter than before, like it too is in on our little secret.

“We need to talk,” I murmur, not wanting to break whatever spell we’ve stumbled under. The corners of her mouth twitch upwards, and she nods, her green eyes flickering with anticipation—or maybe that’s fear? Hard to tell.

Her door clicks shut behind us, sealing us away from the rest of existence. No more police inquiries, no more corporate espionage—just Adrian and Isabella, two people who’ve danced around each other so much we could have our own ballet.

“When you asked me the other night if I only wanted to be with you because of the baby ... it isn’t true,” I start. “I know I hesitated, but it wasn’t because I was stalling to spare your feelings. I could only focus on the potential heartbreak I might face if I said yes—if I dived headfirst into a relationship with you. As you know, I don’t exactly have the best track record when it comes to marriage.”

“Adrian, I may have blamed you, but I was scared too,” she admits, her words shaking slightly. I never thought I’d hear Isabella King admit to fear. It’s like spotting a unicorn at a bus stop.

“Scared?” I scoff gently, running a hand through my hair which probably looks like a bird’s nest by now. “You? I find that hard to believe.”

“Believe it,” she shoots back, but there’s warmth there. She’s melting, and I’m the lucky fool holding the hairdryer. “I want to be with you. Through thick and thin.”

“Okay, full disclosure—I was terrified too,” I confess, and her smile spreads, lighting up the room. “But if we’re going to leap into this relationship abyss together, we need to be all in. Cards on the table, skeletons out of the closet, the whole nine yards.”

She steps closer, closing the insignificant gap between us as she says, “No more walls. No more guessing games.” It’s a truce, a white flag, and a starting pistol all rolled into one.

“Deal,” I say, my voice barely above a whisper. I cup her cheek, feeling the softness of her skin against my rough palm, and wonder how I ever thought keeping distance was a good idea.

Then, we’re kissing, and it’s like finding the missing piece to a puzzle you didn’t even know you were putting together. The kiss deepens, unhurried and promising, as if we have all the time in the world to explore what’s unfolding between us.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:45 am

And maybe we do. Because as we stand there, lost in each other, the future stretches out before us—a canvas waiting for us to paint our story, stroke by stroke, kiss by kiss. Clear. Strong. Ours.

Our kisses weave a path, a trail of silent confessions that lead us into Isabella's bedroom. The outside world, with its chaos and questions, shrinks away until it's just the two of us, grappling with gravity as we collapse onto her bed. She lands astride me, a queen taking her throne.

"Let's get this off," I murmur against her lips, my fingers finding the hem of her sweater. It's a delicate dance, peeling away the layers between us, but when her skin meets the cool air, I can't resist tracing the lines of her body, every curve now more pronounced with the life we've created together. Her baby bump, a tender swell beneath my touch, becomes the epicenter of my world.

"I can't wait to meet them," I whisper, awe coloring my voice as much as desire.

"Me neither." Her breath is warm on my cheek, her agreement sending a thrill through me.

"Your turn," she says with that impish glint in her eye, one that sparks a challenge. I rise to meet it, sitting up so she can undo each button on my shirt, her fingers deft and teasing all at once. Freedom comes when the last button slips free, and my shirt falls to the floor, forgotten.

Next comes her bra, and I make quick work of the clasp because, let's be honest, I've had practice. But there's no rush; not tonight. I take my time, savoring the reveal, the

weight of her in my hands. As my mouth finds the peak of her breast, her back arches, and the sound she makes is pure poetry—no words, just raw emotion that I’m learning to read like my favorite book.

“Adrian ...” The way she says my name—it’s half-moan, half-plea, and entirely irresistible.

“Right here, Isabella.” Pulling her closer, I press kisses along her neck, her collarbone, cataloging each sigh and shiver. Her skin is a canvas, and I’m an artist obsessed, painting with the brush of my lips and the pigment of passion.

“God, your body ...” I groan, my hands roaming with reverent curiosity. “It’s like I’ve won the golden ticket to the best kind of wonderland.”

“Keep talking like that, and you’ll never need a lawyer again,” she teases, her wit slicing through the heat between us, grounding me. It’s one of the things I love about her—sharp as a tack, even when she’s unwinding beneath my touch.

“Promise?” My laugh is a low rumble against her throat, and I can feel her smile against my skin.

“Maybe.” She’s coy, playful, the tension of our earlier confessions dissolving in this intimate space.

“Then I’ll have to make sure I’m acquitted on all charges,” I say, as I map the territory of her body once more, committing every detail to memory. Because, despite the frayed edges of our past, this connection we’re forging—it’s uncharted, it’s ours, and I’ll be damned if I don’t explore every inch of it.

I slide her trousers down her legs with a careful urgency that mirrors the rapid beating of my heart.

“Pants off,” she says with a playful smirk, tugging at my belt. I hasten to comply, unbuckling and pushing the material over my hips. The pants join hers on the floor in a haphazard tangle of discarded professionalism.

Her fingers trace the outline of my arousal through my briefs, and it’s all I can do not to lose myself right then and there. “You’re going to be the death of me.”

“Only if you’re lucky,” she quips, and her lust-laden gaze sends electricity skittering across my skin.

I’m spreading her legs now and she’s so damn responsive. Her panties are just a whisper of fabric, barely there, and when I push them aside and feel how wet she is, it’s like every nerve ending in my body ignites.

“Fuck, Adrian. That’s too damn good.” She doesn’t just want my fingers—it’s clear from the way she arches into my touch, seeking more.

“Say no more.” My words are a growl as I shed the last barrier between us. There’s something exhilarating about this, about being completely bare with her, without any pretense or armor.

As I enter her, there’s a gasp—a shared intake of breath that feels like we’re diving into uncharted waters together. Her hands come to rest on my chest, nails pressing lightly into my skin as if she’s anchoring herself to the reality of us, here, now.

“God, Isabella,” I whisper against her lips, my thrusts deliberate, each one a testament to the feelings I’ve tried to keep buried. Every movement is a conversation, our bodies communicating in a language that’s been coded just for us over countless stolen moments and heated glances.

“Adrian,” she cries out again, and I can hear the love there, woven through the

threads of her voice. It's always been there, lingering beneath arguments and banter, waiting for us to acknowledge it.

And as I move within her, feeling the pulse of her around me, understanding dawns in crystalline clarity. This is love—messy and raw and utterly irrefutable. And I wouldn't have it any other way.

I pick up the pace, my hips snapping against hers with a fervor that matches the racing of my heart. Her legs lift, the heels of her feet pressed against my back as I hoist them over my shoulders, allowing me to reach deeper, to claim every inch of her. Her moans fill the air, a melody of unrestrained pleasure that spurs me on.

“Adrian,” she gasps, and it's like a key turning in a lock—a release of something primal within me.

“Isabella,” I grunt, my focus narrowing to the incredible sensation of her around me, the heat, the tightness, the sheer intensity driving us both towards the edge.

We're teetering there, on the brink, when it happens—our climaxes hit us like a tidal wave, overwhelming and all-consuming. I continue to thrust, gentler now, as we ride out the aftershocks together, our breaths mingling in the quiet aftermath.

Spent, I collapse beside her, our sweat-slicked bodies pressing close. Our lips meet in a kiss that's somehow more intimate than what we've just shared, a silent promise sealed in the softness of her mouth.

Page 61

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:45 am

Lying there, panting, I realize there's something we've yet to discover. "Hey," I say, a smirk tugging at my lips despite the seriousness of the moment. "We still don't know if we're having a mini-you or a mini-me."

Her eyebrows lift in mock surprise, as if she could have forgotten such a monumental detail. "Oh, right. I'll go get the results." She rolls out from under the covers, legs wobbly but determined, and disappears into her office.

When she returns, envelope in hand, there's a spark of excitement in her eyes that mirrors my own anticipation. We sit side by side, the bed suddenly feeling like the most significant place on earth.

"Ready?" she asks, her voice a whisper of silk and steel.

"Born ready," I reply, though my heart pounds like it's my first day in court.

She tears open the envelope, and for a heartbeat, time suspends. Then she looks at me, her smile bright enough to rival the sunrise. "A girl."

"Damn." My throat is unexpectedly tight. "I've always wanted a girl."

"Me too," she whispers, leaning into me. Her warmth seeps into my bones as we share a look that says everything.

I pull her closer, marveling at how life can surprise you—in the best possible ways. "I love you, Isabella."

For a moment, she just stares, those green eyes holding oceans of emotion. Then, she breaks into a smile that could outshine the stars. “I love you too, Adrian Cole.” Her words are simple, but they’re everything.

We kiss again, sealing the deal on this crazy, beautiful thing called love. And yeah, it might be messy, but it’s ours, and I wouldn’t trade it for the world.

Chapter twenty-five

Isabella

Six Months Later

The living room buzzes with the same intensity as a high-stakes courtroom, only this time, it’s filled with balloons instead of briefs, and the stakes are baby booties. Adrian’s house—scratch that—our house now, thrums with the sort of energy that could power a small city. Six months ago, Leo was wreaking havoc, thinking he could outsmart us with his fraud and obstruction. Now, he’s got a court date, and we’ve got contracts with names so fancy I need to Google how to pronounce them.

“Isabella, hurry up! This tiny onesie can’t wait any longer!” Amelie calls out, her voice bubbling with excitement. She’s in her element, surrounded by tissue paper and pastel-colored gift bags.

“Patience is a virtue,” I quip, but who am I kidding? I’m about to pop any day now, and my sense of time is as distorted as one of those funhouse mirrors. I shuffle over to the mountain of gifts, each wrapped with more flair than the last.

Caleb bounces on his toes next to me, his eight-year-old enthusiasm barely contained. “You’re going to love what Dad and I picked out,” he says, grinning ear-to-ear like he’s just won the lottery.

“Let’s hope it’s not another ‘World’s Best Lawyer’ mug,” I tease, shooting a playful glance at Adrian. He raises an eyebrow, his trademark smirk telling me I’m probably in for a surprise.

With a flourish, I tear into the first package, revealing a plush elephant that looks like it could double as a body pillow. “For the baby’s first case,” my father chuckles from the couch, his lawyer humor never taking a day off.

“Very funny, Dad. We’ll bill the stuffed animal for its time,” I toss back, winking at him. The room erupts in laughter; apparently, legal jokes are a hit even outside the office.

“Next!” Amelie urges, practically shoving a beautifully wrapped box into my hands.

Adrian’s mother, ever the socialite, has somehow managed to find baby clothes that look runway-ready. I pull out a tiny dress that’s fancier than anything I own.

“For her debut,” she announces with a dramatic flourish.

“Because every infant needs haute couture,” I deadpan, but I can’t help but touch the soft fabric, imagining our little girl wearing it.

“Mommy’s being sarcastic, but she loves it,” Adrian whispers loud enough for everyone to hear, earning a round of knowing chuckles.

“Obviously,” I retort, rolling my eyes but secretly adoring the thoughtfulness behind each gift.

“Okay, okay, this one’s from me and Dad,” Caleb interrupts, thrusting a medium-sized box wrapped in paper featuring cartoon animals wearing glasses.

Inside, I find a baby book titled ‘Contracts for Toddlers: A Negotiator’s First Words.’

“Never too early to start them on the right path,” Adrian says, pride evident in his voice.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:45 am

“Here’s hoping she inherits your charm and not your stubbornness,” I say, but the warmth in my voice betrays my affection. The whole room coos, and my heart swells a size bigger. Who knew a bunch of lawyers and their kin could be such softies?

Each present unwrapped feels like peeling back another layer of this new life we’re building—one that’s less about depositions and more about diapers. And as I sit here among the people I love, in a house that’s become a home, I realize that despite the sarcasm and the chaos, I wouldn’t trade this for the world.

I reach for the next gift, a soft square package with a bow that’s so meticulously curled it has to be Amelie’s handiwork. But as my fingers graze the satin ribbon, a sharp twinge tightens in my abdomen. “Oof,” I murmur under my breath, assuming it’s just another one of those charming pregnancy quirks.

“Everything okay?” Adrian’s dark eyes meet mine from across the sea of pastel-wrapped boxes.

“Probably just the baby practicing her kickboxing,” I quip, forcing a smile.

But then it happens again—a contraction that feels like a vise grip on my insides. This one is different; it’s serious, and an icy realization washes over me—it’s time. My eyes snap up to Adrian, wide with the unspoken truth.

“Isabella?” His voice is low, a mix of concern and something else—recognition.

“Adrian,” I say, barely above a whisper, “I think this little negotiator is ready to discuss terms ... now.”

His reaction is immediate. He's by my side in an instant, his hands steady as he helps me up. His voice slices through the bubble of excitement, calm yet commanding. "Everyone, stay calm. Isabella needs to get to the hospital."

There's a collective gasp, a symphony of scraping chairs as our families rise, but all I can focus on is the rhythmic squeeze of Adrian's hand around mine—firm, reassuring. We're a team, we've always been, even when it meant going head-to-head in the courtroom or, in this case, racing against the clock with a baby on the way.

"Adrian," I manage through gritted teeth as another contraction hits, "if you don't get me to a hospital room with good drugs, our daughter's middle name will be 'Epidural.'"

"Understood, honey," he says, a wry smile flickering across his lips as he ushers me out the door.

The drive is a blur—I'm pretty sure Adrian bends a traffic law or twelve—but his hand never leaves mine, not even as he navigates through traffic like he's maneuvering through a particularly contentious negotiation. He keeps up a steady stream of comfort, "Just breathe, Isabella. Remember the classes. Inhale the strength, exhale the pain."

"Easy for you to say," I huff, trying to follow his advice. With each intense wave, I hold onto his words, and somehow, the man who once drove me up the wall in court now anchors me through the storm.

"Almost there," he says, as the hospital looms ahead, "You're doing great."

The sterile white of the hospital room bleeds into a canvas of pain and garbled voices. Adrian's there, though, his hand clasping mine, anchoring me to something other than the agony that rips through me with every contraction.

“Keep squeezing if it helps,” he murmurs, his thumb tracing circles on the back of my hand. I’m pretty sure I’m close to fracturing his bones, but he takes it like a champ.

“Your encouragement is less motivating than you think,” I snap, half-delirious, as another wave crashes over me. The sensation’s so intense I’d think I was being split in two if not for the absurdity of the thought. Me? Broken by mere physical pain? Not likely.

“Sorry,” he says, his voice a low chuckle that somehow cuts through the haze. “You’re doing ... phenomenally.”

“Phenomenally?” My laugh comes out more like a snort. “My body is staging a mutiny, and you choose now to expand your vocabulary?”

“Always time for self-improvement,” he replies, ever the smart-ass, even in the delivery room.

Hours fade into what feels like seconds and eons simultaneously. Time is just a construct, one that has no place here in this room where my entire universe narrows down to breaths, pushes, and the steadfast presence of Adrian by my side.

Then, the world tilts on its axis. A cry pierces the air—a sound so raw and vital it sweeps away the remnants of my suffering. Our daughter.

“She’s here,” I whisper, exhaustion battling against the tide of elation that swells within me.

“Hey, look at you.” Adrian’s voice cracks, and when I turn to meet his gaze, those deep brown eyes are glistening with unshed tears. His hand leaves mine briefly to brush a damp strand of hair from my forehead. “You did it,” he whispers, his lips grazing my skin in a kiss so tender it might as well have been another promise

exchanged between us.

“Of course, I did.” But my attempt at sass is weak, lost in the wonder of the tiny, wriggling life we’ve created. “We did it.”

I gaze down at our newborn daughter, her face scrunched and red, yet perfect in every way. She’s ours, this little person we made. And she’s absolutely perfect.

A few hours later, the sterile hush of my hospital room is shattered by the stampede of love barreling through the door. Mom and Dad lead the charge, their smiles rivaling the wattage of the fluorescent lights overhead. Behind them, Adrian’s mother, dignified as ever, but with a shimmer in her eyes that’s undeniably grandparent-ish.

“Isabella, sweetheart, she’s just beautiful,” my mother gushes, her hands already reaching for her granddaughter with the practiced ease of someone who’s held more babies than I’ve had hot dinners.

“Looks like she’s got your spirit,” Dad adds, his eyes crinkling as he takes in the tiny bundle in Mom’s arms.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:45 am

Before I can summon a witty retort about genetic inheritance, Caleb bounces into view, practically vibrating with the kind of excitement only an eight-year-old can muster. His dark brown eyes, so much like Adrian's, scan the room until they land on the crib beside me.

"Whoa, she's really small," he says, the awe in his voice making me want to laugh and cry all at once.

"Small but mighty," I reply, winking at him. "Just like her big brother."

Amelie sidles in last, her soft smile warming the cool white walls. She has this way of moving—graceful, almost floating—that makes you think she's walked straight out of some ethereal plane specifically to coo at newborns.

"Hello, little one," Amelie murmurs, tiptoeing closer to peek at the baby. "Welcome to the circus."

I watch as they take turns holding her, each face lighting up with something tender and fierce. It's a look I'm still getting used to—the parental gaze. Suddenly, I'm not just Isabella King, shark-in-heels attorney at law. I'm Isabella, the mom. And it's terrifyingly wonderful.

Caleb's turn comes, and he approaches the baby like it's the Holy Grail. With a seriousness that's both comical and heart-melting, he leans down, his lips barely brushing the top of her fuzzy head as he whispers his solemn vow.

"I'm gonna be the best big brother ever."

“Careful, kiddo,” I say, my voice teasing but my heart full. “She might hold you to that.”

Adrian catches my eye from across the room, a silent conversation passing between us. We’re doing this. Together. And despite the sarcastic quips ready on my tongue, there’s no one else I’d rather have by my side.

“Hey, Isabella,” Caleb calls out, breaking the spell. “Can I teach her to play video games when she’s bigger?”

“Sure thing, but let’s start her on the basics first.” I grin. “Like how to sleep through the night.”

“Deal!” Caleb agrees, oblivious to the chuckle his innocence elicits from the adults in the room.

And suddenly, I’m struck by a surge of pride. My family—this quirky, mismatched group—is perfect in its imperfection. And as I exchange glances with Adrian, filled with quiet happiness and unspoken promises, I know we’ll figure out the rest as we go.

“Best big brother, huh?” Adrian muses aloud, the corner of his mouth lifting. “I like the sound of it.”

“I do too, Dad.”

“Good,” Adrian replies, his hand finding mine, his touch grounding me in the present. “Because this little lady is going to need all the champions she can get.”

“Starting with her parents,” I add, squeezing his hand back. It’s a challenge, a commitment, and a promise, all wrapped up in one. And I wouldn’t have it any other

way.

The last of the well-wishers slips out, and a silence descends, thick and soft as cashmere. Adrian shifts his chair closer to the hospital bed, one hand resting near my own, while his gaze lingers on the tiny bundle swaddled in pale pink. The rise and fall of the baby's chest is a hypnotic dance, the stuff of life's quiet miracles.

"Have you thought of a name?" Adrian's voice is a whisper, as if he's afraid to wake her, to break the spell of serenity cast over the room.

I nod, tracing a finger over the edge of the blanket that cocoons our daughter. "My maternal grandmother's name is Rosalie. I've always liked the name."

A smirk tugs at Adrian's lips. "Rosalie's a beautiful name. You know, my maternal grandmother's name was Hayden."

"Hayden?" I peer down at the baby. "Rosalie Hayden Cole," I say, each syllable thick with the gravity of new beginnings and ancestral ties.

Adrian's smile is a slow sunrise, warming everything it touches. He leans in, his lips finding mine in a kiss that feels like the soft closing of a book we've both loved reading. "It's perfect," he murmurs against my mouth, his breath mingling with mine.

We linger there, lips barely parted, sharing air, sharing this sliver of eternity. The magnitude of the moment presses down, yet it's as gentle as the weight of our daughter's head in the crook of my arm. We've tangoed through minefields, leapt over hurdles, and here we are—still standing, still together.

"You know, we're quite the pair, Mr. Cole."

"Indeed, Ms. King," he replies, that trademark twinkle in his eye not dimmed by

fatigue or the fluorescent lights overhead. “But let’s face it, we’ve always been exceptional at ... collaboration.”

“Collaboration,” I repeat, arching an eyebrow. “Is that what we’re calling it?”

“Seems fitting,” Adrian says, his thumb brushing my knuckle in a gesture so tender it might as well be a vow.

In this quiet, perfect pocket of time, the hum of the hospital fades, the world narrows down to just us three. And I think, maybe for the first time, I can see the outline of our future, clear and bright as daybreak.

Chapter twenty-six

Adrian

2Years Later

I watch Caleb chase Rosalie through the sprinklers, his laughter a soundtrack to our life now. It's a symphony of joy that drowns out the echoes of the everyday stresses that work brings. The Hollywood Hills hold us in their ritzy embrace, our two-story home a massive upgrade from both my Beverly Hills abode with Caleb and Isabella's two-bedroom apartment.

As Isabella stands beside me, her green eyes reflecting the golden sunset, I can't help but feel like the luckiest man alive. I take one look at her in a shade of crimson red lipstick and a form-fitting black dress that makes her eyes pop.

I turn to her. "Hey, you look good."

She tries to hide it, but I catch her blushing. "It's our anniversary. Figured I shouldn't show up in a pencil skirt." Her eyes sweep over me. "You look nice yourself."

I tug at my black dress shirt and matching pants. "Figured it was a step up from my work attire."

We both gaze back out at the kids. "Look at them go," Isabella says, her voice warm with maternal pride. "Caleb's going to sleep well tonight."

“Let’s hope so,” I reply, the corner of my mouth lifting in a half-smile. “Especially since your mom is on duty.”

Isabella nudges me playfully. “Be nice. She’s a godsend.”

“True. Without her, we wouldn’t be stepping out for our anniversary. She believed in us more than anyone in the beginning.” I scoop Rosalie into my arms as she barrels toward us, her giggles infectious. “Okay, speed demon. Time to power down. Take a bath and be good for Grandma. Your mom and I will see you tomorrow, okay?”

“Night-night, Daddy!” She wraps her little arms around my neck, planting a sloppy kiss on my cheek.

“Night-night, angel.” I set her back on her feet, and she scampers off to where my mother has already wrangled Caleb for his nightly routine.

“Two years,” I muse aloud, taking Isabella’s hand in mine.

“I know. Seems like just yesterday you were schooling me on courtroom etiquette,” she teases. “And you were charming every jury with your smug little grin,” she retorts, though her eyes dance with mirth.

“Hey, it’s not smug. It’s ... endearingly confident.”

“Sure, let’s go with that,” she said with a laugh, linking her arm through mine as we head toward the car.

The drive down the winding roads feels shorter than usual, anticipation thrumming between us. I catch Isabella casting curious glances my way, probably wondering why I’m grinning like a Cheshire cat with a secret.

“Adrian Cole, what are you up to?” Her suspicion is as clear as the L.A. sky on a smog-free day.

“Who, me? Up to something?” I feign innocence, which only makes her more suspicious. Classic Isabella, always reading me like the fine print on a contract.

“Alright, Mr. Enigmatic. Keep your secrets,” she huffs, though the twinkle in her eye tells me she loves the mystery.

When we arrive at Lumiere West, one of Isabella’s favorite restaurants, the engine purrs to a halt, and I kill the headlights. We sit for a moment in silence, bathed in the soft hue of streetlights. Isabella’s gaze is fixed on the restaurant, her brows knitting together in puzzlement.

“Adrian, it looks closed,” she murmurs, a hint of concern lacing her voice.

“Does it?” I reply nonchalantly, hiding a smirk as I pop open the door and step out into the cool evening air.

“Wait here.” I circle the car with a swagger I reserve for courtroom victories and moments like these. Her door opens with a gentle creak, and I extend my hand, an invitation to step into the unknown.

“Adrian ...” She hesitates, hand hovering over mine, her eyes searching the dimly lit entrance for signs of life.

“Trust me,” I say, a promise wrapped in two words.

With a sigh that tells me she’s surrendering to the whimsy of the night, her fingers slip into mine. The click of her heels against the pavement is a steady drumbeat as we approach the doors.

“Surprise,” I whisper, pushing them open to reveal an oasis of candlelight flickering across an otherwise shadowed room.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 9:45 am

Her gasp is the sweetest melody, the kind that sings of shock and awe. “You rented out the whole place?” Disbelief paints every syllable, yet there’s a dance in her words, light and airy.

“Only the best for you,” I say, guiding her inside. My heart thrums against my ribs—a drum corps in fullswing—anticipating what’s yet to come.

We slide into our seats, the world outside melting away until it’s just us and the wine that’s already poured into our glasses.

“Happy anniversary, Isabella,” I toast, lifting my glass. Her cheeks flush a shade that rivals the Pinot Noir, and I realize, not for the first time, how this fierce, formidable woman has become my everything.

“Happy anniversary,” she echoes, her green eyes alight with a fire that could outshine the stars.

The waiter arrives to take our order. I gesture for Isabella to go first. I can barely hear her place her order when my palms suddenly begin sweating. Who knew a grown man could be brought to his knees by a tiny velvet box burning a hole in his pocket?

“Adrian? You okay? You’ve got that look,” Isabella says, tilting her head. That’s her lawyer mode kicking in—always reading people like her favorite legal briefs.

“Never better,” I manage, though my heart’s doing the samba in my chest. I turn to the waiter. “You can go now. I’m ready.”

Isabella furrows her brows. “What do you mean?”

I push back my chair, stand up, and there’s this hush, like even the candles are holding their breath.

“Isabella,” I start, voice steady, but damn if there isn’t a tremor of emotion betraying me. I drop to one knee, the plush carpet soft beneath me. Shock is written all over Isabella’s face in bold script.

I fish out the ring from my pocket—it glints like a new promise—and I swear I can hear her heartbeat sync with mine. “Isabella King,” I say, each word laced with every ounce of love I feel for her. “I never thought I could have this. You’ve given me more than I ever dreamed—love, family, everything. Will you marry me?”

Her green eyes swell with tears, those windows to a soul I’ve come to know better than my own case files. She nods, her voice quivering like she’s cross-examining her own emotions. “Yes, of course, yes.”

And then we’re in each other’s arms, the kind of embrace that speaks volumes more than any verbose argument she’s ever crafted in court. Our lips meet, and it’s like signing the deal of a lifetime—the merger of two stubborn hearts that have finally figured it out.

We break our kiss, and I’m half-expecting the restaurant staff to applaud—maybe throw in a free dessert for the spectacle. But instead, shadows shift at the edge of my vision, and suddenly there’s more than just candlelight flickering in Isabella’s tear-glazed eyes.

“Surprise!” The word bursts through the quiet like a champagne cork, and out from their clever hiding spots step our parents, wide grins and all, followed by Caleb with his gap-toothed smile, Rosalie toddling after him with hands raised high, and Amelie, her laughter mingling with the clapping.

“Did you guys know about this?” Isabella’s voice crackles with incredulity, her eyes darting between the faces of our little impromptu fan club.

“Every single detail,” my mom beams, pride spilling from her words as if she’d masterminded the whole evening herself. Maybe she did; I’ll never tell.

The rest of the night is a blur of embraces, laughter that bounces off the walls, and enough pictures to crash a phone’s memory. We’re a whirlwind of celebration, and even Amelie, who’s usually more reserved than a library on Christmas Day, is throwing around high-fives like they’re going out of style.

Hours later, the restaurant fades into the rearview mirror, the kids are out cold in the backseat—Caleb’s head lolling against Rosalie’s car seat in a symphony of snores—and it’s just me and Isabella. Our hands find each other, fingers intertwining like they’re trying to write love letters in braille.

“Hey,” she says softly, a smile playing on her lips, the kind that’s worth more than any verdict I’ve ever won on the job.

“Hey yourself,” I reply, squeezing her hand.

In the quiet of the car, with the LA skyline winking at us from afar, we don’t need words to spell out the chapter ahead. We’ve got something better than pages and ink—we’ve got us. And as we pull into the driveway of our mansion—the one that’s more home than any house I’ve ever known—I can’t help but think that life’s funny like that. One minute you’re objecting to late-night briefs and the next, you’re planning a life with the woman who wrote them.

“Best anniversary ever?” I venture, cutting the engine.

“Objection,” Isabella says with a smirk, echoing our earlier banter, “I think every year’s going to top this one.”

“Motion granted,” I chuckle, because, with Isabella King, every win feels like the first, and I’m just getting started on loving her forever.

The End

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