



The Greek Billionaire's Rejected Secretary

Author: *Marian Tee*

Category: Romance, Billionaire Romance

Description: She's forty, single by choice, and the secretary he should've never let go.

Until one kiss ruins everything.

Shayla Tolentino has spent nine years surviving her Greek billionaire boss—his temper, his impossible demands, and his devastating silver gaze. With her sensible ponytail, no-nonsense glasses, and fake wedding ring, Shayla has made herself unshakably untouchable. She's not shy. Just...cautious. And she's always known better than to cross the line.

Until one forbidden kiss makes it impossible not to.

Cynical tycoon Adriano Kontides doesn't believe in love. Every woman in his life has always wanted something from him. Except Shayla. She's the only one who's ever challenged and resisted him. The only one capable of driving him mad with jealousy...until she asked for his heart.

He rejected her. She walked away. And now?

Adriano is the one left burning.

Note: This is a fast-paced, redemptive, and emotionally charged later-in-life romance. Perfect for readers craving a one-sitting escape.

Total Pages (Source): 49

Page 1

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:44 am

Chapter One

ADRIANO

ISTRIDE OUT OF THE courthouse, already loosening my tie. Another win. The Brinkman case was supposed to be impossible—corporate fraud on a scale that made the financial papers salivate for months. But impossible just means I haven't solved it yet.

"Mr. Kontides!"

Reporters swarm, digital recorders thrust toward my face like weapons. I force myself to crack my smile, remembering my secretary's warning not to come off as too ruthless...even if it's the truth.

"The Brinkman verdict speaks for itself. Justice was served." I brush past them, scanning the corridor for the one face I need to see.

There she is.

Shayla.

Standing against the wall, tablet in hand, already typing what's undoubtedly a press release highlighting our winning arguments, many of which are the product of hours' worth of brainstorming between the two of us. Not that anyone knows. Nine years as

my executive assistant, and she still refuses to take even an ounce of credit.

I'm about to head over when I see a slick-haired bail bondsman approach her, and my stride quickens. I recognize him from the holding cells downstairs. And the way I see it, he deserves to be thrown into one of them, with how he's acting now.

The bastard has braced his hands against the wall by Shayla's head, caging her in. "I'm just saying, a woman like you—"

Just hearing him leer at my secretary like that makes me see red.

"—DESERVES A NIGHT OUT. Let me take you somewhere nice."

Shayla doesn't look up from her screen. "Thank you, but no."

"Tomorrow, then."

"I'm afraid that's still not—"

"Shayla?"

The sound of my voice cuts her off, and the bondsman immediately backs away. He turns to me with a whitened expression. I raise a brow, and the bastard is smart enough to understand what I'm asking.

He scuttles off, tail tucked between his legs.

Good.

But I also need to make a mental note and speak to his superior. If they want to remain in my good graces, then he should know better than to bother my secretary.

I turn to Shayla, but find myself staring at empty air. She's already heading back to my limo.

Typical.

Shayla starts talking as I slide into the seat opposite her.

"I've already emailed a draft for the press release."

"Shouldn't you be congratulating me for winning the case?"

"I would love to," Shayla answers piously, "if only it didn't mean shirking my responsibility."

"What responsibility?"

Page 2

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:44 am

"Thou shalt protect your billionaire employer from gaining an even bigger ego than he already has...at all costs."

"I must've missed reading that in the rule book. Then again, shouldn't I be the one making up the rules—"

Shayla cuts me off, saying, "I almost forgot. You have four interviews scheduled tomorrow."

"I'm certain you mean two," I drawl.

My secretary looks at me in concern. "Shall I also schedule an appointment with Dr. Timms? Memory problems are to be expected in your advanced age."

"I'm only five years older than you."

Shayla pretends not to hear this and busies herself with her tablet.

This is typical of her, too, and if she weren't so damn good as a secretary, I would've fired her a long time ago.

In the back of my mind, I have a list of about a thousand things I need to attend to. But instead I find myself studying my secretary for some inexplicable reason. Ponytail and the granny glasses. Crisp white shirt under a shapeless pantsuit. And shoes so clunky they could be a murder weapon for someone with perfect aim.

Shayla glances up. "Do you need anything, Mr. Kontides?"

"I'm curious," I murmur. "Would you have gone out with that bondsman if I hadn't shown up?"

"No."

"Why?"

She adjusts her glasses. "Because I don't date."

"Why?"

She frowns. "Why do you ask?"

"Why don't you want to answer me?"

Shayla crosses her arms over her chest. "Are you feeling alright, Mr. Kontides?"

"Don't call me that."

"That being...yourname?"

"You've worked for me for nine years. Call me Adriano."

"That would be inappropriate."

"Says who?"

"Says standard professional protocol." The limo cruises to a stop in front of our office, and she's out in a flash.

Typical.

But for some reason, I feel irritated—agitated even—as I follow her through the lobby. Shayla is the only woman in my life who treats me like this. The only woman who dares answer me back. The only one who doesn't care to drop anything to accommodate my whims.

It's infuriating.

And infuriatingly refreshing.

Just like the way she now has me running, just to make it to the elevator—

"Seriously?"

Page 3

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:44 am

—since my secretary is the type to wait patiently for her boss and keep the doors open.

Not.

I glare down at her, and Shayla's expression once again turns angelic. "Cardio is always good for one's health, Mr. Kontides. Especially at your age."

How many times do I have to remind her—

Shayla adjusts her hold on her tablet, and I'm distracted by the cheap gold band on her finger catching light.

And annoyed.

"Why are you still wearing that?" I demand.

Shayla blinks in surprise. "What's wrong with what I'm wearing?"

"I'm not talking about your clothes," I say impatiently. "Why do you insist on wearing your ring when you're already divorced?"

"Oh. That." And then she shrugs and leaves it at that.

"You should get over that scum."

Shayla peers up at me. "I'm starting to feel concerned that you're concerned. Should I

call for a doctor?"

"Shut up."

"And there's the boss I know—"

"But not love?"

The word hangs between us, strangely charged.

But my secretary doesn't even blink. "Love isn't real."

I grunt. I think the same. But it doesn't feel right that my secretary does, too.

Chapter Two

Page 4

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:44 am

SHAYLA

ISTAB AT MY SALADlike it personally offended me. The lunch crowd at Meyer's Deli ebbs and flows around my corner table, but I barely notice them. I'm too caught up replaying everything my boss has said this morning.

You should stop wearing that.

Thank you, but no.

You should get over that scum.

I twist the cheap gold band on my left ring finger. Nine years working for Adriano Kontides, and he's never shown this much interest in my personal life. Commenting on my fake wedding ring. Getting irritated about the bondsman at the courthouse.

It's like he suddenly noticed I exist beyond the borders of his calendar.

I spear a cherry tomato with unnecessary force. What would he say if he knew the truth? That there was never a husband. Never a divorce. Just a twenty-dollar ring from a pawn shop and a carefully crafted lie to keep men—and complications—at a distance.

The fork hovers halfway to my mouth. Would he fire me? Laugh at me? Or worse, look at me with that intensity that makes my stomach flip...

My phone vibrates against the table, saving me from that dangerous line of thought. An unknown number lights up the screen.

"Shayla Tolentino speaking."

"Shayla?" A woman's voice, warm and hesitant. "It's Hope. Hope Tiangco? Well, Soukoulis now."

I nearly drop my fork. "Hope? From St. Agnes Elementary?"

"Oh, thank goodness." A relieved laugh plays out from the other end. "I was worried you wouldn't remember me."

"Impossible." I mean this, too. Hope was the only one who shared her lunch with me when my mother forgot—again—to pack mine. The only one who didn't whisper about my secondhand uniform.

"How on earth did you find me?"

"LinkedIn," she admits. "I know this is completely out of the blue, but my husband and I are in New York for business, and I remembered you lived here. Would you want to meet up? Maybe dinner tonight?"

"Tonight?" I glance at my watch. Adriano has a dinner with Senator Holbrook. I've already prepped the talking points. Nothing requires my presence. "I'd love that."

"Great! How about Ryuat seven? It's this little Japanese place in Tribeca my husband loves."

"Perfect." I pause. "It's really good to hear from you, Hope."

"You too, Shayla. Can't wait to catch up!"

I end the call smiling. A genuine smile—not the professional mask I wear at the office. When was the last time I had dinner with a friend? Not a networking event. Not a client meeting. Just... people.

I can't remember.

My phone pings with a reminder. Fifteen minutes until the 2:00 PM meeting. I need to get back.

The elevator is packed when I return to Kontides & Partners. I squeeze in, clutching my portfolio against my chest as the doors close. Two junior associates from the tax department huddle near the front, whispering.

"Did you see him in court today?" The blonde one's voice carries despite her attempt at discretion. "I swear, Adriano Kontides in a suit should be illegal."

Her friend giggles. "I'd let him object to me anytime."

"I heard Melissa from Accounting tried to ask him out at the holiday party."

"And?"

Page 5

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:44 am

"Shot down before she could finish her sentence."

"God, what I wouldn't give for just one night with him, though. Those hands. That mouth."

"That accent when he gets angry."

I grip my portfolio tighter while fighting to keep my face expressionless. They're talking about my boss like he's a piece of meat. Like he doesn't have more Yale Law Review citations than anyone in the firm's history. Like he hasn't argued before the Supreme Court twice. Like he isn't the most brilliant legal mind I've ever—

Whoa, self!

What am I doing?

Why am I so passionate about defending my boss?

Sure, he pays the bills, but this is also the same man who makes all our interns cry, to the point that nearly every law school on the East Coast warns their students about us. Apply at your own peril, stuff like that.

Whatever.

If they think he's such a catch, then go ahead.

Catch at your own peril, you poor unfortunate souls.

They just don't know what they're asking for. A night with Adriano would be like a night with a hurricane—thrilling until it destroys you.

Not that I've thought about it.

"I heard he doesn't date anyone from the firm," the blonde sighs.

"I'd change jobs in a heartbeat for a shot at that."

I fight the urge to roll my eyes. They could do better. Anyone could do better than a man who considers a fifteen-hour workday as "leaving early".

The elevator stops at our floor, and I step out, relieved to escape the gossip. As I walk toward the conference room, my phone buzzes again. A text from Adriano.

Where's the Jensen file?

I type back: Third drawer of your filing cabinet. Where it's been for a week.

His response comes immediately: Head over to HR and tell them you need a refresher course on proper workplace etiquette.

Me: I'm not sure if they can fit me in. They're still busy playing counselor to all the interns you've traumatized.

I tuck the phone away, lips twitching. There's a specific rhythm to our exchanges: sharp but not mean, challenging but not disrespectful, and it's taken years to perfect.

Nine years to be exact, not that I'm counting.

Well, okay, I am counting.

And every time I remember just how long I've been working for Adriano Kontides, it's just...

Wow.

Even I'm not sure how I've been able to survive this long without cracking. Nine years of having to butt heads with him every darn day. Nine years of having to grit my teeth every time I make him coffee because he knows how much I hate doing it, but he's also offered me a bonus every time I do, and it's an offer I just can't afford to refuse.

Grrr.

It annoys me to no end just thinking—

Seriously?

Page 6

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:44 am

It's another text from my boss.

Need you back. Holbrook changed the dinner venue.

I sigh. So much for my reunion with Hope. I start typing an apology, but pause.

No.

For once, Adriano's schedule adjustments won't dictate mine. He can handle a venue change without me holding his hand. I have dinner plans with an old friend, and I'm keeping them.

I text back:Already confirmed with the new venue. Details in your email. You're all set.

Before I can think better of it, I add:I have plans tonight. Unavailable after 6.

Three dots appear immediately. Disappear. Appear again.

Finally:Fine.

Unease skitters down my spine. The Adriano Kontides I know would've blown up a fuse by now and said something scathing. So this one-word reply that's practically saintly coming from him?

I don't like it.

At all.

Please don't tell me he has something up his sleeve.

I mean, why should he?

Right?

Chapter Three

ADRIANO

FINE.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:44 am

I stare at my phone, disgusted with myself. Since when do I accept a flat "unavailable" from my secretary?

Since never.

I swipe to my calendar and glare at tonight's dinner with Senator Holbrook. The old man has been rambling about judicial nominations for months. Nothing that can't wait.

I send a quick text to his chief of staff.

Emergency case development. Need to reschedule. My apologies.

Then I call my driver.

"I won't need you tonight, Milos."

"Everything alright, Mr. Kontides?"

"Business emergency. I'll drive myself."

I hang up before he can ask questions. Milos has been working for me for twelve years, and one thing he does a lot is play chess with my secretary during their free time. Traitors, the lot of them. How did I end up paying so much money just to be betrayed like this?

But to hell with that.

Right now, it's all about figuring out where Shayla's going, and if for one moment she actually thinks I'd let her spend the evening with that courthouse slimeball—

My teeth start grinding against each other, and I find myself cracking my knuckles at the mere thought.

It's just concern, I tell myself.

Professional concern.

I've invested nine years in training the perfect executive assistant. I'm simply ensuring she doesn't ruin herself with some third-rate lawyer who smells like cheap aftershave and desperation.

I wait at my desk, pretending to review briefs while actually watching the clock. At 6:05, I hear the click of her heels passing my door. No goodbye. No checking if I need anything before she leaves.

Not typical of her, and the thought has my blood boiling.

Could she really be going out with that ass? And this early on he's proving himself to be a bad influence on my secretary? Has that sleazeball somehow convinced my Shayla that he's more important than me, her rightfully concerned boss?

Bastard.

I give her ten minutes, then follow. My Maserati purrs to life in the parking garage, and I keep a careful distance as her cab turns onto Sixth Avenue.

It eventually stops in Tribeca, and I make sure to park half a block away. Shayla steps out, and what the—

How did she change in that cab?

The ponytail, the glasses, and even the shapeless pantsuit.

It's all gone.

And in their place is a strapless dress that hugs her every curve—curves that my sensible secretary of nine years should have no business of possessing.

Dammit.

A muscle starts ticking in my jaw as I follow her into an upscale Japanese restaurant. I force myself to hold back and wait until she's past the inner set of doors before letting the guy at reception see me.

His face registers immediate recognition, but he's trained well enough not to express any surprise even though he's clearly aware that the woman who entered before me is my secretary.

"Good evening, Mr. Kontides. Table for how many?"

Page 8

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:44 am

"Just me, and I'd like a good spot where I can likely catch up with old acquaintances."

"Of course, Mr. Kontides."

My conscience starts to nag me as I follow behind him. I know I'm crossing a line here. I'm her boss, not her keeper.

But...I'm just concerned.

It's not like I'm going to get myself involved or anything.

I just want to make sure she's alright, that's all.

The guy at reception gives me a table right in front of a private room.

Ah.

I see.

They want privacy.

While I...want to murder someone.

I give it an hour, nursing a whiskey at the bar, watching the hallway.

But no one comes out.

What the hell's happening in there?

Is she already being smooth-talked into saying yes to something she shouldn't? Is she being seduced? Or having her drink spiked?

Enough of this, dammit.

I'm going in there.

Just to make sure she's safe and not being taken advantage of.

It's nearly eight o'clock. If it's an innocent dinner, I can apologize for the interruption and leave.

But if it's not?

My muscles tense as I head toward the private room.

I hear laughter. And another female voice?

Relief floods my entire being.

So it is an innocent dinner, after all.

Of course it is.

But you can't be too sure, you know?

I turn away, deciding it's high time I leave—

"Greek billionaires think they own everything. Including people."

But then I turn back just as swiftly the moment I hear Shayla's voice and what she has to say—

"He's the absolute worst!"

Page 9

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:44 am

—about me.

SHAYLA

Dinner with Hope and her husband Colin has me feeling free and relaxed like I can't ever remember being. So much so that I end up having one too many sips of sake, and the next thing I know—

"Greek billionaires think they own everything," I declare, "including people."

—saying out loud the things that I only think about but know better than to express.

Hope leans forward, amusement dancing in her eyes. "This sounds specific. Are we talking about a certain Greek billionaire lawyer?"

"The one and only."

"And yet you've stayed nine years," Colin observes.

"For the salary."

Colin's gaze turns thoughtful. "Hope has told me a lot about you, and so you saying that you've stayed all the years for the money? It doesn't add up."

"It does," I insist even while taking another sip. "I'd have left if I could afford to. He's just so...mean!"

Hope laughs. "If that's all you can complain about him, then I'll have to take Colin's side—"

The sake hits me suddenly, and my head feels light, my tongue too loose. Did I really just vent about Adriano out loud? And in public?

"He's going to kill me."

"For calling him mean?"

"For lying to him about being married," I say with a gulp.

Hope nearly chokes. "Did you just say—"

"And he thinks I'm divorced, too, and...and...and I think I'm going to be sick!"

I rise unsteadily to my feet. Turn around to slide the door open. Only to have my worst nightmare come true as I find myself face to face with Adriano Kontides' gorgeous and un-gorgeously furious face.

Oh no.

Because I just can't control it.

I want to, but I can't.

And the next thing I know, I'm throwing up on my boss' ten-thousand-dollar suit.

I am so fired.

Chapter Four

ADRIANO

IPACE THE LENGTH OFthe law library, my Italian leather shoes soundless against the plush carpet. The stench of bile and sake has been scrubbed from my skin, my ten-thousand-dollar suit sent for specialized cleaning.

But the stink of betrayal?

Oh, you bet it's still there.

For nine years—nine years, dammit—Shayla Tolentino has let me believe she was divorced.

Let me offer sympathies, let me think I knew her.

She lied to me.

I hear the door open, and there she stands: chin up, shoulders back, like she didn't just vomit all over me last night, like she didn't just demolish nine years of trust with one drunken confession.

"In my office. NOW."

"This is already part of your office, Mr. Kontides."

What the—

She really thinks she still has a right to be smart with me?

After last night?

"Try giving me that kind of attitude again," I bite out, "and I'll fire you on the spot."

But of course, this doesn't scare her one bit.

Why did I even think that kind of threat would work on New York's most-sought-after legal secretary?

"Actually—"

"Don't bother." Because I actually don't care to hear her make excuses. "What I want to know right now is how."

She stares at me blankly. "How...what?"

Unbelievable.

"How dare you lie to me about your divorce?" It takes everything in me not to raise my voice. And start shaking some sense into her. How the hell can she just stand there and not know that it's no way acceptable in any industry for a secretary to lie to her boss? And especially someone as perfect as me?

"Actually—I didn't lie." She says it so, so calmly, that it makes me want to just as calmly wrap my fingers around her neck...before slowly giving it a squeeze. "I simply

smiled and let you draw your own conclusions."

"Fornineyears?" I'm this close, dammit. This close to bellowing in hopes that the sheer volume of my words will get past her thick head.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:44 am

"Actually—"

I'm beginning to hate that word. I realize now it's always she starts with when she's about to piss me off.

"It's eight and a half—"

Knew it.

"That is not the fucking point, and you know it!"

My secretary looks at me disapprovingly. "Language, please."

And now she has the gall to lecture me on my language when she's the one who's been lying through her teeth for almost a decade?

"You could have told me at any point, damn you."

She looks at me...and then blinks as if I've just spoken to her in Sarsi.

"I'm just your secretary, Mr. Kontides. It's not my position to correct my boss—"

Oh, please.

She's really going that route?

My hands clench against the urge to start strangling her. "In case you've forgotten—"

"No worries about that, Mr. Kontides. I rarely forget anything."

I swear, I'm this close to killing her and throwing a party right after.

"You," I bite out between clenched teeth, "have been arguing with me since day one—"

"Exactly. Arguing. But I've never corrected you." She pauses then adds after a moment, "Sir."

Oh, so now she calls me 'sir'?

She's not just unbelievable at this point. She's downright insane, and what's even more incredible is how her personal brand of madness wants me to kill her and kiss her at the same time.

What the hell has this woman done to me?

I look at my secretary, and all I can remember is how she looked last night.

Hair down.

Curves outlined.

Legs bare.

Men staring.

And speaking of other men...

I remember how I used to waste time hating on her ex-husband, when all along—

"You even dared accept my sympathies for your failed marriage!" I find myself actually roaring the words out this time. Which I've never done, not even during the most heated courtroom debates of my entire career.

And only Shayla, dammit.

Only my secretary alone could piss me off this much—

Page 12

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:44 am

Shayla extends her hand, palm up. "Here, sir."

And she's still not done pissing me off, damn her.

"I'll give you your sympathies back."

I think it's time I remember that I'm a lawyer. And not just any lawyer but one of the best there is in this side of the Atlantic. So why not use that to get away with murdering my secretary?

All she's done in the past ten minutes is give me every reason to fire her.

But instead all I can think about is claiming what everyone else dared to look at, and the next thing I know—

"Take off that ring."

I'm gritting out words that have absolutely nothing to do with me as her boss but everything to do with me as a man.

My secretary looks at me angelically. And then her lips, which look irresistibly luscious all of a sudden, slowly form a word—

"No."

—and I remember too late that the devil comes in all guises.

"Why the hell not?" I'm roaring again, dammit. I can even feel a vein in my head about to pop. It just goes to prove that my secretary is an exception, in all the worst ways one could think of.

Shayla lifts her chin. "It's my ring. I paid for it. I'll wear it as long as I please."

"Why the hell do you want to keep wearing something that's fake?"

"Because!"

A dangerous calmness settles over me. This one, I realize, is my limit. This one, I cannot—and will not—let go.

"Don't push me, Shayla," I warn.

And smart girl that she is, she knows when I'm not playing.

"I have no intention of dating," she says stiffly.

"Ever?"

My secretary shrugs. "Believe what you want—"

"I believe you're a liar."

She flinches.

Good.

A crack in her too-perfect composure, finally.

And since there can only be one reason for her to hide behind the shapeless clothes and that ring—

"Who hurt you then?"

"I never—"

"Don't bother lying." I stalk towards her, and she backs up until she hits a bookshelf.

"M-My personal life is none of your business."

Page 13

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:44 am

I'm making her stutter.

Good.

But it's not enough.

So I come even closer until our bodies nearly touch, and my secretary's eyes widen in shock.

"You made it my business when you lied to me."

"H-How many times do I have to tell you I didn't lie?""

Her breasts start rising and falling rapidly, and I'm getting distracted.

She then licks her lips, and I'm distracted even more.

"I j-just let you assume—"

"Same thing," I snap.

"It's not!"

I slam my hand against the shelf beside her head, but this time, my secretary manages to stand her ground.

She doesn't even flinch.

And that only makes me want her more.

"One last chance to tell me the truth," I say flatly, "or you won't like what I'll do next."

She glares up at me even as the pulse in her neck quickens.

"It's my parents, okay?" It's Shayla's turn to answer flatly. "They married young, they divorced young, shared custody turned me into their personal yo-yo, and after hearing them just arguing nonstop even when they're no longer together—" My secretary shrugs again, but this time she's unable to hide her pain. "It just turned me off relationships completely."

I reluctantly back up, knowing the truth when I hear it. "So that's it, then? You never dated?"

"Why bother? My parents were crazy about each other. They both swore by this. But then all of a sudden, they just...weren't."

"And you still haven't met anyone capable of changing your mind?"

Her gaze drops to my mouth, and then she quickly looks away.

"Nope."

The air between us shifts, charged with something that neither of us is ready to acknowledge.

Shayla straightens, and I see a mask fall into place.

Ah.

"I've just remembered. You have a meeting in fifteen minutes."

Shayla has slipped back into her role as my ever-efficient secretary, and I realize now that this is nothing but a role for her to hide behind.

"I'll go and have the boardroom set up."

From life. The world. And me as well, probably.

"If you'll excuse me, Mr. Kontides?"

Page 14

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:44 am

She doesn't wait for an answer.

Typical.

But what's not typical is how she has me staring as she leaves the room.

I want her.

And I have no idea what the hell am I supposed to do about this.

SHAYLA

I make it to the women's restroom before my composure cracks. My hands shake as I grip the edge of the sink, staring at my reflection.

What just happened?

I can't believe he still hasn't fired me, even though he knows about everything.

My fake wedding.

Fake divorce.

And all the other messier things that I don't yet have the strength to think about.

The look in his eyes when he cornered me against the bookshelf—I've never seen him look at me like that before. Like he was seeing me for the first time.

Take off that ring.

Why does he care so much?

I twist it around my finger, a habit formed over nearly a decade.

So that's it, then? You never dated? And you still haven't met anyone capable of changing your mind?"

The answer I gave him...

It's the only answer you can give, I remind myself.

So don't let him bother you!

I straighten my blouse and check my appearance one last time.

Focus, self.

I can't let this...this mess bother me.

I...regret saying personal stuff about him, and I still intend to apologize to him about that.

Because truthfully?

I love my job. I love working for him. And so I can't let anything...messy destroy the life I've painstakingly worked hard for in the past nine years.

So just do what you usually do, and pretend everything's normal!

Chapter Five

SHAYLA

THE COURTHOUSE FEELS like a pressure cooker, but as much as I want to think it's because of the high stakes involved in the whistleblower lawsuit we're handling—

It's not.

And I'd only be fooling myself pointlessly if I said it was.

I slide into the bench and place Adriano's briefcase precisely where he likes it—right side, handle facing outward. I arrange his notepad and pens in perfect alignment. His coffee (black, boring, and scalding hot, just the way he likes it) on a black marble coaster to the left.

It's been a couple of days since the night he found out about my fake marriage (and divorce, but let's not be petty and start counting lies). And since then, we've both avoided looking into each other's eyes and doing our best to act like nothing's changed.

Because nothing has.

Really.

And then I feel it.

His presence.

Even before the courtroom starts buzzing, I already know he's arrived, but I keep my eyes on my notepad even as he reaches his seat.

"Good morning, Mr. Kontides."

"Shayla."

Hearing him say my name startles me into looking up—

Ugh.

I regret it immediately, with the way my heart starts banging so loudly, I'm afraid it will get people to wonder if the courtroom's haunted, and we have with us some ghostly judge pounding its invisible gavel in condemnation of our poor unfortunate souls.

Control yourself, self!

But the opposite happens as I hand him the case folder, and our fingers accidentally brush.

Yikes!

I barely keep myself from flinching as electricity jolts through both of us.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:44 am

Stop sparking, sparks!

"You look pale," my boss observes broodingly.

"I'm fine."

"Did you eat breakfast?"

Since when does Adriano Kontides care about my eating habits?

"I had coffee."

"Coffee isn't food."

"Says the man who considers espresso a food group."

He almost smiles. Almost. But because I'm suddenly terrified of what could happen if he does.

"The judge is in a mood today," I relay under my breath.

"And you trust your sources about this?"

I nod.

"Thank you." I'm pretty sure he'll find a way to use this to his advantage, just like how he always does. He's the kind of man you never want to lower your guard around.

Give him an inch, and he'll end up taking a mile.

"Anything else?"

I consider his question seriously, and that's when I see it.

Double ugh.

But...I've done this a thousand times before, and so all I can do is croak out the truth.

"Your tie's crooked."

So please, please, please just fix it yourself.

But instead, my boss keeps his gaze on the documents as he says, "Fix it then."

Grrrr.

I reach for his silk tie with hands that stupidly tremble. I do my best to ignore the muscular heat of his chest.

C'mon, fingers. Move faster, will you?

I find myself needing to move just a little closer to knot it at the perfect angle.

Ugh.

But this also means being close enough to have me biting my lip at the scent of his aftershave.

Why does he always have to smell so...yummy?

I end up yanking his knot a little too tight in my anxiety, and his dark head lifts up sharply.

Oops.

I adjust the knot and take a step back. "All done."

Page 17

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:44 am

"Thanks."

Then he goes back to reading his case file, and I go back to obsessing-not-obsessing over my boss.

"All rise."

The bailiff's booming voice nearly makes me jump, but it's also a distraction I desperately welcome. Something to occupy my mind, finally.

"The Honorable Judge Conchita Samson presiding."

For the next three hours, I watch Adriano do what he does best—command a courtroom. While the other counsel seems to have an arsenal of tricks up in his sleeve (and doesn't hesitate to use it), Adriano's voice remains perfectly cool. Not once does he raise his voice. He never does, actually (except for the time he found out I lied about being married. And divorced. But again, that's a completely different thing.)

Adriano in lawyer mode has always been a secret joy of mine. It's like watching an episode of *Suits*, but live. And just in case you're wondering, the answer is no.

I never saw myself as Meghan Markle...since she never had the hots for Harvey.

But I digress...again.

When the lunch recess is called, Adriano tells me he's invited the opposing counsel to lunch (typical) and that he needs me to join them (also typical...not).

"Lissa wants you there," he says simply.

"I understand." When he puts it that way, it's not like I have any other choice. I turn to leave, but he suddenly catches my wrist, and his touch is pure and forbidden...fire.

I yank my hand out of my hold and pretend not to notice the way my boss stiffens at my reaction.

"Yes, Mr. Kontides?"

"We need to talk."

"About what?"

"Do you have plans tonight?"

"I do." I absolutely have zero qualms about lying right now. Anything to escape being alone with him, and especially after office hours.

"Cancel them."

Typical Adriano.

The courtroom door swings open, and Ms. White enters with her junior associate. Saved by opposing counsel. That's a first.

"Adriano!" She extends a well-manicured hand. "That was quite the performance this morning. But don't think I'm rolling over."

"I'd be disappointed if you did." His charm switches on instantly. "We have a table at Rufino's. Shayla will join us, as requested."

Lissa turns to me with a warm smile. "Excellent! I've heard so much about you. The woman who keeps the great Adriano Kontides on schedule and on his toes."

"If you're interested in pirating me right under my boss's nose, I would love to consider——"

"Shut up, Shayla."

Lissa laughs. She obviously thinks I was just joking, but I wasn't. And so did my boss, apparently, if his glare is anything to go by.

ADRIANO

A private room is ready for our use when we get to Rufino's, and Lissa doesn't even wait for us to get seated when she starts talking.

Typical.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:44 am

Lissa has a reputation for being a shark...and proud of it.

And normally, even though I've already made up my mind on the kind of settlement I'd like my client to accept, I'd still be paying attention to what Lissa's saying, in case she slips up.

Normally speaking, that is.

But nothing's normal right now. Nothing's been normal since the night I found out my secretary has been lying to me all along.

Everything's changed since then, and it's why my secretary has all of my attention at the moment.

Look at me, dammit.

She's been avoiding my gaze since that night. And she's still doing it, with her gaze fixed determinedly on her tablet as she jots down notes.

Shayla has always been good at that. It's why Lissa wants her here. She never misses a thing.

Well, except for this.

She's been doing her best to act like she doesn't feel it.

This mix of tension and heat that's just burning hotter between us moment by

moment.

Does she really think she can keep this up forever?

"Adriano? Your thoughts?"

Lissa looks at me in askance, and even though I haven't heard a single thing she's said, I only have one answer to give her.

"You can't afford to hear them right now, considering what you're offering to my client."

Lissa isn't insulted. "You need to be realistic. The evidence is circumstantial at best."

We're used to playing this game, no hard feelings.

But what I'm not used to?

At all?

Shayla shifts in her seat at that moment, and her leg accidentally brushes against mine under the table.

Shit.

She immediately pulls away, but the damage is done. I've lost my train of thought.

"Talk to your client," Lissa urges.

"I'll do you one better, and speak to Ms. Tolentino about this."

Lissa looks at me in interest. "Since we are dealing with gender-sensitive issues here, I'll indeed consider that a positive." She then looks at Shayla, saying, "Do stop dilly-dallying, Ms. Tolentino. You were born to be one of us. I look forward to going up against you next time."

Silence stretches between us when Lissa leaves, and Shayla still refuses to meet my gaze.

"She's right, you know."

Shayla glances up. "About what?"

"You should be one of us."

She shrugs. "Not everyone wants to be a lawyer, Mr. Kontides."

"Indeed. But you do."

She rises to her feet, and so do I.

"We should head back to office—"

"I've already told Milos to drive you home," I interrupt her. "Take the afternoon off. I'm sure you'll need time to prepare for tonight's ball."

Her eyes widen. "Are you talking about the fundraiser—"

"Yes."

"But you're supposed to attend that alone," she protests. "And I already told you I had plans—"

"I bought that for a second," I acknowledge, "but then I remembered that I've known you for nine years—"

"Eight and a half."

"Is that really the hill you want to die on?"

"Actually—"

"Donotpush me on this," I warn her coolly. "I expect you to be with me this evening. And that's my final word on it."

"Fine." And then she just leaves.

Typical.

All the other secretaries who had worked for me before Shayla were either crybabies, sycophants, or gold-diggers. Sometimes, all of the above.

Shayla was the only one who dared speak her mind to me, to the point of being rude. The only one not to flinch even no matter how many times I lost my temper. And unfortunately for both of us—

She was also the only secretary I've come to realize was a woman.

And a very desirable one at that.

Chapter Six

ADRIANO

TONIGHT'S BALL IS JUST like any other ball I've attended my whole life. First, as my billionaire father's only heir. And later, when I've made a name for myself, as one of the most successful attorneys on the East Coast.

When you attend them long enough, they start looking and feeling the same. It's just the same people over and over, and no one seems tired of playing the same game over and over as well.

But at the same time, tonight also feels different.

Because of her.

Shayla.

One look at her, and it's clear to see she's decided to let her hair down, both literally and figuratively.

The shapeless clothes have been replaced by something short and silky, and the sight of Shayla in it has me torn between wanting to keep her by my side and asking security to escort her out.

What the hell's she thinking? Does she not realize that all a guy has to be is five-foot-six and as soon as he looks down at her dress, he'll immediately find twin mountains of joy bared to his sight?

I shrug out of my jacket, and she blinks in surprise when I dump it over her shoulders.

"I'm not cold—"

"You are," I say in a steely voice, "and you'll stay cold if you know what's good for you."

My secretary rolls her eyes. "Oh, please—"

"Mr. Kontides!"

A blonde in a skintight red dress charges toward us, dragging an equally young brunette, and both of them looking barely old enough to drink.

"I told Candy we'd see you here," Red Dress gushes. "My dad's partner is, like, totally obsessed with your cases. I'm Stennie, by the way. Pre-law at Columbia."

Her friend extends a slender hand. "Candy. Also Columbia. Your TED Talk on corporate liability was life-changing."

Shayla's lips slowly press together, and I glare at her. If she so much as smiles, I'll kill her.

"We're, like, super passionate about social justice," Candy continues. "We'd totally love to pick your brains about it. Maybe we can get together—"

I nod at Shayla. "If you give her your number, she'll be in touch."

The two girls look at each other in confusion, and when they realize I have nothing else to say—

"Oh, um...okay." They give Shayla their numbers and look at me in confusion one last time before reluctantly saying goodbye because it's getting a little too awkward, even for them.

My secretary clears her throat. "So..."

"Don't."

"About your TED talk..."

I never did one, and she knows it.

"Shut up."

"I think she's just made that up as a pick-up line," Shayla suggests piously.

"Or maybe she, like, had me confused for someone else."

This has her laughing, and I'm, like, enthralled. Completely.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:44 am

"You should still feel flattered though." Her voice is just oozing with sincerity. "Those two were half your age, and they obviously still think you're hot."

I'm saved from saying something caustic when someone jostles her from behind, pushing her closer to me. For one moment, her body is pressed tightly against my chest—

And my arms automatically tighten the moment I feel her stiffen.

"If you don't let go of me in the next three seconds," she says under her breath, "you'll have people start talking."

"Let them."

Consternation flashes in her eyes, but this only makes me want to hold on to her more tightly.

"Mr. Kontides..."

She's glaring at me as she says this, but it only makes me realize that the angrier my secretary is...

Shit.

The moment I realize where my thoughts are heading, it feels like someone's dumped a bucket of ice-cold water over my head. It's one thing to realize that Shayla can look pretty damn good when she cares to wear something else aside from her shapeless

sacks. But to start thinking that I'm also attracted to her?

My arms automatically loosen, and while this obviously surprises Shayla—

She doesn't waste another second, doesn't even bother giving an excuse, doesn't even look back as she makes her escape.

Smart of her.

I should be glad that one of us still has a functioning brain and knows better than to let our professional relationship develop into something else.

But I'm not.

"Kontides, isn't it?"

The voice is slightly familiar, and I turn around warily.

Ah.

It's the man who was with Shayla that evening.

"Colin Soukoulis." He extends his hand for a shake. "My wife Hope is friends with Shayla."

My lips twist in a sardonic smile. "It's my first time to hear that. My secretary believes in keeping her work and personal life separate."

Colin looks at me thoughtfully. "But you don't?"

I only shrug, mostly because I'm feeling defensive all of a sudden, and it's a feeling I

haven't had since...hell,I can't even remember the last time I felt like this. Even worse, I don't even know what I have to hide or feel defensive about.

"You know," the other man says conversationally, "I almost lost my wife once."

The words put me on edge for some reason. Why is it that everything this man says or does bothers the hell out of me?

"I thought I wanted one thing. And I was firmly convinced that I had no need for the other. I had a plan, and I was determined to stick to it."

"I don't see that as a problem."

Colin only nods. "That's true. But only up to a point. People who are used to being in control have a tendency to fear change. But because it wouldn't do for them to admit such...reservations, they end up using their plans—or routines even—to prevent such changes from taking places. Even if it's the best thing that can happen...to both of them."

What the hell is this guy saying?

Colin only smiles at my silence. "Perhaps we can have dinner sometime. I'll have Hope reach out to Shayla."

Page 22

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:44 am

I've never had anyone have the last word so easily, dammit. But the thing is...I can't think of anything else to say either. And as painful as this is to admit, minutes have already passed since Soukoulis left that it finally hits me.

Both of them.

Those were the exact words he had used.

Because my secretary is as much as a control freak as I am, and since we have that in common...was Soukoulis suggesting that all the other factors were the same for both of us?

Which means...if I've started seeing Shayla as a woman—

Has she also started seeing me as a man?

SHAYLA

At first, I was ecstatic and relieved to see a familiar face in the crowd. I didn't expect Hope and Colin would be attending the same fundraiser, but come to think of it, I should have realized they'd get an invitation to this as well. Her husband was a billionaire, after all. That's all that's needed for everyone to want you in their party, even if they don't know you from Adam.

But when Hope tells me how she saw me in my boss's arms before looking at me meaningfully?

Ugh.

"Just because you and Colin are now happily married doesn't mean everyone wants the same happy-ever-after ending."

"Not everyone, yes...but remember when we were kids, and we used to have art classes? And remember how you'd always draw—"

"Nope."

Hope laughs. "It's all over your face. You totally remember—"

"You're, like, totally mistaken." And I'm, like, totally blaming those girls from earlier for suddenly making me sound like them when I'm flustered.

"This one time, please humor your once-orphaned, once-bullied friend whose pregnancy is quite sensitive—"

Childhood friends are the worst. They know exactly which sob story to use to get their way.

"Close your eyes..."

Fine.

"Recall all of those sketches you made about the wedding day you imagined."

Ugh.

"And then ask God in your heart—"

Oh no.

I find myself shifting on my feet as soon as I hear her say this.

"To show you the man He's chosen for you—"

What if I don't want to?

What if...I also don't want to believe in God?

Can I just keep pretending that He isn't real?

"—in case you already know this person."

No. No. No.

Page 23

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:44 am

Because the moment she says this, I see it.

I see him.

And Him.

A presence of light that's terrifying in how comforting I find it...right behind my annoyingly gorgeous boss, who's also terrifying, but for entirely different reasons.

Hope suddenly snaps her fingers, and the sound makes me open my eyes.

Uh...

Why do I feel so disoriented? And so inexplicably overwhelmed?

My friend smiles.

I scowl back.

But this only makes her smile widen.

Grrrr.

She's just so different these days. It's as if she knows something that I don't. Something that her husband also knows. And it just makes them so content—but in a way that has nothing to do with her husband's fortune—and so genuinely kind (you can just feel they're not faking it) and...and so horribly wise, even when they're so

swift to say that they don't have the answers to everything.

I mean, have you ever met someone like that?

Someone who says they trust God to actually tell them what to do, and they, you know, actually mean it?

"Stop smiling at me like that," I grumble.

But this only makes my friend ask teasingly, "Dare I make a guess—"

"No. Don't you dare."

"But—"

My phone buzzes.

Oh, thank goodness.

But when I see who's sent me a message—

We need to get back to the office. Work emergency.

I take it back. This is nothing to be thankful about. At all.

Chapter Seven

SHAYLA

THE KONTIDES & PARTNERS boardroom is silent except for the hum of the air conditioning and the soft tap of my fingers on the keyboard. Floor-to-ceiling windows reflect our images against the night skyline—me at one end of the glass table, Adriano at the other.

It's also nearly midnight, and even though I still have so many cases to review, I'm still dangerously distracted by the sharp line of my boss's jaw as he reads his half of the workload.

Pathetic, right?

For almost nine years, I've prided myself for being immune to the great Adriano Kontides. I'm the only girl who's known him this long and still haven't fallen for him. But ever since he found that my marriage—and subsequent divorce—was fake?

Everything's changed.

For the better or worse.

I catch him looking at me all the time now, and he doesn't even have the decency to pretend that he wasn't. Or act uncomfortable at being caught. He only stares back at me with those beautiful brilliant blasted silver eyes of his, just staring at me like I'm suddenly something he's found worth devouring—

I'm always the one who's forced to look away like a coward in the end, and it just makes me grit my teeth every time I remember this.

Like, seriously.

What is wrong with him?

And me?

For, like, thinking and speaking, like, I've been given a role in, like, a remake of Clueless?

This has to be Adriano's fault, darn it.

And Hope's, too.

For making me actually pray when I've never ever prayed—

And talking to God when I don't even know if I want Him to be real—

And worst of all, for making me actually try to imagine who God's choice is for my bridegroom.

Ugh, just ugh.

Just remembering who I saw in my mind makes me feel like slamming my head against the desk over and over.

I just have a hard time believing that my visions of my future husband—

"The notes you scribbled here," my boss suddenly says irritably. "They're completely

wrong. Use a damn pencil next time so we don't need to cross anything out. It just complicates things unnecessarily."

—looked awfully like the billionaire ogre I'm stuck working overtime for at present.

"Understood, sir."

Silver eyes immediately narrow at my direction. "Don't take that tone with me."

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:44 am

Oh, does he think he's going to scare me with that?

I cross my arms over my chest. "You started it."

"Excuse me?"

In the almost-nine years I've known him, there's only one reason for my boss to suddenly speak with a noticeable Greek accent.

"You heard me."

And that reason is the anger I now see stamped over the chiseled features of his face, which I find even more annoyingly gorgeous at the moment.

What in the world is wrong with me?

He throws his case file on the desk.

And so I do, too.

Because I can be childish when I want to.

"You're picking a fight with me." His accent is awfully thicker. He's also speaking as if he's handing out a death sentence with each word, and all of them are for my wrongdoing.

"Of course not," I say demurely even though we both know I'm lying. "I'm just being

honest—"

"You mean disrespectful," Adriano snaps.

"If it means so much to you, then alright. I was just being disrespectfully hon—"

"Enough."

I know right away I've pushed him too far.

I'm dead.

I make a run for it, but Adriano is so much faster, and the next thing I know he has me trapped against the wall, my hands captured over my head, and I'm torn between fear and excitement as my annoyingly gorgeous boss glares down at me.

"You say we have nothing to talk about," he bites out, "and yet the way you're acting makes it clear there is."

"I have no idea—"

"Do you know what I'm thinking of right now?"

"No." Yes. And it only makes me feel even more frightened and excited at the same time.

"I'm thinking I had it all wrong."

"Tell me more, please." Because Adriano Kontides admitting a mistake? Music to my ears, always.

But when his lips slowly form a smile, and I see how it doesn't reach his eyes at all—

Why do I have a feeling that I've just walked into a trap?

"Talking about what's changed between us is a waste of time."

It is?

"I should have just shown you instead."

What? Wait. No!

Page 26

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:44 am

I'm not sure if it's his smoldering proximity that's dumbing me down or work that's fried my brain. Either way, it's too late by the time I realize what he's saying.

Nooooooooo.

I only get as far as pressing my hands against his chest, intending to shove him off. But the moment the warm heat of his mouth closes over mine, my fingers involuntarily curl, and when his lips pry mine apart, I end up clutching my boss's shirt as his tongue slides inside my mouth.

Aaaah.

My toes curl inside of my shoes.Hard.

Like, as hard as my heart is pounding right now.

Because I've never been kissed this way.

Never.

And so for this to happen with the man I've been working for all this time?

It should feel wrong, but it doesn't.

Everything about this should feel wrong.

The way he's kissing me so hungrily and forcefully?

Or the way he's making it so impossible for me to breathe as his big, hard body presses against mine, and my breasts begin to swell and ache against his chest?

It should all feel wrong, but it doesn't.

And the longer and deeper he kisses me, it feels as if almost a decade's worth of pretences start to fade—

No, oh no.

It can't be.

Adriano suddenly wrenches his head away, and even as I take much-needed gulps of air, our eyes have collided—`

It can't.

But the truth I can no longer deny also glitters back at me from his gaze.

We wanted this.

From the start.

We both wanted this.

And as soon as the thought becomes impossibly clear in my mind—

It's all over for me.

When he lets go of my hands, I don't push him away.

When he reaches for me, I remain completely still.

It's as if knowing we've both wanted each other from the start has cast a spell on me, and there's suddenly this restless craving inside of me. Like a part of me has had needs that have been unmet for eight long years.

And a half.

But who's counting, right?

Page 27

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:44 am

We take our time undressing each other, both of us seemingly of one mind without having to talk about anything. Maybe it comes from all the years we've been working together. Maybe it's something else.

But honestly?

I don't care to know why right now.

Because I'm too busy staring and gulping.

I've only managed to take his shirt off, and he already has me feeling so ridiculously hot and bothered.

How is he, like, so smooth and hard all over?

And when my gown falls into a pool around my feet, leaving my heaving flesh exposed to his gaze?

I thought I was already burning up.

But the moment I see how he's staring at my breasts?

Well, now I know better.

Now I know what it means for someone's stare to set me on fire.

His hands clasp my waist, and I start feeling delirious as soon as he has me seated on

the edge of the desk. I thought I'd have time to gather my thoughts, even just for a few seconds, but no.

He cups one breast in his hand, his mouth closing over a sensitive tip, and all I can do is clutch his head and whimper. It's the sweetest agony, for him to taste me like this, one breast at a time. But just when I feel I'm about to shatter at any moment—

Adriano pulls away, and I barely manage to bite back a cry of protest.

"You're driving me crazy, Shayla. I want you. More than I've ever wanted anyone."

So apparently, there's a second reason for my boss to speak with a strong accent.

Because right now, Adriano's Greek accent is thicker than ever.

And it makes me want him.

So, so much.

But when I think about completely surrendering to him—

Not yet.

There's still a part of me that's holding back.

And so I hear myself whisper, "Not just yet."

His jaw clenches.

"But instead..."

His entire body jerks when I reach for the hem of his pants.

And he ends up sharply sucking his breath when my hand disappears inside of it.

I try wrapping my fingers around him, but I realize to my shock that I can't.

I really can't.

He's just too...

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:44 am

How is this possible?

"Too big for you, Ms. Tolentino?"

Oh, that mocking tone of his voice.

It makes me want to kick him so bad.

And kiss him just as bad, to be honest.

So I simply decide to start moving my hand.

And I have my sweet revenge as my boss's entire body turns rigid.

But it doesn't end there, of course.

Because nothing is ever easy between the two of us.

And so...

"Adriano."

He's now touching me just as intimately, and his name slips out in a whimper.

My hand starts moving faster.

And so does he.

Our eyes lock as our breathing quickens.

I can't stop looking at him, and he can't stop looking at me either.

The sounds our hands make are driving me mad. And I think it's the same for him, too.

I want him so, so much.

So, so much.

And it's as if something inside of us is now completely attuned to each other.

Because we feel it the same time.

That one moment of knowing you're about to fall.

Adriano grasps a fistful of my hair just as my body starts to shake. His mouth crashes over mine just as I cry out. Both of us shattering at the same time, our bodies shuddering against each other. And it lasts so, so long.

So impossibly long.

That it almost feels like an eternity has passed when the waves of pleasure washing over me finally start to fade.

And I slowly regain my senses.

And come face to face with the consequences of my decision.

Did I just...

Did he just...

Did we just...

Page 29

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:44 am

And am I still holding him right now?

Seriously?

Adriano stiffens when I yank my hand out of his hold and jump off the desk. I can feel him staring at me as I grab my gown off the floor and dress myself in a hurry. I start grabbing my things, and when I reach for a phone, I see several messages from Hope waiting for me.

I know it's hard to say no, but sex will only complicate things.

She's,like,totally right, but it's also,like, totally too late.

"Shayla—"

He reaches for me as soon as I turn around, but when he sees me flinch—

His handsome face turns expressionless.

I'm sorry.

But because we've known each other far too long, I know I've hurt him.

I'm so, so sorry.

But all I can think of right now is how my own parents both told me how they used to love each other so, so passionately—

"Let's please pretend this never happened."

—until they just didn't.

And then I'm walking away without looking back.

Chapter Eight

ADRIANO

SEVEN MISSED CALLS. Twelve text messages. Three days of radio silence.

Page 30

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:44 am

I stare at my phone, resisting the urge to throw it against the wall.

This isn't me, dammit.

I don't chase women, and I certainly don't obsess over whether they'll call me back.

So why have I been checking my phone every five minutes like some lovesick teenager?

Why the hell can't I stop thinking about her?

Shayla has become even more distant since that night in the boardroom. If she was stiff in my presence before, now she's downright unapproachable, with the way she hides behind her polite smiles and efficiency.

A knock on my office door breaks my train of thought. I should've known better than to hope it would be her—

"Mr. Kontides?"

But it's not. I should've known it wouldn't be her, so why the hell do I keep tormenting myself like some hopeless idiot?

"Today's brief is ready for your review, sir." Willa, one of the junior associates, is the newest one to unwittingly join this stupid game of pass-the-message that Shayla has been playing lately. "Also, Ms. Tolentino asked me to remind you about the charity auction tonight."

"Anything else?"

"She, um, also said to remind you that your tux came back from the cleaners and is hanging in the partners' lounge. That's pretty much it, sir."

Of course, that was it. Did I really think she'd pass a message that isn't work-related?

Enough of this.

I stand abruptly, decision made. If she won't come to me, I'll go to her.

Her desk is empty, her computer screen dark. Where—

"Looking for Shayla?"

What the—

Lissa White stands by the water cooler, designer briefcase in hand.

"Deposition prep, remember?" She clucks her tongue. "You normally don't miss things like this. Is something wrong?"

"You'd like that, won't you?"

"Naturally. But I also enjoy winning fair and square, so...if you're looking for your secretary, she mentioned stepping out for lunch." Lissa checks her watch. "Our meeting is set at one. You still have time to catch up to her. And just scratch that itch—"

"Don't." No one should speak about my secretary like that.

But this makes Lissa's face actually soften. "You took offense. Good."

And no one should look at me like the way Lissa's looking at me right now.

"It's not what you think," I snap.

Because whatever it is she's thinking, she's wrong.

"I haven't said a word."

Why are women so damn good at pointing out something that's completely not the point at all?

"If you want my advice—"

"I don't."

Lissa actually comes forward to give my arm a motherly pat. "Women like Shayla are rare. Treat her as such, and you can't lose. But if you take too much time making up your mind, someone smarter will swoop her off—"

"Don't you mean sweep?"

"That's for wimps," Lissa says scornfully, "and if Shayla had always been the type to be swept off her feet, don't you think someone else would have already stolen her away by now? It has to be someone more cunning, someone who understands when a demonstration of one's power and authority is called for—"

Is she complimenting or insulting me?

"That's the kind of man Shayla is certain to respect, and if you're so fortunate...willingly surrender to."

Well, hell.

Who would have thought the day would come when I'd actually concede in Lissa White having the winning argument?

Her words make uncomfortable sense, and it's more than enough to have me striding out of the building.

Because I know Shayla far better than she gives me credit for, and case in point?

Her absolute shock at finding me suddenly taking a seat in front of her, causing Shayla to drop the sandwich she's holding.

"You could catch a fly with that," I say gently.

Shayla turns red even as she quickly closes her mouth.

"You never ask me to join you for lunch," I murmur.

"How did you know I was here?"

"I've always known."

Her mouth opens and closes.

Good.

It would greatly disappoint me if she were to insist on wasting our time with pointless arguments.

Because Shayla and I?

We've come up with a system of communication over the years. When there's something I want my secretary to know is the absolute truth, I simply look into her eyes, the way I'm looking into her eyes now—

And she gets it. Even if she doesn't want to. She can't deny that she gets it.

"Pretending nothing happened between us won't work."

Just like she can't deny this next truth that I need her to accept.

"Because something did."

She swallows hard.

But something is still holding her back.

And so I decide to keep pushing.

"I can't stop thinking about that night, Shayla. And the dark circles under your eyes tell me it's been the same for you—"

She opens her mouth, clearly intending to deny this, but when she sees the way I'm looking at her, challenging her to win an argument without playing dumb—

Page 32

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:44 am

"I need space, okay?"

Good girl.

It's not the answer I hoped for, but at least we're getting somewhere.

"How long?"

"I don't know."

And when she looks at me—

It's the same way she's always looked at me...when she wants to know she's saying the absolute truth.

IT'S ANOTHER DAY ATthe office.

Another day where frustration gnaws at me.

But this time, I've decided to try another approach.

Because she's not the only one who can play this game she's playing.

A mutinous expression flashes over my secretary's face when I tell her about today's charity auction, and why I need her there.

"If you insist, sir."

"Yes, I do insist."

Shayla glares at me when she realizes her attempt to piss me off fails.

Good.

Let the games begin.

Milos drives her to the museum, and I finish up with work before heading over myself. I find my secretary right away, and my jaw clenches.

You messed up, Kontides.

I should've told her not to change. Should've remembered the last time she showed up at a party with her hair down, both literally and figuratively. But now it's too late. She's in another one of those strapless little things that she loves, and I'm obsessed with getting rid of.

Unfortunately, it's also one of those strapless little things that anyone taller than her can find joy, and the prosecutor she's talking to clearly isn't any exception. To be fair, all I've heard are good things about him. But I don't give a damn.

Even from here, it's clear to see that Prosecutor Schitt is infatuated with my Shayla.

So yeah.

I hate him, of course.

But someone blocks my path before I can even take a step towards them.

"Adriano!"

Therese air-kisses my cheeks, and I let her. We've known each other our whole lives and even attended the same law school. She's also the reason I wanted Shayla to come.

"It's been a while, right?" But the moment she places a hand over my arm, I suddenly start to wonder if I've made a mistake. My plan here is to make Shayla jealous. Enough to make her realize that she'd rather stake a claim on me before anyone else does.

But when Therese moves close enough to have her breasts brush against the side of my arm—

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:45 am

What the hell's wrong with me?

This is nothing new, so why the hell is my skin suddenly crawling at having another woman this close to me? Why do I suddenly feel so hollow, knowing that Therese wouldn't have done this if she didn't think I was willing to consider what's being offered?

Men aren't the only ones who exchanged favors for sex. Women like Therese have no problem doing the same thing, and while it's something I've never cared to get involved in—

I realize now that I'm still playing their game. Because when Therese smiles up at me, my own lips curve in a smile, and I can't remember hating myself more than I did at that moment. Whenever women like Therese come on to me, I simply let them think what they want without actually taking the bait. It's strategic, and that's how I've always thought of it. You never know whose favor you'll someday need, so I've always played it safe. It's never been my style to pick unnecessary fights.

But when I turn to Shayla, just to make sure she's still within my line of sight, and my gaze unexpectedly collides with hers—

No.

Pain flashes over her features as she sees Therese holding my arm like I'm already hers, and I suddenly find myself wondering how far I'm willing to be strategic—

"The Olivarez case," Therese says. "I think I've come across something that you

could find helpful. Should we talk about it in private?"

—if it means hurting the woman I...want.

I look back at Therese, and she holds my gaze without hesitation, letting me know without words that her offer comes with certain expectations.

"I'm not an idiot, Therese. There's always something more to your offer."

A moment passes before she completely relaxes with a laugh. It's exactly what I'm hoping for...since rejecting her outright would have gained me an enemy for life.

"Weigh your options then..." Therese's fingers slowly trail up my chest as she speaks, and it's a struggle not to shove her away. "And call me once you've made up your mind."

She walks away, and I watch her doing so because I know it will hurt her pride if I do anything else.

Shame eats me alive when I realize how low I've sunk, and how I've ended up playing the same dirty game as everyone else here. I may not have yet reached a point of selling myself, but wasn't that only a matter of time, with how I've been making compromises left and right?

And all for what, dammit?

To maintain my reputation as one of East Coast's most successful lawyers? To prove to everyone that I don't need my father's billions to make a name for myself? Is gaining another meaningless milestone in my career worth losing sight of what matters?

And when I finally turn to start looking for Shayla—

She's gone.

And that's when I realize how big a mistake I've made.

My parents were crazy about each other. But then all of a sudden, they just...weren't.

That was what she said about the two people she had trusted as a child...only to have them shatter her trust in relationships.

You're driving me crazy, Shayla. I want you. More than I've ever wanted anyone.

And that's what I told her.

The man she's worked for all these years.

And even though she's never said it—

We both knew she's always respected me. Looked up to me. Trusted me.

And in return, I told her I was crazy about her...only to allow another woman to touch me like my own body were a commodity.

Chapter Nine

SHAYLA

I ONLY REALIZE WHERE my feet have taken me when the front door opens, and a startled Hope lets me in. "Shayla?"

And I only realize why I'm here the moment I see her surprise turn to concern. "What is it?"

Ever since my parents' divorce, I've been determined to do things on my own.

To prove to everyone that I'm strong and independent, and that no one has any reason to look down on me even though I've come from a broken family.

I don't even like saying that word.

Broken.

Every time I hear someone talk about my family like that, it makes me feel they think I'm broken, too, by default.

And so I've made it a point never to ask for help.

Until now.

Because I think...

I really think I'm about to break.

"Oh, Shay."

Hope gets me inside, and I'm not sure how long I end up crying in their living room. I can't even make myself care that her husband's there to witness my breakdown.

I'm just so tired.

So, so tired of pretending to be strong when I'm really not.

And these two.

It's, like, they know exactly when and when not to speak.

They're perfect, really.

Either that...or it's just like Hope says, and God's the reason why they are how they are.

Page 35

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:45 am

What about me, God?

What about me?

Is my life the way it is because it's how You want it?

"Shay?"

And there it is again.

Hope interrupting my thoughts at the right moment...and stopping me from making accusations that even I know are unfair and baseless.

"What happened?" Hope glances at her husband. "Maybe you should—"

I shake my head. "He should probably stay. Maybe he can share a guy's perspective or something."

"Then I'll stay for as long as I'm needed."

Colin's voice is quiet and gentle.

It's actually how I wish my father would have talked to me, the day he and Mom decided to separate. And just remembering this brings fresh tears to my eyes.

I'm so, so tired.

Just so, so tired of bottling everything up inside me—

"I don't know what to do..."

The words come out in a rush, and after that, the truth. Me being silly and stubborn when I insisted on pretending that nothing had changed. And after that, me being impulsive and shamefully weak when temptation got the better of us. And after that...

Tonight is what hurts the most. Because when he told me I was driving him crazy, I believed him. So why was he okay with Therese pawing him like that? Had he been lying to me all this time? When I allowed him to touch me that night...had that been enough to make the novelty of having me gradually wear off? Had I stopped being a challenge, and that was why I had lost interest? Was this God's way of—

"You need to stop beating yourself up over what happened, Shay."

Hope squeezes my hand as she speaks, and her words make me feel like I'm slowly emerging from this world of darkness that I didn't even realize I had been trapped in.

"Please know that I'm not judging or condoning anything you did, but right now, I think there's one thing you need to hear the most."

Oh no.

Why do I feel like covering my ears when I see Hope leaning forward? It's almost like—

"Please stop punishing yourself every time you feel you've done something wrong."

Almost like she sees through me even though we haven't talked to each other for years—

"It doesn't work that way, Shay. And God...He doesn't work that way either."

Because He wants to tell me something through her.

I didn't even realize I'm crying again until Hope sits down next to me, and I'm crying in her arms like I'm a little girl again.

Her words remind me of the past, and Hope listens with sympathy and patience as I tell her about how I had once told my dad about getting my first B- in school, and him just nodding before telling me he's done with our family.

"I think I'm even more confused this time," I joke tearfully as I pull away. "I thought I was coming here to vent about my boss, but instead I end up talking about old childhood wounds that I didn't know existed."

Ever the thoughtful gentleman, Colin offers us tissues, and we both laugh helplessly even as we start dabbing our eyes.

"God works in mysterious ways," my friend says, and all I can do is nod.

Page 36

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:45 am

No truer words have been spoken, and when Hope asks if she can pray for me...

All I can do is nod. Because the moment I try to speak, I feel like I'm going to cry again.

No one has ever asked me that.

No one.

And I wonder how my life would change if someone had, the first time I needed someone to show me that I could always run to God, no matter what.

HOPE INSISTS I SLEEP in their guestroom later that night, and honestly? I didn't put up much of a protest. I just wasn't ready to be all alone in my apartment.

Even so, sleep still doesn't come easy. Hope's prayer comes back to me, and my chest squeezes. It was a really simple prayer, but just thinking about it makes me want to cry.

Lord, Shayla, Your beloved daughter needs to hear Your voice.

We know You've been by her side all this time.

But we also know this world that we live in has a way of making it hard for us to feel Your presence.

May she hear Your voice, Lord. May she know Your will. May she find strength and comfort in You, so that she'll never be made to think she's ever alone. She never was, and she never will be. May her hope always be found in You.

I toss and turn in bed. The cat-shaped analog clock on the bedside table tells me it's already midnight, and yet...I still haven't heard a thing.

Should I not be hearing God's voice by this time?

It's so, so tempting to think it's because He's abandoned me...but I remind myself I know better now.

Right?

I sit up. But it still doesn't feel right. I get to my feet. But it's not right either. Nothing feels right until I find myself down on my knees...

Like I have nowhere else to go...

Because I don't.

And that's when the tears start falling again.

I remember Therese touching Adriano like he's already hers, and it hurts.

So, so much.

I remember that night in the boardroom, and this hurts, too.

So, so much.

But what hurts most of all is this.

This feeling like I should be hearing His voice by now but I don't.

"I don't know if You're listening," I whisper. "I know I've never tried to talk to You. Never had the courage to find out if you were truly real. But this time..."

Oh God, please.

I can't even speak now.

The pain is just too much that all I can do is cry out to Him in my heart.

Page 37

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:45 am

I want to believe You're there.

I think I believe, but I want to believe in You more.

So please God.

Please talk to me.

Chapter Ten

ADRIANO

SIX IN THE MORNING, and I'm already on my third coffee. The night air clings to the city streets, a damp reminder of hours spent searching. I lean against the stone pillar outside our office building, waiting. Watching.

Shayla never came home last night. And the only reason I know this is because I've gone straight to her apartment from the auction. But she never came back. And all the calls I've made for the past twelve hours have gone straight to voicemail.

If she doesn't show up for work today...I don't give a damn if this makes people think I'm overreacting. I'll have her reported as missing. I just need to know she's fine.

Movement at the corner catches my eye. A sleek silver BMW pulls up half a block away, and my lips tighten when the driver's door opens, and it's the last face I want to see.

Prosecutor Shit.

He walks around to the passenger side, opening the door with a flourish. Well, that's good news at least. If he's with a woman, then he won't be sniffing around my—no.

My entire world crashes at seeing Shayla—my Shayla—stepping out of his car. She's smiling and bright-eyed, her hair damp from what can only be a morning shower, and still wearing last night's clothes.

She laughs at something he says, and I want to kill somebody. Something inside of me turns ugly, and then it devolves into something vicious when they start walking on the sidewalk, and I hear my secretary say, "You just wait. I'll have him eating from the palm of my hand soon."

Prosecutor Shit answers her, but I've stopped listening.

Because I've heard all I need to hear.

Shayla watches the other man drive away, and I can feel my blood turning colder by the second as I watch her watch him. She turns toward the building, her face lighting up when she sees me. But all I do is stare back, and her smile falters.

Damn her.

I push off from the pillar and walk toward her. And with every step I take, the thing inside of me grows more vicious.

"Adriano?"

She sounds so uncertain. So damn innocent. And yet I know this time it's all for show.

I look at her coldly. "It's Mr. Kontides." My tone is low and glacial, but people passing by still turn to look. A bike messenger even slows down in his shock while two paralegals from the third floor stop mid-walk.

Shayla pales, but I'm not buying it.

She's just a damn good actress, and I can't let myself forget this.

"I've been trying to call you since last night," I say flatly.

"I'm s-sorry," she stammers. "I left my phone in a cab, and I still haven't—"

"It doesn't matter." I cut her off. "I'd rather not have to tell you this in person, but perhaps it's for the better."

Fear flickers in her eyes. "Tell me what?" she asks shakily. "If this is about last night, I..."

"I wanted to tell you you're fired."

"W-What?"

"I was hoping to keep you around until I'd had a taste of your body." The words make her flinch, but it's not enough. Not even close. "But last night changed everything." I want to kill her the way she's killed me. "Bumping into Therese made me realize you're not all that—"

The slap comes fast and hard, cracking across my cheek.

But when you look at her face, it's as if she's the one who's hurting more.

Good.

But it still isn't enough. The viciousness inside of me has turned into a monster, and it's insatiable.

"Why are you saying these things?" she chokes out.

The tears spilling down her cheeks feed the monster inside of me, but these, too, aren't enough.

"HR will make sure you're duly compensated."

The light in her eyes dies completely, but I remind myself all of this is just an act.

"You are no longer authorized to enter the premises of this building."

As I walk away, I hear her choke back a sob, as if doing her best not to break down in public.

But this, too, I tell myself, is just another performance.

This is how it should end.

If I don't want history to repeat itself and have the world laughing at me—

I can't allow myself to follow in my father's footsteps.

Chapter Eleven

ADRIANO

TWO WEEKS.

It's been two weeks since I fired Shayla.

And those two weeks have been hell.

The East Coast Financial Conference buzzes around me, a monotonous hum of corporate jargon and networking. I've given my keynote speech on corporate litigation strategies, shaken the necessary hands, made the expected small talk.

And felt nothing. Nothing but a hollowness that seems to grow by the day.

Everyone at the office walks on eggshells around me. Three associates have requested transfers. My new executive assistant—I can't even remember her name, dammit—lasted four days before quitting in tears. The replacement is competent, efficient, and completely forgettable.

None of them are Shayla.

"Adriano."

I turn to find my father approaching, champagne flute in hand. Pietro Kontides still commands attention at sixty-five, his silver hair and tailored suit projecting an image

of success and vitality.

"Father."

"You look like hell," he remarks.

Pietro actually sounds gleeful when saying this.

"Is it because you're starting to realize you were an ass for firing the best legal secretary in the world?"

What the—

Pietro looks at me in surprise. "Everyone in our world knows, son. Do you not know how many have attempted but failed to steal your secretary from you?"

And for him to know this...

I stare at him in disbelief. "You were one of them, weren't you?"

My father grins shamelessly. "I had to try."

I don't smile back. This is Pietro's problem all along. He just doesn't have any boundaries.

Pietro sighs. "You're always too serious."

"And you're never serious enough."

"But at least I'm happy."

"Your happiness comes at a terrible cost," I retort, thinking of all the divorce settlements my father had to pay. Eight wives. Eight failures. Eight lessons he never learned.

"We make mistakes, it's life." He shrugs, unrepentant. "But at least I experienced happiness. Can you say the same for yourself?"

A waiter appears between us, offering fresh drinks. My father exchanges his empty glass for a full one while the momentary interruption allows me to regain my composure.

"Let's just talk about something else—"

"Shayla was different from the rest."

Classic Pietro. A good listener...he never was.

"Why would I listen to someone who has been divorced eight times and never seemed to learn his lesson?"

"You learn new things with each divorce. And I may not have found the one for me, but I've learned enough to know a good one when I see one—" He then looks at me pointedly. "Or when someone's stupid enough to lose one."

"She was just my secretary," I bite out.

"In the beginning, yes. But something changed,ne?" Pietro looks at me with pity.
"And then you just had to ruin it, like your dear papa."

"You speak of her like you've known her."

"For eight and a half years," he confirms with a nod, "yes."

Only one person would make that kind of correction...and I can no longer deny the truth. Pietro knows me.AndShayla. And I can no longer dismiss his words as something meaningless and meddlesome.

My father looks at me with wily eyes. "You didn't know we have been talking and spending time, did you?" He sips his champagne, watching me over the rim. "Whenever I called and you were unavailable, she'd keep me on the line. Ask about my cases. My investments. My life." He shrugs. "No one does that—unless they want something."

My heart hardens. That part, Pietro definitely got right. At the end of the day, she was just like everyone else. She wanted—

"And in her case, I knew from the start she wanted—"

Money.

"—to understand me for your sake."

Bullshit.

"Let's not just talk about her," I say flatly.

My father studies me for a long moment. "You know what your problem is,

Adriano?"

"I'm sure you're about to tell me."

"You've spent so long preparing for people to leave that you never learned how to ask them to stay."

The observation lands like a blow. I want to argue, to defend myself. But he's right, damn him.

"I've just remembered I need to talk to someone." Anyone but my father, who's suddenly full of wisdom. Where was this wisdom when Pietro kept falling for eighteen-year-old gold-diggers?

I turn and walk away, ignoring my father's knowing look. The conference ballroom feels suddenly stifling, the conversations either tedious or shallow.

Outside, the summer air offers no relief. I loosen my tie, suddenly desperate to be anywhere but here. To be someone else. Someone who doesn't carry this weight in his chest.

That's when I see them. Hope and Colin Soukoulis, walking hand in hand along the sidewalk across the street. They look... complete. Content in a way I've never been. The cynical part of me wants to dismiss it as an illusion. I want to think of Shayla and her friend are completely alike, both of them motivated by greed, both exceptionally skilled in hooking up with billionaires.

But even I know I'd be fooling myself if so.

It's impossible to think such a thing with those two.

What they had was special...while what I had with Shayla was nothing but a sham.

I'm about to walk away, to avoid the reminder of everything I've lost, when Hope looks up and spots me. Her eyes widen in recognition, and manners dictate that I meet them halfway. I wait for traffic to clear, then cross the street.

Chapter Twelve

HOPE

"IS THAT ADRIANO KONTIDES?" I give my husband a nudge, and Colin follows my gaze. "That's him, isn't he?"

Colin turns to me, saying dryly, "Just give it to me straight."

I love how my husband knows me so well.

"We should talk to him, don't you think?"

"Is that what God's telling you?"

I nod.

"Then you won't hear any arguments from me," he says simply.

Oh my goodness. He's always been the most beautiful man in my eyes, but his gorgeousness takes a whole new level every time he says things like that. I really wish I could stand on my toes and give him a kiss, but...

Pregnancy has made me ungainly, and so all I can do is throw my arms around his waist. "I love you, Colin."

A flush stains my husband's high-boned cheeks when I pull away. It's terribly cute, but I can't let myself be distracted, especially with Adriano already crossing the street.

Please guide me, God.

Adriano reaches us in the next moment. His smile is courteous, but his eyes are haunted by pain.

"Hope. Colin." He nods stiffly to each of us. His face is a careful mask, but his eyes give him away. He's hurting.

"What a lovely surprise," I say. "We were just talking about you the other day, weren't we, Colin?"

Page 42

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:45 am

"We saw the news about your latest case," Colin affirms. "Congratulations."

Adriano's shoulders relax slightly. "Thank you."

"How have you been?" I ask, keeping my tone light. "We haven't seen you since the charity auction."

"The usual."

"And Shayla? We haven't had any contact with her since that evening either. She actually slept over in our place that night. Did you know?"

His jaw clenches. "Is that so?"

It's clear he doesn't believe me, and I completely understand, having learned a bit of his background from Shayla.

"Do you still have that photo of us three?" I ask Colin brightly.

My husband grimaces. "Unfortunately...yes." He takes his phone out and shows Adriano the photo of the three of us wearing animal-themed sheet masks just before heading to bed. More importantly, the photo comes with a date stamp, and seeing this has Adriano noticeably stiffening.

Mm.

Shayla wouldn't tell me why Adriano had fired her. But now I'm starting to realize

that it's possible for Shayla not to know the real reason as well.

I look at Adriano with a sheepish smile. "I hope she didn't arrive late at work the next day. It was just complete chaos that time. I had a bit of a false alarm with my pregnancy. Colin had to drive me to the hospital. We wanted to call a cab for Hope, but that's when our neighbor so very kindly offered her a ride."

"I believe you're acquainted with him," Colin murmurs. "Gilbert Schitt, the prosecutor?"

Adriano's face is starting to lose color, which I personally think is a good sign. Or at least I hope it is.

"He was on his way to the vet with Chip, his five-year-old Rottweiler," I go on to share. "The clinic's just a block away from your building."

"Chip is not what you'd call friendly, though." Colin's voice is so perfectly casual. I love it, and I love him. "He barks all the time and at everyone," my husband adds dryly, "and Gilbert tells us Shayla was not an exception."

"Poor Shayla," I say with a cluck of my tongue. "She really thought she could have Chip eating from the palm of her hand—" I snap my fingers, and both Colin and I notice the way Adriano jerks at the words. "—just like that."

Adriano looks like he might be sick, and my heart aches for him...and Shayla.

"I need to go." His voice is uneven. "Please excuse me."

Colin and I watch him walk away. I want to think this will mean they'll finally find their way back into each other's arms, but...what if Shayla's the one who's unable to forgive him?

I look up at my husband, asking, "What do you think will happen now?"

"I know what you want to happen," Colin says quietly, "and it's what I want, too. We've also done what we could. We've planted the seeds. But only God decides whether those seeds grow."

I just have to throw my arms around him again, and Colin chuckles even as he presses a kiss to the top of my head.

"I love you." My voice is muffled against the hard wall of his chest.

"I love you, too."

"I'm so, so glad you emailed me to be your bride."

"I didn't want to."

I pull away with a laugh, not at all offended because it's the truth.

"But..." Eyes that are the color of molten chocolate gleam down at me. "It's like what you love to say these days."

"Reformed rakes make the best husbands?" I quip with a teasing smile.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:45 am

Colin smiles even as he answers gravely, "God works in mysterious ways."

My heart melts, and when I tell him so, my husband only laughs.

Chapter Thirteen

ADRIANO

DELLBROOK, NEW JERSEY looks like it was left behind by time and economics decades ago. Boarded storefronts line the main street. Faded awnings hang over dusty windows. Cars from the previous century rust in driveways. The air smells of factory exhaust and defeat. It's a place that no one in his right mind would choose to live...and that makes Dellbrook also the perfect town to hide.

It took three private investigators and a small fortune to find Shayla here, of all places. Fifty miles and a universe away from Manhattan's glass towers and marble lobbies.

I lean against my Maserati—painfully conspicuous on this rundown street—and stare at the shabby building across from me. Peeling paint. Cracked windows. A hand-painted sign that reads "Dellbrook Community Legal Aid."

I'm going to rescue her from this dump. Bring her back to where she belongs. To me.

The door to the center opens, and people begin trickling out. I straighten, scanning faces, and then—

There she is.

Shayla emerges into the afternoon sunlight, surrounded by a small group of people. An elderly couple. A young mother with a toddler. A man in a worn uniform.

She's talking animatedly, hands gesturing as she explains something. And then she laughs, head thrown back, sunlight catching in her hair.

I've never seen her more beautiful. More peaceful. More...herself.

And that's when I realize I had it all wrong.

She's not the one who needs rescuing me. I do.

She's not the one who's trapped. I am.

It's me, not her, who's all the things I thought she would be, and it shames me to think how I could be so damn full of myself not to see that from the start.

On the day I had bumped into Colin and Hope, the couple had sent a package to my apartment. It was a Bible, of all things. My first Bible, too, to be honest. I had opened it to a random page, and even now I remember how my ego still had me so damn blind, that the verse I ended up reading didn't bother me one bit.

God opposes the proud but exalts the humble.

Page 44

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:45 am

It didn't make sense then. But it does now. Painfully and terrifyingly so.

Because the longer I watch her, the more I see the way she interacts so joyfully with the people around her, and how they dote on her in return—

I get it now, God.

While driving here, I had convinced myself that she had to forgive me. And that she needed me to rescue her from a place like Dellbrook. But now, it's just so damn clear.

I'm the poor one here, I realize numbly. Not her.

And if I truly loved Shayla, wouldn't it be better for her to be without—

"You're that famous lawyer, ain't you?"

I turn to find an elderly woman beside me, cigarette dangling from the corner of her mouth.

"I've been known to practice law."

"Hmph." She takes a long drag. "Seen you on the TV. That pharmaceutical case. Good work." Her gaze turns cunning. "You here for Shayla?"

"You know her?"

She looks at me disdainfully. "Everyone here knows her." The woman gestures

toward the building. "Place is run by volunteers. Offers free legal help to folks who can't afford fancy lawyers." She eyes me appraisingly. "She started volunteering after leaving some hotshot firm in the city. Said she needed to remember why she loved the law in the first place."

This woman clearly isn't the type to pull punches. Good for her. Hell for me. Because now I'm even more convinced that I just have to let her go—

God, is there truly no other way?

—if I truly love her.

"She's studying for the bar, too," the woman continues. "Gonna be a fine lawyer. Better than you, probably."

"There's no 'probably' about it," I say quietly. Shayla is better than me in every way. I just...I just wasn't as smart as Pietro. I didn't know I had a good one when I had it.

Across the street, the small crowd around Shayla has dispersed. She turns to my direction, and her body jerks, her face paling as soon as our gazes finally collide.

I'm sorry.

Because me just being here—it's discomfort that she doesn't deserve. She's already moved on, deservedly so, but here I am, ruining things for her again.

I'll just apologize, I tell myself doggedly, and then that's it.

Her face crumbles as I start to cross the street, and my heart does the same. I give her every chance to turn and walk away if that's what she wants, but Shayla remains perfectly still. She only watches me approach, eyes wide, hands clutching her bag like

a shield.

People around us step back, creating a small circle of privacy in the public space. Their protective stance tells me everything—they care about her. They know she's good.

While I, the idiot who've known her for nearly a decade, was so swift to condemn her.

"I'm sorry," I say hoarsely when I reach her. "For being the biggest idiot in the world. I'm sorry for—"

"Being traumatized?" she cuts me off, eyes brimming with tears.

What was she talking about?

"I won't deny how much you've hurt me," she whispers. "I won't deny I've been praying for God to help me stop loving you—"

Please don't answer her prayer, God.

"But do you know how He answered me?"

Page 45

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:45 am

You didn't have to ask? It's all part of the plan that Adriano Kontides live the rest of his life in torment?

"I received a call from Hope as soon as I finished praying," she says shakily. "And she told me..."

Ah.

"How you lost your mind because you were jealous of a dog."

I honestly wouldn't put it that way, but...

That was what it was.

And when Shayla actually starts laughing...

It can't be this easy, God.

It can't.

How can you not punish me for hurting someone like Shayla?

I wasn't expecting an answer. I didn't think I deserve one. But God...

God.

I'm finally starting to understand just how much He loves even cruel idiots like me as

I hear Him say, Forgive yourself, son. Just like Shayla and I've already forgiven You.

SHAYLA

The past two weeks have been hard. But bearable. I kept waiting for myself to lose hope. But I never did. I kept waiting for myself to start feeling alone again. But I never did. And most of all, I kept waiting for my heart to finally break into pieces. So I could start hating him and stop loving him. But none of those things happened either.

And it was only when I received Hope's call yesterday that everything became clear.

A dog, for goodness' sake!

A dog!

Adriano is one of East Coast's toughest and smartest litigators...and yet he still ended up dumping me because of a dog?

It made me laugh and cry while listening to my friend excitedly discuss her every hypothesis, all of which I also believe to be true.

Because I know my boss.

I've been working for him for eight-and-a-half years.

I know what makes him tick. What makes him smile. And most of all, I know what would make someone who's always been noble...do something so, so cruel out of the blue.

"I don't deserve your forgiveness."

His words make me want to laugh. And cry. I know there's a saying about how opposites attract, but I think in our case, it's the other way around. We're each other's mirror image, and it's why, even from the start, we've always understood each other.

Just like how I understand he's punishing himself the way I used to punish myself.

Needlessly.

I place one trembling hand on his cheek, and his big body shudders at my touch.

"We've both hurt each other because of our past, Adriano. But when it comes to what we've both said and done to each other?" A smile wobbles to my lips. "Everything we did, every day we've spent together, it was always good and beautiful. We were falling in love with each other from the first day we met. We just didn't know—"

His jaw suddenly clenches, and I stop speaking as fear gets the better of me.

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:45 am

Oh no. Oh please. Don't let there be another misunderstanding.

"You have it wrong."

"W-What do you mean?"

"When I look back on that day," Adriano says unsteadily, "I think I've always known."

It takes me a while to realize I was scared for nothing.

"The moment I saw you, somewhere in my heart, I knew—"

And I start to cry even as his hands settle on my waist as he slowly pulls me close.

"I've found the woman I want to spend the rest of my life with."

I close my eyes as he lowers his head. Our lips meet, and the whole world fades away.

This man...is my boss.

And someday, my husband.

But from the very start, he was the man God chose for me, and the man I'll love for the rest of my life.

Epilogue

SHAYLA

I STAND BEHIND THE heavy wooden doors, listening to the gentle melody of the string quartet filtering through. My heart is racing, but not out of nervousness. It's just that my joy is almost impossible to contain, my gratitude to God overflowing.

So much has changed in such a short time, and I know it's all because of Him. There's no longer a concern. I didn't even have time to wonder or worry if there's anything going on between them. I didn't even have to ask a single thing. That night we got back together, Adriano told me right away that he's dealt with Therese. Apparently, she tried asking him out again when we were apart, and because he already knew of his feelings by then, he had told her they could only be colleagues...since he was hoping to marry me, the woman he loved.

And yes, he said those exact words.

Lissa White is also joining our firm to reduce Adriano's workload. He wants to spend more time loving me and making babies, and yes, he did say those exact words, too. Even worse? He insisted on being quoted verbatim on this when we were interviewed.

Hope's pregnancy is showing now, and the amount of satisfaction her husband derives from this...is equally proportionate to the dissatisfaction I derive from how Chip continues to bark at me...while all it takes is one meeting with Adriano, and the traitor can't stop wagging his tail every time he sees my boss.

Grrr.

Needless to say, Chip's seal of approval means the world to Gilbert, and the former prosecutor and my future husband haven't just become fast friends since then. Both men also take the pleasure of siding with each other against me in legal debates.

Double grrr.

Or maybe I should say 'triple grrr' since that part about Gilbert being a former prosecutor? It's because he's now working with us, too, and he's even brought along a new client: Hollywood royalty Guy de la Rocq, who's in need of legal representation because of a woman Gilbert describes as the "unlikeliest" of fangirls.

Honestly, the past three weeks have been hectic and eventful, but I also wouldn't have it any other way. If we weren't so busy, I doubt Adriano and I would've been able to keep our vow of celibacy until our wedding night. Most people think we're crazy for making such a vow, but that's fine. We're doing it for God, not for anyone else. But be that as it may...

It's not easy. At all. And that's why holding hands is as far as we've allowed ourselves to do. Anything else is off-limits. We both know all it would take is the briefest of contacts for us to forget what we've promised. Temptation is something you flee from, not fight futilely against.

Last but not the least, I've registered for the bar exam. Finally. Next spring, I'll be Shayla Kontides, Esquire. A far cry from the frightened, defensive woman who hid behind a fake wedding ring for nearly a decade.

Well, eight and a half years, to be precise, but I think it's time I stop counting, with the doors in front of me finally parting open. It feels so symbolic, too, with a new chapter of my life that's about to begin, andooooh!

A choked laugh escapes me. The way everything's decorated is wonderfully familiar. It's straight out of my childhood sketches of my future wedding, which I'm sure Hope was quite happy to share with Adriano.

I slowly walk past a sea of familiar faces. Friends and colleagues, both old and new. Pietro's there, of course, and surprisingly still single. My parents, too, and they've even sworn not to quarrel. It's just for tonight, but I'll take it.

Nothing can ruin this evening for me, and oh, when I finally see him, my heartbeat just skyrockets.

My love.

Adriano looks perfectly dashing in his white tux, and my heart feels like it's about to burst when I see the way he's looking at me. The words I see in his eyes are exactly what I felt.

My love.

We truly are mirror images of each other, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

I take my first step down the aisle. Alone, or so it appears. But with each step, I feel His presence beside me, and it's humbling beyond words.

Thank You, God. Thank You.

If not for my Father in Heaven, none of this would be possible.

None of it.

Adriano reaches for my hand, I place mine in his, and everything feels so perfectly right.

"Hi," I croak out. I'm finally feeling nervous. But that's normal. Right?

"Hi." Adriano says this with mock gravity, and it's exactly what I need to hear. My nervousness disappears, and now I'm just struggling not to laugh.

This, I can't help thinking.

This is what love is all about.

ADRIANO

All my life, I've been an obnoxious jerk, making it clear to everyone that I had no need for my father's billions.

I was making enough money on my own as one of the East Coast's top lawyers, and this made me feel like I was everything.

But I know better now, of course.

Everything that I am is no accident. All of it are His gifts, all of it undeserved. And everything in my life is part of His plan, including my inheritance. I finally understood why I had so much money at my disposal, and its purpose now stands before me, a fully renovated building that a massive team in the hundreds had worked hard to complete in a short span of time.

Psalm 13 Community Center

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:45 am

It's my wedding gift for my bride of four hours, whom I've abducted from our simple Christian ceremony, and have kept blindfolded for the drive here.

"Can I take it off now?" Shayla asks, fingers fidgeting with the silk scarf covering her eyes.

"Go ahead."

She pulls the blindfold down, and the look on her face is priceless. Shock, confusion, then dawning understanding as she reads the sign. Her lips part, but no sound comes out.

"YOU'LL RUN OUR FOUNDATION from here." My own voice cracks as I say this. Because her dream has become my dream as well, and a part of me still finds it hard to believe how God's given us the privilege to serve Him this way.

"T-This..." Shayla shakes her head. "This is why you agreed to the interview."

"Yes." In exchange of allowing a society magazine to feature our wedding, they'll make a sizeable donation to Psalm 13.

"I can't believe this," Shayla whispers in a daze. "Is this really true? How will it work?"

"If someone comes here, they need to be okay with a thirty-minute talk with our in-

house pastor before they can receive help. All they have to do is listen. That's non-negotiable."

She's nodding at every word, and I'm glad. Every foundation has its own objective, and we're both standing firm on what's ours.

"It will have free daycare, legal counsel, medical consultations, counseling. For a start."

Shayla starts crying, tears spilling over her cheeks. "I've never heard anything hotter in my entire life."

I can only shake my head and laugh. She's lived just three weeks with Hope, and the effects are already showing, and most likely permanent.

"But this is just the first half of my gift."

Milos drives us back to my penthouse—our home now—and my wife looks at me in bemusement when I take her straight to the infinity pool. The night air is warm against our skin, and the pool's reflection is a fascinating mix of starry skies and city lights. I've had candles placed around its edge, their flames dancing in the gentle breeze.

Shayla's eyes widen when I slowly pull her close and reach for one of the delicate straps of her gown.

"A-Adriano?"

"Do you trust me?"

"No."

I laugh. "Liar." Because I'm already spinning her around, and she hasn't made the slightest effort to resist. Her body trembles as I reach for the zipper behind her back, and she lets out a whimper as she feels it slowly sliding down.

"But what if—"

"Trust me." I have my ways. No one will see us. It's guaranteed.

Her gown falls into a pool around her feet, and the sight of my bride down to her lacy underwear has me sucking my breath.

"You're beautiful, Mrs. Kontides."

"And embarrassed to death."

My lips curve in a smirk. "Good." And then I start taking off my clothes off in silence.

"What are you doing?" Shayla croaks out.

I turn her around in answer, and she gulps audibly at seeing all of me for the first time.

"A-Adriano..."

Page 49

Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 4:45 am

The sound of her whimper has me struggling for control. "Come here, love."

She moves toward me as if spellbound. And she's staring at my lips like they're the sweetest thing she's ever seen. It's a side of her that I know I alone will see, and the thought makes me feel fiercely possessive.

Mine.

This woman is mine, now and forever, and I will thank God for her every day of my life.

Shayla starts trembling again as I lead her to the pool steps. The water is warm as we descend, heated to the perfect temperature, and the water laps at our waists as we reach the middle.

I finally turn her around, and her body automatically melts against mine as her arms wrap around my neck. I cover her mouth in a kiss, and she sighs against my lips.

I keep it slow and gentle. Soft and tender. And only when I feel her sigh again do I take things to the next level.

Unclasping her bra from the back. And making my bride gasp as I rip her lace panties off with a yank.

"Adri—"

I don't let her finish, my mouth taking hers again in a kiss, but this time with my

tongue thrusting past her swollen lips.

Now is not the time to talk. Now is where we just feel. And love.

Her arms tighten around my neck when she feels me lift her up. Her breath hitches as I pose her above my throbbing length.

"I love you," I rasp out against her lips.

"I lo—" Her words end in a moan as I choose that exact moment to take her, my fingers digging into her sweet flesh as I pull her hips down until she's completely seated on my length.

Our bodies move in instinctive rhythm, her legs locking around my waist as I plunge deeper and harder with every thrust. Our breathing turns ragged, my mouth trailing down until I'm sucking on the side of her neck. She clutches my hair as my mouth continues its descent, and her grip tightens, my name falling past her lips in another moan as I start suckling on her nipples.

I want this to last as long as until we've both driven each other mad with need.

But the moment I hear her sob out—

"My love!"

The water around us laps violently as my control breaks. I'm taking her as hard as I can, every move of my body almost savage in its urgency and desire to make both of us reach for the stars at the same time.

"Shayla..." I growl her name out so she can look into my eyes and see the truth.

She's all I want. All I feel. She's the girl I've been designed to wait my entire life.

"I love you..."

She shatters in my arms with a cry, and I'm right behind her.

This, I can't help thinking.

This is how it should be, when you truly love someone, heart, body, and soul.

The End