



# The Neighbor's Son

**Author:** K. Webster

**Category:** Erotic, Romance, Adult

**Description:** Getting dumped was rough.

Losing the baby? Heartbreaking.

Now I'm thirty-six, single, and stuck in a body I barely recognize.

Clara says I need fresh air and a fling.

I wasn't expecting the fresh air to come with a stolen cat...

Or him.

Brayden Foss.

My sweet, quiet neighbor.

Freshly eighteen.

My landlord's son.

Totally off-limits.

But he's not a boy.

He cooks for me, looks at me like I'm everything, and shows up when no one else does.

Even when I push him away.

It was never supposed to be more than a spark.

But this thing between us?

It's real. It's wild. It's ours.

**Total Pages (Source):** 50

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 9:23 am*

Casey

Two years down the drain.

I wait for the tears to come, but they're all dried up. I've cried so much for Derek, the baby we lost, and the deterioration of our once-great relationship.

Now I'm just numb.

Most of Derek's things fit easily into the bed of his truck. He's leaving me with all of the furniture we acquired while together and essentially taking only his clothes in the drawers and closet. Since he's so neat, and doesn't collect things like I do, it'll be as if he were never here.

My gut hollows out and bile creeps up my throat.

At one time, I might've obsessed over possibly being pregnant again, but I've just come off my period. Plus, the last time we had sex was right before the miscarriage three months ago. The nausea is just from being sick at the situation we've found ourselves in.

I pushed too hard on everything—wanting to move in together, wanting to get married, wanting to have a baby. The only thing we accomplished was the first, and now that's gone.

“Take care of yourself,” Derek says, unable to meet my eyes. “I'll be around if you need me.”

The man isn't a bad one. He's good to his core. It's just, the more I spiraled from the pain of our loss, the further he drifted from me. Our last several weeks have been nothing but shouting matches that always ended with me crying, and ultimately, him breaking it off with me.

"I'm sorry," I manage to mutter, giving him a half wave. "I wish..."

He flashes me a grim smile. "I know. Me too. Bye, Casey."

The somber finality in his words makes my throat clog up with emotion. I manage a nod and then watch him climb into his pickup truck. Derek, the man I thought I'd spend my life with, drives away, leaving me empty and heartbroken.

With a heavy sigh, I head back inside, noting how it already feels lonely without him. Tapping on the backdoor, though, jolts me out of my terrible mood. My friend, and one of the other neighbors here at Moonlit Gables, grins at me through the glass. I can't help but smile back at her.

Clara has been my rock the past few months. We're so different it's not even funny, but I'm grateful for our friendship.

"Let's walk," she says when I open the door for her. "You told me to hold you accountable. This is me doing that."

The last thing I want to do is walk the trail that circles the ponds and gardens at our townhome complex. I'd rather crawl into bed, sniff Derek's pillow, and pretend this breakup never happened.

"Raincheck?"

Clara snorts. "Nope. Put your shoes on."

Seeing Clara is a reminder that I do want to walk, even if I don't feel like it today. She's slim, has curves in the right places, and actually has muscles. Men do a double take when she walks by.

Meanwhile, I put on weight with the pregnancy and continued to gain even after I lost the baby. I've jumped several sizes in clothing from my usual size eight to eighteen. Even though Derek says our breakup has nothing to do with my weight gain, my self-esteem disagrees.

Nah, Casey, he broke up with you because you're a nutcase, not because you've had a fixation with gummy worms and Oreo's for the past few months.

I grumble, ignoring Clara's giggles, as I shove my feet into my sneakers. "Today is not really the best day."

"Because Derek moved out?" She shakes her head. "It's because of that you do need to get out and walk. It'll make you feel better."

We exit my townhome onto my back patio. Off to the left, I can see Travis's Dr. Pepper can wall hiding the view there. Maggie, who lives between us, doesn't understand boundaries. I'm sure now that Savvy has gone to live with him and Travis, she's really been on "nosy neighbor alert."

"Get back here, you bad cat!"

An orange cat leaps off Maggie's back patio and darts under my wooden deck to hide from the woman. Clara snags my arm and hurries me toward the walking trail, so we don't get swept up into a conversation with Maggie. The lady is kind of mean and demanding, so I'm not mad to make our escape.

Once we make it to the trail, and are far enough from earshot of Maggie, we take a

minute to stretch. I try not to be envious of Clara's flat stomach that peeks out at me when she raises her arms over her head. Instead, I tug at the T-shirt I stole from Derek, hoping to hide the growing bloat in my stomach. I have got to stop stress eating sour gummy worms.

"A man asked for a happy ending today," Clara tells me once we start walking. "If I had a dollar for every time that's happened to me, I'd be rich."

I grimace at her words. "What did you say?"

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 9:23 am*

“I said I’d be more than happy to call his wife and ask her if she would like to come take care of that for him.” Clara smirks at me. “He left in a rush after that. Asshole.”

Clara and I both work on people’s bodies. Hers is for relaxation and mine is for therapy. I’ve done therapy on a ton of men, mostly athletes, and not one has been inappropriate toward me. But, then again, I’m not a knockout like Clara.

I’m just me.

As she yammers on about work, I stare down at my breasts that bounce with each step I take. The good thing about my weight gain has been my bigger boobs. I try to see that as something positive rather than focus on what I hate about myself. Plus, my boobs make it to where I don’t have to see my stomach when I look down.

It’s just the mirror that reminds me.

We round the bend, passing the complex office where Reid’s probably inside working, and slow down when we hear a heated discussion taking place. Sure enough, Tammy and Joel, the couple from unit ten, are on their patio arguing for the whole complex to hear.

“You’re addicted to porn, Joel, and it’s ruining our marriage!”

Clara snaps her head at me, eyes wide and mouth in a gaping “o” shape. “They are so loud.”

I try not to listen, but it’s hard not to.

“It’s the only action I’ve seen in months,” Joel bites back. “How about you dust off the cobwebs and have sex with your husband? Maybe then I won’t have to resort to my hand so much.”

Tammy is chain-smoking on her vape, the cherry-scented clouds floating their way over to us. “We had sex the other day. You’re so dramatic.”

When she locks eyes on me, her demeanor changes. Then, as if she needs to claim her balding, portly husband, she rushes over to him and throws her arms around him.

He’s stiff at first and then the two of them start sloppily making out, only pausing long enough for Tammy to hit her vape and smirk victoriously at us.

“I’m still not over her accusing me of sleeping with Joel,” Clara says bitterly as we hurry past their public display of affection. “Seriously. I have taste. Joel is...absolutely not my flavor.”

I know what her flavor is.

Travis.

But that only happened once, and he’s avoided her ever since. Now, I’m pretty sure he and Cole both are sleeping with the new girl, Savvy.

“Do you think anyone’s moved in yet?” Clara asks, pointing to unit nine. “It seems like Gordon’s kids have been cleaning out his stuff for over a month now. Reid’s too nice if you ask me. He should have told them they had thirty days tops so he could rent it out again.”

She abandons the trail to walk over to Gordon’s back patio. His outdoor furniture is gone. It’s sad he passed away, though I didn’t really know him.

“It’s empty,” Clara says, motioning for me to come over. “Look.”

Unlike Clara who is full of boundless energy, I’m already breaking a sweat and huffing for air due to being out of shape. I climb the steps and then peek into the window.

“It’s going to take a lot to get that place looking good,” I murmur as I take in the yellow-stained walls. Gordon smoked the real stuff unlike Tammy and her sugary-sweet vape juice.

Someone steps into the living room from the hallway, causing me and Clara both to scream in surprise. The person whips their head our way at the commotion.

“Oh my God,” Clara says through the window. “You scared the shit out of us, Brayden!”

He waves to us, flashing a friendly smile, as he carries a couple of paint cans. If he says something to us, I don’t know what it is because I nearly trip over my own two feet trying to get back to the walking trail. For some reason, I’m flustered at having been caught by the landlord’s son.

“Brayden will be legal soon,” Clara teases, tugging on my elbow when she makes it to my side. “He’s cute. Perfect distraction to help you forget Derek.”

Heat burns at my cheeks. The last thing I need right now is another man. Or, boy, in this case. Not happening.

“That was embarrassing,” I grumble.

“We weren’t doing anything wrong, Casey. Lighten up.”



I start power walking, needing to put distance between me and Brayden. His smile is always so bright and contagious, and I always easily returned it. For some reason, today, it unnerves me. Most likely because of Clara's "Brayden will be legal soon" comment. My face heats up again much to my annoyance.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 9:23 am*

“Are you going to his party? Reid told me everyone is invited,” Clara says, easily staying in step with my quicker pace. “You could probably use a little socializing.”

“I socialize with you.”

She nudges me with her elbow. “I don’t count.”

“I do it at work, too.”

“That really doesn’t count. Come on. Maybe we’ll see Travis and Cole. I’ll lure Travis back into my bed. You can bang the cop.”

I snort out a laugh, and quite frankly, it feels good to do it. “We’re not banging either of them. For one, Cole is friends with Derek. Secondly, I think they’re tag teaming Savvy.”

She stumbles to a stop. “Seriously? Their dead best friend’s daughter? But she’s like a teenager.”

“Eighteen. Same as Brayden in a few days.” I arch an eyebrow at her to argue. “Guess we don’t need to go to the party now.”

“Nice try,” she says with a smirk. “We’re going. Besides, I need to see if it’s true.”

I think Travis is just an infatuation. Clara tends to want things she shouldn’t have. Since he wasn’t interested after their one-night stand, it only made her want him more. I hope one day she can find a guy who truly appreciates her for her and not just

someone to be used for a good time.

We speed walk past Linda's house, so we don't get roped into babysitting her two little monsters. Finally, we make it to Clara's place. I follow her inside where she pops open a bottle of wine.

The walking was just an excuse to get me out of the house.

This is where she really wanted me. Truth is, it's where I want to be too. I gratefully accept the glass and take a sip. It's probably about as bad for me as the gummy worms I'm addicted to, but it's much needed on this terrible day.

We settle on her sofa, kick off our shoes, and spend the next several hours talking about the good, the bad, and the ugly that is my life.

I'm going to move on from Derek. I have to. Somehow, in the past couple of years, I've lost myself. No wonder Derek was done with me. The Casey he fell for in the beginning is not the Casey I am now.

I'm not sure the hurt of losing the baby, and a good man, will ever go away, but I have to keep going. I will keep going.

As I accept another glass of wine and warmth buzzes through me, I am filled with a fresh wave of hope. It's something I haven't felt in many months.

I will find love again one day.

Maybe I'll even get that family I ached for too.

Until then, I'm going to focus on being happy.

It's long overdue.

Brayden

Sometimes Dad tries a little too hard to make up for Mom's neglectful tendencies. This whole birthday party he's throwing me is kind of embarrassing. There's no better way to broadcast what a lonesome loser you are than to have your dad invite all your neighbors in lieu of actual friends.

The one real friend I have here was an arranged friendship that Dad organized for me.

Seriously, why am I so fucking awkward when it comes to people?

My phone buzzes and I snatch it from my pocket, eager to do something with my hands. Standing around waiting for people to arrive is too much for my nerves. I don't like being on display. I like to observe rather than be the one being watched.

Savvy: I'm so sorry I'm going to miss your party. Got called into work. I'm still new, so I don't want to make Aiden or Vale mad.

I deflate now that even my arranged friend can't make it.

What if the only person to show up is Dad?

Can we just go to dinner at my favorite diner instead like I originally wanted to do?

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 9:23 am*

“Someone looking for a keg?”

The deep voice belongs to one of the beer bros. I smirk because Kevin and his brother Tyler are the kings of beer. While they’re older than me and way more social, I do like them. I’m even more grateful at least someone other than my dad will be here.

“Wow, a keg?” I smirk at Kevin. “You seriously overestimate my ability to draw a crowd.”

Kevin saunters in, flip flops smacking the linoleum, dragging a keg on a dolly behind him. He’s wearing a pink shirt that says, “I’m a Barbie girl,” that’s a few sizes too small. My guess is one of the chicks he parties with left it at his house on the floor and he put it on, far too lazy to hunt for something in his own closet. It amazes me how the beer bros have a steady stream of women. Still working out that mystery in my head.

Dad abandons the food table where he’s been obsessively fanning out cheese slices to greet Kevin. “Thanks, man. I owe you one.”

“Remember that when rent is late again.” Kevin flashes his most charming grin.

Dad must be nervous because he nods in agreement before stalking back over to the food table.

I love my dad. He’s a great parent, but he’s more than that. When Mom left to pursue having a new family, he filled in the void, sometimes going overboard with attention and interaction with me. As a result, I think of him as my best friend. Which, in turn,

makes me feel like a loser. Again.

Maybe I should take Kevin and Tyler up on their numerous offers and actually go to one of their parties. I could connect with people on my own, without needing Dad to facilitate for me.

Tyler drags in a few minutes later. I'm pretty sure he has vomit on his shirt and probably didn't shower. I think the beer bros are enrolled in college, but no one really knows for sure if they actually attend or not.

Cole and Travis show up next. Travis still wears his electrician uniform, having not changed after work, and grins when he sees me. Cole, a serious cop and my dad's best friend—who he's not related to—is stoic as he follows. The two of them are dating Savvy. At the same time. If I knew her better, I would ask more questions about their relationship dynamics. It's intriguing, but if I'm being honest, would seem overwhelming if you were in it.

I can barely make friends, much less satisfy two people at the same time.

Do they have sex together all at once?

Cole extends his hand, and I shake it, face burning hot. He's used to seeing right through people's crap because of his job. I wonder if he knows what I was just thinking about.

Think about anything else, man.

Anything else.

"Happy birthday, kid," Cole says, expression giving nothing away. "Savvy felt horrible she couldn't come. She said she'll take you to lunch one day soon to make

up for it.”

“No problem,” I assure him.

Is my face still red as a tomato?

As people arrive, I’m forced to mingle and talk. Since most of the guests are tenants at Moonlit Gables, I know these people. At least talking about Gordon’s death and the updates needed for his unit keep me from thinking about sex positions that Cole and Travis partake in.

People have brought presents which makes me uncomfortable. I don’t need or want anything. Do I open them in front of them or do I take them home to look at later? What’s the protocol?

I’m fidgeting, wondering about the gift situation, when two women arrive. I immediately recognize them. Clara and Casey. Clara, our neighborhood gossip, flits around like a butterfly to each group, hugging and laughing with people. Casey hangs back.

Casey is my next-door neighbor.

I feel guilty that I was glad to learn Derek moved out. Their fighting got worse and worse as time went on, penetrating through their walls and into my room. It was maddening to listen to.

But now they’ve split, and Casey is...lost.

She bites on her glossy bottom lip, shifting from foot to foot. Lately, I’ve only seen her outside wearing a T-shirt and leggings. Today, she looks great in a pair of fitted jeans and a mauve-colored off-the-shoulder top that accentuates her nice breasts. Her

blond hair has been curled in loose waves and pulled over one shoulder.

Derek really lost out on a beautiful woman.

I have the overwhelming urge to go talk to her—like maybe I could make her smile. It's strange when my legs start moving on their own accord. My heart hammers in my chest as I worry about looking like a damn fool in front of this woman.

What if she laughs at me for striking up a conversation?

I stop when I'm close enough to reach out and touch her. I don't. Instead, I inhale her sweet, perfumed scent. It's a lovely smell—like the tiger lilies that grow all around the complex ponds.



## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 9:23 am*

“Hey,” I say, voice sounding gritty and hardly audible from lack of use. I clear my throat and try again. “Hey.”

She snaps her head up and meets my gaze. Her blue eyes, though clouded with pain, are brilliant and bright. I find myself marveling at how they glitter with the reflecting lights.

“Hey,” she says, voice soft. “Happy birthday.”

Her cheeks turn red, and she cuts her eyes away from me. I reach up and awkwardly rub at the back of my neck. This seemed easier in my head. Now that I’m here, I don’t know what to say to her.

“Thanks for coming,” I blurt out, lamely.

“Of course.”

Okay, this sucks. I’m the worst conversationalist. She probably wants me to go the fuck away.

And yet...I can’t move.

“You look beautiful.”

You look beautiful?

Am I just blurting out random thoughts now?

What the actual fuck?

Her head jerks back up and she frowns at me. “What?”

She’s going to make me say it again.

Fuck.

“I, uh, said you look beautiful.” My skin is hot, and I feel like a moron. “Is that okay for me to say that?”

She crosses her arms over her chest and all it does is make her breasts smash together, highlighting the cleavage. Like an idiot, I lick my lips. And thank God for baggy jeans because I’m pretty sure my cock is filling with blood right now, growing uncomfortably hard.

“Yeah,” she murmurs. “I just, thought maybe I misunderstood.”

Not sure how she can get confused. Surely, she sees herself in the mirror each morning. Probably has people tell her all damn day.

“How was work?” Again, I really, really suck at talking. Kill me now. “Any good cases?”

Thankfully, she brightens at my question. “It’s great. I love helping people. Physical therapy is a great way to hear people’s stories. It’s very intimate, you know?”

All I can do is focus on how her pretty lips move and words come out. How do men survive when she’s their physical therapist? The idea of her dainty hands rubbing all over me is enough to have me stifling a groan.

“Cool,” I mutter.

Cool?

If only my legs would move, and I could run far away from my stupid mouth.

“Yeah.” She tucks a blonde strand of hair behind her ear and looks at me from beneath her thick lashes. “How’s painting going?”

At least she’s throwing me a bone. Literally. I clasp my hands over my crotch, so she doesn’t notice.

“It’s going to need a few coats,” I tell her as I think about Gordon’s old place. “It reeks of smoke. I’m going to have to rip up all the carpet too.”

Is she bored to tears yet?

Why is she lingering when I’m so fucking bad at carrying on a normal conversation?

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 9:23 am*

“Sounds intense.”

I nod because this chat with her is intense. Being so close to her I can smell her scent is intense. Staring down at her sexy cleavage is intense.

“Want a drink?” I ask, voice gritty again. “Kevin brought a keg. Can’t promise it’ll taste good.”

“You’re still a baby,” she says, lips curling into a teasing smile. “And there are police here. You sure you can drink?”

Her teasing puts me at ease. Playfully, I scratch at my jaw with my middle finger. This makes her giggle which makes me grin.

Okay, man, this is better.

Relax.

I motion for her to follow me, and my legs begin working again. Once at the keg, I fill a red solo cup with the warm beer and hand it to her. Her fingers brush against mine sending jolts of electricity through me.

With heat burning my face, I hide my reaction to our touch to fill up my own cup. It’s a long enough distraction to hide my obvious attraction to her.

Casey Monroe is way out of my league.

Flirting with her is just cruel to my heart.

Is that what we're doing? Flirting?

Poor Savvy. Little does she know, I'm about to unload this entire evening on her later because I need advice. I don't date girls because they're not interested in the quiet, awkward guy with no life. I certainly don't date women.

Casey is all woman.

When she's been with a good looking, muscular guy like Derek, it'd be stupid to think she'd downgrade to someone like me.

"So," she says and then sips her beer.

"So," I mimic. "I'm sorry. If you want to go talk to someone normal, go ahead."

She giggles again. The sound is sweet and genuine. I want to hear it a lot more. It's better than the crying I sometimes hear coming from her place.

"You're funny." She glances over at Clara who's flirting heavily with Travis, but he's clearly not interested. "I'd rather be talking to you. Clara is making it her mission for me to get over Derek." Her shoulders tense up. "Sorry. I know you don't want to talk about that."

"I want to talk about whatever you want to talk about," I say too quickly. God, I sound so desperate. "I mean, or whatever."

She flashes me a grateful smile. "You're sweet."

Funny. Sweet. Datable?

“Now that you’re officially an adult,” Savvy says, “what are your big plans? You graduate soon. College? Trade school?”

The hope I had flaring inside of me is dashed by her questions.

I have no big plans.

I’m not going to college like she did.

I’ll still be doing the same thing I’m doing, but without school, I can do it full time.

“My cat is missing,” Maggie announces from the doorway as she enters. “Brayden, I need your help.”

I’ve never been so grateful for that old woman in my entire life.

For once, her interruption is welcomed.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 9:23 am*

Casey

Meow.

I have a cat now.

A stolen cat.

My little stowaway zipped inside when I came home last night, finding refuge under my bed. It was the same cat I'd seen running from Maggie the other day. It was also the one she was later searching for, stealing the birthday boy away from me when he went to help.

Boy is right.

I can't believe I allowed myself to flirt with him. Clara's influence is ridiculous. Listening to her has embarrassing consequences.

Like enjoying conversation with Brayden Foss, eighteen years my junior.

His attention, while welcome and sweet, was inappropriate. Sure, he's a legal adult now, but just barely. He's my landlord and neighbor's son. It has "mistake" written all over it.

You're just lonely, Casey.

As if conjured up by my thoughts, the cat hops onto my bed and sits on my stomach.

His purring is soothing. I scratch him behind the ears and smile.

“Maggie has a lot of cats,” I agree, like I can read his mind. “No wonder you wanted to escape. You know I have to put you out, though. You’re not mine.”

He meows in protest. His glittery green eyes are intelligent as he stares me down. I feel bad that he has to share a home with a bunch of other cats he clearly doesn’t want to be around.

“I’ll talk to her,” I vow, already dreading that conversation.

Satisfied, he climbs off my stomach and stretches, orange tail swishing back and forth. He keeps me company as I get ready for work, and when I grab breakfast, he gets a few bites along with a bowl of milk. When I finally open the door to leave, he bolts, not giving me a chance to walk him over to Maggie.

He’s a survivor.

I smother a silly giggle as I head out the door. I’ve always enjoyed my job. It helps that the man who runs the physical therapy clinic, Drew, is a good friend, too. My patients are who have kept me out of my depressed state, giving me the will to keep plugging along.

They need my help, and I love helping them.

By the time I arrive, the place is already hopping, patients crowding the small waiting area. I’m not late, but with some of the looks I’m getting, you’d think I was. I flash the group a friendly smile and then head to the back to put away my purse in the break room.

Drew is leaned against the counter, an eyebrow hiked up, as his woman, Sophia, yaps



at him. Not many people like Sophia, because she's a grumpy old man in a young woman's body, but Drew seems to enjoy her fire.

"You done, crybaby?"

She gives him the finger and limps off. He smirks at me in triumph.

"A little too busy to be flirting with your baby dragon," I tease as I stuff my purse in a cabinet. "I wouldn't want to have to tell the boss you're fraternizing with the employees."

Drew snorts. "Sophia doesn't work hard enough to be considered an employee. And at least I was here early. Your boss should fire you, Monroe."

We both grin and then get to work.

The first part of the day is so busy I don't have time to obsess over my conversation with Brayden. During lunch, though, when I'm heating up a Lean Cuisine in a desperate attempt to eat healthy, I can't help but let my mind replay last night.

He's just a kid.

Not anymore...

I'd looked at him as a man for the first time. Though nothing like Derek, who's broad and muscular, there was something truly appealing about Brayden's lean but tall body and adorable smile.

A lot of men are sure in their advances with women, but he was so awkward it was endearing. Honestly, it was refreshing to not be the one with all the confidence issues.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 9:23 am*

It was also really cute when his face would turn red.

I wolf down my tasteless food and hurry back out to greet my next patient. Riko Valentine scowls, long legs sprawled out in front of him, as he sits in a waiting chair.

This is the second time this week to see Riko. He recently suffered a grade II hamstring strain, and like every teenager, is in a hurry to get back to the soccer field. Unfortunately, the human body doesn't work on sheer willpower alone. His injury wasn't severe enough for surgery, but he'll need repeat sessions to get him back to where he needs to be.

"You got to leave school early," I say, gesturing for one of the therapy tables. "Why are you pouting?"

He grunts as he slowly rises to his feet, not bending his right knee. As much as he tries to hide it, I notice the slight grimace of pain.

"I'm not pouting," he states, voice booming, as he limps over to the table. "Just over this shit."

An elderly woman recovering from wrist surgery frowns at his language. I would usher him into one of the private rooms because he's so loud, but they're all full.

"I know," I tell him kindly. "We're going to get you fixed in no time."

Once he settles on the table, I begin working on him with a soft tissue mobilization massage. With gentle movements, I knead the tightness in his hamstring. This will

help with the blood flow so we can stretch it in a bit.

“Fuuuuuuck,” he cries out. “You’re a sadist, woman.”

I can’t help but laugh. “I’ve barely started. Don’t be a baby.”

He grits his teeth, thankfully keeping his big mouth shut for a minute, as I increase my massage intensity. I know he wants to get back to playing soccer, but he’s in a lot of pain. Unless we address the issue and get it to heal, he’ll only make things worse.

Eventually, I’m able to reduce some of the stiffness in his hamstring. Now on to the next part.

“I want you to relax while I stretch you,” I instruct. “Don’t tense up, even if it hurts. I’ll go slowly.”

I start with a straight leg raises stretch and slowly lift his leg until his face twists in pain.

“Too much.” He curses again, earning a few more nasty looks. “Why are you so cruel?”

I roll my eyes. “I’m not taking it past what you can handle. We’re going to hold it here for a few seconds. All we’re doing is lengthening the muscle.”

Sophia grabs a rolling chair and wheels it over to us. Riko groans again, this time because of her.

“A sadist and a psychopath. What do I owe the honor?” he grumbles. “Seriously, don’t you have other people to torment?”

Sophia laughs. “No way. I only torment babies and you’re the only one crying right now.”

“Not crying.”

Drew stalks over to us, grabs the back of Sophia’s chair, and wheels her over to his office. Riko praises Drew for being “the real MVP.”

The next half hour he curses at me and his stupid leg, but by the end, when I’m no longer pushing his muscles to their limits, he’s back to his happy self.

“Hope to see you never, Casey,” he says as he leaves.

Our receptionist, Jenna, grins evilly at him. “Sorry to burst your bubble, but you’re scheduled for the day after tomorrow.”

We both laugh as he leaves, shooting us the bird.

Work is fun. If only I could stay here all day. It’s when I go home, everything is hard.

The house is so quiet.

Not that Derek was an especially noisy man. There’s a certain emptiness that I can’t seem to fill with just me. It sucks. Really sucks.

When I walk inside, though, a blur of orange darts past my feet, once again hiding out at my place.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 9:23 am*

This is becoming a problem.

He meows from the kitchen, waiting on me to serve him. With a groan, I follow the presumptuous cat to where he sits by the refrigerator.

“Got a taste for milk and now you’re an addict.” I laugh as I make him a small bowl. Since I don’t have cat food, he gets a can of tuna. “You can’t stay here forever, little dude.”

But what if he did?

It would sure fill the empty void Derek left.

Someone knocks on my back door, and I scream in surprise. Nothing can deter the cat from his feast, though, and he continues to happily eat.

I make my way over to the door and nearly trip over my own two feet when I see Brayden peeking in through the window.

My skin flashes hot and I absently tug at my shirt, wondering if it looks too tight. There’s not much I can do to make myself feel or look better between here and answering the door, so I resign myself to not worry about it.

Easier said than done.

“Hey,” I say, opening the door a crack. “What’s up?”

Brayden arches an eyebrow and smirks. “I think you know what’s up.”

Meow.

I close my eyes and groan, knowing I’ve been caught. “To my defense, I didn’t invite him.”

Brayden laughs. “Now that I know you’re harboring a fugitive, can I come in?”

Brayden Foss in my house?

Wouldn’t be the first time. He’s fixed a few things in the past, some by himself and some with Reid.

But now...

Now it feels different.

“Uh, sure,” I say a little too breathlessly. “You can try and wrangle this cat since he doesn’t listen to me.”

I move aside so Brayden can enter. As he passes, I get a whiff of his clean scent. Then, my thoughts wickedly travel to thoughts of him having just showered.

Do. Not. Think. About. That.

My skin is on fire from embarrassment. What is it about Brayden that gets me all flustered?

“Well,” Brayden says as he squats beside the cat to scratch its head, “if it isn’t the notorious Mo himself. Your human is looking for you, man.”

Mo meows as if to complain.

“She calls him Mean One, or Mo for short.” Brayden looks up at me, a cute smile on his face. “He seems pretty sweet to me.”

“I don’t think Mo likes it there,” I tell him, scrunching my nose. “She has so many cats. So. Many. Surely, she won’t miss one.”

He scoops Mo into his arms and stands. The cat protests with loud meows, but doesn’t try to get away, instead, enjoying the scratches Brayden gives him. I can’t help but step closer so I can pet Mo too.

“Dad says she has too many,” he says, deep voice vibrating over my skin. “They bicker about it a lot.”

“You hear that, Mo?” I say, leaning forward to kiss the cat. “Maybe you can come live with me instead.”

When I lift my eyes, Brayden is watching me with unguarded intensity. My confidence may be low, but our attraction to each other is undeniable. Of course, the first guy I feel a spark for would be the neighbor’s son.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 9:23 am*

I bite down on my bottom lip, snared in his stare. His eyes drop to my mouth and his cheeks turn a lovely pink. Mine are probably just as red.

Being around Brayden Foss is dangerous to my sanity.

He chases away the cloud of depression that's been hanging over me, filling my chest with warmth.

An inexperienced young man and a heartbroken older woman is a recipe for disaster. It's a perfect storm for two people, who have no business being together, to fall in love.

It'll only end in catastrophe.

Someone needs to be the adult around here and end it before it begins.

"You should take Mo home now," I murmur, voice raspy, barely audible over Mo's purring. "I'm sure Maggie is worried."

Brayden lingers, eyes still hyper focused on my lips. "But you'll be sad if we go."

And if you stay, it'll make me happy.

The last thing I need is another man to fill the place of the one I lost.

It's unfair and cruel to the both of us.



“Bye, Brayden.”

He gives me a soft smile. “See you around, Casey.”

I really hope I do.

Brayden

Last night was...charged.

When Casey kissed the cat, I'd hoped she would kiss me next. But then, she sent me away, almost as if it pained her to do so.

It's been killing me ever since.

I'm not crazy. Casey, for some reason, is attracted to me.

Why does Savvy have to work so much? I could really use someone to talk to. That person can't be Dad, either. He'll tell me it's a mistake to crush over our neighbor and I'm sure he'll have a multitude of reasons why.

She's much older than me.

Her heart is freshly broken.

The woman is clearly going through some things.

But none of that bothers me. In fact, I want to talk to her about the things that have hurt her in the past. I'm a good listener and I think Casey just needs to talk.

So how do I get her to open up to me?

Meow.

Mo stands at the door at Gordon's old unit, swishing his tail. I grin at the silly cat and abandon my trim work. Once outside, I scoop him into my arms.

"Want to go see our girl?" I ask him.

He purrs loudly, giving me my answer.

I close the door, and we set out on a discreet path to Casey's, avoiding any areas that Maggie might see me with her cat. Once I reach Casey's back door, I angle myself to keep Mo hidden.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 9:23 am*

“Brayden,” Casey’s eyes are wide as she takes in the cat in my arms. “What are you doing?”

I flash her a conspiratorial grin. “Mo wanted to visit. We’re on a clandestine mission. Let us in.”

She smothers a laugh as she hurriedly ushers us in. “Quick before she sees.”

After we’re safely inside, I pass her the cat. She’s all smiles as she cuddles him.

“I got you some presents today, Mo,” she says in a singsong voice.

Mo meows happily.

She sets the cat down and then leaves the kitchen. We follow after her up the stairs. In the bathroom, she’s set up a litter box and two small bowls. One is filled with water and the other has dry cat food in it.

“This is all yours for when you visit,” she tells Mo. “I have toys for you too in the living room.”

The cat sniffs at the litterbox. We take our cue to leave, letting him have his own space to do his business. As we exit, I glance into the guest room. What I see makes my heart ache for Casey.

It’s a nursery.

Unable to stop myself, I step inside, taking in the pretty shade of mint green on the walls.

“I know we’re not supposed to paint,” she utters quickly. “I’m sorry. I’ll paint it back white.”

I turn to look at her. “It looks nice. Don’t change it.”

Her eyes water and she looks down at her feet. “I might as well. It won’t happen. Not now.”

My gut twists as if I can feel the pain inside of her at this very second. Unable to stop myself, I approach her and tenderly stroke her cheek.

I just... I don’t know.

I want to make her happy.

Her sadness is so heavy. Maybe I can share it with her to lighten the load.

“You and Derek are over, but it doesn’t mean it won’t happen again for you,” I tell her firmly. “You deserve everything you want in this life.”

She gives me a watery smile but then bottom her lip starts to tremble. And, like a dam giving way under the weight of a river, she hunches in on herself and sobs.

I can’t stop myself and pull her into my arms. She’s warm and soft and smells like salty sadness. Can I hold her until she’s better? How long will that take? I’m a patient man.

At first, she’s stiff, but then she melts against me. I stroke her back, whispering sweet

words of encouragement as she cries. She goes from leaning on me to clinging to me. It's an honor to be able to give this to her.

"What can I do?" I murmur. "Tell me so I can make it better."

"You're already doing it. God, I'm so embarrassed, but I needed a good cry."

She doesn't need to be embarrassed. If anyone should be, it's me. I'm so addicted to this woman who's out of my reach, and yet, I swipe the air, longing for her anyway.

Maybe I'm a stalker.

"Thank you." She sniffles and pulls back, lifting her chin so I can see her pretty, tear-streaked face. "You're a good man."

My chest puffs out a bit. I'm so used to being Reid's kid that I forget sometimes people see me as my own man. Of all people I want to do this, Casey is at the top of my list.

Unable to keep from touching her, I reach up and use my thumb to swipe her cheek. Her lashes flutter at the gentle touch. I make note to do more of these things that seem to please her.

"Want to stay over for dinner? Maybe watch a movie?"

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 9:24 am*

I flash her a crooked grin. “Hell yeah.”

We exit the room, and she shuts the door behind us. I stupidly let myself think of myself one day in that room, rocking our baby to sleep. It’s impulsive and crazy to think like that, but I can’t help it.

Casey is the ideal woman a man could want.

The woman I want.

She’s beautiful and has a job she loves. Sweet, kind, funny. I still think Derek was a fool to leave her behind.

Don’t worry, I’ll take care of her.

And that starts with dinner.

I stare at the frozen lasagna she pulls out, frowning. “That might take a while. You want me to cook for you?”

She smiles. “Really? I hate frozen food but that’s all I really eat.”

This woman eats frozen crap and hates it. Luckily for her, I’m the cook at my house. Dad, too, would eat frozen if it weren’t for me.

“Let’s see what you have, ba—” Heat burns hot on my cheeks as I stop myself from blurting out babe.

Thankfully, she doesn't act weird about it, instead moves out of my way so I can rummage through her fridge and cabinets. Since she doesn't have much to work with, I have to get creative.

"I'll run by the store tomorrow so I can make you something really good," I tell her as I start cutting up some sausage. "I'll improvise tonight."

"Hey," she says with a grin, "I'm just excited to see what you'll make. Anything's better than Stouffer's lasagna."

So that's a sneaky "yes" to my also sneaky suggestion of another date.

Is that what this is?

Mo joins us when the sausage starts to sizzle on the skillet. I find some frozen streamable veggies, garlic bread, and an almost bad pre-made salad in the fridge. It's not the best meal, but after I pull out the wilted pieces of lettuce and add some extra fixings, the salad will definitely work.

I can feel Casey's eyes on me as I prepare our meal. Even though my skin feels hot, I like her attention on me. It's strange to be interacting with a woman like this, but it also feels kind of natural. I've been overthinking what I would say or do with her. Turns out, all I need to do is just go by instinct.

Casey likes to be taken care of.

That much is plainly obvious to me.

Alternatively, I like to take care of her. After trying to be an adult for so long so as not to make my dad stress any more than he needs to, I think it's sort of ingrained in me.

“Want me to make some tea or do you have something else you’d prefer to drink?” I ask as I wrap up cooking.

“I’m trying to behave,” she admits, sounding unsure. “Is water okay? If not, I can get you something else. I just—”

I interrupt her with a grin. “Water is fine, babe.”

We both freeze.

Dammit.

My smile falters and I quickly turn back to the stove. We’re both quiet as I plate up the food for us. At the table, she’s placed two bottles of water out for us. She sits down and I take a seat across from her.

There’s no avoiding it now.

“Sorry about that,” I say sheepishly. “It just slipped out.”

“It’s fine.”



*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 9:24 am*

Our forks clink against our plates as we eat, the only sound in the silent home.

“Did I ruin this?” I finally ask, meeting her stare. “Please tell me I didn’t.”

Her eyebrows pinch together. “What is this? We’re just friends, right?”

Just friends?

How can anyone be just friends with Casey?

I want to be everything with her.

But that answer is a little too strong. If I scared her off with “babe,” I think I’d really send her running if I admit I thought about fathering her babies too.

“Friends,” I repeat, not loving the word. “How do you like the food?”

I purposefully don’t commit to that word. I’m not a liar and it feels like the biggest lie known to man.

“Oh, it’s great. I’m impressed you whipped that out so quickly. Me and Derek used to...” She trails off, face paling. “Sorry. Gah. I’m so sorry. I know you don’t want to keep hearing about him.”

I cock my head to the side. “You putting words in my mouth? I never said that. He was a big part of your life. It hurts now that he’s gone. Why would you want to hide those parts that make you you?”

She blinks at me, stunned to silence for a moment. “You’re a lot more mature than I originally gave you credit for.”

“I get that a lot.” I shovel in a mouthful of food, taking the moment to just stare at her.

Why does she have to be so damn pretty?

It’s like staring at the sun. I should look away, but I’d rather go blind.

“You’re a very intense young man, aren’t you?” She sips her water and smiles behind the bottle. “Every expression you have is so...”

“Intense?”

We both chuckle.

“Yes. It makes me, uh, nervous,” she says, cheeks turning pink.

I frown at her words. “You’re scared of me?”

“No,” she rushes out. “Not like that. Just...” She closes her eyes for a moment, her long, mascara-painted lashes resting on her apple cheeks. “I have this visceral pull to you. After having gotten out of a long relationship that ended badly, this feels dangerous to me.”

She has a pull to me?

“Dangerous can be good when it’s safe.” I stretch my leg out, foot gently touching hers. “I’m safe, babe.”

This time, I say the endearment on purpose. It feels right. And I think she needs to hear it. Like I said, Casey likes to be taken care of, and I can already tell, taking care of her is my new favorite hobby.

“Babe makes me sound hot.” She giggles.

I arch an eyebrow up. “Youarehot,babe.”

Mo rudely interrupts our flirting by jumping up onto the table and meowing loudly.

“Way to make an entrance,” I grumble to him as I pull him into my lap. “I was actually flirting without making a total idiot of myself. Now the moment is ruined.” I feed him a piece of sausage. “Thanks a lot Mo.”

Casey’s foot touches mine, making me jerk my head up to look at her.

“The moment isn’t ruined,” she tells me, flashing me a sexy grin. “And your flirting skills are far from idiotic.”

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 9:24 am*

This feels surreal.

Am I really on an impromptu dinner date with the most beautiful woman I've ever known in person and she's flirting back with me?

Hell, yeah, I am.

Casey

"Pay attention to me," Clara says, snapping her fingers in front of my face. "What is going on with you?"

The truth is, I don't know.

Last night, at dinner, I started to feel something strong for Brayden. When he called me "babe," it felt right. I wasn't lying when I told him he was intense. But, while he was cleaning up the kitchen, his dad called. As they discussed homework and graduation, I was immediately reminded why going after someone like him was a bad idea.

Too young.

The neighbor's son.

And I'm too fresh out of a relationship to dive right back into one.

That's the thing with Brayden. There's no hesitation in his eyes. When he looks at

me, it's like I'm the surest thing he's ever known.

"You said something about Smoke & Sugar," I say lamely. "Sorry. Just have a lot on my mind."

Clara stops on the walking path to stand in front of me. "I know. That's why we're doing the double date tonight. These two guys from my gym have invited us out to eat. I'll take the cutest one, Wyatt. You can have the other one."

My eyes widen. "Wait. A date? No. I can't. I..." I like someone else.

"Why not?" Clara demands. "You can get out and have fun. I bet Derek is already on dating apps, getting laid as we speak."

I know she's trying to get me fired up to go on this date, but her words sting. I'm sure he's popular on those apps, too. Derek was definitely a ten in the looks and physique department. He could have anyone he wanted.

At one time that was me.

My clothes suddenly feel too tight and small around my middle. Why can't I lose the weight already? I've been walking a lot with Clara. Maybe I should say goodbye to carbs forever. She'll convince me to go on this date and whoever "gets" me will be disappointed. Clara is also a ten.

I am not.

"Crap," she grumbles. "Sorry. My mouth just says shit sometimes and it comes out mean. I don't want to hurt your feelings. You've just seemed happier lately. I thought it was a good time for you to get your feet wet with dating again."

I'm happier because Brayden chases away a darkness that's settled over me.

"Just tell me you'll go on the date," Clara says. "Please. I'll even do your eyeshadow. You know I'm basically a genius when it comes to eye makeup."

I don't disagree there.

"Oh, hey Brayden," Clara calls out. "Tell Casey she's beautiful and deserving."

Without hesitation he says, "Casey, you're beautiful and deserving."

"See," Clara crows. "Even the neighborhood kids think so."

Brayden comes into view and gives me a curious look. Why does he have to always be so unintentionally cute? He doesn't even have to try. A backwards ball cap on him paired with his crooked grin makes me weak.

"I'm trying to convince her to go out on a double date tonight," Clara explains. "She needs to have a little fun. Someone will appreciate my bestie."

I freeze, caught in Brayden's confused stare. Then, his shoulders slightly hunch and his lips tug into a frown. It makes my chest physically ache.

Tell her no!

## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 9:24 am*

But my brain keeps chanting things like, “Date someone your own age,” or “Bradyen doesn’t need someone with your mental baggage,” or “You could make a bad situation worse by hooking up with the neighbor’s son.”

No is on the tip of my tongue, but I can’t push it out.

He finally lifts his chin and meets my gaze, hurt shining in his lovely green eyes. “If he doesn’t appreciate you, he’s a fucking fool.”

With those words, he storms off, taking my heart with him.

“See,” Clara says, oblivious. “A fool. Come on, let’s get ready.”

As much as I don’t want to be meeting these gym guys at the restaurant, I keep telling myself it’s the right thing to do. I actually put in a lot of effort, too. My jeans are new, and I think they look sexy on my curves. The black shirt I’m wearing is slightly cropped and shows my cleavage. I’ve paired it with lots of fun jewelry and cute wedged shoes.

I can do this.

I look great and am ready to date.

When we enter Smoke & Sugar, I immediately recognize Savvy at the hostess stand. She’s young, like Brayden, and stunning. Her long brown hair has been swept up into a messy knot on top of her head. She wears a simple black uniform, but it just looks cute on her tiny frame.

I wonder if Brayden flirts with her on their way to school each day.

How could he not? I mean, look at her.

“Casey,” she greets, grinning. “So nice to see you.”

I’ve spoken to her a handful of times when getting the mail or while walking the trail. She’s a sweet girl, but there’s a fire in her eyes that can’t be ignored.

Clara stiffens. Oh, that’s right. Savvy “stole” Travis from her. I give Savvy a tight smile and then stand close to my friend to offer my support.

“We’re meeting a couple of guys,” Clara tells her coolly. “Are they here yet? Tall, muscular, handsome?”

She falters a bit, clearly shaken by Clara’s iciness. “Uh, yes. I’ll take you to them.”

Clara struts ahead of me in a figure-hugging dress that shows how great she looks from head to toe. I’d felt good when I left the house, but now, my familiar insecurities scratch to be let out.

A man with blond hair hugs her. She blushes at his attention. Must be the one she’s crushing on.

“I’m Wyatt,” the guy confirms, offering to shake my hand. “This is my buddy, Conrad.”

Conrad is hot. Exceptionally hot.

“Hi.” I shake Conrad’s hand. “Pleasure to meet you. I’m Casey.”



He gives me a quick once-over and then lets his eyes linger on Clara. A flash of embarrassment burns through me. I'm obviously the "not cute" one and he's rethinking this date.

Awesome.

We sit down and I'm forced to look at Conrad. Clara chats animatedly, making everyone chuckle. Conrad skims his gaze over me again, and I see his lip pull up slightly.

Disgust.

He's repulsed by me.

I can feel myself shrinking on the inside. If only I could make that work on the outside too. The menu has lots of delicious items, but I find myself searching for a salad or something healthy.

"So, you guys know Clara from the gym?" I ask, keeping my eyes on the menu.

Conrad chuckles. "It's where we meet all the hot chicks. You should go."

I jerk my head up, thinking I misheard him. "What?"

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 9:24 am*

“The gym,” he says slowly, a taunting grin on his face.

Clara, clueless at his comment, jolts and grabs my arm. “Yes. You know I have been begging you to come with me sometime. Maybe we could all work out together.”

Conrad nods. “Absolutely. I do some personal training on the side. I’d love to give you some pointers.”

His words drip with condescension. I’m equally repulsed by this man.

Dinner continues on, the three of them carrying the conversation. I’ve mentally checked out. I’m not even hungry anymore. While they get sloshed on cocktails, I count down the seconds until we can leave.

I’m miserable.

Dinner last night was so much fun. Brayden made me feel desired—like I was actually something special and beautiful.

After we eat, Wyatt tries to get us to go to a bar. But Clara is already kind of drunk. She needs to go home. Maybe the two of them can go on a date without us.

“Sorry to be a buzzkill, but I need to get my girl home,” I say, forcing a smile. “Say bye, Clara.”

She pouts but then allows herself to get pulled into Wyatt’s embrace. They start kissing which is incredibly embarrassing to have to witness while standing next to a

guy who doesn't give two shits about you.

"I was serious," Conrad says, giving my butt a playful smack. "Call me and set up a session. We'll get this ass in shape. There's probably a cutie hiding underneath all that."

All that?

His breath stinks of liquor and garlic. Up close, I can see he's not that cute. There's a meanness in his eyes that makes him ugly. Unfortunately for him, he can work out until he's nothing but muscle, but he can't hide what lurks beneath.

"Fuck off," I hiss. "You're a piece of shit."

He gapes at me, shocked at my words. I don't let him say another word to me as I rush over to rescue my friend from the man sucking her face off. She complains all the way to the car, but I feel lighter with each step away from those douchebags.

Clara falls asleep on the way home which makes me even happier that I didn't let them talk us into going to a bar. She'll sleep it off and later I'll tell her what an asshole Conrad was.

After I get her safely into her townhome, I finally make it to mine. I've barely gotten the door open when Mo rushes inside. He's basically my cat now. I'm going to have to confess this to Maggie sooner or later.

I'm about to close the door when I hear someone clear their throat.

Brayden sits on his back porch, arms crossed over his chest. He's watching me with an unreadable expression. I get the sense he's pissed.

Because I went on a date?

“Hi, Brayden.” I walk over to the edge of my patio so I can see his face better. “You okay?”

He scrubs a palm over his face and shakes his head. “Nope. Feeling kind of shitty to be honest.”

Because of me.

I made him feel this way by leading him on and then dropping him at the first date that came along.

“Why?”

His stare bores into me. “You’re smart, babe. You can figure it out.”

I shiver at the word babe. “You’re unhappy I went on a date.”

“Unhappy,” he parrots, the word sounding strange as if it’s not the right one.

“Mad?”

He grunts as he rises to his feet. “I just want you to be happy. Are you? Did this guy do that for you? Did he make you smile?”

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 9:24 am*

I tear my eyes from him, trying to ignore the heat the burns across my flesh as he strides across the yard to me. His footsteps thud on my deck until he's standing too close for comfort.

"Casey," he implores, voice husky. "Are you happy?"

I give him a small shake of my head.

He reaches up and cups my cheek. "Did he appreciate how sweet and beautiful you are?"

My eyes lift to meet his. They burn with such yearning that I want to get lost in them. I feel myself melting into him, drawing closer until my breasts brush against his chest.

"No," I admit, shame flooding through me. "He did not. The date was awful, Brayden."

He doesn't relax at my words. His jaw muscle ticks as though he's angry on my behalf.

"He doesn't deserve you then," he murmurs. His forehead rests on mine and his eyes squeeze shut. "Did I do something wrong last night?"

Pain lurches in my chest. "No, and that's the problem."

His thumb strokes my cheek, and his eyes bore into me again. "You are a fucking

mystery to me, babe. How was that a problem?"

"You did everything perfectly right," I whisper. "That terrifies me."

He leans forward, lips ghosting over mine. "I'll keep you safe. You don't have to be afraid with me."

After a beat, I let out a soft, "Okay."

It's a word that gives him more than permission to keep me safe.

It hands him a key...to everything.

Will he want to open that door?

Brayden

I can't hold back any longer, not when her supple lips are so close to mine. With a feral-sounding groan, I crash my mouth to hers. There's a need to claim this woman as mine that I can't begin to explain.

All I know is when Savvy texted me earlier, I'd been gutted.

Savvy: Just saw our neighbors Clara and Casey on a double date with a couple of hotties. How cute are they?!

She sent me a picture, too.

I took one look at the guy sitting across from her and knew I could never compare to him. He was good looking, around her age, and ripped.

I'm just me.

When she came home, I wanted to know what I'd done wrong during our date last night.

Nothing.

I did it right.

And now I'm kissing this sexy woman. She tastes like perfection and sweetness. I want to eat her alive.

A small moan escapes her and it's a maddening sound. One of my hands slides into her silky blond hair and the other finds her hip. There's a sliver of exposed skin and I can't help but stroke the softness there.

She's so out of my league and yet she's kissing me like I'm not.

It gives me hope.

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 9:24 am*

Her hands slide up my chest, sending curls of pleasure tickling through my body. My cock is embarrassingly hard. She just turns me on that easily.

“I fucking love your mouth,” I whisper after a pause and a nip to her bottom lip. “I’ve been agonizing over tasting your pouty lips. I’m in heaven, babe.”

She laughs, breathy and soft. “You’re a great kisser. I’m right there with you, babe.”

Even though she’s jokingly calling me babe, it has me wanting to claim her as mine right the hell now. But I know she’s a bit skittish and if I start proclaiming how all-consuming my feelings are, she might rethink her decision to give in to kissing me.

I could kiss her all night.

I could kiss her forever.

When we’re both breathless, I pull away so I can look at her, needing to see how she’s feeling about all this. Her eyes are hooded, and her wet, puffy lips remain parted as though she’s still yearning for my mouth.

“I’m addicted to you,” I murmur. “I could stare at you all damn night.”

Her smile is breathtaking. “I’d rather you kiss me instead.”

I chase her words with another long kiss. Her tongue is flirty, licking and flicking, teasing me relentlessly. What else can she do with her tongue?



That thought nearly makes me nut in my pants. I force myself to not think about sex with this woman. A man can only handle so much in one night.

“Do you want to come inside?” she murmurs against my mouth.

“Yes,” I growl. “But not tonight.”

She groans. “Why not?”

“Because you deserve more than that.” I pull back and give her a crooked grin. “As much as I want to follow you into your house, and I really fucking do, I want you to have some space after this to think about what more might look like with me.”

“I’ve thought about it,” she huffs. “I need you.”

It’s beyond difficult to deny this woman.

“I need you too. Trust me. I’m hard as fuck right now.” I smirk at her. “But I’m not a halfway kind of guy, especially not with you. Before I dive into something I won’t ever come back from, I need to make sure you’re right there with me.”

“I am,” she argues.

But we both know she went on a date tonight.

She needs more time to think. I won’t rush this and have her regret it in the morning.

I step away from her and meet her with a firm stare. “I’m taking you on a date tomorrow night.”

Her eyes widen. “Do I get a choice?”

“Nope.” I dip down and give her a quick kiss. “Wear comfortable shoes and be ready to eat.”

I force myself to back away from her. She gapes at me in confusion.

“Brayden...”

“I’ll be back,” I say with a wide grin. “See you tomorrow, beautiful.”

That’s a promise.

“You and Casey.” Savvy pauses to sip on her Dr. Pepper as if she’s trying to make sense of a difficult calculus problem in Coach Long’s class. “Casey and you. Hmmm.”

I look up from painting trim in Gordon’s old unit and level her with a glare. “Why do you seem so perplexed?”

## Page 19

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 9:24 am*

“She’s, uh, older.”

“Says the girl banging two guys her dad’s age.” As soon as I say that I regret it. Her dad died. I’m a fucking idiot. “Sorry. I’m just anxious about messing it up.”

“I’m not insulting you or anything,” she assures me. “It’s just you two are an unlikely pair. Have you slept together yet?”

Crimson heat creeps up my neck. “We kissed.”

“That’s it?”

“Trust me,” I grumble, “I wanted to do a lot more.”

“And you didn’t?”

I smirk at her. “I’m a gentleman.”

“With the patience of a saint. I have no chill. You should have seen me practically throw myself at Cole and Travis in the beginning.”

“No shade to you, Sav, but I want to nurture this thing with Casey. She’s so fucking perfect. I’m afraid I’ll ruin it if I do the wrong thing.”

She sets her Dr. Pepper can down on the bar and comes to sit down beside me as I paint. “You’re totally obsessed with her. It’s cute.”

I can't deny my feelings.

"You know you can just be yourself," she says gently. "It doesn't have to be perfect. Based on what you told me, it sounds like she's very much into you. I'm happy you two made this connection."

Casey deserves perfect, though.

I'm nervous as I walk up to Casey's back door. She answers right away, a huge smile on her face.

Holy shit.

Is she trying to kill me?

I gape at her, eyes bugging out of my head. "Wow. You look amazing, babe. Seriously. Now I can't remember my own name."

She laughs and her tits jiggle with the movement. The dress she wears has some sort of binding in it—like a corset or something—that pushes her breasts up. She's fully covered by the floral material, but her boobs are on full display.

How the hell can I think straight with this beautiful sight?

The dress hits her above the knees, and she wears wedge heels that put her close to my height.

"Are those for me?" Her eyebrow arches. "Did you steal those from the pond?"

I grin devilishly at her, my spell of stupidity broken. "Only the best for my girl."

She takes the orange tiger lilies I've bundled together with some ribbon I got from Savvy. I follow her into the house, nearly tripping over Mo who rushes past me.

"He can't get enough of you."

She smirks as she pulls a vase out of a cabinet. "You or the cat?"

"Touché."

I can't keep my eyes off her as she fills the vase with water. Her ass is so cute in that dress. It's impossible to focus when I keep eyeing her backside.

How am I going to take her on a walk with a damn hard-on?

"Where are we going?" she asks after she places the flowers in water.

## Page 20

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 9:24 am*

I glance down at her feet. “We’re walking there. Those are sexy as fuck, but do you have something more comfortable to wear on your feet, unless you want me to carry you.”

She snorts. “No. I don’t want you to attempt that.”

Attempt?

I’d carry this woman anywhere and everywhere if she wanted. She’s a bit independent though, so she’d probably prefer to just change her shoes.

Once she comes back with Chucks on her feet, I take her hand and lead her outside where my bag is waiting. She eyes it curiously but doesn’t try to peek inside.

We walk toward the back of the complex, passing several townhomes until we reach a fence. Behind our property is a wooded hill. Since no one can build on it, it remains wild and untouched. But I’ve been escaping here since I was a child and have carved out a path to the good part.

“I’ve never been back here,” she says, leaning in close. “It’s dark. Anything to be scared of?”

“Nah,” I assure her. “Squirrels and rabbits mostly. Plus, I’ll protect you.”

She seems satisfied at that answer which makes me puff up in pride. The moonlight shines brightly through the trees, making our trek easy to see. It’s a steep incline and we have to weave around some of the bigger trees and roots, but we eventually make

it to the opening near the top.

Years ago, Dad helped me build a picnic table up here, so I'd have a place to sit. Tonight, it's decorated with a yellow tablecloth weighed down by a couple of rocks. More tiger lilies sit in a vase in the center beside several candles.

"Oh my God," she says under her breath. "This is the most romantic thing ever."

"Have a seat while I get things ready."

She sits down at the picnic table, eyes lit up with anticipation. I set down my bag and retrieve a lighter. Once all the candles are lit and adding to the mood, I begin pulling out the containers of food I prepared.

"At home, I do all the cooking. I always felt bad for my dad and wanted to help him whenever I could. When I was a kid, and he needed a sitter, I'd go over to Maggie's. She taught me to make quite a bit of stuff. The rest I learned from Pinterest."

"Pinterest." She grins at me. "You're continuously surprising me, Brayden Foss."

I wink at her and then start telling her about all the different courses I made. We start with a simple Caesar salad with homemade croutons. Next, I offer her some stuffed mushrooms.

"It's my first time making these, so if you don't like them, I won't get upset."

She takes a bite and groans happily. "They're so good."

I devour two in a row and completely agree.

"This is the main entree." She laughs when I open the container. "Real lasagna."

It's the good, homemade kind with a ton of ingredients. None of that fake, frozen shit. Her eyes twinkle when I grate fresh parmesan over her food.

While we eat, she tells me about her day at work and how busy they were. I like how her face lights up whenever she mentions what she does for a living. I'm proud of her for helping people in pain so they can heal.

If only someone could help heal her heart...

I hope I can be the one for that job.

"This is such a sweet gesture," she says after finishing her lasagna. "No one has ever done anything like this for me before. Not even..."

"It's okay to say his name," I tell her. "I'm not threatened by him."

That's not the total truth, but I want her to feel comfortable confiding in me.

"Don't get me wrong," she says quickly. "Derek was a good man. He just...he never spoiled me like this."

"His loss."

Her gaze softens as she watches me put away the lasagna container in the bag. I pull out dessert for last.



## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 9:24 am*

“Do you like chocolate?” I ask, arching an eyebrow.

She throws her head back and laughs. “Who doesn’t love chocolate?”

Our eyes meet and hers are filled with joy. I made her happy. Me.

I poke at the chocolate dessert with a fork and then reach across to offer her a bite. Rather than take the fork, she leans forward and wraps her lips around it. Her eyes never leave mine as she pulls away. The whole thing is hot as fuck, and I’m left speechless.

“You’re killing me, babe. Fucking killing me.”

“My turn.”

Who knew being fed cake by a hot ass woman would be so damn thrilling?

I’m falling deep and fast for her.

I’ll have zero hope of ever escaping.

Nor do I want to.

Casey

This whole date is ridiculously romantic. Who knew Brayden Foss had it in him? My heart keeps stuttering inside my chest each time he does something sweet or

thoughtful.

Plus, he's an amazing kisser.

Now that we've demolished the cake in the sexiest way ever, I'm dying to taste him again.

"There's a place through those trees where you can lie down and look straight up to see an unobstructed view of the stars. It's like you're in another world." He grins at me. "Want to check it out?"

He makes the simple things seem fun. I absolutely want to do this with him.

"Show me the way."

We finish putting the containers away in his bag and blow out the candles. Then, he takes my hand, leading me through a thicket of trees. Something scurries nearby, startling me. Brayden gives my hand a reassuring squeeze that works wonders in making me feel protected.

The small clearing comes into view, and he's prepared the spot with a blanket spread out on the grass there. He thought of every detail and prepared ahead of time. I'm not sure anyone has gone to such great lengths for a date with me before.

Way to make a girl feel cherished.

"I've never brought anyone here before," he says as we sit on the blanket. "It's just been my place until now."

I lie back and look up at the sky. The dark canopy of trees around us only highlights the glittering stars that can be seen from this vantage point. It's beautiful and serene.

“I love it,” I tell him, unable to tear my gaze from the majestic sight.

“Me too.”

We’re both quiet for several moments as we enjoy the view, hands still conjoined.

“I want to know everything about you, Casey. The good and the bad and even the sad.”

Normally I would clam up because I don’t like talking about the things that hurt, but Brayden relaxes and comforts me. I know I can trust him.

“I’ve had a great life,” I admit with a small smile. “My parents are good, loving people, I have amazing friends like Clara, and I’m doing the career I love.”

The pause after those words is heavy. He knows there’s more and waits patiently for me to confide in him.

“All I needed was my Prince Charming, you now?” I chew on my bottom lip and then sigh. “Trust me, I dated a few frogs at first, so when I met Derek, he felt like a solid choice.”

## Page 22

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 9:24 am*

Of course, I thought he was attractive, but if I'm telling myself the truth, it felt like he was with me as if I were a solid choice too.

The fluttery feeling Brayden gives me is so different than with Derek. With Derek, it just felt like we were checking off the next important thing in life: a committed relationship.

"Sounds boring," Brayden teases, squeezing my hand. "A solid choice is what you call the package of filets you grabbed at the grocery store. Not too expensive but looks like a good cut for the price."

I let loose a small chuckle. "We're comparing my ex to a piece of meat. I'm sure he'd love that."

"I've seen the guy," Brayden says, a smile in his voice, "and he was a beefcake."

"Who even says beefcake? Are you sure you're not eighty instead of eighteen?"

He rolls toward me on his side, propping himself up on his elbow. "You like my quirkiness."

He's right about that.

"Go on. Tell me more, babe."

I'm no longer transfixed by the stars but now stare at his youthful but incredibly handsome face. When I'm with him, I feel like I'm that young woman fresh out of

high school, eager to conquer the world.

Where did she go?

I really lost her in the past couple of years.

“We were compatible,” I explain, recalling fondly how responsible Derek was and how refreshing that was for me. “I knew we should move in together right away. After a few months of dating, I got my unit at Moonlit Gables, and when his lease was up a couple months after that, he moved in. It was really...nice.”

Brayden listens with rapt attention, not getting jealous or angry or annoyed by my talking about Derek. It makes me want to hug and thank him for being so kind.

“We got along well for the first year, but then...” I frown, knowing this was my fault. “I was ready for the next step in life. Marriage.”

I should have known right then it was the beginning of the end. When I mentioned it to Derek, he kind of shut down as if I’d taken some part of his future from him. I thought maybe it was my insecurities creeping in, but Derek was also good at putting on a front for me. So, since he didn’t tell me no, I started planning our eventual wedding.

“I became obsessed with planning a wedding for us,” I tell Brayden, shame coating my voice. “When he’d come back from work, I’d launch right into the plans, how much it would cost, and who all we’d invite.” I close my eyes and sigh. “He started smoking. I should have noticed I was stressing him out.”

Brayden cups my cheek, thumb stroking over my flesh. “He had a mouth, babe. He could have spoken up at any time. Don’t carry the burden of it all on your shoulders alone.”

How is this eighteen-year-old guy so wise beyond his years?

“You’re right,” I admit. “The more he withdrew, the more I obsessively clung to him. It was growing more and more toxic, but neither one of us could stop it. One week, I was just sure he was going to break up with me. But then...”

My throat tightens with emotion. This part hurts too much. I hate thinking about it, much less talking about it. A tear leaks from the corner of my eye and races down my temple and into my hair.

His arm slides under my head, letting me use it as a pillow, and his face lowers to mine. “It’s okay,” he murmurs, pressing a sweet kiss to my lips. “You can tell me everything. I just want to know you, Casey. All parts of you, not just the ones everyone gets to see at first glance.”

I want to curl into him and cry my eyes out. He’d probably let me get away with it too. But I need to get this out. I can do this.

My bottom lip trembles. “I accidentally got pregnant. We weren’t even trying. It just happened. I knew it was a miracle from God.”

He kisses my lips and then my cheek and then my jawbone. It’s comforting in ways I’ll never be able to express my appreciation for.

“He changed for the better,” I explain, the tears freely falling now. “I thought we’d fixed us.”

I can’t say the next part.

“And then you lost it,” Brayden says for me. “I’m so sorry, Casey.”

The sob in my throat is pitiful and pained sounding. There's no stifling it. It needs release, and in this wild moment under the stars, I let it go without fear of judgment. Brayden kisses me over and over as I let go of some of the pain clawing at my heart.

"I shut down after that," I admit in a whisper. "I just wanted Derek to fix me—us—and he couldn't. We drifted further and further apart. The only time we spoke was to argue. When he finally left, I felt like a failure on so many levels."

## Page 23

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 9:24 am*

He gently turns my face toward his, eyes boring into me. “You are not a failure. All that stuff happened, and it sucked, but you’re going to be stronger on the other side of it.”

This time when his lips press to mine, I want more than a sweet peck. I thread my fingers into his hair, pulling him closer to me. He groans against my mouth, letting his tongue swipe over mine.

“You taste so good,” he murmurs. “I can’t get enough of you.”

I’m aching for his touch. It’s so nice to be desired. I’ve missed this feeling. With Brayden, it’s so much more intense than anything before. He’s in every moment with me, not locked away inside his head.

I pull him to me, needing more. Something. Anything.

He’s hesitant at first but then follows my lead, settling between my legs. I hook them around his waist, encouraging him to relieve some of the pressure building inside me. His kisses become more ravenous and feral, but still, he doesn’t move despite the raging erection pressed against me.

“I’m hanging on by a thread,” he admits, voice hoarse with desire. “The things I want to do to you.”

I press my heels against his firm ass, hopefully giving him the hint of what I want.

“Tell me what you need.” He nips at my bottom lip. “I love hearing your voice.”



He never fails to make me melt at his words. “Grind against me. You’re so hard and I need to feel it.”

His next kiss is fiery, and his hips begin to move. With my dress bunched up at my hips and nothing but his jeans and my panties as a barrier, my nerve endings come alive at the friction.

“Oh God,” I moan, stars of pleasure dancing around me. “Feels good.”

He groans, moving roughly against me, working my clit in a delicious way. With each buck of his hips, I grow wetter and wetter. I’m pretty sure my panties are soaked.

“Fuck me, Brayden,” I beg. “Please.”

“Not out here,” he says gruffly. “When I finally have sex with you, it’s going to be in your bed where I can take my time.”

That’s not what I wanted to hear.

“I just need...” I whimper. “I need more.”

“Want me to touch you inside your panties?” He nips at my bottom lip. “Do you want my fingers inside you?”

“Yesss.”

He lifts up to get his hand between us. Then, his fingers move my panties aside and tentatively touch my pussy.

“You’re so slick, babe. I turn you on that much?”

I give him a clipped nod. “You tease me. It’s mean.”

His chuckle warms me to my soul. “I’m drawing out your pleasure. The teasing is fun. You’ll be fine, beautiful.”

He starts a firm, circular pattern on my clit and it nearly sends me into a state of shocked bliss. Each sound I make it’s as if he’s cataloguing it so he can fine tune how he plays the sensitive parts of me. His touch is expert, sexy, and loving.

I’m in some other world when I’m with him.

I make an erotic sound that no doubt signals I’m on the edge of the cliff. This emboldens him and he intensifies his efforts. My orgasm, an old friend I haven’t seen in months, revisits with an explosive scream and obliterating pleasure. I shudder from the sheer pleasure, unable to stop the embarrassing sounds I’m making. Then, his long finger slips between the lips of my pussy, sinking deep into my body. This somehow makes the orgasm linger as he lazily fucks me with his finger.

When I finally come down from my high, he gently eases his finger out of me and then brings it to his mouth. With my lip captured between my teeth, I watch as he sucks his slippery finger into his mouth.

“Mmm,” he rumbles as he fucks his finger between his lips, sucking off all my juices. “Soon I’m going to taste you straight from the source.”

His hooded eyes drink me in as if I’m the most beautiful thing he’s ever seen. It feels good to be adored by him. I hope he can see how much I’m losing my mind over him.

“You’re hard,” I say breathlessly. “Need me to take care of that?”

## Page 24

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 9:24 am*

“I want it so fucking bad,” he says with a groan, “but I need to stop.”

“Why?”

“Because if we don’t, I’m going to do something I regret, like fuck you right here under the stars. I’m not here for sex, babe. Yes, I eventually want that, but I’m here for you.” He presses a sweet kiss to my lips. “Come on. Let’s go for a walk before I take you home for the night.”

He’s here for me.

Brayden Foss is stealing my heart one conversation at a time.

Soon, it’ll completely belong to him, and that scares the crap out of me.

Brayden

I can’t stop thinking about last night.

So much so, Coach Long gave me detention for “daydreaming.”

Totally worth it.

Now that I am finally released from his boring detention prison, I make my way to Casey’s work to surprise her. We still haven’t exchanged numbers. I suppose you don’t really need to when you live next door to each other.

The physical therapy place is busy as hell, cars everywhere, and I almost decide not to go inside. She's probably busy as hell and doesn't need me distracting her.

Or it might be the thing to brighten her day.

Plus, I got her an iced coffee.

I can't waste that.

"Come on," I mutter under my breath. "Don't be a pussy. Go see your girl."

Is she my girl? After last night, I hope that's true.

I climb out of the car and grab the coffee from the cupholder. Once inside the building, I have a flash of anxiety from all the people waiting everywhere. A frazzled young woman working the front desk doesn't even spare me a look.

Quickly, I scan the space, looking for Casey. I see her in a corner area working on someone. As I approach, I notice the guy is about my age, but clearly an athlete based on his muscle tone. She has her hand on the back of his thigh, rubbing deeply with her fingers.

It's just her job.

Why is there a flare of jealousy spiking inside of me?

I feel like a stupid kid for even feeling that way.

"Take a picture if you want something to look at later," the guy says, eyes meeting mine. "Thigh porn."

Casey sighs, shaking her head in exasperation, before turning to see who he's talking to. I stand rooted in place with her cup in my hand, flashing hot with a mixture of anger and embarrassment.

Her smile falls when she sees me and confusion crinkles up her features.

This was a mistake.

The guy on the table moans in pain, but I can't help feeling like it's sexual. My chest starts to ache like someone just fucking stabbed it.

"What are you doing here?" Casey demands, voice sharp.

I thrust out the cup, feeling like a total idiot. The guy on the table watches me with interest, like I'm his entertainment for the day. Casey never ceases her rubbing on his thigh.

It's all too much.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 9:24 am*

“I’m sorry,” I blurt out. “I’ll set this up front for you to get later. I shouldn’t have come here.”

“Later, loser,” the guy says with a laugh that echoes across the whole damn place. “Next time make an appointment.”

Casey calls out to me, but I’m already practically fucking running to the front desk. I slam the cup down with a little too much force, flinging condensation droplets all over the sign in sheet.

“For Casey,” I hiss out, and then rush out the door.

What the hell just happened?

I climb into my car and peel out of the parking lot. I’m desperate to put as much space between me and that awkward fucking moment as possible.

This is her workplace.

I just showed up unannounced and had the audacity to get jealous of her doing her job.

I’m so frustrated and upset with myself, I totally run a yellow light that turns red midway through. It’s no surprise when a cop pulls out behind me after I sail through the intersection.

“Fuck!”

I pull over and slam the car into park. I'm overwhelmed by messy emotions. I don't like them. I don't like how out of control I feel now that I've been pursuing Casey.

One minute I know she likes me. A lot.

The next, I think I misunderstood everything and it's a stupid fantasy I want to come to life.

Now I'm getting a damn ticket.

I mash the button down for the window and await my fate. A man saunters over to me and laughs.

Wait, laughs?

I whip my head over to see Cole leaning in, smirking at me. In his cop getup, he's kind of intimidating. But there's amusement in his eyes, so maybe that's a good sign.

"Dude, I'm so sorry," I mutter. "I fucked up. Just give me my ticket."

"Your dad's one of my best friends, kid. I'm not about to fuck that up by giving his baby boy a ticket. I'm here to warn you to slow the hell down and pay attention."

"Warning taken." I run a shaking hand over the back of my neck. "Sorry, Cole."

"Everything okay?"

"Yes." I grimace. "No. But you're a cop, not a therapist."

"I'm a neighbor and a friend, too. My shift is ending. Let's meet at the diner and have a chat."

“Did Savvy tell you?”

“That you’re head over heels in love with Casey? Yup. Also, I saw you fly out of the parking lot where she works. Something happened. Let’s talk about it. Follow me.”

With those words, he leaves, assuming I’ll follow. I don’t want to, but I feel trapped now, and go with him to the diner. Once inside, sitting opposite at a booth and our order placed, Cole affixes me with a firm stare.

“Tell me, kid.”

“I’m not a kid,” I grumble. “Same age as the girl you’re sharing with your best friend.”

Okay, that was mean.

Cole arches an eyebrow. “You really are upset. I’ve never once known you to be an asshole. Spill it or I’ll interrogate the shit out of you.”



## Page 26

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 9:24 am*

“Sorry,” I mutter again. “I’m just confused and, yeah, fucking upset.”

Because I need to confide in someone, I spill everything to Cole. I tell him about my birthday party, all my interactions with Casey, including the stolen cat, her double date with Clara and the douchebags, our romantic date, and then what transpired this afternoon. I leave out all the personal details Casey told me, but I imply that we’ve had deep conversations.

By the time I finish with my word vomit, the waitress brings my chocolate milkshake and Cole’s black coffee along with a basket of fried mozzarella sticks.

“How many girls have you dated, Bray?”

Heat burns at my cheeks. “They weren’t exactly beating down my door to date me.”

“Well,” Cole explains, “you’re seeing a woman now. That means you need to act like a man.”

I scowl at him. I was all man when I had my finger inside of her last night. This bit of information I keep to myself.

“I’m not saying you’re being immature,” he rushes out, “but I do think you need to talk to her later with a cool head. Being jealous over one of her patients was seriously bratty teenager behavior. A real man, who cares about and trusts his woman, doesn’t act that way.”

“That’s why I left,” I grumble. “It was all just stupid. I realize that now.”

“It wasn’t stupid.” He sips his coffee and seems to mull over what he’s going to say next. “Honestly, it was a nice thing a boyfriend would do. But are you her boyfriend?”

Again, I had my fucking finger inside her last night.

I clench my teeth together and focus on poking my straw in my milkshake, not interested in it at all. “I don’t know.”

“You don’t know because you haven’t talked about these things.”

“I thought it was implied.”

“That’s another kid game, man. Implying your wishes or hinting isn’t going to accomplish anything.”

“I don’t want to screw this up,” I admit, voice hoarse. “I really, really like her. She’s so damn gorgeous, funny, sweet, vulnerable. I just want to make her happy.”

“From what you’ve told me thus far, you are making her happy. But, if you want to continue to make her happy, you need to have direct conversations with her about what you two plan to get out of this relationship.”

“What if she just wants to have a good time and nothing more?” My heart sinks at that prospect. “How do I keep from falling in love with her?”

“These are questions for her, Brayden. I’m sure you two will figure it out.”

When Casey gets home from work, I’m sitting on her front porch on the top step. Her expression is unreadable when she exits the car.

I rise to my feet and stride over to her. She's tense as I approach, eyes watching me warily.

I really did mess it all up, didn't I?

"I'm sorry," I say first and foremost. "I just wanted to do something nice for you."

Her body relaxes and her gaze softens. "The coffee was a sweet gesture. Thank you."

I inch closer, inhaling her perfume I'm addicted to. "I should have warned you I was coming. That was out of line, huh?"

She takes my hand in hers and squeezes. "Nope. I was surprised, but again that was sweet."

"But..."

"That whole part where you had a look of disgust on your face while I was with my patient, that was the part that was out of line." She frowns. "Storming out of my workplace was out of line. It was embarrassing to be honest."

Her words make me want to shrivel up.

"I talked to Cole," I admit. "He pulled me over. I was upset and he helped me."

## Page 27

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 9:24 am*

“Upset because you were jealous of Riko?”

Riko.

My chest burns at the name on her tongue.

“Maybe a little,” I mutter.

“For the record, Riko is a little shit who drives me bonkers. He isn’t a threat to you.” She steps closer, tilting her head up. “Throwing a tantrum at my workplace is a threat to you, though. I won’t tolerate that.”

There’s a fiery glimmer in her eyes I’ve never seen before. With Derek she was always so demure and complacent. I like how she’s coming into her own lately.

“It won’t happen again,” I vow, imploring her with my eyes. “Do you believe me?”

Her sexy lips curl into a grin. “I believe you.”

“Forgive me?”

“Of course.” She stands on her toes and gives me a filthy kiss that makes me dizzy. “Want to come inside and hang with Mo?”

I guess Mo didn’t leave last night.

That’s two of us obsessed with this woman.

Luckily, for him, I don't mind sharing her. But only with him.

We head inside her place, and I give Mo the attention he demands while she takes a quick shower. Twenty minutes later, she arrives downstairs smelling sweet like her shampoo, and wearing skimpy, thin sleepwear.

"Are you trying to torture me?" I ask, unable to look away from her nipples poking through her shirt. "Seriously, what the hell, babe?"

She makes her way over to me and lets me pull her into my arms. I slide my palms to her juicy ass, giving it a possessive squeeze.

"I like you, Brayden, a lot. And I know we're both dealing with our own insecurities. I get that. I'm sorry too for how I behaved. I was abrupt and rude at seeing you."

I dip my mouth down to hers, kissing her plump lips. "Can we just be over that whole situation?"

"I think we can."

"And is it okay if I surprise my girlfriend at her place of work if I don't act like a dick?"

She smiles against my mouth. "Your girlfriend, huh?"

"I just need to make that official."

"Consider us an official item. But don't make bringing me coffee a regular thing. I'm trying to lose weight, and those things are full of sugar."

"Deal. I'm going to make up for all that sugar by cooking something healthy for you

tonight.”

“You’re going to cook for me again?”

“Hopefully every night if you’ll let me.”

I know we’re moving at lightning speed, but I can’t help it. She’s a shooting star and I have to keep up with her.

“Tell me what I can do to help, boyfriend.” There’s a teasing lilt in her voice that makes me want to kiss her until it’s gone. “Put me to work.”

“You’re going to sit on the counter, looking hot as fuck, while I chop vegetables.”

“Hot as fuck, huh?”

## Page 28

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 9:24 am*

“I don’t lie, babe.” I give her ass a playful smack. “Now, hop up. I’m going to take care of you.”

It’s such a loaded statement, but I mean every word.

Casey

We’re moving fast.

Way too fast.

This afternoon, I was determined to come back and put on the brakes. I didn’t lie when I said I was embarrassed by how he’d acted when bringing the coffee.

But then he was waiting for me, heartbroken and remorseful. How could I keep him at bay when he looked like a sad little puppy?

“What?” Brayden asks, arching a brow at me as he washes the skillet he used for dinner earlier. “You okay?”

“Perfect.”

He flashes me an adorable grin before going back to the dishes. This man is incredibly sweet and thoughtful. A girl could get spoiled to this treatment.

Mo rubs against my bare leg so I pick him up. His purrs vibrate against my chest as I hug him to me. I’m starting to realize I’ve legitimately stolen Maggie’s cat. Not just a

little joke in my head, but for real. I love him already and don't want him to go back over there.

"You sure you don't want to come to bed with me," I ask, knowing my question will fluster him.

As predicted, his face burns bright red. He whips his head my way and gapes. "W-What? I thought we were going slow."

I giggle because he's so cute. "I know. I'm just teasing you. There are other ways I'd like to thank you though."

His eyebrows furl together. "I don't need anything in return, babe."

I set Mo down and then saunter over to Brayden. "You may not need anything, but you're going to want this."

He makes a choked sound when I grab at his belt, tugging. I'm not surprised when he puts up zero fight, allowing me to push his jeans down his thighs. His dark red boxer briefs hug his legs and cock, accentuating his thick arousal. I can't help but lick my lips in anticipation.

"You're going to kill me," he rasps out. "Help."

I laugh. "Who are you calling to for help? No one can help you now. Just me."

A ragged groan escapes him when I get down to my knees. I stare up at him as I grab the waistband of his underwear and slowly draw them down, hoping to tease him a little while longer. His cock flops out, long and hard, pre-cum leaking at the crown.

"You have a nice dick," I tell him, smirking. "Very veiny like your arms. So sexy."



He has one hand on the edge of the sink, gripping tightly, and the other one is fisted at his side.

“You can touch me,” I say, batting my lashes at him. “Guide me on what feels good and what doesn’t.”

“Everything feels good with you.”

I reward him by taking his cock in my hand. It pulses with need and is warm in my grip. He shudders at my touch.

“Has anyone ever sucked your sexy cock before, Brayden?”

His eyes flutter closed and a droplet of cum runs down the side of his shaft. “N-No. Fuck. This is the most amazing thing that’s ever happened to me.”

I’m emboldened by his exuberance and unchecked desire. Once, I might’ve felt self-conscious about doing this with a much younger man, but right now I feel like I’m a seductress—a goddess in his world.

With eyes locked on his, I run my tongue up the side of his cock, tasting the saltiness of his pre-cum. His hand finds my hair and he grips the damp strands gently. I can tell he can barely hold onto his control. It makes me want him to lose it all the more.

“You taste good,” I murmur against his tip. “I want to make you come and swallow it all for dessert.”

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 9:24 am*

The grip on my hair tightens to the point my eyes water. For some reason, this thrills me. I suck on his crown, lightly teasing the slit, and then take him fully. Strangled sounds escape him as I swallow his cock into my throat. It's natural to gag when something is forced into your throat, but I've had years of practicing this sort of thing and know how to turn off that reflex.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck.”

His chanting inspires me to bob up and down with the cadence of his words. In turn, he starts saying the word faster and louder. He fists his hand in my hair, tugging so hard I nearly cry out. When I glance up at him, his head is tilted back, his prominent Adam's apple on display, and he's lost to the bliss I'm providing. I love that he's totally lost control.

I pull completely off his cock long enough to say, “Fuck my mouth,” and then swallow him back down. He doesn't hesitate and roughly bucks his hips. It only takes a few thrusts and then he forcefully holds my head still as his cock throbs.

Salty cum spurts out of him, shooting down the back of my throat. He must've been storing this up for some time because it's like a never-ending flood of cum. I manage to keep swallowing, though I wonder if I'll choke on it eventually. But then his cock stops twitching and he pulls back.

With his hand still grabbing my hair, he guides me up to my feet. I'm pushed against the side of the sink, his wet cock pressed into me and soaking through my T-shirt. His lips crash to mine and he devours my mouth like it's the only chance he'll ever get to kiss me again. I get lost in his desperation, clawing at his hair and my own core

throbbing needily.

He pulls back, hot gaze boring into me. “Do you want—?”

“Yes,” I interrupt. “Take me upstairs and fuck me.”

His lips curl into a deviant grin, but then a knock on the back door startles us both. He stumbles back, yanking at his boxers, as he exits the kitchen. I groan and make my way over to see who’s at the door.

Maggie has her face pressed to the glass. It’s a good thing her view doesn’t include the sink where I just gave the neighbor’s son a blowjob.

Mo takes off under my feet, darting out of the kitchen and into the dining room.

“Oh, hi, Maggie,” I say, voice breathless. “What’s up?”

She eyes me with suspicion. “Have you seen Mo? I know he’s been lurking around your house some, but he’s too quick for me to grab.”

“Uh,” I mutter, wondering how and if I should lie to this woman.

But then, to my utter shock, I see Brayden walking up behind her, Mo in his arms. He must have grabbed him, slipped out the front, and made his way around.

I could kiss him right now for being my hero and saving me an awkward conversation.

“This little guy?” Brayden asks, climbing the steps on my patio. “He’s a spunky dude, isn’t he?”

Mo meows loudly, claws digging into Brayden's shirt. The zipper on his jeans is down. I want to warn him, but he's focused on the cat that's trying to make its escape.

"There you are," Maggie grumbles, shuffling over to Brayden. "He's a naughty kitty. All his brothers and sisters love their home. This one keeps trying to get away like he gets mistreated."

"Want me to make sure he gets inside?" Brayden offers.

Maggie nods, looping her arm with Brayden. "May as well. I'm too old to chase that damn cat everywhere."

Brayden looks over his shoulder and mouths, "Sorry."

I grin at him and mouth back, "Thank you."

His wink is somehow filthy and suggestive. We share a weighted look that indicates our secret fun we just had. I can't wait for more.

The last thing I want to do is walk, but I need the exercise. Plus, Clara showed up after Maggie and Brayden left with Mo. My best friend then forced me to put on some workout clothes and leave the house.

"I have to tell you about my lunch date," she says as we start on the walking path. "Total fail."

"With Wyatt?"

She nods, curling her lip up. "I thought both he and Conrad were cuties. They seemed to have a lot going for them."

Conrad was a misogynistic pig in my opinion.

“I guess it was the alcohol on our double date that made Wyatt so attractive. Today, completely sober, I got a dose of the real him. Thank God you didn’t let me go home with him that night.”

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 9:24 am*

“Gotta protect my girl from Grade-A douchebags.”

She smirks at me. “Soooo, what’s up with you? You’ve been acting strange lately. Not to be a creep, but I saw you walking with Brayden.” She waggles her eyebrows at me. “Tell me what’s going on with you and him.”

Because she’s my best friend, I unload on her. All of it. My explosive feelings for him, the most romantic date ever and getting some finger action, the awkward surprise visit at my work, the apology, and yes, even the blowjob.

I have no filter and need to confide in someone.

“No fucking way,” she hisses. “Holy crap. You’re having an illicit affair with a high school student. That’s so taboo, girl.”

I roll my eyes at her. “He’s eighteen.”

“Like just yesterday.”

It’s been a few days, but I get her point. “Are you judging me? I’m pretty sure you encouraged this.”

“No judgment at all. I swear. Honestly, you’re glowing with happiness. You deserve that.”

She pauses for a long beat. I know she wants to say more, but for once is holding back, clearly not wanting to hurt my feelings.

“But,” I encourage with a soft sigh.

“But I worry about you getting hurt.” She cuts her eyes over to me. “If it was just getting laid by some young hottie, I’d be one-hundred percent cool with it. You’re falling for him, though. Kind of fast, don’t you think?”

Her words do hurt. No wonder she didn’t want to say them.

“You think I’m filling the hole Derek left in my heart with Brayden?”

“Are you?”

No. Yes. Maybe. Ugh, I don’t know.

“When we’re together, it doesn’t feel that way,” I say softly. “It feels fresh and exciting. My insecurities about weight, the pain of the miscarriage, and the failure of my relationship all fade away when I’m with him. I feel young again. Wanted. Spoiled. Adored.” I laugh bitterly. “Guess it was too good to be true.”

She stops walking and stands in front of me, putting her hands on my shoulders. “Look at me.”

I meet her firm stare.

“You deserve to unload those heavy feelings and to be spoiled by a hottie like Brayden. I just don’t want you to get your heart broken again. You were drowning in despair, and I’ve only just gotten you back.”

I know she’s right, but how do you stop a freight train of fiery feelings?

“It can be ‘too good’ and ‘true’,” she assures me. “But you can also be careful and

don't fall in love blindly with the first man you connect with after Derek."

I'm not falling in love with Brayden Foss.

He chooses this time to walk across our path, heading toward Gordon's unit, and bores his heated stare into me as he passes.

My heart does a ridiculous leap inside my chest.

"I'll be careful," I say absently to Clara, unable to stop looking at Brayden until he disappears into the townhouse.

Clara sighs heavily. "I fear I may be too late on my bestie advice."

"Why's that?" I ask, finally looking back at her.

She cups my cheek and gives me a sad smile. "I think you've already fallen, and I have no idea how to undo that for you."

Undo it?



## Page 31

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 9:24 am*

If the feelings bursting inside of me are a view into a future with Brayden, I don't want to undo a thing.

In fact, I want to toss gasoline on the small fire.

This thing between us burns hot.

All I want to do is keep stoking the flames.

Brayden

Casey: OMG. Thank you! The fruit is such a hit here at work. You're such a sweetheart.

I grin at her text. It's been a few days since she gave me the blowjob of my lifetime and I can't stop thinking about her. Every second of every day is Casey. Sexy, sassy, perfect Casey.

And, as much as I wanted to hop into bed with her like we were planning to before getting interrupted by Maggie, I've kept my distance.

If I come on too strong, she might think I'm too much.

I wasn't lying when I told her I wanted to get to know her.

So, I've kept my distance, physically, but have started texting with her. Don't tell Dad I broke into his phone and grabbed her number from him. The break we've had has

also come out of necessity. She works during the day, and I go to school. The past few nights, though, I've been working my ass off with Dad on Gordon's old unit. He wants to get it ready to rent out as soon as possible. If he knew I've been slacking off so I can play grab-ass with my girlfriend, he might get pissed.

Me: It took a long time to cut the cantaloupe into star shapes.

Casey: Wait. You made the fruit bouquet?! I thought it was from that one place that delivers. Your talents never fail to impress me.

That one place that delivers was going to charge over a hundred dollars. I knew I could make the damn thing for less than thirty.

Me: The delivery was tricky, but I got Savvy to run it in for me on our way to school this morning. I was hoping you didn't notice that.

Casey: I was too busy. Wow. You're an incredibly thoughtful man.

Me: Can I take you out tonight?

Casey: I was hoping you would. I miss you. Gordon's place must be almost finished by now.

Me: It's getting there. I'll be at your place after work.

Casey: Should I dress practical or sexy?

Me: You're always sexy no matter what you wear.

Casey: Ugh, my client just walked in. Talk soon.

“Are we interrupting social hour, Mr. Foss?” Coach Long asks, deep voice booming in the quiet classroom. “There’s a detention slot with your name on it after school if you can’t part with your phone for the rest of class.”

I stuff my phone into my pocket, face burning hot with humiliation. A few other students snigger at my expense. Detention for chatting with Casey would be worth it though. But, since I have a date with her later, I can’t jeopardize my time with her by spending it here at school.

Later, at lunch, I plop down next to Savvy who’s already scarfing down her sandwich.

“Did she like the fruit bouquet?” she asks around a mouthful of food.

I give her a sheepish grin. “Yeah, especially when she found out I made it.”

“It was badass,” Savvy agrees after she swallows. “They’re doing a baby shower for Vale at work later this month. Maybe I could get you to make one for that. I could totally pay you.”

I’m not looking to have a side gig making fruit bouquets, but Savvy is my best and only friend at school, so I’d do whatever she asked me to.

“Of course.” I take a bite of my burger, grimacing at the generic taste. Dad makes way better burgers. These are borderline poison. “Can I ask for advice?”

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 9:24 am*

“Always.”

“Me and Casey have done some things,” I say slowly, heat creeping up my neck, “but not that.”

Savvy snorts out a laugh. “What’s that?”

“Sex,” I grumble. “Why do you have to be annoying? You know what I was talking about.”

“It’s fun watching you get all embarrassed.” She grins wickedly at me. “Go on, lover boy.”

“Anyway,” I say dryly, “I want to make the night special for her without being creepy. I’ve cooked for her some, but I think I should take her out someplace nice like a real man would.”

“First of all,” she says firmly, “you’re a real man. You fingerbanged Casey Monroe and she gave you a blowjob. Own that, big man.”

“Yeah, yeah.” I already regret giving her the dirty details on the way to school this morning.

“Second of all, wherever you take her, she’ll be happy. But...”

“But?”

“You should take her to Smoke & Sugar tonight. I’ll be on shift. I could see you in action.”

I chuff out a laugh. “My action is awkward as fuck Sav. I don’t need an audience for that.”

“She obviously thinks the awkwardness is hot.” She bats her dark lashes at me. “I’m kidding about watching you, though. For real. You need to take her there. We have the best desserts.”

“She’s on a diet.”

She gapes at me as if I have three heads. “Boy, no. Wrong answer.”

“But—”

“I said no. When it’s the two of you, cook her the healthy crap. But, when you take her out, the diet stuff flies out the window. Treat the woman. Let her make the decision to abstain or not. Otherwise, it totally comes off as douche-y for you to keep her from the super yummy treats at Smoke & Sugar.”

“I didn’t mean—”

“I know you meant well,” Savvy says with a patient sigh. “You’re adorably inexperienced with everything, including boyfriend/girlfriend stuff. Do you even know how to fuck your woman? Should we have the birds and the bees talk?”

Thankfully the bell for the end of lunch period puts a halt to that conversation.

“Bye, Savvy.”

“Bye, boner boy!”

I’m going to kill my best friend.

Why am I nervous?

This isn’t our first date.

And yet, I’m anxiously pacing my living room, waiting until the time I told her I’d pick her up. I’ve already peeked out the window and know she’s home, most likely getting ready to go out with me.

“Everything okay?”

I nearly jump out of my skin when Dad walks into the room. Did he prowl down the stairs like a creep so he could come up behind me?

“Dad,” I bark out, whirling around to face him. “What the hell?”

Amusement makes the corners of his lips twist. Dad isn’t a super smiley guy, so it’s rare to see it. Normally, I’d think that was cool, but since it’s at my expense, I’m not loving the humor.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 9:24 am*

“Didn’t mean to freak you out.” He crosses his arms over his solid chest and comes to stand beside me. “Are you going out? You’re dressed up. I didn’t even know you owned a nice shirt.”

“I have a date,” I grumble. “Shirt is new. Trying to impress my girl.”

Great.

Now I’ve piqued his interest.

He looks out the open window as if he can see the girl I have my boxers tied in knots over. All he needs to do is look next door.

“Who is she?” Dad asks. “One of Savvy’s friends?”

I’m surprised Cole didn’t tell him. Since he didn’t, that earns points for Cole in my book. Everyone in this complex is nosey and talks, so I figured it was a given.

“No. The neighbor.”

I glance over at him as he frowns, clearly thinking about which neighbor it might be.

“Who?”

He really is clueless.

Fuck.

“Casey.” I stiffen, waiting for whatever negative thing he as to say.

“Derek’s Casey?”

“She’s not his anymore,” I growl, facing off with my father. “Don’t ever say that shit again.”

His eyes widen, clearly taken aback by my outburst. I’m protective over her. I certainly don’t like having her ex still claim her despite having left her.

She’s mine now.

Dad rubs at his temple as if this isn’t computing in his brain. “But she’s so much older.”

“So?”

“You’re in fucking high school, Brayden. You’re just a kid.”

Why does everyone say this to me? It’s the most annoying shit ever. When I’m with Casey, I don’t feel like a damn kid.

“Are you done?” I ask, voice cool. “Because I’m done hearing it.”

“I’ll walk back that statement,” Dad says, voice gruff, “but don’t be an asshole. It’s not like you. That’s more your mother’s speed.”

He’s not wrong.

“Sorry. I just really like her and I’m tired of getting told she’s too old for me. I’m not an idiot. I can handle my dating life just fine.”



“Have you, uh, you know...”

For fuck’s sake, not him too.

“None of your business, but no.”

“Promise me you’ll wrap it up, Bray,” Dad says in his most dad tone ever. “I’m too young to be a grandpa.”

As soon as he makes that statement, the vision forms in my head. Casey in a pretty sundress, bare feet in the grass, holding her belly that’s swollen with my child. I would take such good care of both of them.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 9:24 am*

“Dammit.” Dad sighs heavily and drops into his recliner. “I was kidding about that last part, but clearly, you’re not. You’re lovesick, my boy.”

Lovesick doesn’t sound like a bad thing to me.

“So?”

“Lovesick can be a toxic thing,” he says gently. “I was that way with your mother. Fell way too hard, way too fast. We had you, which was great, but we weren’t meant to be for the long run. I’m just worried she’s going to break your heart.”

Casey isn’t Mom.

Casey is good and loving and kind.

“It’s a risk I’m willing to take.” I lift my chin, hoping to show him how serious I am about this. “Casey is an incredible woman. There are so many layers to her, and I love uncovering each one. Plus, she’s so fucking beautiful.”

Dad grunts but doesn’t argue with me.

How can he?

This isn’t an infatuation or a fling.

I have feelings for her that get deeper with each passing second. It’s maddening but also the best thing to ever go through.

“Does Derek know?”

“It’s not his business.” I grit my teeth together. “You’re not going to tell him either.”

He holds up both palms in defense. “Not my place, but he is my friend. If he asks, I can’t lie.”

“Then don’t. It’s not like he has any right to have an opinion about it either way. He gave that up when he walked out on her.”

“Promise me you’ll be careful,” he says, voice pleading. “Slow things down if you can. There’s no rush. Sex isn’t everything in a relationship.”

No, it’s not.

Casey is everything, though.

I’ll take her in whatever capacity she’ll give me.

“I know, Dad.”

“If things get messy, as things often do, just know you can’t escape this. She lives next door. I’m her landlord. I really hope you’re being smart about this.”

Nothing kills the buzz of a hot date like your dad lecturing you.

“I have to go,” I say gruffly. “I told her I’d pick her up now.”

Without another word, I leave our unit and stride over to the one next door. Mo is waiting by the door, swishing his tail angrily. He wants in.

“You and me both,” I mutter to him.

I ring the doorbell and a few seconds later, Casey answers. She’s in a brown skirt that swishes when she walks and hits her mid-thigh, showing off every inch of her silky skin. The creme-colored camisole barely contains her bouncy breasts and the orange sweater she has over it just begs to be ripped off the second she gets too warm. She’s wearing a pair of sexy tan wedges that accentuates her calf muscles, showing off all her hard work from daily walks. With her blonde hair in loose waves over one shoulder and smelling so fucking sweet, I’m too dazzled to do anything but stare.

“I take it you like this outfit,” she says, beaming at me. “I love how I can read your emotions. They’re not hidden behind a wall of stoicism.”

My face flashes hot, revealing how I feel about her words. “You’re a damn knockout, Casey. A dream come true.”

Mo meows from inside her house, having slipped inside while we were distracted. We both laugh as she closes the door behind her.

“Ready for my date, boyfriend,” she says, holding out her hand so I’ll take it.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 9:24 am*

I pull it to my lips, inhale her sweet scent, and then kiss the top of it. “Staring at you all night, unable to touch you like I want, while being surrounded by other people will be torture.”

“Who says you can’t touch.” She smirks at me. “I give you permission. Touch as much as you’d like.”

I don’t hesitate and kiss the hell out of her.

Casey

Brayden cleans up really well. I only thought he was cute wearing his plain T-shirts and jeans, but tonight, in a dress shirt and nice pair of jeans, he’s hot.

He smirks at me as he drives, one hand resting on top of the steering wheel and the other clasped with my hand. There’s a confident sexiness about him as he maneuvers the vehicle along Main Street downtown. I’m glad he’s just as infatuated with me as I am him.

When he pulls up to Smoke & Sugar, I tense up. Not because the last date I had here sucked. This place isn’t exactly cheap, and I know he only works part time with his dad. Maybe I’ll pick up the tab today.

And insult him?

He’s proud to take me on a date and I don’t want to hurt his feelings by implying he isn’t prepared to pay for a nice dinner. Honestly, I should know better. So far, in our

wild, freefall of a relationship, he's done incredible gestures for me, not all of them cheap.

Breathe.

Don't be nervous.

It's true, though. I am nervous. The home cooked meals, treats brought to work, sexy makeout sessions, and late-night picnic all felt surreal since I never left the comforts of my world.

We're going to be on display for others to judge our unconventional relationship. It's obvious he has youthful features whereas I'm older. Will they think I'm a cougar?

My gut twists as insecurities rear their ugly head. I hate that I can let myself get all twisted up over these things. Brayden has been good for me. To hell with what everyone else thinks.

Once we park, Brayden runs over to my side of the vehicle just as I'm opening the door. He offers his hand for me to take. Butterflies take flight in my stomach when he pulls me to him, stealing a quick, hot kiss.

"God, you're beautiful."

He says these things so easily and truly believes them. I'm starting to believe them too.

Hand in hand, we walk inside of Smoke & Sugar. Savvy, the adorable thing she is, squeals when she sees us, abandoning the hostess stand to hug us both.

"You two are the cutest ever," she gushes, beaming. "I saved a table on the rooftop

for you. Technically it's reservation only, but it pays when your bestie is the hostess, right?"

Brayden grins at her. "Hell yeah. Thanks, Sav."

She takes us through the restaurant to the rooftop area. A few couples enjoy a candlelit dinner while they overlook the quaint, lit up downtown area below. Once we're seated, Brayden's intense stare bores into me, making me feel slightly self-conscious.

"What?"

"Just like looking at you."

Heart is melting.

"Back at you," I say, tucking a loose strand of hair behind my ear.

A server appears to tell us about the specials. Brayden orders the smoked maple bacon bites. The caption says, "Thick-cut bacon glazed with maple, black pepper, and a hint of smoke." Yum.

He orders a soft drink, and I try my hand at the Midnight Manhattan cocktail, a rye whiskey, vermouth, black cherry, & smoked oak essence concoction that sounds pretty good. Once she's gone, Brayden's attention is back on me.

"What do you want out of life?" I ask him, unable to hold back. "Like really, really want. I know you've mentioned buying another property to fix up and rent out with your dad. But what do you want for you?"

His gaze softens, as though the thought is there, and it touches his heart. Now, more

than ever, I want to know.

“I see myself as a good husband and father. With my flexible schedule, I’m able to spend quality time with my kids like my dad did with me. That’s very important to me.”



*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 9:24 am*

Flashes of Brayden with a baby in his arms and a toddler tugging at his pant leg nearly brings tears to my eyes.

“She’ll be a lucky woman,” I say with a tinge of sadness in my voice. Just because we’re head over heels for one another, that doesn’t mean I’ll be the woman in that future he sees.

“Yes, she will,” he agrees, pinning me with a penetrating stare. “I’ll love her with everything I have. I’ll give her everything she wants. I’ll make sure she never doubts herself. Her tears will be a thing of the past, and if she does have them, I’ll dry each one of them with a kiss.”

My heart aches at his words. Who taught this guy to woo a woman? He’s an expert. If Reid taught him, I’m amazed that man doesn’t have a wife already, because this is a skill lacking in a lot of men.

“That’s sweet,” I murmur.

“It’s the damn truth.”

The server brings our appetizer, and it is to die for. We both are distracted with talks of the future as we wolf down what’s presently in front of us. Somewhere between our groans of appreciation, the server takes our order for our entrees. Not long after we’ve polished off the appetizer, she brings each of us the ember-seared filet mignons we ordered cooked to perfection. I got the charred brussels sprouts with crispy prosciutto and Brayden got the sweet corn & jalapeño pudding with the intention of us sharing with each other.

Everything is so delicious.

I try not to think about my diet, because there's always tomorrow. Tonight is about letting loose and enjoying a good time with an even better man.

We move on from heavier topics to more mundane. Brayden loves reality TV but falls asleep during movies. He once saved a drowning dog from one of the ponds on the property and actually did CPR on the poor thing. His favorite color is green, and he wants to visit the beach one day.

I tell him all my quirks too. It's fun, lighthearted, and an enjoyable time.

I'm happy to see we don't just have a physical chemistry, but a personal one too. I like hearing about him and his life. His eyes light up whenever I talk about mine. To everyone else, we must look like dopey idiots in love.

"Hear me out," Brayden says after polishing off his steak. "We share both the honeycomb ice cream flight and the molten chocolate whiskey cake. I know it's a lot, but I really want to try them both."

Truth is, so do I.

"I'm in," I say with a grin.

Later, when we're drowning in decadent dark chocolate lava cake with salted caramel whiskey sauce and smoked vanilla, dark chocolate, and salted honey caramel ice cream, I discover we're holding hands across the table.

It's such a natural thing to reach for him.

His thumb swipes over mine as he licks honey off his spoon. My core tightens. I have

been fantasizing about his tongue somewhere else, licking off another type of honey. He must spy the heat in my gaze because his darkens and then drops to my lips. We just went from sweet to spicy in no time flat.

Check, please...

“Casey?”

I reluctantly tear my eyes from Brayden, seeking out the sound of the familiar voice. “Nick? What are you doing here?”

“Date night without the kids,” he says, smiling at me. “Apparently me and Dane weren’t the only two with that idea.” His eyes cut over to Brayden. “Hey, man.”

Awkward.

I tug my hand free and jerk out of my seat to hug both Nick and Dane. “This is my neighbor, Brayden,” I explain to them. “Brayden, this is Nick, Derek’s cousin, and Nick’s husband Dane.”

Brayden rises to his feet to shake their hands, but I can tell I’ve hurt his feelings. I know why, too. I didn’t introduce him as my boyfriend, even though that’s so obviously what he is to me.

“Good to meet you,” Nick says to him and then cuts his eyes back over to me. “I heard the news. Sorry, Casey. I really thought you guys were the real deal.”

I want to shrivel at that statement. What do I even say to that? Me too? That wouldn’t hurt Brayden’s feelings or anything...

“Yep,” I blurt out, voice shaking. “I’m sorry. I know you two want some time alone.

It was good seeing you.”

Nick gives me another hug and then the two of them walk away.

Brayden sits stiffly, clearly stewing on the whole thing. I feel like an idiot and need to apologize. The server interrupts us to bring the check. Brayden hands over his card without looking at the ticket. Unfortunately, he doesn’t look at me either.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 9:24 am*

Silence stretches out between us and my eyes begin to sting. Tell him you're sorry, Casey. It's on the tip of my tongue. I'm ashamed that I just did that to him.

"You're being quiet," I murmur, not trusting my voice to say much more.

The server returns before he can answer. He signs the receipt, collects his card, and then rises to his feet. I want to run over to him and take his hand, but shame has me clutching my purse tightly instead. He leads the way across the rooftop, down the elevator, and out the front door of the restaurant. By the time we reach the car, and he opens my door for me, I'm about to lose it, tears welling.

"I'm sorry," I choke out. "I froze up. Seeing Nick was a shock and a punch to the gut to be honest. Why are you giving me the silent treatment?"

His head snaps toward me and then he steps closer until our chests are touching. With the gentlest of touches, he swipes a rogue strand of hair out of my face. "I didn't want to embarrass you again by saying something stupid."

My bottom lip wobbles. That's fair. "What did you want to say?"

He leans closer, resting his hands on the roof of the car behind me, nose brushing mine. "That you're mine now. My girlfriend. Mine."

A flash of heat singes my skin. "Oh."

"Embarrassing, right?"

“Yes and no.”

“I can bite my tongue for you, Casey. I’m learning how to be the man you deserve. Not going to lie. Hard as fuck sometimes.”

I cup his cheek and stroke my thumb over his pouty bottom lip. “I’m proud of you. Me? Not so much.”

His lips find mine for a soft but claiming kiss. We’re both breathing hard by the end of it. “You’re still here with me. That’s all that matters.”

We fuse our mouths together again, the kiss growing with intensity. His hands move from the car to my ass, stroking me over my skirt, and lifting it some to squeeze my ass cheeks. Anyone walking by could see if they looked our way.

This gives me an idea.

I grab his wrist and lower it between my thighs. His kiss deepens as he wastes no time slipping his hand beneath the material. As soon as his fingers brush over my panties, I shudder with anticipation.

“Want me to finger you right here with people walking by?” he demands, voice raspy with need. “When I make you come, you have to be quiet, babe.”

“I’ll be quiet,” I lie.

He grins against my mouth and slides his hand into my panties. I groan, not quiet at all, as he teases my clit. “No one touches you like I do,” he hisses. “Right, beautiful?”

“Yesss.”

His touch makes me crazy with the need for more. All he does is send me spiraling with lust. It only takes a few minutes to have me shattering from his touch. And, like before, he pushes a finger into me, as if he enjoys the feeling of my contracting muscles. I bet he'll really like it on his cock.

"Let's go home, babe. I'm not done with you yet."

He eases his finger out of me, rights my panties, and makes sure my skirt is in place. Then, he stares at me with hooded eyes as he crudely licks the juices off his fingers.

"Home. Now," I agree, body still trembling.

"Next time I get you off," he rumbles, "it'll be my tongue inside you."

The neighbor's son is killing me.

I'm loving every second of it.

Brayden

Her taste is decadent, far better than the overpriced desserts we indulged in. I'm aching to lick her arousal, familiarizing myself with every crease and fold that hides her sensitive clit. I want my tongue deep inside her so I can feel the second she loses control.

I'm so twisted up over this woman, I can barely think straight, much less drive within my lane.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 9:24 am*

“You’re being quiet again.” This time, there’s amusement in her voice. “Why’s that?”

I shoot her a brief, ravenous look before turning my attention back on the road. She laughs at my reaction. It’s pretty evident in how my cock strains in my pants how much I want her.

Are we really finally going to have sex?

I’m dying to be completely intimate with her.

As we navigate the streets, I can’t help but think of her other lovers, mainly Derek. She never speaks badly of him, but I don’t think he satisfied her like she truly needed. Could I be better at this than him or others in her past?

I want to be.

I’ll die trying.

Mostly, I’m worried about nutting twelve seconds in. At night, I take my dick in my hand as I think about having sex with her, doing my best to draw out my climax so I don’t end up a two-pump chump.

When we reach the parking spot in front of her unit, I have to force myself to breathe in and out slowly.

This is happening.



Finally.

I hop out and run to her side, pleased she's learning already and waits for me to open the door for her. She takes my offered hand and climbs out. Once the door is closed, I hang an arm across her shoulders, loving how possessive and right this move feels. She leans into my side. I'm pretty sure she inhales me too.

That gives my confidence a much-needed boost to know I'm not alone in this wicked obsession.

We're pretty well behaved until we get inside, barely making the time to close the door behind us. Her purse and my keys get tossed away simultaneously. Then it's tongue on tongue and hands roaming everywhere.

"I've been dying to take this off of you all night," I growl as I shove her sweater down her shoulders, revealing naked skin. "I like seeing these soft, pretty parts of you, babe."

Her fingers thread into my hair as I stoop to kiss the top of her shoulder. She makes a keening sound when my open-mouthed kisses trail to her neck and then her earlobe.

I love having my mouth on her.

She tastes sinful and heavenly all at once.

Our mouths find each other again until she starts tugging at buttons on my shirt. I stiffen at the realization she's going to seemenaked. I'm not freaking buff like Derek. Just a regular guy.

"What's wrong?" she asks, breathless.

“I, uh, nothing.”

Her palms find my face and she pulls away to look at me. “Tell me. You’re in your head about something. What is it?”

I know she prefers directness over having to guess. It’s just embarrassing. But I say it because I know she wants me to.

“I’m not fit, you know, like the guys you’re normally into.”

She blinks at me, confused, as if I’ve lost my mind. “Are you seriously feeling self-conscious about your body right now?”

My cheeks burn hot, and I nod. “Well, yeah.”

Her smile is beautiful as it shines on me. “That makes two of us, honey. I’m literally stuffed into an undergarment meant to keep my gut held in. I’m not looking forward to you seeing all of me.”

“I think you’re hot as fuck,” I rumble, eyes boring into hers. “You have nothing to worry about because I think everything is perfect on you.”

“Likewise. Remember that next time you’re in your head about it.”

Knowing she sees me as desirable and someone worth getting naked with emboldens me. I start flicking through the rest of my buttons so I can shed the shirt. She helps with my undershirt and rips it away. My eyes snap closed when her fingertips ghost over my chest and abs.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 9:24 am*

“See, perfect,” she breathes. “Just like your cock which I’ve met personally.”

I grin at her. “He’s your biggest fan after me.”

We get lost in another heated kiss. She doesn’t resist me when I peel away her camisole. And, like she admitted, there’s some stretchy contraption wrapped around her torso.

“Take me to your bed,” I demand. “It’s mean to show me this gorgeous fucking body when I don’t have a bed to pin it down to.”

She grabs my hand, and we start for the stairs. Mo meows at us from the kitchen but wisely doesn’t follow. Once inside her room, she reaches behind her to unhook the thing she’s wearing, unwraps it from her body, and lets it fall to the floor. Her skin is red and indented from the material pressing into her. She sucks in a sharp breath when my fingers ghost over the angry flesh.

“Do you wear that torture device for yourself, or did you do it for me?”

She chews on her bottom lip. “I wanted to look hot for you.”

“You could wear sweatpants and a hoodie and never put on a stitch of makeup, and I’d still think you looked good enough to eat.”

A laugh tumbles out of her. “So, you’re saying I can throw it in the trash?”

“I hope you do.” I reverently rub her stomach. “I love your body, babe.”

She kisses me again and while she's distracted, I fumble behind her to unhook her bra. I'm dying to see her juicy tits that taunt me every damn day. Her lips curl into a smile when I finally manage to undo the damn thing. All too eagerly, I start tugging it off her arms. Then, I stand back to admire her.

"Holy shit, woman," I say, taking in the lovely sight. "I have never seen anything in my life that turns me on more than right now." I reach down to rub at my cock through my jeans. "I'm going to come from just looking at you. How fucking embarrassing."

She snorts out a laugh. "Nah, I won't let you. You're going to be inside me when you come."

Her words inspire me to start yanking at my belt. With her eyes on mine, she unzips her skirt and lets it fall to the floor at her feet. Then, she puts her thumbs in her panties and shimmies them down. Oddly, the last thing she removes are her shoes.

Now she's fully naked.

Bravely standing before me, insecurities and all.

I can do the same for her.

I'm not sexy at all as I rip off the rest of my clothes. She made undressing look like a seductive art form. Mine looks like horny desperation. Thankfully, she doesn't shame me for it.

"Get on the bed," I instruct, voice hoarse. "Spread those sexy thighs for me so I can get a good look at what's mine."

She obeys, turning to head for the bed. I get a glorious view of her ass. My cock jolts

at the idea of fucking her from behind one day soon as I hold onto her ass cheeks. I give my dick a hard squeeze hoping to stave off the need to come too early.

“Turn that overhead light off,” she murmurs. “It’s blinding and I think you’ve seen enough.”

I flick it off, bathing us in darkness, but then turn on the lamp. “I’ll never get enough of you, babe.”

The softer light makes her skin seem velvety. I want to run my tongue over every inch of her. I’m going to start with the sweet honey between her legs. She looks over her large breasts as I crawl between her parted thighs. I grab her legs and push back, opening her pretty pussy like a present designed only for me—one I can greedily eat, worship, and own.

I’ve never been with anyone sexually. Ever. This entire experience with Casey is special to me. I’m fumbling my way through it, going on what feels right, and it’s enough. Her eyes are glassy with desire for me. I’m a fucking novice but she treats me like I’m some expert lover.

I’ll make my girl proud.

The first swipe of my tongue along her slit is exhilarating. The whine that escapes her is empowering to my efforts. I start licking and sucking with earnest, eager to draw out pleasure from any and all parts of her. Each time I suck on her clit, she goes bananas, bucking her pelvis at me as if to implore me to do it more. I indulge my sweet girl, only stopping to nip at her occasionally.

I totally get it why they call it eating a woman out.

Her pussy is a fine delicacy, and I’m starved for it.

Since I want to feel her from the inside, too, I slide my tongue along the slit of her pussy and then push into the tightness of her body. Her hands find my hair and she tugs at the strands. Since I know she likes her clit touched, I pinch and pull at it while I fuck her with my tongue.

It doesn't take long for her to lose it.

## Page 40

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 9:24 am*

Her body convulses and constricts around my tongue. I don't stop my movements, if anything, intensifying them as she rides out her climax. When she can't seem to take anymore pleasure, she physically pushes me away, panting.

"Oh God," she breathes heavily and then softly laughs. "How are you so damn good at that?"

I was...good?

Next time I'll be even better.

"It's natural with you," I rumble as I prowl over her still shaking body.

She gasps when I dip down to run my tongue over one of her nipples. With my eyes on hers, I suck on one until she whimpers and then move onto the other. This must drive her mad with lust because she grabs my head pulling me to her mouth. We kiss messily and deeply for what could be hours or just a few seconds. All I know is I get lost in time with her.

My cock is aching for relief, and I find myself rubbing against her pubic bone. She encourages me to go further by hooking her legs around my hips.

"I have a condom in my wallet," I rasp out.

"Just one?" She smiles against my lips. "Sex just once with you seems like a tease."

I grip my cock and push against her slick heat. "I'm, uh, safe or whatever. I've not

had any partners. Ever.”

My cheeks heat but she doesn't seem to care. I find myself inching inside of her, overwhelmed by the sheer pleasure of how her body feels around me.

“I'm negative, too,” she says, sounding much wiser and knowledgeable at these things than me.

We both groan as I sink all the way inside her. The raw feeling of being inside her with no rubber is nearly more than I can handle. I have to keep from moving for a second, so I don't explode inside her. As a distraction, I kiss her deeply, hoping she doesn't notice I'm about to come embarrassingly fast.

“Your cock is so big,” she says against my mouth. “It almost hurts.”

“Should I stop?”

“Hell no. Just feels really good. I love this feeling of being completely filled and stretched by you.”

Her words aren't helping the state of my cock.

“I won't last long,” I hiss out. “I'm afraid to move.”

“Just pull out when you do. My hormones have been a mess since...” She gives me a watery smile. “Anyway, I'm not on any birth control at the moment.”

“I will,” I vow.

Our lips come back together for another deep kiss. My hips slowly start moving and I'm proud that I haven't come in the first three seconds. She moans with each thrust



and it's so fucking erotic. Since I know how needy her clit is, I slide a hand between us, rubbing at it.

"Too much," she whines. "I can't take how good it feels."

Her words confuse me, but she doesn't push me away, so I continue my efforts. It doesn't take long for her to seize up with pleasure, nearly biting my lip off in the process. As soon as her pussy clamps around my cock, pleasure blinds me, and blood rushes through me as I orgasm.

On the first spurt of cum, I pull out of her, thankful that most of it made it outside of her body. It shoots across her lower stomach. Since I still need to feel her, I fuck against her body, my cock slippery with cum. It feels like it just keeps jetting out of me like a never-ending flood.

Super fucking embarrassing.

It finally ends, my cock beginning to soften now that it's spent, and I collapse on top of her, burying my nose in her hair. "That was amazing, babe."

She laughs, fingers stroking over my back. "It absolutely was. Now let's see about a shower together so you can take me for another round after."

Blood rushes to my dick, miraculously already hardening again between us.

"Being with a guy half my age has its literal perks."

I think that means she likes that I can get it right up after mind-blowing sex.

## Page 41

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 9:24 am*

Lucky for her, I'm going to fuck her until my dick falls off.

Casey

Brayden is a cuddler and I am so here for it. He also plays with my boobs in his sleep. And he is always ready to go when I push my ass against his cock. This morning, I am deliciously sore and completely spent.

Maybe I can tell Clara I don't need to walk anymore since I'm getting a full-on whole-body workout each night now.

I stifle a giggle. Brayden's grip on my breast tightens. I'm tempted to get him aroused again, but I know he's tired. We both are. Lying here with him without a care in the world makes me insanely happy.

When was the last time I felt deliriously giddy?

I'm disappointed to realize maybe back in college years ago when partying with my sorority sisters.

What about with Derek?

As if he knows my thoughts are wandering, Brayden's cock thickens against me. I'm not sure if I can go again, but I'll try. His hand slides from my breast down to my pussy. It's only taken a few times of touching me for him to learn exactly how to make my body sing. This morning is no different.

I let out a soft moan.

“You moved on quick.”

The deep voice doesn't belong to the man with his hands on me. It belongs to someone else. Someone I also know intimately.

Shocked by the intrusion of someone in my house, both me and Brayden scramble to sit up and face off with our peeping Derek.

“What are you doing here?” I demand, voice shrill. “What the hell, Derek?”

Derek's shirt strains over his biceps as he stands, arms crossed over his chest, scowling at us. Like he's caught me cheating on him. Unbelievable.

“Go downstairs,” I bark out. “We're undressed. I'll be down in a minute.”

His jaw muscle ticks and then he turns on his heel, storming out of my room and stomping down the stairs. As soon as he's gone, I slide out of bed to throw on my pajamas. Brayden wears an unreadable expression as he pulls on his boxers, his erection flagging after our surprise visit. I admire his lean, virile body as he dresses.

I quickly brush my teeth and pee before making my way downstairs. Brayden is in the kitchen making coffee while Derek paces in the living room. He gave me his key. How the hell did he get inside my house?

“What are you doing here?” My voice is icy and sharp. “You don't live here anymore.”

Derek casts a glance toward the kitchen and scowls. “You're lucky I don't call Cole to deal with this. You're fucking an underage kid—”

Brayden flies into the living room with chaotic energy that takes us both by surprise. He walks up to Derek and pokes his chest. "I'm not a kid, man. And do not raise your voice at her. Ever. Are we clear?"

I gape at Brayden. Derek blinks at him, as if he doesn't know what to do next. That makes two of us. I thought I was about to have sex again, not get into a fight with my ex.

"Brayden," I say, tugging at the back of his shirt. "It's okay."

He relaxes and steps away from Derek before disappearing into the kitchen again. Derek watches him leave. Then, his dark gaze lands on me again.

"This is a low move, Casey. Reid's son? Seems a bit predatory."

Derek isn't normally cruel. Something is going on with him.

"Why are you here?" I ask, voice much calmer than before. "How did you get in?"

He grits his teeth. "Door was left unlocked. It wasn't even pushed closed all the way. I was worried something had happened to you, so I let myself in."

Me and Brayden were in too much of a hurry to get naked to worry about things like closing and locking doors. Ugh.

"Fine," I say with a sigh. "But why were you here in the first place?"

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 9:24 am*

“To talk about getting back together.”

Brayden chooses this moment to reenter the living room. He winces at Derek’s statement. “Here, babe. Just how you like it.”

I accept the steaming mug and flash him a grateful smile. “Thank you.”

“Should I go?” Brayden asks, eyes locked on mine.

No.

Please stay.

I’ll get rid of him.

And yet, I find myself nodding. Derek is struggling, actually showing emotion for once, and he needs to get it out. I can at least hear what he came to say.

Hurt flashes in Brayden’s eyes, but he quickly shutters the look. He presses a soft kiss to my forehead and then slips out of the house without another word. A shiver races down my spine. It’s as if he took his sunny warmth with him.

I sit down on one end of the couch and draw a blanket into my lap. Mo prances into the room, meowing and letting his presence be known. I pat my thigh, and he jumps up onto my lap so he can get morning cuddles.

“You got a cat?”

“Stole it.”

Derek’s expression of horror would be comical if I weren’t so annoyed about him being here in the first place.

“Maggie,” I explain with a sigh. “Mo just visits when he wants.”

Derek stops pacing to take a seat on the other end of the sofa, angling his body toward me. “It was not easy seeing that up there.”

Me with another man.

“I’m sorry it upset you.”

He scrubs a palm over his scruffy face. “Nick told me he saw you. Failed to mention your date was a teenager.”

“You’ve made your point how you feel about that, but I won’t continue to take this level of disrespect from you in my own home.”

His body flinches and I know I’ve gotten through to him. He’s being an asshole, and he knows it.

“Sorry,” he grumbles. “I just got jealous, you know? The thought of you with someone else made me miss our good times.”

“Too little, too late, Derek.”

He nods. “I can see that now.”

“This isn’t like you. You’re not explosive or angry. In fact, you usually bottle up all

your feelings.”

“I gave up smoking,” he says with a grunt. “Turns out when you can’t smoke, the feelings burst out a lot more easily.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

“I just thought about us and...” His bottom lip quivers just once, making my heart ache.

“The baby,” I whisper. “Not a day goes by where I’m not sad too.”

“It really messed us up losing it.”

I take a sip of my coffee as I stroke Mo’s soft fur. “We were messed up before getting pregnant. We were too stubborn to admit it.”

“Maybe we could fix it,” he says, voice tight.

But we can’t.

I realize now Derek never truly made my heart flutter wildly whenever he was near, not even in the beginning.

Brayden does, though.

Every single time.

“Listen,” I say gently, “I know you miss the idea of us, but we weren’t going to last. I know this now. Even if we’d have had the baby, I don’t know if it would have been enough to keep us together. Something was always missing. Don’t you see that?”

His jaw works like he might cry which would be a sight since I’ve never seen him do it, not even after the miscarriage. “I wanted to feel that with you. I just...”

“You can’t force chemistry and true love, Derek. But we had a solid friendship. I still think of you as someone I can count on. You thought something was wrong when my door was left ajar, and you immediately came to check on me. That matters to me.”

“But...”

“But we’ll never have what we had. It’s not good enough for either one of us. Your person is out there. When you find them, you’ll realize that is worth fighting for, not this.”



“I’m sorry I barged in and insulted you and Brayden. That was out of line.”

“Apology accepted.”

“I should go.”

“You should. I need to go find where my boyfriend ran off to and assure him we’re still good.”

Derek nods, defeated. “For what it’s worth, tell him I’m sorry for being a dick.” He pauses and gives me a sad smile. “And tell him thank you for making you coffee. I should have done stufflike that for you. You really do deserve the world, Casey, and I hope he’s the one who can give it to you.”

After Derek left, I took a shower and spent time dolling myself up. I need to have a conversation with Brayden. Looking hot for him will help win him back.

Do I think he’s angry with me for sending him away?

No.

Did I hurt his feelings again?

Absolutely.

But, apparently, the conversation with Derek was long overdue. It gave me closure I didn’t know I needed. I’m ready to put my past with him behind me once and for all.

The wind blows as I walk toward Gordon’s old unit, lifting my short white skirt. I have to hold the material down with both hands, so I don’t flash any creepers like Joel or Troy. This outfit is specifically for my man.

Rock music blasts from the townhouse Reid and Brayden have been working on freshening up. I find Brayden aggressively sanding a patched wall. White dust dances around him, clinging to his brown hair. He's wearing only a sleeveless undershirt and basketball shorts. Though he's lean and not a "beefcake," I think he's entirely too good looking. My mouth waters just watching him sand a freaking wall.

I walk over to the Bluetooth speaker and turn it off.

He whirls around, face pinched angrily but softens when he sweeps his gaze over my outfit.

Smart choice, girl.

Now that you've distracted him with something pretty, get on with your speech.

"You never cease to amaze me," I say as I saunter over to him. "Most men don't learn so quickly from their mistakes. You practically become perfect."

His eyebrow arches in faint amusement. I'm grateful when I step close to him, he doesn't back away. Instead, he leans closer, head angling down at me.

"That was a messy situation, and it needed diffusing," I say, running my palm up his chest over his shirt. "You handled it well."

## Page 44

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 9:24 am*

“I didn’t like him speaking to you that way,” he growls, teeth grinding together. “Honestly, I seriously wanted to punch him, but we both know he can beat my ass.”

We both chuckle.

We’re getting somewhere.

“The fact that you came to my aid was sweet and admirable. Thank you.” I reach up and stroke my fingers into his dusty hair. “And when I asked for privacy to speak to him, you didn’t act jealous or refuse to. You gave me the space I needed. Very mature for a man with zero dating experience. I trained you well.”

He gives me an adorable, dopey smile at my teasing. I’m too distracted by how cute he is and end up pulling him to my lips for a kiss. The kiss turns filthy quick. It’s as if we spent weeks apart rather than an hour or two.

He manhandles me into the bathroom and pushes me over the sink. The heat flaming in his eyes tells me he has a fantasy he’s looking forward to giving in to. I’m game for wherever this goes.

“We never finished our talk,” I say as he roughly yanks my skirt up over my ass.

He grunts and jerks my panties down my thighs to my knees. “How did your conversation go with him?”

“Fine.” I bite on my lip as he pushes his cock against my pussy.

Brayden pushes all the way into me as he pulls on my hair. It's painful on both ends, but seeing the animalistic expression on his face as he fucks into me is worth it. He's claiming me and I love it.

"This ass is so fucking beautiful," he rasps out, looking down between us. "So perfect."

Because he's so hot all feral like this, I'm aroused which has him easily slipping in and out of me. Each thrust is bruising but sends zings of pleasure through me.

"Mine, mine, mine," he chants with each thrust. "Say it, babe."

"I'm yours," I choke out, legs shaking with need.

"That's my girl."

He fucks me hard and fast. And then, to my utter surprise, when he comes, he doesn't pull out. Our eyes meet in the mirror, his daring mine to argue. My heart twists happily at the promises he makes with one penetrating stare.

You're mine.

Always.

No matter what.

His thrusting slows now that he's climaxed, and he speaks again. "What did he want anyway?"

"To talk about getting back together."

He frowns. “What the—”

“Bray, kiddo, where are you?”

“Shit, my dad’s here.”

So much for that conversation.

He pulls out, yanks up his pants, and escapes out of the bathroom all within three seconds. I’m left still bent over, cum running down my thighs, wondering if I’ve just lost my mind to be okay with this.

My smile reflecting in the mirror says I’m stupidly falling hard for Brayden, and I don’t care if that makes me crazy.

Brayden

To get back together.

Get. Back. Together.

## Page 45

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 9:24 am*

My dad is talking to me, clearly stressing the fuck out, but I can't shake away Casey's words. Obviously, she said no because she came to me, and we just fucked in Gordon's bathroom.

Right?

She chose me.

"Are you even listening right now?"

I rub at my temple, forcing myself to give Dad my full attention. "What about renting this unit out?"

He studies me for a beat, eyes narrowed as he attempts to figure out what's going on in my head. Maybe he can explain it to the both of us because I sure as hell can't make sense of it.

"We need the income renting this unit out. I can't afford to take a financial hit like that," Dad explains as he checks his phone and then groans. "Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck."

Concern chases away my own problems. "Why can't we rent this one out? It's almost fixed up and ready. It'll definitely be ready by the first. Am I missing something?"

Dad sighs heavily, shaking his phone at me. "Amara."

Amara is Dad's newest girlfriend. He's got a bit of a savior complex. Mom was way

too independent for him, so now he just dates women he can fix. It's a fucking disaster to be honest.

"What about her?"

"You really weren't listening."

Something out the window catches my eye. I see Casey hurrying past and I can't help but smirk. She didn't want to do the walk of shame, so she snuck out a window.

"I'm listening now," I say, turning back to him. "Are you thinking of giving Amara this place?"

"What's the alternative?" he asks, frowning. "Let her move in with us? She's my girlfriend, but..."

He doesn't love her.

I know that for a fact. At best, he's kind to her and tolerates her. And, on occasion, he fucks her. I've heard them going at it a time or two. But moving in together? They're missing something vital in their relationship.

They certainly don't have what me and Casey have.

Fire. The need to consume one another. Obsession.

"You don't have to save everyone," I tell him. "It's not your responsibility."

Dad does so much for everyone. He's a good friend to Cole, always there to let him vent. He lets the beer bros fuck him around on rent all the time because he genuinely likes them. When Clara almost caught her unit on fire, he put in a new stove and

repainted with not an ounce of anger toward her for being careless. With Maggie, he lets her have a million cats and never asks for a pet deposit even though we're going to have to burn that unit to the ground when she dies because it reeks like cat piss.

"Anyway," Dad grumbles, not liking my calling him out. "How are things with you and Casey? I noticed you didn't come home last night. I'm guessing it was good."

My cheeks flame hot, and I can't stop the stupid grin forming on my face. "Your boy's a man now."

Dad barks out a laugh. "No shit? Good for you." His features pinch as he grows serious. "I saw Derek leaving this morning. What was that all about?"

Honestly, I barely know myself. I still need to talk to Casey about it.

"Thought he could have her back," I say with a sigh. "He walked in on us. Awkward as fuck."

He scrunches his face. "I don't envy you a bit. You sure you know what you're doing with this woman? I really don't want to see you get hurt."

I'm sure it'll hurt.

It already has.

My heart is vulnerable and belongs solely to her. So far, it's taken a bit of a beating. I've done nothing but question my every move and drown in my insecurities.



## Page 46

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 9:24 am*

But it's also been the most incredible feeling in the world.

I guess that's what love feels like. A few punches and a lot of sweet caresses to the pitiful beating organ in your chest. I can get used to a little pain with my pleasure.

"I'm not being careful," I say with a soft laugh. "I'm going all in. I feel like my heart is raw, beating fiercely in her hand. She could crush it if she wanted to, but I don't think she will. I'm trusting she won't."

"Women," Dad grumbles playfully. "They're stressful as fuck, but man, do they make up for it in bed."

And with their sweet giggles, gentle touch, kind words, expert tongue...

My phone buzzes in my pocket. I pull it out to see a text from Casey.

Casey: It's not what you think. We didn't have a chance to finish our conversation. Can you please come over, handsome? I want to tell you everything and stay wrapped up in your arms all day.

"Oh shit," Dad says with a whistle. "You are in love. Go get your woman. I need to relieve some stress. Sanding down these walls is exactly what I need."

I give my dad a quick hug, hoping to send some strength his way, and then hightail it out of Gordon's unit like my ass is on fire.

Casey's back door is unlocked, so I let myself inside. Mo prances over to me, orange

tail swishing happily. I pick him up for a quick snuggle.

“You’ll be proud of me,” Casey says from the doorway into the kitchen. “I made it official.”

Mo purrs loudly and I’m glad to have him in my hands. I’m still on unsure footing with what happened with Derek this morning.

“What’s that, babe?”

She walks over to me to pet Mo and then presses a sweet kiss to my lips. Greeting me with a kiss is a good sign.

“I ran into Maggie when I came back home a bit ago. She was asking about Mo, and I confessed he’s been hanging out with me.”

My eyebrows fly up. “Oh yeah? How’d she handle that?”

“Get this,” she says with a smile and a shake of her head. “She knew. Apparently, he’s a little shit at her house so she’s been letting him out to explore. She figured if he wanted a new family, he’d find it on his own, and he did.”

“Was she mad at you for keeping it from her?”

“Nope.” She beams at me. “She said I must already love him to be secretly keeping him at my house. And, she said he looks fatter which means he’s getting spoiled somewhere. I’m officially a cat mom now.”

Mo purrs happily, as if he understands human language and is also pleased. I kiss him and then put him on the floor. Casey wraps her arms around my neck and grins at me.

“How will we celebrate?” I ask, nuzzling my nose against hers. “Eating your pussy seems like it goes with the theme.”

Mo meows in irritation and we both laugh.

“How about I take you upstairs and we finish our lazy day in bed before we were so rudely interrupted?”

“I’ll make us some food first,” I tell her. “You need sustenance if you’re going to keep up with me.”

Her nose scrunches. “I’m so sore, but just thinking about you being inside of me again has me aching. Why are you so addictive?”

“You started it.”

After an eventful half hour of playing grab-ass while I cook us lunch, I finally take my girl back to bed. She’s changed the sheets, but the covers are pulled back waiting for us.

“We’re going to get those dirty too.” I smirk at her as I remove my shirt. “Let’s shower first. I’m covered in drywall dust.”

Showering with Casey is my new favorite thing. I immensely enjoy soaping her down from head to toe, rubbing my slippery hands all over her chest, ass, and thighs. Plus, she washes my hair, her long fingernails lightly scraping over my scalp. It’s relaxing and erotic all at once. As much as I’m eager to fuck her again, the shower just isn’t comfortable. I like when I can stretch out with her in bed. Plus, the water gets cold too fast.

Once we’re clean and naked, we get back into bed. She snuggles against me, pressing

her large tits against my chest. It's a sensation I thoroughly enjoy. Besides her sweet, caring disposition, I think her tits are my second favorite part of her.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 9:24 am*

“You stay hard around me,” she murmurs, reaching between us to stroke my cock. “I turn you on that much?”

“You have no idea, babe. I won’t stop fucking you until my cock falls off. Fair warning.”

She giggles, her breasts jiggling with the movement. It gives me an idea. I roll onto my back and then grin at her.

“I want to see your pretty tits while you fuck me.” I reach over and pinch her nipple. “They’re so fucking perfect.”

“Since you’re a fan,” she teases, straddling me, “I’ll indulge you.”

Her pussy is slick as she rubs against my cock. I grab hold of it so she can impale herself on it. Once she’s fully seated, she bites on her bottom lip and sears me with a heated stare.

I grab hold of her gorgeous, fleshy hips, encouraging her to move. She obeys like a good girl. Her tits start bouncing with her movement and I’m fucking mesmerized.

“Beautiful,” I rasp out as I cup each of them. “So hot.”

Her hips work magic as she fucks me, doing all the work. I let the pleasure build and build as I tug, twist, and pinch her nipples. When she starts making needy whimpers, I know she’s close. I abandon one tit to find her clit. Within moments, she loses control.

The first jet of cum shoots inside her without warning, but I know she feels it. She starts to slide off in a half-ass attempt to do the pull-out method, but I buck my hips up, not letting her get away. I grab onto her waist, keeping her right where I want her as I fill her to the brim with my release.

We share a look of understanding. We're playing with fire very early on in our new relationship and we know what the consequences are. And neither of us care.

"Come here," I rumble, pulling her to me. "Let me hold you, babe."

"I'll squish you."

I laugh at her words. "What the fuck ever. Come here."

She stays on my cock while relaxing against my chest. I'm pretty sure she's fucking insane if she thinks I don't want to keep her like this forever. Even with my cock soft again while still inside her and cum everywhere, I don't want to move an inch.

"I like this," I rumble. "Me still inside you."

"The books call it cock warming." She laughs and more cum trickles out of her, pooling around the base of my dick. "It's a thing."

"Our thing."

"Keep it up and you're going to be forever tied to me, Brayden. We both know where this is going."

I rub my palms down her back to find her big, beautiful ass. Earlier, while fucking her behind, was the hottest shit ever. The way her ass jiggled will be forever etched into my brain for spank bank material.

“I count myself lucky every second I get with you,” I murmur, lips finding her neck. “If I can extend my time with you, I’m going to fucking do it.”

She grows quiet and swallows hard. I can sense a wave of grief overcoming her. Hugging her tight, I murmur assurances as she starts to cry. Losing that baby was hard for her and won’t ever truly go away. I hope to God I can give that to her one day. If anyone deserves all the happiness in the world, it’s Casey.

“What if I...” She shudders, not finishing that statement. Lose another one. “I can’t go through that again.”

“The difference, if it happens again, is that I’m not going anywhere. I’ll hold you through all your ups and downs, babe. The good and the bad. I’m hoping I’ll be able to give you a helluva lot more good than bad.”

“You already have.”

She sits up so I can see her tearstained face. God, she’s incredibly beautiful. I can’t help but reach up and touch a silky strand of her blonde hair. She’s like an angel. Fucking perfect.

“This morning, I got the closure I needed to fully move on.” She runs her fingers over my chest and smiles. “I knew right then Derek and I had something safe and comfortable, but we didn’t come close to having this.”

“What’s this?”

“Love. Real, explosive, messy, untimely.”

“You’re welcome.”

## Page 48

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 9:24 am*

She giggles at me which makes my dick perk back to life. Conveniently, I'm right where I need to be. Cockwarming is definitely our thing.

I wonder how many other things will become ours.

I can't fucking wait to find out.

Casey

A few months later...

"Stop being a baby."

Riko howls as I press my fingers into his reinjured thigh. I'm immune to his over-the-top reactions. He's dramatic and loud. Thankfully I scored a private room for him today. When he's on the floor, he irritates the other patients with his brashness.

"If you would have listened to me months ago," I say grumpily, "you wouldn't be here right now. What part of 'no more soccer' didn't you understand?"

I know it's unfair. He loves soccer. But I know he hates pain. Soccer and pain are married to each other when it comes to Riko Valentine. Unfortunately, that's his lot in life. The sooner he comes to terms with it, the better.

"I'm on an athletic scholarship," he says, breathing heavily. "I can't just quit. My parents would lose their shit."



Since I don't know much about his home life, I don't weigh in with my opinion. He drives an expensive car and his parents are loaded. That much I do know. I'm sure they could afford to pay for college for him, or at the very least help him get a loan. If they're pressuring him to keep playing the sport that causes him so much pain, well, that's just cruel.

"Nice ring," Riko says, changing the subject. "Is it rubber to remind you that you don't know what those are?"

I bark out a laugh. "You're a thorn in my side, Riko. You know that?"

He gives me a goofy grin that makes me shake my head in exasperation. He's not wrong, though. Brayden gave me the rubber ring, so I could wear it at work, later the same day I gave him the news.

I'm pregnant.

It's surreal, most days, and I freak out with worry, but I'm happy.

We're going to get married at the courthouse next week. Clara is going to throw me a "shotgun themed" bridal/baby shower tomorrow. She's extremely tickled over her "clever" idea to combine both the events with the theme. My mother was less thrilled over it, especially considering my grandma and great aunts are invited.

Someone knocks on the door and Jenna peeks her head in. "Cute boy with a watermelon chiller is waiting in the lobby for you."

"Probably to try to get her pregnant again," Riko offers. "Is that how twins are made?"

She rolls her eyes at him and shuts the door.

“Maybe you should pay attention in your science classes,” I offer, giving him a saccharine smile.

We continue giving each other a hard time until he’s done with his session. As much as we mess with each other, I’ve grown to really care about Riko’s wellbeing. I want him to do what’s best for his body, not for his college career or for his parents. Every day, I worry about him. Behind his jokes, there’s a darkness that breaks my heart for him.

After I get Riko on his way, I clock out for lunch, and head over to Brayden who’s chatting it up with Sophia. Both her and Jenna each have a Starbucks drink in hand. Not only does he spoil me, but he’s sweet to the girls I work with too.

“Hey babe,” he says upon seeing me, eyes lighting up and then darting down to my stomach. “You look hot today.”

He thinks I look hot every day.

The girls giggle.

I walk over to him and boldly kiss him for all to see.

“Not at work,” Drew barks out from where he’s doing therapy on an older woman’s hand. “Nobody wants to see that.”

“I’m off the clock,” I sass back. “Plus, it’s romantic. You might learn something.”

“Yeah,” Sophia agrees, giving Drew a mean glare.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 9:24 am*

“I’m romantic, Crybaby, and you know it.”

Rather than sticking around while they get into one of their fights that is really just foreplay, I take Brayden’s hand and follow him outside. Since it’s warm, and not quite fall yet, it’s a great day to walk and sip my sweet drink.

We make our way to the end of the strip center where my work is located and then head for a grassy area in front of a small church. It’s our spot. He’s already laid out a blanket and his food bag is waiting to be unloaded.

I’m going to miss this when it gets cold. But, knowing Brayden, he’ll find another way to make lunchtime special.

“What have you been up to today besides spoiling me?” I ask as he helps me sit down.

“Went with Dad to look at a property that’s being foreclosed on. I’m thinking about getting it.”

He shows me the pictures he took on his phone. It’s not a complex like Moonlit Gables, but it’s a cute, older home downtown with a garage apartment. I listen with rapt attention as he explains his plans to rent them both out after rehabbing it. Both his parents are going to cosign on the loan for him, but it’s going to be his responsibility.

“I’m proud of you,” I tell him as he hands me a warm container of leftover spaghetti from last night. “You’re really going to do something great with that.”

“Gotta provide for my baby momma and our little bear.”

I seriously swoon every time he refers to the baby as our little bear.

“I make enough to take care of us,” I remind him.

“I know, babe. It’s a manageable project while I stay home with the baby. And it’ll give us more income in case you decide you want to cut back on work or stay home.”

I love my career, but I won’t lie and say I haven’t considered doing just that. At once, when I thought my future with Derek was what I had to work with, staying with the baby was more appealing since I knew he wasn’t going to give up working. Brayden is such a sweet, caring soul, though. I trust he will be the best stay-at-home-dad, and I can continue to do what I love. It’s thoughtful he’s providing options in case I change my mind.

As we eat the lunch he packed, we discuss next week. We’ll have family in town to witness our small courthouse wedding, so there’s a lot to plan and think about. Luckily, Brayden has put together an awesome menu for our party afterward at the Moonlit Gable meeting room.

“You have room for dessert?” Brayden asks, holding up container filled with cut fruit. “I made that dip you like.”

That dip is addictive and my mouth waters. I think the baby craves it the most of everything he feeds me.

“Maybe I can take it back with me. Right now, I just want to enjoy the sunshine and you.”

I lie down with my head in his lap and he strokes my hair. The wind tickles over my

flesh, making me shiver happily. Brayden gives me the most serene moments I've ever known. Sure, we can light the bedsheets on fire because our sexual chemistry is off the charts, but he's also intuitive about my emotional needs.

He's going to make a great father.

"Tell your dad he can hang out with me and my dad during the shower tomorrow," Brayden says. "We're going to go eat at Smoke & Sugar. I guess it's kind of a bachelor party thing, but lowkey since it's family and old dudes."

I giggle at him. "Dad does love to eat."

The first time I brought Brayden home to my parents for them to meet, I thought my mom was going to have a stroke. She rudely pulled me aside to ask me if he was even an adult yet. Dad, though, welcomed Brayden right away and they got to discussing how they could fix my parents' back deck that had some wood rot.

He's growing on Mom, especially once she learned he's an excellent cook, but Dad adored Brayden right from the start.

A big brown truck passes, and we both look to see who's driving. Sure enough, it's Derek. He doesn't look our way which is probably for the best.

"Oh," I say, sitting up. "How did it go with your dad and his girlfriend? I forgot to ask."

For the past few months, Amara and her daughter have been living in Gordon's old unit. Brayden confided in me that Amara made first month's rent but hasn't paid since. His dad is stressing out over it.

"Ugh," he says with a groan. "Not good."

“Oh no.”

“It’s a sticky situation since she’s his girlfriend, but he was honest with her. Told her he has his own bills to pay, and he can’t afford to lose the rent money on that unit.”

“Let me guess,” I utter with a frown. “She cried.”

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 9:24 am*

Brayden snorts out a laugh. “Of course she did. She cries so fucking much. I’m pretty sure it’s emotional manipulation.”

I’m not therapist, but I wholeheartedly agree. I don’t know that she’s doing it on purpose, though. It’s just her go-to reaction when things don’t go her way. Amara is mousy and soft-spoken. She likes to be rescued.

“So, he’s evicting her?”

Brayden shakes his head. “Well, yes and no. She asked if she could live with him instead.”

“No,” I huff. “This is a recipe for disaster.”

“Tell me about it. And, for the record, he reluctantly agreed.”

I feel guilty for letting Brayden move in with me, freeing up his room at Reid’s house. Amara probably saw that as an opportunity to move her and her daughter in since Brayden’s room was empty.

“It’s weird giving Dad relationship advice,” Brayden says with a smirk. “Not that he listens. I’m just happy as fuck we have it so good.”

The thing with Reid and Amara is it’ll never work. He’s doing the noble thing by letting her move in, but it won’t be without consequences. I know this because me and Derek stayed together for all the wrong reasons. Brayden changed my life for the better. Amara is going to change Reid’s for the worse.

We move on to lighter subjects like what to name the baby and if Mo needs a cat friend, so he won't get jealous. Brayden pulls me into his arms and rubs my belly with such reverence my eyes tear up. Stupid pregnancy emotions.

It's hard to believe that six months ago I was depressed from my miscarriage and trying so hard to hold a toxic, failing relationship together. I'd held on so tightly to the life I thought I wanted.

But there was this better life out there waiting for me.

All I had to do was let go of the other one.

Nothing about me and Brayden makes sense, but it's also the most sensical, real thing in the world.

Next week I'll be Casey Foss.

A loving wife. Soon-to-be mother. Amazing cat lady.

Best of all, I'll still be me. The me I'd somehow lost over the years, who was hiding behind insecurities, pain, and stubbornness.

Brayden found her in the wreckage of her life, dusted her off, and reminded her she was worthy, capable, and beautiful both inside and out.

My life irrevocably changed when I fell in love with the neighbor's son.

And it keeps getting better.

The End