



Accidental Mile High Daddy

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Billionaire Romance, Adult

Description: I joined the mile high club with a hot older stranger...

Now we're fake engaged—and I'm carrying his twins.

My ex dumped me right before our vacation.

So I kept the first-class ticket... and flirted with the dirty-talking silver fox seated next to me.

He promised to help me forget my broken heart.

And wow, did he ever—with one reckless night of pleasure at 30,000 feet.

I thought it would end when we landed.

I had no idea he was my ex's older, billionaire brother... and a single dad.

Or that he was about to make a very scandalous proposal:

Be his fake girlfriend.

Crash his brother's wedding.

Get revenge—Strathmore style.

But there's just one twist he never planned for...

Becoming a daddy to the twins growing inside me.

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Page 1

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:00 am

Chapter 1

Sienna

I didn't pay for a single drop of the champagne in my flute, but I was damn well going to enjoy it.

The first-class lounge smelled like money. Not the crisp, papery smell of a freshly printed hundred-dollar bill with the Word Art on the backside, but real money. Old money. Like a heady bourbon or polished leather, like bergamot from someone's cologne. I sank deeper into the ridiculously soft armchair, trying not to think about how just the seat alone probably cost more than my monthly rent.

I didn't belong here. I knew that. But then again, this whole trip wasn't supposed to have been mine anymore, and I took it anyway.

Bubbles tickled my nose as I took another sip, my hand shaking just a minuscule amount. I'd been fine until now — until reality smacked me in the face the moment I sat down alone instead of next to Ryan. His name, his everything, still buzzed in my brain like a fly I had no way of squishing. Ryan. Ryan and his smirking, lying mouth. Ryan and Lauren. God, Lauren.

I set the glass down a little harder than necessary. The bartender glanced at me from across the room.

We were supposed to be here together. We were supposed to be heading to the Amalfi coast, having sunset cocktails and couple's massages and his-and-her bathrobes in

Positano that I could have never afforded myself without Ryan's connections and wallet. But instead, I was sitting alone in Atlanta's Hartsfield-Jackson International terminal, marinating in false status, and pretending like I hadn't found him balls-deep in my best friend four weeks ago. A month. A goddamn month.

But the vacation was already paid for. And if he thought I was going to stay home and cry into a pint of mint chocolate chip ice cream while he got laid on a private yacht off the coast of Italy, he could eat shit. So, I'd convinced him to let me keep the trip.

At least I was taking back something.

I tugged at the hem of my sundress — yellow, cute, too short for first class. Definitely not in the dress code of what everyone else in the lounge seemed to be following, but I'd told myself I wouldn't care about it. Even if it was a lie. Even if the woman with a face sharp enough to cut glass glared at me over the rim of her espresso martini like I'd tracked in mud. I gave her a sweet smile and picked up my champagne again, swallowing down the knot at the back of my throat.

The plush seat seemed to swallow me just that little bit more as I sank further. I just had to keep my thoughts off him. That was all.

A voice came over the intercom, announcing boarding for a flight that wasn't mine, and I let my head tip back on the cushion, closing my eyes and trying not to imagine Lauren's face when I'd opened that door. I was almost relaxed, almost convinced I could make it through the next five days pretending none of it mattered, when a low voice behind me cut through the silence.

"Mind if I sit here?"

I didn't realize I'd dropped the champagne flute until I heard the shatter.

Shards of crystal glinted like ice on the little table beside me. I stared at them for half a second too long, body locked, heat creeping up my cheeks, heart beating like a drum in my ears.

“Shit,” I muttered, instinctually reaching to clear it up myself, shards be damned — but a large, warm hand locked around my wrist before I could make contact.

“Don’t think they’ll want to clean up champagne and blood,” the voice cut in, chuckling as he slowly pulled my hand back from the mess. He let go the second my arm was back within the space between the armrests on either side of me. “For the record, I wasn’t trying to scare you.”

I turned my head toward the sound, swallowing down the rising humiliation, and got my first proper look at the man behind the voice.

And promptly forgot how to breathe for half a second.

Tall. Older, maybe mid-to-late forties. Mostly silver hair that looked like it belonged in a goddamn cologne ad, swept back from bone structure that was just wholly unfair. A smattering of scruff along his jawline, blacks swirling into the grey, just enough to know you’d feel it if you ran your fingers over it. And his eyes, Christ, hazel and sharp. He was striking, commanding almost, like he expected the world to move when he stepped into a room because it would.

But most of all, he just looked amused.

“Are you going to speak, or should I just assume I can sit?” he asked, raising a single mostly-black brow at me.

I blinked away enough of the fog clouding my head to get my mouth to cooperate. “Um—yeah, yes, sorry,” I swallowed, gripping my carry-on’s handle and dragging it

slightly out of the way for him. “I can, like, move if you want this section?—”

“I’m not asking you to move,” he chuckled, gripping the sides of the arm rests as he lowered himself into the plush seat to the right of mine, cocked at a ninety-degree angle. “Saw you when I was at the bar. Your hand was shaking. Thought you might be nervous about flying.”

A dry laugh crackled out of me. “Yeah. That’s it. Planes.”

He didn’t call me on the lie — just leaned back slightly, giving a subtle nod to the bar staff. A second later, a suited attendant appeared like magic to clean up the glass, and I stared at him for half a second too long before remembering that I probably shouldn’t look like I was in shock from someone cleaning up after me. The man to my right hadn’t said a word, and the attendant had just moved, and I couldn’t get over how absolutely ridiculous it was that he somehow expected and received the world following the order of the jut of his chin.

Rich. Definitely rich, and not in the flamboyant, posting photos of Louis Vuitton bags on Instagram kind of way. No, this man had weight. The kind that didn’t need to brag. The kind that knew he could walk into a room and own it without saying a damned word.

“I should’ve just stayed home,” I muttered, mostly to myself as I turned my head away from the last bits of broken crystal being swept away.

“Why didn’t you?” The words were casual, but the answer to them was charged, sticky in my mouth. My eyes tracked him as he stretched one long leg out in front of him and leaned back, the cuff of his shirt riding up just enough to flash a stupidly expensive-looking watch around his wrist.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:00 am

“Because,” I said, adjusting my posture simply because I felt like I had to, “I wasn’t about to let a fully paid-for Amalfi Coast vacation go to waste just because my ex has a cock with no sense of loyalty.”

His hand came up to his mouth as a laugh bubbled out of him, his finger rubbing against his upper lip. “Well. That’s a hell of a reason.”

“I’ve got better ones, but that one gets the point across fastest.”

He smirked and extended a hand toward me. Big, with veins across the back of his palm. Clean nails. A silver—no, platinum—ring on his right index finger, just subtle enough not to scream mid-life crisis. “I’m on the Naples flight too. I’m Matt.”

Just that. Nothing I could Google. Just “Matt.”

I narrowed my eyes at him and hesitated for a second before taking it. His grip was warm, strong, not too tight, and not a show of dominance. Just confident. “Sienna.”

Matt gave me a slow once-over, his eyes flicking down before dragging back up, and for once, it didn’t feel sleazy, didn’t feel like he was trying to strip me with his eyes. It felt more like he was either sizing me up or trying to memorize something about me. “Sienna,” he repeated as if testing my name in his mouth. “Nice to meet you. And apologies, again, for nearly causing your heart to leap out of your chest.”

Christ. I rolled my eyes. “It’s fine,” I said, waving it off. “First time a guy’s ever made me break a glass, though. That’s, like, an accomplishment.”

His lips quirked up at the corner. “I’ll take it,” he said. “Can I get you a replacement, at least?”

I blinked at him. “Are you asking to buy me a drink when the drinks are complimentary?”

“I’m asking if you’d like another one,” he clarified, a smirk breaking out across his cheeks. “And offering to get off my ass and get it for you.”

The skin on my chest suddenly felt slightly too warm for comfort, and I rubbed at it to try to hide the flush creeping up. “Only if you don’t mind me making it weird.”

“Weirder than shattering a champagne flute the moment I say hello?” he teased, pushing up to his feet and smoothing down his shirt.

I leveled a glare at him that had zero heat in it. “Rude.”

He didn’t even react. “Another champagne?”

Squinting at the little board on the bar, I shook my head. “One of those elderflower and gin things.”

He moved with the quiet kind of confidence that didn’t ask for attention but somehow demanded it anyway — broad shoulders, long legs, the roll of muscle beneath his shirt as he crossed the lounge like he belonged to it, or more likely, the other way around.

I shifted in my seat as I tracked him, hyper aware of how short the stupid yellow sundress really was, and watched as he leaned an elbow onto the counter, his posture easy and relaxed. He gestured toward the bartender, all calm and unrehearsed confidence, and I couldn’t help but glare a little. He was annoyingly composed.

Probably listened to alpha-male mantras like podcasts. Probably did yoga and stock market investments at the same time on a lazy Tuesday.

It didn't take him long. Barely two minutes had passed before he was walking back, highball glass in one hand and something delicate in the other, like he somehow trusted I wasn't going to break something else.

He handed it to me with a little nod. "Yourelderflower and gin thing," he drawled.

I took it, my fingers just barely brushing against his, and tried not to think about what that did to me as I glanced down at the glass instead. It tasted exactly like what I needed to get through this conversation and however long it would take to actually get on board and lock myself in my private seat.

"So," he said, sinking back into his seat with his glass of amber liquid in hand. "Flying solo on a couple's trip. That's bold."

"I didn't say it was a couple's trip," I shot back over the rim of my glass.

He shrugged. "You said Amalfi. You saidex. And I'm pretty sure you said you kept the vacation, so I made a logical leap."

I narrowed my eyes at him and dodged the conversation entirely. "You heading to Italy for business or pleasure?" I hated the word as soon as it came out. Pleasure.

His head tilted left and right, weighing it up. "Bit of both. Mostly business," he said, leaning forward a little and dropping his voice before continuing, "but I won't lie and say I don't enjoy the pleasure part more."

I snorted into my glass. "Christ." The confidence in him was annoyingly overwhelming. Not arrogance, though he was definitely cocky, but he moved and

spoke like he'd earned the right to say what he wanted. Like the world had bent enough times for him that he didn't feel a need to fake it. Subject change. Now. Before he says something else. "So, you're rich, then?"

He laughed — properly, this time, not hidden behind his hand or muffled. "Why are you asking?"

I shrugged, taking a sip of my drink before setting it down gently. "That's just the vibe you give off. You've got 'I own a yacht and have a mistress in Monaco' energy."

The grin from his laugh stayed plastered to his cheeks. "I'd argue with that if it wasn't half true. I don't have a mistress."

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:00 am

“Oh, good,” I said dryly. “Just the yacht, then.”

He chuckled as he brought his—bourbon? whiskey?—to his lips. “Last I checked, we’re both in the first-class lounge, Sienna.”

I shot him a look before directing my gaze elsewhere. “There’s a difference between first-class rich and whatever...this,” I said, gesturing toward him.

“You say that like you fit into the first category.” He didn’t miss a beat. Just laid it out there, not like it was an insult, but a fact. I scowled at him. But then he spoke again. “You don’t. That’s clear. But I’d bet good money every man in this room’s wondered what you taste like anyway.”

I nearly choked on my saliva.

A voice crackled over the speakers above, blessedly saving me. Now calling boarding for our First-Class passengers with StrathOne Air for the 7:15 pm flight to Naples, Italy.

I stood faster than I probably should have, gripping the handle of my carry-on in my hand and tugging at the bottom of my dress to make sure it hadn’t caught on anything. Matt rose beside me with far too much easy grace, polished off the last of his drink, and set the glass on the table.

“After you,” he said, motioning toward the exit.

The temptation to flick him on the forehead almost won out.

The walk to the gate was quiet, him trailing behind me without a bag in sight. I could feel his eyes on me as we scanned our passports and boarding passes, could feel him staring as I walked down the gangway in front of him. I glanced behind me when the feeling faded, catching a quick glimpse of him speaking to one of the attendants in the gangway, but kept moving.

I wasn't going to be wooed by a random silver-haired mystery man with a voice like silk and hands that could probably make me forget how to say my own name. Especially not one who seemed like he was already convinced he could.

Except I'd already thought about it. Twice. Fuck, three times now.

"Here you are, Miss James. 1A. Enjoy the flight."

I had to check with the flight attendant that I was definitely in the right spot before I was even slightly confident this...suite, if I could even call it that, belonged to me. The walls that blocked each one were tall enough to reach my eyes, creating a private space with a lounging chair that looked far more like a La-Z-Boy than an airplane seat and an already-made bed on one side. Ridiculous. Fantastic.

I set my bag down inside just in time to see Matt's head appear around the corner of the cabin, smiling as he refused help from one of the attendants. I hesitated in the entryway to mine.

He passed the first set of suites.

I glared at him.

He checked his ticket and let out a bark of laughter. "Convenient," he said, stopping beside the door of the suite one down from mine. 2A.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I groaned. “That’s too close. That’s weird.”

An attendant wordlessly passed him a small suitcase as if that was completely normal, and he rolled it just inside before flashing me a grin. “What are the odds?”

“You did something,” I accused, narrowing my eyes.

“I didn’t,” he chuckled, raising his hands in surrender as he leaned against the exterior wall of his suite. “I booked late. It was the only one available.”

I gave him a long, exhausted look. His smile didn’t fade in the slightest.

Chapter 2

Matt

I stared at the partition between our seats like I had a vendetta against it.

We’d taken off thirty minutes ago, and now we were flying high at 35,000 feet, the seatbelt light off and temptation bristling my neck.

She was sharp, Sienna. Not just the way she looked—though that yellow sundress was now burned into my goddamn brain like a brand—but the way she held her ground. Like she’d been knocked too many times and had decided staying down wasn’t an option.

I liked that.

I wasn’t supposed to particularly like anything about this flight. I’d booked last minute on whatever international StrathOne A380 still had a suite seat left this morning, so that I could see firsthand what our newest first-class rollout felt like for regular

passengers. It should have been boring. Quiet. Work.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:00 am

Instead, I was sitting ten feet away from the most unexpected part of my year so far, with a chunk of plastic blocking my view of tied-up, brunette hair I wanted to sink my fingers into, lightly tanned skin that looked soft enough to feel like sin against mine, and a face that could easily drop grown men to their knees.

And her body. God, her body.

She had to be nearly half my age. Couldn't have been much more than mid-twenties. But it wasn't stopping me from thinking.

I bit my knuckle as I pulled out my tablet, flicking through a handful of flight operations reports to try to take my mind off the button glaring at me from the other side of the suite beneath the partition, but I barely absorbed any of it. I knew what that button did. I knew how to use it. Passengers weren't meant to, but I wasn't a standard passenger.

I fought myself through the dinner service, up until the moment when the cabin lights lowered and I could hear the rustling of people getting ready for sleep. I unbuckled my seatbelt and moved to the foot of the bed, glaring at that stupid button like it owed me something. Maybe it did.

She'd either hate me for it, or we'd get what we both wanted.

Worth it.

I pressed it, just enough for the partition to lower a few inches, just enough that my entire head was visible over it.

Sienna jumped like a startled rabbit.

“Fucking—Christ,” she cursed, her brown eyes wide as she stared at me from her seat, her phone in her hand and her legs crossed. God, those legs. “I could have been naked in here. What’s wrong with you?”

I raised a brow at her. “Planning to get naked in your suite?” I asked, lowering the partition just a little more.

“No, but—” She cut herself off, shaking her head. “Don’t make scaring the living daylight out of me a habit, please.”

“Is twice a habit? Thought it was three times,” I mused, resting my forearms on the top of the partition. “You free?”

She blinked at me. “Unless there are scheduled events on this flight, then yes?”

I tilted my head toward the lounge bar on the other side of her suite’s privacy walls. “Let’s get a drink.”

“So you can hit on me again?”

I chuckled. “I haven’t hit on anyone.”

“So lying is a habit of yours, too?”

I rolled my eyes. “Fine. You caught me,” I said, raising my hands palm-out. “Let me chat your ear off a bit more, and you can keep shooting me down in style.”

She made a face. “It’s three in the morning Italy-time,” she said. “Shouldn’t you be trying to sleep? They gave out those little eye-masks and everything.”

“I don’t sleep much.”

“Shocking.”

The corner of my lips twitched up. Feisty. “Just one drink, Sienna.”

She hesitated, her lips pressing together in thought, and I didn’t push. I didn’t need to. I knew the power of silence, of offering space and waiting until someone filled it. And sure enough, she finally opened that pretty mouth again.

“Okay,” she said, unbuckling her seatbelt and uncrossing her legs to stand. “But I’m not putting my shoes back on. You’re dealing with vacation-Sienna.”

I grinned. “Vacation-Sienna,” I said, pushing back off the partition, “is already my favorite.”

She rolled her eyes and opened her suite door. A second later, I was following her down the hall, her bare feet padding against the carpet.

The bar was empty. Sleek marble countertops, soft lighting with the cabin lights dimmed, a handful of bolted-down leather stools that wouldn’t fall over in turbulence. I gave the bartender a nod, and he snapped into motion like I’d ordered it.

“Do you do this often?” Sienna asked, hoisting herself up onto the barstool half with grace and half with the kind of chaos that made me glad the stools were bolted down.

“Invite women to drink with me on flights?” I asked, leaning against the barstool on her right.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:00 am

“No. Charm them into ignoring their better judgment,” she clarified, shooting me a glare as she looked at the little leather-bound cocktail menu.

I chuckled. “Only when they look like they could use it.”

She leaned onto the bar as she hooked one leg over the other, her bare foot nearly colliding with my thigh without a hint of remorse. No shoes, no fucks given — I’d seen heiresses and influencers try to command attention with far more effort and far less effect.

The bartender slid over without a word, looking between us expectantly. Sienna glanced at me before meeting his gaze. “In the first-class lounge, they had these... elderflower and gin things,” she said, setting the menu down like it had personally offended her. “Can you make one of those?”

“Of course,” he smiled, then turned to me, opening his mouth to—what I could only imagine—address me formally. Didn’t need to have the I own the airline conversation right now if she inevitably asked about the why, so I cut him off before he could even speak.

“Lagavulin 88,” I said. “Double. Neat.”

“Of course, Mr.—”

“You’re not what I expected,” I said to her, cutting off the bartender before he could say another word.

She looked at me like I'd grown another head, a little crease forming between her brows. "You said that like it's a threat."

I reeled back a little. "Did I?"

She hesitated. "People don't usually say that like it's a good thing," she said. "At least not in my experience."

A second of quiet fell over us, nothing but the sound of the drinks cart rattling as we hit the smallest bit of turbulence. Then her drink arrived in a highball glass with a sprig of mint on top, and mine appeared beside it, and she lifted hers to her mouth. I opened my mouth to change the topic?—

Her tongue darted out to catch a stray drop from the rim of her glass without even thinking, and I felt heat crawl down my spine like a warm, lightly tanned hand. She caught me staring and tilted her head.

"What?"

I blinked. "Nothing," I said, willing myself to put the lingering image away. "Just thinking you wear vacation well."

Her eyes narrowed, amusement twinkling. "That's the second time you've said something weird about vacation-Sienna. First she's your favorite, now I'm wearing it well."

"I meant both."

She rolled her eyes at me, and for a second, all I could picture was the way they'd roll back in her head with her mouth parted?—

“Let me guess,” she said, turning to face me a little bit more, her voice swiping through my thoughts like a knife. But I caught the way her eyes darted to my hands, just quickly, just a glance. “You work too much, don’t date seriously, and use words like ‘a distraction’ and ‘inconvenient’ when women ask what we are to you.”

I snorted as I lifted my glass to my lips. “Not bad.”

“I’ve met your type.”

“I doubt that.”

She arched a single brow at me. “Older? Check. Rich? Check. Annoyingly composed? Check. Walks into a room like gravity bends for him, keeps things neat and tight and exactly under control until someone like me steps in and messes everything up? Check and check.”

I let my grin stay as I lowered my glass. “That’s a flattering take on yourself.”

She shrugged. “You haven’t denied any of it.”

“No. I haven’t.”

She leaned in just a little, just a fraction, but it was enough to catch the scent of her perfume—light, floral, sweet, with a hint of something sharp underneath. “Why are you really flying commercial?” she asked.

I dragged my finger along the rim of my glass. Her eyes flicked to my hand again. “What do you mean?”

“You probably have more money than most people ever dream of having. Am I wrong?”

“No, you’re not.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:00 am

She smirked. “Then why not take a private jet?”

Shit. “It’s cheaper. I don’t mind it,” I lied coolly. “Economy’s tanking, saving where I can.”

She let out a low laugh. “That’s either bullshit or both of us are pretending to be rich.”

“You are pretending.” I leaned onto the counter and let my fist take the weight of my chin. “I am not.”

“And yet here we are,” she said, swirling the ice in her glass like it was a wine needing to be aerated. “Same seats. Same drinks. Same flight. Me in a sundress I bought at TJ Maxx on clearance, and you in... Christ, what is that, Tom Ford?”

“Custom,” I said simply.

She rolled her eyes and stuck out her tongue like she was gagging. God. “Of course it is.”

There was something about her that refused to be intimidated, even when she knew exactly how far out of her depth she was—it wasn’t desperation. It wasn’t the wide-eyed gold-digging I was used to. It was stubbornness, and it was fucking sexy on her.

Her gaze flicked over to me again, lingering on my hand a little longer than the last couple of times. Then it shifted, moving across my chest, my arms, my neck. She wasn’t subtle, but she wasn’t trying to be, and that was one thing I was used to. Her

eyes came back up to mine, and I saw it there, the tiniest crack in her armor. The moment to strike.

She knew it too.

I leaned in slightly, letting my voice drop. “You keep looking at my hands.”

She blinked. Slowly. “You’re imagining things.”

“Am I?” I smirked, knocking back the last of my whiskey and setting it down with an audible clack. “Or are you just very bad at hiding how much you’re thinking about what else they can do besides holding a glass?”

She held her drink near her lips, staring me down, a little patch of fog springing up on her glass. Her gaze flickered for the briefest of seconds down to my mouth, then back up again. “I have no idea what you’re talking about, Matt.”

Matt. Was that the first time she’d said it? It sounded good from her lips.

Something about the way she looked at me, the way she let my eyes drag over her again, made me want to push.

I leaned in a little further, voice lower. “Have you ever done something you weren’t supposed to on an airplane?”

Her stubborn expression faltered just a hair. “Define ‘wasn’t supposed to’.”

“You’re smart, Sienna.” I held her gaze. “You already know what I mean.”

She set her glass down slowly, deliberately, and turned fully toward me, her bare foot bouncing. Her knee brushed against my thigh, and I nearly had to restrain myself. “Is

that your line?”

“I don’t use lines. I make an offer,” I said casually. “And you say yes, or you don’t.”

She tilted her head. “What exactly are you offering, Matt?”

There it was again. My name. It sounded fucking sinful. “A distraction.”

She blinked.

“That partition between our suites,” I drawled. “It goes all the way down. The beds connect.”

I watched as her throat worked.

My lips split into a grin. “How good are you at being quiet, Sienna?”

She stared at me, her lips parted, her pupils dilating, for what felt like a lifetime. “You’re serious.”

“Dead.”

“What makes you think I’d say yes?”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:00 am

Another breath from her, and I leaned a little closer, just enough for her to hear the gravel in my voice. “Because your ex is somewhere getting fucked by God knows who, and you took this pre-booked trip to remind yourself that you’re not broken.”

Her breath hitched.

“And because,” I continued, “you’re looking at me like you’re desperate to know what I’d feel like inside of you.”

Chapter 3

Sienna

He wasn’t joking.

That was the part that made my skin prickle, my chest squeeze tight, like I’d suddenly been pressurized more at 35,000 feet than the hunk of metal shooting through the sky had already done. I swallowed and turned slightly back toward the bar, staring hard at the smear of condensation trailing down my glass. If I just laughed, if I just told him to fuck off, this whole moment would dissolve into an anecdote that Jules and I could cackle about over too many margaritas. Remember that stupidly rich, hot stranger who looked old enough to be my dad, who tried to talk me into joining the mile-high club on that flight to Italy?

But he wasn’t just hot. And I wasn’t just annoyed.

I was starving.

Starving for something, for someone, for a clean and numbing break between who I was with Ryan and whoever I'd be after this trip ended. Maybe that was supposed to start here.

"You're very full of yourself," I said, but the words came out wrong—too breathy, too insecure. Too rattled.

He smiled regardless, like he liked that I was pushing back. "Not full of myself. Just observant."

"You're a stranger," I shot back.

"So are you."

"This is a red-eye. People sleep on red-eyes."

"Not all of them." My stomach plummeted 35,000 feet the second I felt the lightest brush of his knuckle against my knee. He was shameless now, leaning in further, close enough that his stubble brushed my cheek and his cologne filled my nostrils—deep, masculine, clean. "You don't have to take me up on my offer, Sienna."

He kept saying my name, and every goddamn time, my mouth went dry.

"But if you let me," he continued, that single knuckle turning into a warm hand, palm down, wrapped gently around my lower thigh, "I'll make you forget that man's name. I'll make you forget what he did. Just for tonight."

My throat closed. My cheeks heated.

He didn't say it with a hint of sleaze. Just quiet, anchored certainty. Like he knew he

could.

I took a deep breath, barely, the air almost croaking through the thin space in my throat. “I shouldn’t,” I whispered, but I wasn’t sure if I was telling myself or telling him.

He squeezed once, just barely, before pushing off the stool without another word. The warmth of his invasion dissipated, his scent vanishing a half-second later, and all that lingered was the brutal hum of the airplane and the chill of the too-cold cabin as he turned his back to me and walked toward our suites.

Like he was betting I’d follow.

Like he knew I would.

And God help me, I did.

My pulse thudded in my throat as I slipped off the barstool and headed back for the suites.

Matt was waiting as I stepped back around the corner and into the galleyway. Not inside his suite, but leaning against the outer wall beside his open door like he knew I’d come. The low blue light of the cabin caught the sharp cut of his jaw, the curve of the smirk playing at the corner of his mouth.

I didn’t stop at my suite’s closed door.

I didn’t make eye contact, either.

I walked past him, my shoulder brushing against his chest—Christ, it had zero give—and turned, crossing the threshold into his suite.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:00 am

The door clicked shut behind him as he followed me in.

The warmth of him at my back flooded my senses as I glanced around his space. It was identical to mine, but mirrored, with the bed on the right against the half-lowered partition between our suites instead of on the left like it was in mine, and his passport sat closed and face-up on the little desk, United States of America in gold embossed letters shining with a boarding pass shoved in the center of it and poking out like a bookmark.

His breath on my ear from behind me made my spine stiffen.

“Get on the bed, Sienna.”

I forced a swallow. “You haven’t even kissed me yet, and you’re telling me to get on the bed?”

The warmth of him disappeared, and I blinked, turning my head in confusion — but he was moving, leaning down slightly to press a blue button at the foot of the bed. The partition started to lower further. “Our heads are visible over the walls,” he said quietly, hazel eyes flicking to the plastic separating us from the galleyway. “I’d rather not give the flight attendants a show by standing.”

I stared at him, caught between the horror at the idea of a flight attendant catching us and the thrill of it. “How did you know it did that?” I asked, nudging my chin at the partition as it slid down that final bit, absolutely nothing but an inch of plastic separating our single beds.

Matt didn't answer. Just watched me as he stood up straight, his eyes glancing toward the galleyway for half a second before his fingers found the top button of his shirt.

It popped open.

Christ.

Another.

My legs wouldn't move. I was too fixated on the third button as it popped.

A sliver of toned chest with a light dusting of salt-but-mostly-pepper hair peeked out, a hint of a collarbone visible as his fingers shifted the fabric. My throat closed.

Matt exhaled, slow and amused, like he could see my pulse jumping and my nerves spiking. His fingers stilled on the fourth button, and he sank onto the edge of his bed, eyes glued to mine as a familiar warmth wrapped around my wrist.

A single tug, firm but not rough, had my knees buckling and my body falling toward him.

Asshole.

He caught me with a hand on my waist, his thumb pressed against my ribs, as he guided me over him and onto his lap, my knees pressing into the firm mattress on either side of his hips. My sundress rode up, the heat of his body searing through his slacks and into my bare thighs, through his shirt and into my palms where I steadied myself on his shoulders.

His scent surrounded me, invading my nostrils, branding itself to them as he looked up at me with an infuriatingly confident smirk he wore like a second skin. The hand

on my side slid down to my thigh, just below the hem of the dress that was barely giving me a shred of decency downstairs, and I shivered as his thumb dug in just enough to make me really feel it.

It was strange. He looked younger like this, like the lines beside his eyes and on his forehead had smoothed out from the promise of pleasure.

“How old are you?” I asked, the words slipping out before I could think.

His thumb pressed in a little harder, drifting an inch further in and higher. Teasing. Punishing. “Does it matter?”

“No,” I swallowed. “I’m just curious. Want to know if I’m beating a record here.”

He snorted, that overly-confident facade cracking as he fought a grin. “I’m forty-seven.” His free hand wrapped around the back of my neck, bracing around the base of my skull. “Don’t think we’re beating any records, sweetheart, but humor me. How old are you?”

I swallowed. Forty-seven. Our age difference could vote, join the army, take up a nicotine addiction. “Twenty-eight.”

He pulled me closer as his hand pushed higher on my thigh, fingers skating beneath the hem of my dress and pushing it up, his thumb getting maddening close to the heat building between my legs. “Younger than I normally go for,” he murmured like it was the most casual thing in the world. “We’ll make it work. But stay quiet.”

His hand moved again, eating the distance, and before I could even process his fingers lifting the already-damp cotton gusset and sliding through slick heat, he pulled me that final inch closer and pressed his mouth to mine, swallowing any hint of noise that threatened to spill past my lips. Oh, God.

There was no hesitation.

No gentleness.

Just claiming, immediate and urgent.

His tongue swept past my lips, and I melted into it, my fingers grasping at the collar of his shirt to keep myself upright as he released the back of my neck. He leaned back, his elbow catching him, and I followed, keeping my mouth locked on his. I popped a single button.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:00 am

“Soaked,” he muttered against my mouth, tracing slow, deliberate circles over my clit. “Just from this?”

I choked back a whimper, trying to focus on another button, and then another, despite the maddeningly slow but perfect touches. I pulled at the bottom of his shirt, freeing it from where it was tucked into his slacks, and worked the last button free right as the plane picked the perfect moment to jostle us.

Two of his fingers thrust inside of me, deep, merciless, and harder than he intended.

My head spun.

They curled inside, his thumb pressing in against my clit, and my hips ground down on him, driving him deeper, chasing more. A quiet, rough groan escaped him, half frustrated and half something I couldn't place, and then the world tilted and shifted in a blur as gravity seemed to reroute, and he flipped me beneath him.

With the partition gone, I was sprawled across both sides, my heels digging into the mattress on his side and my shoulders pressing down on mine. He hovered above me, the two sides of his shirt dangling in the narrow space between us, his belt catching on the fabric of my dress and pulling it higher.

He moved away from me for enough time to wrestle my underwear down my legs and off before he sank back down between my thighs.

Matt's mouth found my neck this time, sucking, biting, his stubble scraping across my skin like a match to a flame. Heat pooled low in my stomach, twisting, warping,

pleasure blooming, andshit, I never got here this quickly?—

His free hand clamped down over my mouth.He could tell.

“Come.”

I shattered around his fingers, my eyes screwing shut, the smallest little whimper breaking out against his palm as I fought for control over my vocal cords. I didn’t have time to recover.

“For the love of God, tell me you’re on birth control,” he growled, his voice low enough against my neck that I could barely hear it over the hum of the engines. I nodded beneath him, and his hand went to his belt, slipping it free with practiced precision.

His mouth dragged lower, teeth grazing my collarbone, cutting off my view between our bodies. He uncovered my mouth as I managed to catch my breath.

“Do you want me to wear a condom?”

“I don’t fuckingcare, Matt, please?—”

A dark laugh ghosted over my skin as I felt the warm, rigid tip of him against my entrance. “You sound so pretty sayingplease,” he murmured. “That impatient?”

My hand sank into his once-neatly-styled greys, tightening, and I hooked my leg around his hip. My heel dug into his ass to tug him closer. “Yes, you pompous?—”

His hips snapped forward, hiling in a single, brutal thrust. His mouth covered mine before I could even think to cry out, swallowing the sound, and he gave me all of two breaths to accommodate the sheersizeof him before he moved.

Oh, God.

Oh,fuck.

That wasn't fair.

He was perfect. Stupidly, annoyingly, agonizingly perfect, the burn of the stretch morphing so quickly into the burn of pleasure that I nearly forgot where we were as his pace started out ruthless. His hands pushed my thighs up, his fingers digging into the backs of them hard enough that I was positive I'd be coming back from the Amalfi coast with both a tan and bruises, before one hand left and grasped my jaw instead.

"Look at me," he ordered, his voice low.

I blinked through the haze and snapped my gaze to his. His pupils were blown, his jaw set tight, a single wave of grey hair falling forward over his brows. Why did he have to be hot?

His grip on my jaw tightened, his thumb pressing into the hinge. "Bet you thought I wouldn't live up to the arrogance."

Asshole. A breathless laugh leaked out of me, but then his angle changed, and the laugh choked and bled into a whimper that I barely managed to keep quiet. His smirk was victorious.

"By all means, sweetheart, tell me if I don't," he rasped, his hold on me shifting, his thumb dragging across my lower lip. Every thrust was deliberate, deep, the kind of precision that made my thighs shake and my eyes struggle to stay focused and heat coil low in my gut. "But I can feel the way you're clenching around me like you're seconds from coming again."

He released my face and dragged his hand down my body, roughly palming my breast over the fabric of my dress, before drifting lower. My hands fisted in the shirt still barely covering his shoulders, the heat between us turning heavy, slick, and feral. “Matt?—”

His breath tickled my ear. “Tell me, Sienna, do you normally manage to come from just this?”

I hated him. I hated him so much, even as I started to peak, even as it built from just the way he was burying himself inside of me. The hand between our bodies pressed down flat on my lower stomach, and I nearly lost my mind. “Fuck you,” I gasped, digging my nails into him.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:00 am

He laughed, low, dark, and sinful, his teeth nipping at my jaw. “You are.”

My orgasm hit before I could mentally prepare for the onslaught without stimulation, sudden and violent and ripping the air from my lungs. He swallowed the cry climbing up my throat with his mouth on mine, grunting, groaning quietly against my lips as his hips jerked and stuttered, his own release flooding him and filling me.

For a heartbeat, the only sounds were our ragged breaths and the low hum of the plane. But then he was pulling back, just enough to meet my gaze again, a rim of hazel barely visible around his blown pupils.

Christ. I wasn’t going to get a single second of sleep on this flight.

Matt’s scent still lingered on my skin as I exhaustedly dragged my roller behind me down the gangway.

I’d let him touch me three more times after the first, need outweighing rational thought. The partition had gone back up after that, him insisting he needed at least an hour of sleep, but I hadn’t been able to for a single second. My body ached in every good way and a handful of bad ways from not getting any rest, but I couldn’t find it in me to care.

Ryan was no longer the last person I’d slept with. That was enough to make the stupid decisions worth it.

I tried not to think about how Matt's hands had felt on my skin despite being able to feel his presence walking behind me. We hadn't exchanged full names, hadn't given each other phone numbers — once and done. That was it. Strangers who probably wouldn't cross paths again. And even though he'd touched me like Satan himself had blessed him with the ability to give out sin, I was fine with that. He'd raised my standards.

But something was different. Something I couldn't quite place.

The staff along the gangway gave me a smile and a wave, but I saw the way their faces shifted just as I got passed them, morphing into something far more reverent and appreciative in the millisecond before they were out of view, their gaze locked on the man behind me.

The moment my sandaled foot crossed the threshold into the airport to head for Immigration, I heard it.

“How was your flight, Mr. Strathmore? Everything up to standards?”

I froze.

Just for a half-second, everything shut down.

Strathmore.

The air in my lungs left in an instant.

Strathmore.

Matt Strathmore. Matthew Strathmore.

No. No, no, no, no. That couldn't be real. But the puzzle pieces started clicking into place before I could catch my breath — the flight. The fact that Ryan managed to get us a first-class experience that fancy, so easily, before I'd kicked him off the booking. The fact that Matt—Matthew—had gotten that seat last minute.

I'd slept with Ryan's brother.

Ryan, who used to talk about his estranged sibling like he was the devil reincarnated. Ryan, who'd told me he was disinherited from their family's wealth because Matthew—not Matt,Matthew—took everything and locked the accounts. Matthew, who owned an airline. This airline. The one I'd flown on, courtesy of a ticket Ryan had booked months ago when I still thought we had a future, and he had a soul.

God.

I felt sick.

I didn't turn around. I walked faster, through the doors of the terminal like they'd personally offended me, needing to be anywhere else than within eyeline of him. Away from Matthew Strathmore, away from the man I'd let myself want without knowing just how tangled and fucked-up it was.

This was going to my fucking grave.

Chapter 4

Matt

One week later...

Sienna had infected my thoughts like a goddamn virus.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:00 am

Every meeting. Every spreadsheet. Every finely tuned, billion-dollar decision I'd made since stepping off that plane in Italy and hopping on the next flight back to Atlanta had carried the scent of her or the image of that fucking yellow sundress in the back of my mind.

Her laugh, sharp and unfiltered. Her mouth, and the way she'd kissed me like she was starving after the first time, when she'd relaxed into it. Her legs, bare and tangled around my waist, her foot digging into my ass to pull me flush against her in a conjoined suite tens of thousands of feet above sea level.

I couldn't shake her. Wasn't sure if I even wanted to.

I told myself it was about the mystery and the fact that she'd had the guts to walk away without a goodbye or trying to get my number. Women didn't do that, not with me — they lingered, they schemed, they left lingerie in my luggage and excuses to “accidentally” meet again.

But Sienna had ghosted me like she'd trained for it.

I sat behind the polished black walnut desk in my office at StrathOne Air headquarters, one hand clenched around a glass of whiskey I wasn't drinking. Floor-to-ceiling windows framed the Atlanta skyline, gold, and pink and orange bleeding through the glass as the sun was setting, but most of the employees had already left for the day. I'd barely heard a word of my briefings on the Southeast Asia rollout earlier.

I just kept seeing her. The way she'd looked at me before the partition had gone up,

that little smirk when she said something she knew would land well, the sliver of heat behind her eyes.

She wasn't supposed to linger in my head. But the best ones usually did — though, strangely, not for this long.

So, of course, I broke a rule.

Just a small one. A line easily erased, justified if I tried hard enough. I gave myself a bullshit excuse as I opened the manifest for Flight 417, ATL to NAP, knowing damn well what I was doing and not caring. I skimmed until I found first-class. My name stood out first, Matthew Strathmore - 2A.

But just above mine, in 1A: Sienna James.

Full name. No more mystery. Just four syllables and punch to my chest.

James.

James, James...

Why did that sound familiar?

I clicked into it, checking the original ticket holder name, pre-reservation changes.

Passenger: Ryan Strathmore.

I stilled.

Blinked.

No.

No goddamn way.

I clicked again, into the original booking receipts. Ryan's name filled the slot for 2A, my seat — refunded and cancelled two days before the flight. I couldn't breathe.

I scrolled down, looking for the card made to book the reservation, and there in bold lettering and asterisk were the last four digits of his fucking maintenance account.

The emergency fund I fed money into every time Ryan criedbrokeand begged like a petulant teenager.

My jaw clenched so hard I felt it in the back of my skull.

I'd paid for that flight. I'd paid for the ticket that landedhernext to me, and the reasonSienna Jamesitched at the very back of my memory became clear. That single time, almost a year ago now, that I'd cared enough to ask him what was going on in his life and he'd said her name.

His ex. The ex that, according to Sienna, he'd cheated on.

I'd heard bits and pieces of the story when Ryan had left, and he'd called to ask for money. Details I hadn't asked for but had gotten anyway—dumped her, he'd said.Clingy. Emotional. Dramatic. Desperate. Got “weird” when he slept with someone else after their breakup.

But that wasn't true, was it?

Nothing ever was with him.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:00 am

Of course she wasn't the problem. Of course he was.

And I'd slept with her.

I leaned back in my chair, the weight of the revelation pressing against my spine, and dragged my hand down my face, willing air into my lungs.

She was his. His ex, his mistake, his mess. And somehow I'd managed to walk right into the fucking middle of it despite trying my absolute best to keep distance for my peace of mind. But Ryan had been busy lately. I knew that much. Knew that he'd flipped on a dime and started begging me for money out the wazoo, far more than usual. Knew he'd bought a ring. Knew he moved fast with whoever he was with now, and I didn't have much of a choice when it came to paying for it.

Knew he was marrying her after only a month of being broken up with Sienna.

Knew I was footing the bill for it.

Maybe unintentionally sleeping with Sienna hadn't been shoving myself into his mess. Maybe it was an opportunity. Sienna wasn't simply a mistake, no, she was a turning point, a key. She was a part of the debris Ryan always left in his wake, a face in a sea of ruined trust funds, ruined friendships, ruined women. But this time, the damage wasn't abstract, spoken through a telephone call or a text message. It wasn't distant.

This time I'd touched it.

Tasted it.

And I had a chance to not just stand by now.

The image of her in that first-class lounge, chin high, voice sharp, wearing that little yellow sundress like she had something to prove, flashed in my head. She didn't even know who I was. She had no idea what she'd stepped into, and yet, she'd held her ground like she was ready to go down swinging. She'd walked into first class and took the damn trip anyway.

That wasn't desperation, that was grit.

And that was useful.

I knew Ryan. I knew his insecurities. His ego was a house of cards just waiting for a gust of wind, and Sienna could be that. Not if I manipulated her, not if I pushed her into something she didn't want, but if I offered her something, if it was mutually beneficial...

Maybe she wanted revenge. Maybe she just wanted control over her life again. Either way, I could give her that.

I could give her a match. I could watch her set him on fire. I could burn him down with her.

Chapter 5

Sienna

Teachers probably shouldn't drink in places where the bathroom soap costs more than what my hourly wage breaks down to.

That was the consensus Jules and I had come to as our overpriced martinis clinked together at the too-glossy cocktail bar nestled into the edge of downtown Atlanta. It was the kind of swanky velvet-and-glass spot where the lighting was low enough to make everyone attractive and the prices high enough to make sure only the right kind of attractive people stuck around.

Jules, naturally, fit in without even trying. Her sleek black dress, meticulously styled ringlets, and perfectly paired gold jewelry made her look simultaneously scandalous and rich. Her lashes were curled perfectly, her lipstick blood red against her darker skin tone, her grin sharp as a knife. No one would know she taught in a criminally underfunded school.

I, on the other hand, was wearing a dress I got on final clearance two summers ago at Ross and shoes that pinched in one place and slipped in another. The waves in my hair were fighting the Atlanta humidity, my makeup was rushed since I hadn't had the luxury of booking Jules' birthday off work, and I had exactly eighty-nine dollars left in my checking account until payday seven days from now.

"I swear to God," I said, sipping the last of my martini down like it was liquid gold, "if they charge me twelve dollars for tap water, I'm leaving."

Jules snorted. "You say that every time we go out."

"I mean it every time we go out. Especially this time."

I pushed up and out of my chair in a huff as she giggled, turning to one of her other friends I hadn't even bothered to learn the name of because I'd been so far in my own head all night. All of the last two weeks, really.

When I'd gotten off that barstool on the flight, I thought I'd be able to forget about it. I thought I'd be able to file the man with the gravel voice and the hands that ruined all

logic away in a neat little box inside of my head, thought I could wipe away the way he'd made me whimper against his palm, or the way he'd made me come without direct stimulation for the first time in my goddamn life like some kind of weird body whisperer.

I might have been able to if I hadn't heard his name.

I still hadn't told Jules what happened. It wasn't the kind of thing you just said, not when the man in question was Ryan's fucking brother.

I wove through the small sea of tables and velvet booths, heading for the bar tucked into a glowing nook surrounded by an absurd amount of potted plants and hanging ivy. The cocktail bar was loud, but not from music — it was all laughter and murmured conversations and drinks clinking, low beats of money and indulgence that I'd once again found myself in despite not being a part of it. Jules' fault.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:00 am

I ordered a water, refused when they tried to hand me a glass bottle and insisted on tap, and put up with the way the bartender's face scrunched like I'd kicked a puppy and waited for him to fill up a glass with ice.

The back of my neck prickled.

It wasn't anything specific. Just an odd shift in the air, the feeling of being watched.

I glanced behind me, toward our table, expecting to find Jules waving her hand and asking me to get her another drink. But she was still talking to what's-her-name. I scanned the rest of the bar, but nothing stood out, nothing out of place, no eyes on me.

But the feeling lingered.

The bartender slid my glass across the bar like it physically burned him, and I grabbed it, turning on my heel to head back for the group.

Something shifted in my periphery.

Movement caught my attention at the edge of the far booth beyond the wall of plants, barely visible past the oversized monstera and the ridiculous hanging ferns that apparently passed as decor.

Hazel eyes. Just for a second. Sharp, fleeting.

And a flash of silver hair.

It was gone just as quickly as it appeared, and my stomach twisted.

No. Couldn't be. I was simply going insane, obviously.

I took a step toward the table, and the booth I thought I'd seen was empty. Nothing there but shadows from obnoxiously angled lights and a cold feeling of déjà vu.

Clearly, I needed a lot more money in my bank account so I could afford more drinks to drown out the thought of him.

I shook it off and went back to the table, Jules already halfway through a story that I barely managed to understand, laughing where I was meant to, nodding when that seemed appropriate. I sipped at my free water with a hint of shame as I forced myself to push it all to the back of my mind. It was Jules' birthday, for Christ's sake, I didn't need to be thinking about him.

But then a tray of drinks appeared with a slightly confused-looking bartender, a whole extra round arriving at the table, and I was two seconds away from strangling whoever had ordered me another drink that I absolutely couldn't afford when the bartender opened her mouth.

"Just wanted to let you know that the tab's been taken care of," she said.

Jules blinked. My brows furrowed. What's-her-name whooped.

"Seriously?" Jules asked.

The bartender glanced at me before setting down a martini in front of me. "The gentleman said to tell you, 'Thanks for choosing first class.'"

The world dropped out from under me.

I stared at her in her stupid suit-and-tie uniform and pristinely styled blonde curls.
“What?”

She shrugged and straightened up, tucked the tray under her arm, and walked off.

Jules leaned toward me. “Sienna,” she said carefully. “What the hell does that mean? Is that, like, a code? Did you flirt with someone while getting a water? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“I didn’t—” I stopped, mouth dry, heartbeat slamming against my ribs.

First class.

First fucking class.

That meant two things: Matthew Strathmore was here, and he knew that I knew who he was.

The breath in my lungs turned to ice. I scanned the room without thinking, trying to keep my breathing under control and battle off Jules' incessant questioning.

If he were here, if he'd said that, then he hadn't left.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:00 am

I looked past the bar, the booths, the low candlelit tables set against the back wall, the gaudy velvet, the plants—and then I stilled.

Tucked into the far corner, half-obsured and shadowed by a trailing vine and a whole-ass tree someone thought would do well inside a lowlight cocktail bar, a pair of hazel eyes locked with mine.

Matt.

That same easy confidence oozed from him as he leaned back in his seat, the body I'd dragged my hands over two weeks ago now covered in a dark grey button-up and a tailored jacket, one hand clutching a glass of amber liquid I could only guess was whiskey based on his order on the flight. He hadn't moved toward me.

He looked at me like he'd already won.

He lifted his glass slightly toward me, a hint of a smirk breaking out across his lips, and crooked two fingers in a come heremotion. It wasn't aggressive, wasn'tdemanding.

But it was expectant.

“Sienna,” Jules said carefully. “What the fuck is happening right now?”

I shook my head as I set my water down slightly more aggressively than I needed to. “I-I just need to go to the bathroom.”

Her eyes narrowed as I pushed back up from my chair. “You don’t look like you need to pee. You look like the IRS has just audited you.”

I swallowed. “I’ll explain later. I swear.”

I didn’t catch what she said as I slipped around her seat and walked. I tried to hide that a full-blown panic attack was bubbling beneath the surface and threatening to come up for air as I crossed the bar in heels that hurt and slipped, tried to hide that I was approaching a man that I’d had the most intense, unrepeatable sex of my life with.

Matt’s eyes didn’t leave mine for a second.

I reached his table and stopped, my throat closing in as I gripped the back of the chair opposite his. The soft murmurs and clinking of glasses and laughter from a table that was far too drunk suddenly felt deafening. But maybe that was just my heartbeat thundering in my ears.

He grinned at me.

“Hello, Sienna.”

Chapter 6

Matt

She walked to me as if her bones were made of glass, but she was too stubborn to admit it might make her shatter.

I could read her like a book, whether she wanted me to or not. She wanted to bolt. Her jaw was tight, her hand wound tight around the back of the chair, her gaze

was struggling to hold mine. But she came.

That alone earned my respect all over again.

The way her flowy, little, navy-blue dress hugged her body, made me clench my teeth to keep from acting out in a room full of strangers. It wasn't anything remarkable, but on her, it was sinful. It clung to her curves and cinched in at the waist, dipping low enough to tease the freckle just beneath her collarbone. The one I'd noticed when I was inside of her for the third time on Flight 417 from ATL to NAP, the same one I'd dragged my tongue over. Her skin was a little deeper from what I could only imagine was the Amalfi sun, golden in a way that begged to be touched.

I fought the images back as if they'd pull me under a rip current if I didn't.

"Hello, Sienna," I said, my voice as even as I could will it to be, a little grin breaking across my lips.

"Thanks for the drinks," she deadpanned.

"I didn't send them."

Her eyes narrowed. "Cut the shit."

I tilted my head, letting the corner of my mouth twitch. "You wound me."

"'Thanks for flying first class'? You might as well have signed it with your dick."

I snorted, the words catching me fully off guard, laughter creeping up my throat. Why was she so good at that? "I was being polite."

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:00 am

“You were being you,” she said, releasing her death grip on the chair to cross her arms over her chest. “You were trying to get under my skin.”

“I wasn’t,” I said, not a hint of a lie. I gestured casually to the seat across from me, the one she’d held onto, but she didn’t move.

She narrowed her eyes, though. “You knew.”

I pressed my lips together, rolling them between my teeth. “Knew what?”

“Don’t—” She cut herself off, taking a deep inhale through her nose as her gaze flicked to the ceiling before landing back on me, somehow sharper, somehow angrier. “You knew who I was—or, am.”

I met her stare and held it. “I didn’t.”

A bitter laugh poured out of her. “Oh, come on, Matt?—”

“I’m serious,” I said, cutting her off. “I didn’t know your name until I looked up the flight manifest a week ago. Before that, all I had was Sienna. No last name. No context.”

Her jaw went crooked, her tongue working something in her mouth as her nails dug into her arm. “I’m supposed to believe that?”

“I have no reason to lie. If I wanted to sleep with the woman my brother was with for almost two years, I wouldn’t have needed to hide who I am.”

Her eye twitched. “You’re so fucking cocky?—”

“I genuinely didn’t know,” I reiterated, cutting off her insult. “I hadn’t seen Ryan in months. We barely speak, and I’d never met you. He’d said your name, what, twice? It wasn’t at the front of my mind.”

Her throat worked, and for a split second, I felt bad about mentioning how little Ryan spoke of her. But I wanted to get this out there.

“I had no idea he had planned a trip to Italy, let alone with you,” I continued, sitting forward in my chair. “I didn’t know he’d booked it until I looked at the original booking information and saw the change in the reservation, with his name, and the card he used.”

She stiffened, her brows narrowing. “His card?”

“My card. I recognized the last four digits. It was the card for the support account I set up for him. So, you’re welcome.” I held her gaze as I leaned forward onto my elbows on the table. “Your vacation came out of my wallet.”

Sienna blinked, her body recoiling just a tad. I’d rattled her. “Wait, what? Go back. What do you mean by support?”

I sighed, trying to work out how to explain it. It didn’t surprise me that he hadn’t told her where that money came from, but it did make my blood boil. “Money I send him to keep him from spiraling,” I said carefully. “He burns through cash like it’s gasoline, Sienna. When it runs out, he calls me. Always has, always will.”

Her brows furrowed as she stared at me, the gears in her head turning so obviously that I could see them whirring.

“You didn’t know that, did you?”

“I thought—” she hesitated, trying to find the words, then scowled. “I thought he was spending what he had left after you screwed him out of the inheritance.”

I exhaled sharply through my nose. “Of course you did.”

“Are you saying that’s not true?”

“I’m saying Ryan has a very convenient relationship with the truth,” I said.

Her arms dropped, her chest rising as she took in a slow, shaky breath. “So, what, you’re just some generous brother who gives away money to the sibling who hates him? That’s your story?”

I exhaled, trying not to let my irritation get in the way of the truth. “It’s not a story, Sienna. It’s what happens every few months. More often recently. But whether you believe me or not is entirely up to you.”

Her jaw tightened, but she didn’t say anything.

“I’d rather you believe me,” I added, my voice lower, more deliberate. “But maybe before you lob another accusation at me, you should ask yourself why you’re trusting the man who cheated on you for a year, instead of me.”

That landed. I felt the shift, saw the way it flickered across her face.

“Yeah. I spoke to him last week. He told me,” I continued. “You believe him, even after everything he did. But I lied to you once—unintentionally and by omission—and I’m the villain?”

Page 16

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:00 am

The answering silence was deafening.

She looked down, then away, her breathing shaky and her fingers twitching like she needed to either throw something or tear it in two. Even frustrated, she looked striking enough to make a grown man drop to his knees.

“I get it,” I said carefully, sitting back again in my chair. “You feel played. But I wasn’t playing.”

Her eyes flicked to mine again, but there was something unreadable in them. Not softness, but something confused. Something conflicted.

I could work with that.

But she started to shut it down before I could even mention it.

“I’m not doing this again,” she said, her voice breathy as she took a single step back. And then another. “Whatever this is. I’ve seen this movie, the ending fucking sucks.”

I didn’t move.

I didn’t reach for her.

Just held her gaze steady as she took one more step back, and then opened my mouth.

“Ryan’s marrying her,” I said.

She stopped dead in her tracks.

“I’m sorry,” I said. I meant it. “I assume you didn’t know.”

Her mouth pressed into a thin line as she stared at me, the heaviness sinking in. “He’s marrying Lauren?” she asked. “Please tell me you’re kidding.”

“I wish I were.”

“Wow,” she said, almost nodding to herself. “Well, I hope they get gifted matching toasters and trip into a full bathtub holding hands.”

I let out a quiet breath of laughter. “That’s disturbingly specific.”

She looked off into the distance, those gears whirring again, her mouth locked tight. Then took a step toward me. “Why would you tell me that, Matt?”

I blinked. “Because you deserve to know.”

“No,” she snapped. “No, you don’t get to sit there like some noble, morally grey antihero who drops information like that because he cares. That doesn’t make sense. You don’t know me, you don’t owe me anything.”

“You’re right. I don’t.”

“Then why?”

“Because I have a proposition,” I said, my lips twitching up at the corner. “One that benefits us both.”

“If you’re about to offer another distraction?—”

“I’m not,” I said casually, motioning for the seat across from me again. She still didn’t take it, but she took another step forward. “I want you to come with me to the wedding.”

That step she’d taken was immediately reversed as she recoiled. “What?”

“Be my date. Officially, publicly, whatever the hell you want to call it. You and me, front, and center, on their day.”

She stared at me like I’d started speaking another language that didn’t exist. “You’re joking.”

“I’m not,” I smirked.

“You want me to pretend to be your girlfriend in front of Ryan.”

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:00 am

“And Lauren,” I clarified. “It takes at least two to get married.”

“I know how a marriage works,” she scoffed, taking that step forward again like it meant nothing. “Why on earth would I want to do that? Why would I want to see him—either of them—again after what he put me through?”

“Because I’ll pay you a hundred thousand dollars.”

Her lips parted, then closed, then parted again. “What the hell kind of man?”

“One who’s tired of letting his little brother ruin everything he touches,” I huffed, cutting her off. “One who has nothing to prove to Ryan, but plenty to gain from watching him squirm. And one who happens to think you deserve to get to make him feel small.”

Sienna’s throat worked as she took another step forward, and then another, closer now than she’d been before as she leaned forward onto the table. It took every bit of control not to let my eyes wander down to where the top hem of her dress was gaping from the position. “Do you genuinely think I’m going to parade around my ex’s wedding as a prop just for a check?”

“No,” I said, quieter now, leaning forward onto my elbows and closing the distance just a little bit more. I could smell her — that same scent from the flight, light, floral, and sweet, with a hint of something sharp underneath. “I think you’re going to consider it. I think you know it’s not about the money. And more importantly, I think you understand that it’s about the look on his face when he sees you happy, thriving, and wanted on my arm.”

Her chest rose and fell like she'd run a mile. I kept my gaze locked on hers. "I don't trust you," she rasped.

"That's fair."

"I think you're cold. And calculating, and maybe a little bit full of shit."

I shrugged. "You're not wrong."

"Why on earth should I believe anything out of your mouth?"

I didn't blink. "Because I'm not trying to do anything to you, Sienna. I'm giving you an option and a reward. And because, if it truly makes you feel better, I'll swear on my son's life that this isn't about getting you back into bed, and instead is about getting us both a little closure."

Her brows knitted. "You have a son?"

It was horrifically unsurprising to me that Ryan had never mentioned him. "Zach. He's five."

She stared at me incredulously. "You have a kid?"

I rolled my eyes. "Do you want me to get out my phone and show you photos?"

She held my gaze for what felt like hours, her eyes flicking between mine, studying me like I was a riddle she could solve. "You're serious."

"About the offer or about my kid?"

A little crease formed between her brows. "Both."

“Yes, I’m serious.”

The silence that lingered coiled tight, like charged static flicking between us. I reached into my jacket pocket, pulled out a card, and slid it across the table to her.

Slowly, her gaze dropped, her fingers closing around it slowly as she read the two lines of information written on it: my full name and my personal phone number.

“Seriously? Metal?” she scoffed, turning it over in her hands like it personally offended her. “That’s, like, next level asshole-ery.”

I snorted. “I’m sorry, would you have preferred I’d printed it off on a standard eight-by-eleven and folded it?”

“You could have just written it on a napkin like a normal person in a bar,” she mumbled.

“I’ll keep it in mind next time I’m offering a hundred grand to make my brother feel half as small as he made you,” I chuckled. “Just think about it, Sienna. You don’t have to answer right away. The wedding’s in three weeks, you’ve got a little time.”

“I hate you,” she grunted, pushing back upright with the card solidly in her palm.

My smirk turned into a full grin. “No, you don’t.”

Chapter 7

Sienna

The morning sun was rude as it clawed through my blinds like it had a grudge. It stabbed right into the center of my brain through my eyes, rattling my skull like coins in a change-counting machine.

I groaned and rolled over, burying my face into the pillow and pulling the blanket over my head as if it would shield me from what had happened last night. Not the amount of drinks I'd had, not the money I'd spent, but the conversation I'd had with Matt.

But my hand still slipped out from under the comforter, found the sleek metal card on my nightstand, and slipped back beneath the covers like I'd be caught for it.

I turned it between my fingers again and again, the sharp edges scratching against my skin. One hundred thousand dollars. It echoed in my mind, taunting me, daring me, over and over and over until it was all I could think about, and the blaring hangover took a backseat.

That kind of money could wipe out my credit card debt. Every last dollar of it. That kind of money could fix the leak under my shower, could replace my bald tires, could pay off the rest of my student loans. That kind of money could give me the space I needed to breathe and then some, could give me a life that didn't involve occasional weekend tutoring gigs and mental math in the grocery store.

It was a trap. But it was a tempting trap.

Matthew Strathmore wouldn't have offered six figures without strings, even if he claimed there weren't any outside of making Ryan feel like shit. I knew Ryan like the back of my hand — he hated his brother with a dying passion, and Matt was right that he'd lose his goddamn mind seeing me with him. So, it wasn't the money making my stomach twist.

It was the wedding. It was Ryan and Lauren, my ex-boyfriend, and my ex-best friend, and it was seeing them together in a marriage ceremony I'd had the balls to think would be mine. It was seeing them for the first time after walking in on him balls deep inside of her.

But if I did this with Matt...

Ryan would see me. And for the first time in his life, maybe, he'd know he hadn't gotten the last word.

I stared at the card in the low light under the blankets, dragged my thumb over the raised lettering of Matt's name and phone number.

I didn't want revenge. I wanted Ryan to stop existing. But that required either a magic genie lamp, or a life spent in prison, and this...

This was the next best thing.

My phone was in my hand before I'd even thought it through, typing in the numbers and hitting the call button. It rang once. Twice. Three?—

“Sienna.”

Smooth. Low. Confident in that way that made me want to fight him and get his hands back on me at the same time.

I didn't let myself hesitate.

"I'm in."

I could hear his exhale down the line. "I thought you would be."

"You don't know me well enough to assume like that," I said, but the bite I'd wanted to infuse the words with fell flat. My hangover had filed down my sharp edges.

"Maybe not," he answered casually, his voice filling one ear while I pressed the other into the pillow. "But I know my brother, know what he does. What he did. And I know that you're still angry about it, like you have every right to be. So, I came to a logical conclusion."

I closed my eyes. "Fair enough," I murmured. "Is there any other motive here I should be aware of before I throw myself in the deep end?"

"If you're asking if this is a trick, it's not. I'm not trying to play you," he said. "You'll be paid. You'll look fucking incredible. We'll both enjoy watching his jaw hit the floor and his ego deflate."

"And that's it?"

"That's it."

I paused, letting my lungs fill and holding it until they burned. "You hate him, don't you?"

Matt didn't even hesitate. "I hate what he does to people. What he did to you. What he's done to me."

I didn't say anything. I didn't have to. We both already knew we were doing the wrong thing for the right reasons, or maybe the right thing for all the wrong ones. But it didn't matter.

"Okay," I whispered.

“Okay?”

“Yeah. We’ll do it. Fuck him.”

He chuckled, just lightly, just enough that I could hear it. “Atta girl.”

My eyes narrowed into the nothingness of my comforter. “But just so we’re clear,” I started, hating how unsteady my voice was, “I’m not sleeping with you again.”

“Understood.” I could hear the grin in his voice. “I won’t point out the irony of you calling me from your bed.”

“You literally just—wait, how did you know I’m in bed?” I pulled the sheets down immediately, sitting up in a huff.

“You sounded like you’d just woken up, and I could hear your blankets moving,” he said as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. “Another logical conclusion.”

“I hate you,” I grumbled, pulling the comforter up to my chest.

“Are you trying to hurt my feelings?”

“I’m trying to—fuck, I don’t know, I’m hungover,” I admitted, rubbing my eye with the base of my palm. “It’s not my fault that you’re trying to frustrate me.”

“It’s not my fault that you’re cute when you’re frustrated.”

“Do not flirt with me at eight in the morning after too many martinis, Matt,” I grumbled. “I just told you I’m not sleeping with you. Was that not clear?”

His answering laughter was soft, but it was cut short when a higher-pitched voice, too quiet for me to fully hear what they were saying, bled through the phone. For a second, a familiar feeling that I didn’t dare give a name to swirled in my gut, but then Matt spoke, and it disappeared instantly.

“I know, bud, just give me a minute,” he said, all the patience in the world evident in his voice. There was a shuffle on the other end, the sound of a phone shifting slightly. “Yeah, I see it. That’s a lot of syrup you’re trailing. Did the waffle survive, or should we call time of death?”

“It’s okay. I only dropped half of it. The good half is fine, I think.”

I blinked, sitting up a little straighter in my bed. That was definitely a kid’s voice—young, boyish, completely matter-of-fact in the way that only children could be. Matt said he had a kid. What was his name?

Matt chuckled as a faint thud made it through the phone, like metal on tile. “That’s good triage,” he said, his amusement so evident I could hear it without seeing the smirk on his face. “You want me to come help or are you staging a full, syrup-covered recovery mission solo?”

Zach. That’s what he’d said.

“I think I got it, I just need a new fork,” Zach said, accompanied by the sound of a piece of metal tinkling against a plate. “Do I put the bad part of the waffle in the trash?”

I didn’t know what I was expecting when Matt said he had a son, but it wasn’t...this.

Not a syrup-covered breakfast war being fought at eight in the morning with calm, collected dad energy and a tiny voice chirping back with good grammar and total confidence.

“Yeah, tiger, just—actually,shit, you’ve got syrup all over you,” Matt laughed, full andbright, and that was probably the most surprising thing about this.

“You said?—”

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” Matt grumbled, but there wasn’t a bit of bite to it. “Don’t repeat it.”

The phone shifted again, rustling like he’d had it wedged between his shoulder and his ear, and when he spoke again, it was clear he wasn’t speaking to Zach anymore but was speaking to me.

“I’ve got to go,” he said. “I’m about ninety-nine percent sure there is maple syrup trailing through half of my house.”

I snorted into my palm, trying to suppress my grin before realizing there was zero point in that when he couldn’t see me. “Good luck with that.”

“Yeah, yeah, thanks. I’ll text you.”

“Okay.”

“And Sienna?”

“Yeah?”

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:00 am

A huff came down the line as I could only imagine he stood up, his hand adjusting his grip on the phone now. “You’re going to look better than her.”

My brows twitched. “Have you even met her?”

“No. But I don’t need to.”

Click.

I took my first real breath of the morning sitting across from Jules at our favorite coffee spot. It was less of a café and more of a shed on wheels with fairy lights and eclectic, mismatched chairs out front, and a barista who spelled my name 'Ciena' every time, but it was consistent.

Jules stirred her oat latte absentmindedly. “So let me get this straight,” she said, blinking at me like it was a chore. “You met him on your flight to Italy that Ryan had booked. Ryan, who has a rich brother named Matthew who owns an airline. You met a rich-as-fuck man named Matt who was overly looked after by the staff and happened to know what certain buttons did, and somehow didn’t put any pieces together before he talked you into sleeping with him?—”

“In my defense, it wasn’t the first thing on my mind?—”

“And then he appeared at my birthday, offered you a hundred grand to go as his date to Ryan’s wedding, and now you’re doing it?”

“Don’t say it like that,” I muttered, taking a sip of my cold brew like it was emotional support in a plastic cup. “It sounds worse when you summarize it like a plot twist from a Hallmark movie.”

She grinned at me. “It’s a plot twist. It’s kind of hot.”

“It’s unethical and probably a horrible decision.”

“That doesn’t make it less hot.”

I groaned and let my head fall into my hands. “What the fuck am I doing?”

“Being unhinged in a way I approve of for once.”

“I’m being bought, Jules.”

“Nah,” she laughed. “You would have agreed to do it without the money if you had enough time to stew on it. You’re just being funded.”

I lifted my head just enough to shoot her a glare, watching as she turned the business card over in her hand.

“Matthew Strathmore,” she read aloud, her voice dripping with faux poshness. “Sounds like a man with a yacht and the attitude to match.”

“He does have a yacht,” I mumbled into my palms.

“God, I hate how much I want you to sleep with him again.”

“No.”

“Oh, come on,” she laughed. “Tall, grey hair, hot? And he wants to ruin his brother with you? That’s not a red flag, babe, that’s foreplay.”

I groaned in frustration. She just patted my hair in answer. “I’m not sleeping with him,” I said, but the irritation in my voice had turned into exhaustion instead.

“But you already did once. It wouldn’t hurt?—”

“That was before I knew who he was.”

“Him being Ryan’s brother doesn’t make him any less hot,” Jules said, sitting back in her chair with a shit-eating grin so wide I wanted to slap it off her. “If anything, it makes him more tempting. Forbidden fruit and all that.”

I pushed my hair back from my face, huffing when it fell right back in front of my eyes. “You’re a terrible influence.”

My phone buzzed on the table beside my drink, and I reached over, flipping it face up. Shit.

Matt:

Page 21

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:00 am

Booked you an appointment at Esme Salon for 1pm. Dress fittings at Regale at 6, they'll have plenty of options.

Tell them your name. It's covered.

Left a card for you at Regale. Buy whatever else you need. Don't abuse it.

I stared at the screen like it had physically attacked me. "Apparently," I swallowed, my eyes hovering over the left a card for you like it was a lifeline, "I'm getting a makeover."

"Lucky bitch," Jules snorted.

Me:

You didn't even ask if I had plans.

His reply was almost immediate.

Matt:

Do you need me to reschedule?

Me:

...no.

Matt:

Good.

Jules stared at me, her brows raised, waiting for some kind of explanation or biting word. When nothing came, she just huffed out a breath instead. “You’re absolutely going to sleep with him again.”

I glared back. Typed quickly.

Me:

To be so clear, I’m not sleeping with you. Just making sure you understand that.

Matt:

Duly noted. For the third time.

Tell me, Sienna, do you always say no this insistently, or am I just special?

Goddamn him.

Chapter 8

Matt

Three weeks later...

Tulum was all turquoise water, overpriced exclusivity, and a polished sham. It was exactly in line with Ryan choosing it as a way to flaunt a life he hadn’t earned.

The resort sprawled along the coast like a sun-drenched fever dream. Whitewashed villas framed by swaying palms, staff in linen uniforms passing out chilled towels and some kind of fruit-infused water the second your feet hit the tarmac, private bungalows and open-air spas and curated playlists likely humming through invisible speakers.

It was a wedding for royalty. And it was funded entirely by me.

Zach slept in the back seat of the hired SUV, his tiny mouth open, one fist curled around the stuffed dinosaur he insisted on bringing everywhere he went. He looked far more peaceful than I felt.

I let the silence stretch as I sat in the car in front of the resort, staring down at a sign gilded in gold leaf that read, Bienvenido, Strathmore Wedding Weekend. Subtle as a sledgehammer.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:00 am

Of course he'd flaunted our last name. Of course.

Finally, forcing myself to come to terms with my decisions, I stepped out of the car, rolling my shoulders as I circled the vehicle. Palm trees swayed overhead, the humidity wrapping around me like wet silk, and I opened Zach's door carefully.

"Hey, tiger," I murmured, brushing my thumb against his cheek. "We're here."

Zach stirred, squinting and blinking from the sun I was trying to block with my head. His dark little curls were flattened on one side, his voice all raspy from sleep. "Tulum?"

A smile broke across my cheeks. "Mhm. Good job on the pronunciation," I said, unbuckling the seatbelt from his car seat. "Come on, you're gonna love the pool."

He rubbed his eyes. "Will there be smoothies?"

"Nothing but smoothies."

He grinned sleepily and held his arm out, his dinosaur still clutched in his grasp. I lifted him into mine and carried him through the breezeway, nodding to the concierge who stammered out a welcome in Spanish. Inside, the air conditioning prickled against my already slightly damp skin like a reprieve, and I shifted Zach on my hip as he babbled about the best kind of fruit to put in a smoothie.

Margot, bless her, stood near the concierge desk already, tapping a card against the counter and trying her absolute best to speak Spanish with the woman behind the

desk. Sixty-five, smart, and blessedly unflappable, she spotted us in an instant.

“Zachary!” she chimed, stepping toward us with her arms outstretched, her loose linen trousers and shirt flitting about her short frame, her wide-brimmed hat flopping dramatically. “Come here, little man.”

I passed him off to her, Zach practically launching himself into her arms with a sleepy but desperately excited hug as if he hadn’t seen her last night before she helped put him to bed. Margot deserved at least quadruple what I paid her to nanny for me, but every time I tried to up her salary, she refused.

“Can we go swimming?” Zach asked, his legs kicking on either side of her hips.

“You know what? How about you and I take a little walk around and check things out while your dad checks us in, and then we can dosomuch swimming that you’ll grow gills by dinner,” she promised.

He beamed at her.

I ruffled his hair, fixing the flattened side. “Be good for Margot, bud.”

“Iamgood,” he said seriously.

“Is she coming?” Margot asked, arching a brow at me.

I swallowed.Sienna.“Yeah. She’s flying into Cancun later this evening. Had to teach this morning, so she’s flying StrathOne.”

“You’re not sending the jet back for her?”

My jaw ticked before I took a deep breath and leveled it out. “She refused the offer.”

Margot nodded as if that explained far more than it did and turned, shifting her attention to Zach, and stepped out the back doors toward the beachfront area of the resort, Zach already babbling about working on his cannonball.

Check-in was easy when they realized that everything had been booked in my name, but I nearly popped a vein in my forehead when they'd asked me if I wanted to approve the upgrade for Ryan's villa to have masseuses come in the mornings. I'd declined, tried to control my breathing, and asked for a singular masseuse tomorrow morning for my villa as an added reward for Sienna instead.

But the moment I turned away from the front desk, I stopped dead.

Ryan was standing by the entrance to the bar, a cocktail in hand, his head thrown back in faux laughter at something a short, older man was saying to him. He looked almost exactly the same as the last time I'd seen him almost a year ago — expensive sunglasses perched high in his tousled, mousy brown hair, a perfectly tailored linen shirt that likely cost as much as some people's rent hanging open around his chest, his skin already tanned like he'd hit a sunbed a few days ago at my expense and fallen asleep inside.

And from the way he moved as he turned toward me, I could tell he was absolutely tipsy.

"Matthew," he drawled, flashing that bleached white grin at me that he reserved for when he wanted something. "Was wondering when you'd show up."

"Ryan."

He stepped forward, his arms outstretched like we were friends, but I didn't move.

The hug didn't happen.

His mouth twitched like he wanted to roll his eyes at me. “Fine, don’t hug me,” he muttered. “What do you think? Swanky enough for ‘ya? Had them add extra bits of that gauzy curtain shit by the doors, looks awesome.”

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:00 am

God. You'd think he was twenty-three with the way he spoke sometimes, not thirty-five. "It's definitely your kind of wedding."

"Wouldn't have happened without 'ya," he said, his smile wide, but didn't come close to meeting his eyes. "You're a saint."

My jaw ticked. "I haven't paid for all of this for you."

"Yeah, yeah, Mom and Dad would be real proud," he droned. "Anyway. Minor thing, we wanted to order masseuses for the next couple of days, y'know, limber up before we say I do, but front desk said they needed your approval since it's your card, so?—"

"I already told them no."

He blinked at me, brown eyes swallowing the light whole. "What?"

"I'm not paying for that," I said simply. "You want it? Charge your maintenance account like everything else. Or is that drained right now?"

His fake smile faltered.

I took a step backward away from him, rolling my eyes at his lack of an answer. "My girlfriend's arriving separately," I added. "You'll be down a van from around four this afternoon, I'm sending someone to go get her from Cancun."

His brows knit together. "You're seeing someone?"

“She’ll be here for the party tonight,” I added, not daring to elaborate as I offered a fake smile back to him and turned toward the villas.

The bar inside the main lounge was all stonework, gold accents, and seashells, filled with the scent of orange blossoms and spiced rum. I stood near one of the open doorways that looked out over the ocean, drink in hand, collar loose, eyes trained on the front door while waiters in white jackets floated past with trays of ceviche and champagne.

Zach was back at the villa with Margot, sun-kissed and passed out after hours of pool games and mango smoothies. I’d kissed his damp curls post-shower before I’d left, whispered that I’d see him in the morning. He hadn’t even stirred.

Now it was just me and the hum or conversation around me, the performative laughter of new-money guests who had no idea who they were supposed to impress, so they tried anyone and everyone.

My phone buzzed in the pocket against my chest, and I slipped it out.

Sienna:

I’m outside. Just need two minutes to fix my makeup in the car.

I started typing back, but another one came through a second later.

Sienna:

Please tell me it looks less like a gaudy, dressed-up prom inside.

I snorted into my scotch.

Me:

It doesn't.

Ryan was leaning against the bar across the room from me, chatting up a group of people with a bravado that could've swayed anyone who wasn't me or Sienna. Lauren was draped over him, tucked into his side in a short little white dress with flowers in her hair, looking like she'd just stepped out of a bridal magazine shoot for rehearsal dinners with her glossy, pristine curls, and an artificial saccharine smile.

I slipped my phone back in my pocket. I wasn't sure if I should expect chaos or angry indifference, but I was perfectly happy to deal with either.

I didn't watch the door anymore. I watched Ryan.

And I could tell the second she walked through those doors without turning my head.

Ryan's glass paused halfway to his mouth, his smirk dead, his gaze locked across the room like it was actively trying to murder him. He might've hidden the shocked agitation from those around him, but I knew him too well, knew his little tells — the way his jaw ticked near the hinge, the way his throat worked like someone had punched him square beneath the jaw.

Then Lauren looked up at him, saw what I saw, and followed his gaze like a hawk. Her eyes narrowed. Her mouth twitched. Her shoulders drew back like a snake before they struck.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:00 am

I let myself turn.

God.

It was like taking a punch I willingly didn't block.

She stood just inside the doorway of the bar, perfectly still, perfectly framed, the last bits of golden hour spilling over her shoulders like she'd been dropped off by Helios himself. Her dress was deep red, bold as blood, floor-length silk that clung in places my hands ached to touch again with a slit high enough to make any man in this room forget his vows. Her hair was pinned up in a way that looked effortless, with little waves of rich brown falling around her cheekbones, and her lips were painted just as dark as her dress.

She looked like sin wrapped in silk packaging. And she looked like she knew it.

It took far more mental effort to reroute blood away from my cock than I'd ever admit as I crossed the room with purpose. The room buzzed around me, laughter from people who had no idea what was happening, the faint notes of jazz from the trio playing in the corner of the room, but I didn't hear any of it. Just her breath, just the way she swallowed as she purposely avoided looking at anything else but me.

She didn't smile. She didn't need to.

I could see the relief flicker in her gaze as I stepped up to her, but I could see something else there too, something darker, something she'd shoved down so hard that barely anything remained. But I knew it was there.

She was nervous. And I fucking loved that she'd done this anyway.

"Sienna," I said, my voice low enough that it was just for her.

She rolled her lips between her teeth before glancing down along my body as if mentally calculating both whether we matched and how easy it would be for her to climb me like a goddamn tree. "Matt."

I lifted my hand carefully, slowly, and brushed off a strand of hair that was stuck to her lashes before letting my fingers hook along the side of her neck, my thumb brushing her jaw, and leaned in, lips just beside her ear. "You look lethal," I murmured.

She let out a quiet, breathy laugh, one that sounded both nervous and high on adrenaline. I could feel her pulse spiking beneath my fingertips, and as much as I wanted it to be from my proximity, I knew it likely stemmed from the fact that Ryan was in this room, too. And Lauren.

"Ready?" I asked.

"To see him? Not really?—"

I nudged her head in my direction and pressed my mouth to hers. Not politely, not something dressed up in bells and whistles like I was making a statement with it.

It was a kiss like we'd kissed before, like I knew the shape of her mouth, the way her body would naturally lean into mine — because it was. I remembered how she tasted from the flight, and I sought it back out. I leaned into the ease of what we'd had when she was on that mattress with me and ran with it.

Because kissing her was easy. Far too easy.

My fingers curled at her neck, my drink still clutched in my free hand, and one of hers hesitantly lay flat against my chest, digits slipping under the lapel of my jacket like it was instinct. Like she hadn't noticed.

I pulled back, just enough to look at her, just enough that I could see where her lipstick had smudged a little, and wiped it clean with my thumb, dragging it gently just beneath her lower lip. She snorted when her eyes opened.

"It didn't dry down enough," she said as if it somehow explained the grin creeping across her cheeks. She licked her thumb and lifted it to my mouth, something I did stupidly often for Zach but looked like the devil herself was doing it when it was her, and wiped away what I could only assume was her lipstick from my mouth.

I nipped at the pad of her thumb before I thought better of it and let go, watching the way her brows furrowed, and her cheeks heated like it was just for me.

For the briefest second, I let my gaze flicker to my right, toward Ryan, toward Lauren. Ryan looked like he'd seen a poltergeist, and Lauren was just staring like it would do something. Like it would will us both from existence.

She let out a shaky exhale. "Are they angry?"

I smirked. "Probably. Let's make them angrier."

Chapter 9

Sienna

I was running on caffeine, adrenaline, and spite.

My body had no business being upright after the day I'd had. I'd been up since six

this morning, survived a full day teaching eleven-year-olds who would rather do anything else than listen to their teacher. I rushed to the airport, sat through a two and a half hour flight, rode in a luxury SUV for an hour down to Tulum while fighting nausea from the winding roads and desperately trying to do my hair and makeup. And then walked into a nightmare with a man I absolutely shouldn't have been thinking about sleeping with, holding me up.

And now I was having to smile like I didn't want to scream.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:00 am

But Matt didn't leave my side. Not for a second, not since the moment he'd appeared in front of me and kissed me like he had every right to — which, I supposed, right now, he did.

I tried not to think about how I also had the right to kiss him in return.

He moved with me through the crowd like we'd been doing this for years, with his hand low on my back and his voice warm and raspy in my ear when someone introduced themselves. His touch was casual but constant, guiding, grounding. Reminding everyone who looked at us exactly who I was with, who I supposedly belonged to.

And he looked like the devil's gift to women everywhere while he did it.

It was just a suit, just a stupid, tailored suit, but the way it fit him set my veins on fire. Black, soft, and perfect, with a crisp white shirt and a blood red tie. I wondered, briefly, how he'd known what I'd wear — but he must have known what I'd had altered at Regale. Still, though, I could have picked the black dress or the emerald one, and it made my stomach knot when I considered the idea that he knew me well enough to know I'd ramp up my outfits throughout the weekend.

The champagne he'd placed in my hand with a muttered, "Don't drop this one," was fantastic, and I took a second glass when the server offered it from a tray a couple of minutes later. I let it loosen the coil in my chest just enough to feel like I could breathe, let it settle me like a balm. I still hadn't looked in Ryan's direction. I couldn't. I knew what direction he was in from the way Matt kept occasionally glancing, and I avoided it like the plague.

“What are they doing?” I asked him as we stood near the open door that looked out at the dark water of the Caribbean, sipping my drink as a smirk crossed his lips.

“She’s avoiding looking at you,” Matt chuckled quietly. “Like you are with her. And Ryan keeps looking like he’s about to strangle one of us.”

“Are they standing with each other?” I didn’t break eye contact with him.

“No. She’s with a few girls over by the fire pit behind you and to your left. They’re all in oranges, think they’re bridesmaids,” he explained, absentmindedly reaching up to play with one of the waves hanging around my cheeks. “She’s grinning. I’m pretty sure she’s actively trying to pretend this isn’t happening.”

I rolled my eyes. It was just like her to ignore me entirely, to keep going as if she hadn’t systematically dismantled my life months ago—or rather, over a year ago when they first started sleeping together—and then erased me from hers. “And Ryan?”

Matt snorted. “Ryan is currently standing alone at the bar for the first time all evening, staring at your back like he’s both confused and mortified all at once. Probably thought you were here to crash the wedding until I walked up to you.”

“Did you warn him?”

He shrugged. “Told him my girlfriend was arriving separately when I got here this morning. Didn’t explain beyond that.”

A laugh bubbled up my throat as I thought about Ryan standing there, utterly perplexed at his brother having some kind of romantic life—because he absolutely would have been, knowing Ryan—and the crash it must have been to see that person beme. I covered my mouth, trying to suppress it, but Matt’s hand wrapped around my

wrist and pulled it down.

“You’re cute when you laugh,” he said, but his voice wasn’t low this time. Part of the act.

My cheeks heated, but I let them, the alcohol making it easier to handle him. “Careful,” I said quietly, tilting my head a little as I looked up at him. “You keep calling me cute and people might start thinking you actually like me.”

Matt’s answering smile was lazy, far too confident, but his voice was lower when he spoke. “Well, we are trying to sell it, remember?”

I blinked up at him, my brain exhausted and fried from work and my body lax from a couple of glasses of champagne, and let my eyes drop to his lips for a split second, to the stubble around them that he wore with pride and didn’t bother to shave down all the way. “Then kiss me,” I said, the words falling out before I’d thought them through.

His smile turned devious. “Are you asking me because you want me to or because you want him to see it happen again?”

I swallowed. “The latter,” I said. “Obviously.”

Matt held my gaze for a second that felt like hours before he leaned down, his free hand wrapping fully around my waist, his mouth just an inch from mine. I could smell the whiskey on his breath, the familiar scent of his cologne wrapping around me like a blanket, and just before I could force him to claim the final inch, he shifted.

His lips pressed against my cheek.

Gentle.

Teasing.

“Liar.”

I opened my mouth to respond, to tell him he was an asshole and absolutely wrong, but a voice that sent prickles of ice down my spine cut in before I even had the chance.

“Sienna.”

Matt’s hand tightened around the back side of my ribs. Slowly, like he was retreating from a predator, he lifted his head from where it nudged up against mine.

And Ryan took up the entirety of my peripheral vision.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:00 am

His brown hair was styled and tousled, pushed back from his face for once. His cream suit was almost atrocious, sickening in a way that made me want to tell him how tacky it looked. But it was the scowl on his face that made me shrink back just a hair, almost imperceptibly, but Matt caught it. His fingers dug a little more into my ribs.

“Didn’t think I’d see you here,” Ryan said, his eyes glancing at Matt before sliding back to me.

The image of his legs tangled in the sheets of his bedroom, Lauren under him, her legs bent back like a fucking pretzel — it flashed in my head, just briefly, just enough to do mental damage before I could force a smile on my face. “Life’s full of surprises,” I said, my voice far steadier than I felt.

Matt tucked me into his side the moment Lauren appeared on Ryan’s right. “Baby, you didn’t tell me you were going to talk to them,” she mumbled, a fake grin plastered to her cheeks as she turned to me. “Hi, Sienna. So nice to see you. Why on earth are you here?”

I gritted my teeth hard enough that I worried I’d crack a molar. Just straight into it, then.

“She’s with me,” Matt said. “If that wasn’t obvious.”

Ryan dragged his tongue over his teeth, looking between us like it was both the most confusing and obvious thing in the world. “So, you’re what, dating?”

“I’m pretty sure I told you my girlfriend was coming,” Matt deadpanned. “So, yes.”

“And how long have you been seeing each other?”

Matt shrugged, looking down at me as if I had a magic answer trapped between my teeth.

“About a month,” I said, which wasn’t exactly wrong. That trip was almost five weeks ago.

“A month,” Lauren scoffed. “That’s not exactly plus one?”

“I don’t remember seeing any fine print on the invitation,” Matt countered, lifting his glass of whiskey back to his lips.

“Ridiculous,” Ryan mumbled, dragging a hand down his face before staring between the two of us. “He’s old enough to be your dad. Even with the age gap aside, it’s a little hard to believe, don’t you think?”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “What, that someone could actually want me without lying about it for an entire year?”

Lauren’s mouth twitched, but she said nothing, turning her attention to Ryan instead, as if she was expecting him to lash out at that.

But he didn’t. Of course he didn’t. Ryan never rose to anything when he was called out. All he did was turn back to Matt, meeting his gaze head-on, but Matt gave him none of that energy — if anything, Matt just looked bored.

“Come on,” Ryan said, chuckling as if all of this was hilarious. “How much did you pay her to be here? Seriously.”

A second passed. Two. Three.

Matt didn't answer.

"No one paid me," I lied, words flowing far more easily now. "Do you genuinely think any amount of money would sway me to be here? I'm here so that the man I'm seeing doesn't have to deal with his shithead brother alone. That's it."

Matt smirked into his whiskey as his gaze briefly met mine. I didn't even have to decipher it —good jobwas written all over his face.

Ryan looked at Matt again, studying him, staring him down. "You're fucking?—"

"Do you really want to finish that sentence?" Matt asked, raising a brow. "Because I would suggest neither of you take issue with who I'm seeing."

Another beat of silence. Ryan just stared up at him, a vein popping in his forehead, his jaw ticking. It wasn't even a threat, at least not really, but something about it got under Ryan's skin like nothing else had, something about it I clearly didn't understand.

"Let's go," he muttered, turning to Lauren finally before pushing her toward the bar.

I blinked in confusion.

"What was?—"

"I'll tell you later," Matt said, everything about him screamingcalmas he leaned back on the door frame again, releasing his death grip on my waist. His knuckle dragged alongmy arm, his gaze lingering on my lips for half a second before flicking to my eyes. "You did a good job. Held your own."

I rolled my eyes. "Did you think I wouldn't?"

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:00 am

“Course I didn’t,” he said, shaking his head as he downed the last of his whiskey. “Just knew it wouldn’t be easy. Are you all right?”

My brows knit together. “Huh?”

“Are you okay?” he asked, trying to clarify. “That’s the first time you’ve seen him, no?”

“Oh,” I breathed. “I?—”

“You’ve had a long day,” he added, voice low. “I wasn’t expecting them to talk to us, at least not tonight. It’s okay if you’re not all right.”

The look he gave me was anything but a performance. There was no smirk, no heat in his eyes, nothing that told me he was looking for anything but the truth. His hand stilled on my arm, wrapping around my wrist and giving it a soft squeeze.

“Sienna.”

“I’m fine.” It wasn’t a lie. I wasn’t crying, I didn’t feel a building need to scream — it was just blank. Empty. A little lonely, but a little pumped that I’d looked him in the eyes and said what I’d said. “Thought you weren’t the empathetic type.”

A sly little grin tugged at the corner of his lips. “Only when it serves me.”

I rolled my eyes and downed what was left of my champagne. “That was almost nice of you. Just had to go and ruin it.”

By the time we'd reached the villa, the air had cooled enough to take the edge off the lingering warmth of the day. Moonlight danced off the water of the ocean and the private pool and palm trees framing the lot around it and swaying in the night breeze.

We stepped off the wooden walkway lit by torches between the villas in silence and walked up to the front door. The white exterior and thatched roof gave nothing away, but it was definitely one of the larger ones on the property, if not the largest.

He opened the door and let me walk in ahead of him, his hand brushing the small of my back again, so lightly I couldn't decide if it was intentional or just a habit at this point. Inside, everything was quiet, peaceful, like nothing had been disturbed. Like I was in some kind of sanctuary away from the living hell outside of these walls. The soft hum of central air conditioning was the only sound, the low glow of the strip lighting along the floor the only thing giving me some idea of what the space actually looked like.

Matt set his keycard down by the door and shut it behind him. "This way," he said softly, nodding toward the hall.

We passed a fairly cozy sitting room and an open kitchen, the back door that led out to the pool, a bathroom. He lifted a hand to a door as we walked, his finger gently tapping against it. "Zach's in here," he said quietly, then turned to the one across from it. "And his nanny, Margot, is that one. In case you end up wandering in the middle of the night."

I paused, stopping in the hall to look at him. "Zach's here?"

Matt's brows scrunched together for a second. "Did you think I was going to leave my kid for three days if I didn't have to?"

“I...” I blinked at him. “I don’t know what I thought.”

He studied me for a second before he blew out a breath. “I’ll introduce you in the morning. Come on.”

He ushered me further down the hall, passing another door on his right and briefly mentioning that it was his room, before we got to the dead end with a door right in the center.

“This one’s you?—”

“He’s five, right?” I asked, turning back to him and cutting him off.

Matt huffed out an amused breath. “Five going on sixteen,” he said, his lip curling into a half-hearted smile. “You should lock your door tonight, though. I’m not entirely convinced he knows where my room is, and you probably don’t want a five-year-old gremlin ending up in bed with you if he has a nightmare.”

I snorted. “He’s not the one I’m worried about opening my door at two in the morning.”

Matt blinked at me, his smile morphing into a smirk. “You think I’m going to be the problem? You were the one asking me to kiss you earlier.”

“I’m begging you not to let that go to your head,” I said, pushing open the door to my room. I stared at the space in front of me — it looked like it belonged in a five-star hotel and not a rented villa on a massive property in Tulum. A king bed with white linen and a woven canopy, a chaise lounge by the glass doors, a view of the ocean so stunning it didn’t look real.

Matt stayed in the doorway, not daring to cross the threshold. “Everything you need

should be in there,” he said, polite now, all business, his teasing gone and grin faded. “If you need anything specific, just let me know and I can call the concierge.”

I stepped inside, trying to process, but it didn’t seem correct. The longer I saw it, the more nothing about this wedding made sense, from the location to the villas to the tacky decorations and over-the-top everything. “How...?”

Matt met my gaze as I turned back to face him.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:00 am

“How did Ryan afford this? Not this,” I gestured to the villa around us. “This is obviously you. But that. The wedding, the resort, the gaudy floral arches, and gold lettering and whatever the hell else is happening for the three days we’re here. Lauren’s not wealthy by any means, and Ryan’s—well, we both know Ryan.”

Matt didn’t even hesitate. “He wasn’t the one who paid for it.”

“...What?”

“I did.”

I stared at him. That—That was in line with what Matt had tried to claim about support accounts and Ryan burning through money while having none of his own. But it didn’t match anything Ryan had told me. It didn’t mesh with the story I’d gotten from him of a cold, angry brother who hated him and had stolen every bit of money he was owed and dangled it over his head.

“I don’t understand,” I murmured, shaking my head to try to clear my thoughts. “I don’t get any of this. Whatever the money situation is with him, it makes no sense. Your version doesn’t either. Why would you keep giving him money if it wasn’t because you stole it and needed to trickle it to him? Why... why would he—” I cut myself off, not even sure where I was going, my head swimming from the champagne and the adrenaline and just how long my day had been.

Matt took a step over the line.

Not enough to touch me, not enough to invade my space, but enough that I could

smell his cologne again, could see the sharp edge behind his eyes that wasn't playful anymore.

"I didn't take anything from him. I froze a handful of assets at most," he said, voice low and deliberate. "He lied to you. Just like he lied to everyone else."

I froze as he took another step.

"He had access to everything, Sienna," Matt continued. "And he burned it. I've spent years bailing him out, years covering for him. But sure. Go ahead and believe his version if it makes him easier to love."

I recoiled a bit. "I don't love him."

Something in him softened, just a fraction, and the tension that had appeared a second ago started to ease. "No," he said calmly, holding my gaze. "But you did. And you believed him then. Maybe that's still easier for you than admitting who he really is."

Silence flooded us like a wave. My throat tightened, my fingers twisting in the silk of my dress.

"I can give you proof, if that matters to you," he murmured, taking another step, crowding me, breathing my same air. "I can show you what kind of man he is, what kind of man I am."

My heart thudded in my chest, slamming against my ribs, too loud, too reckless.

"I'm not sleeping with you," I breathed, the only words I could possibly think of spilling out of my mouth.

His smirk returned, splitting across his lips slowly and infuriatingly. "You keep

saying that,” he drawled. “Which one of us are you trying to convince, sweetheart?”

He waited a second longer before he took a step back, turned, and walked out my door, leaving it open behind him, leaving me there, leaving the space cold with my pulse in my throat and confusion whirring in my head.

Chapter 10

Matt

The villa was quiet, save for the sound of eggs sizzling and the soft hum of cartoons drifting from the living room. Zach was curled up on the couch under his favorite blanket that he’d insisted we bring with us, totally absorbed in a show about time-traveling dinosaurs. He was still in his pajamas, hair a disaster, one sock on and the other missing, half a banana in his hand.

My kid, through and through.

I slid the egg off onto a plate before cracking another into the pan, flipping it a moment later with practiced efficiency. Cooking grounded me — it always had. And God knows I needed it. It was something easy, something I could focus on with understandable inputs and predictable outcomes.

Unlike my brother's wedding, or the woman sleeping at the end of the hall.

The soft pad of bare feet on tile told me she was awake as I slid another egg onto the plate. I didn’t turn immediately — just listened, waited until she was close, heard her as she stepped into the kitchen.

“Morning.”

I looked over my shoulder. It hit me like a freight train.

She wore a loose t-shirt, one that was clearly thinned from years of use, that hung around her upper body and hips with an ease that shouldn't have excited me — but her fucking nipples were jutting into it whether she knew it or not. Her shorts were tight, spandex little things that barely peeked out of the bottom hem of her shirt, her hair still a little messy from sleep, and there wasn't a speck of makeup on her face — just a faint flush on her lightly tanned skin.

She was beautiful. Not stunning in the way she'd been dressed last night in red silk and prepared for war, but real, unfiltered, and effortless.

Page 29

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:00 am

Comfortable. That was the word pinging around in my brain. She looked comfortable, here, with me and a five-year-old she hadn't even met yet.

"Morning," I said in return, my voice far steadier than I felt.

She moved toward the kitchen counter, eyeing the eggs on the plate. "Christ. Who are you, Gaston? That's a ton of eggs."

My lips quirked upward. "They're not all for me."

Her brows knit. "Are you trying to bulk up your kid?"

"Zach's got bananas and cartoons," I smirked, dropping the skillet into the sink and pulling another plate down from the cabinet. "These are for us."

She bit her lip, clearly trying to hide the slow grin creeping across her cheeks. "Do you cook for all of your fake girlfriends?"

I stabbed the edge of a couple of eggs and shifted them onto the other plate, popped a slice of buttered toast beside it, and held it out for her. "Only the ones who lie convincingly under pressure."

She stared at it for a second, blinking, before taking it with a half-hearted chuckle. God, her laugh was pretty. "Thank you," she said, setting it down at the breakfast bar.

"Coffee?"

“Please.”

I poured her a mug and slid it across the counter to her. “You want creamer? Milk? Margot had some groceries delivered last night,” I said, opening the fridge. “I don’t really take either, but Margot might collapse if she doesn’t have her Coffee Mate.”

“Black is perfect, actually,” she grinned, wrapping her fingers around the mug and pulling it toward herself. “Didn’t realize you were a man of taste, too.”

I flashed her a grin as I leaned back onto the counter, cutting an egg with the side of my fork. “What was it you said last night? Life’s full of surprises?”

She huffed a laugh into her mug of coffee as she lifted it to her lips. “Definitely hadn’t been rehearsing it in my head the whole car ride down,” she said, her cheeks heating just a tad. “So, what’s the plan today? More awkward small talk? The wedding isn’t until tomorrow, right?”

“Yeah, it’s tomorrow.” I shoved a bite of egg between my teeth and leaned around the edge of the wall, checking on Zach. Still engrossed, still a quarter of a banana left. I turned back to her. “I was supposed to go on some kind of golf outing with the groom and the rest of his entourage. Apparently, he thought I’d enjoy that.”

“Ah. Bonding time with Ryan. That sounds delightful.”

I snorted. “Yeah, well, Margot’s not feeling great, so I’m not entirely sure what the plan is anymore. She’s lying low. Might take him with me.”

She picked up a piece of toast and popped part of her egg on top. “I can stay with him.”

I blinked at her. “What?” “You don’t have to do that.”

Sienna shrugged as she took a bite. “I know. But he sounded sweet on the phone. And you’ll probably only last, what, ten minutes with Ryan before fantasizing about golf cart homicide? So, I’m an out.”

I should have laughed, should have joked back with her, but I was just confused. “You’re offering to babysit my son?”

“Mhm,” she said around a mouthful of toast before swallowing it down. “I teach twenty feral preteens every weekday. One kindergartener with a good vocabulary who hasn’t made a peep this morning is practically a vacation.”

I studied for a second, egg stuck in my mouth like sand. Not because I didn’t believe her, but I just hadn’t expected that from her — it didn’t fit into the sharp-edged version of Sienna I’d built in my head. But she meant it. And the idea of watching her spend a whole afternoon with Zach, relaxed, soft, real...

I didn’t want to pass that up.

“I’ll stay,” I said, swallowing down the egg that tasted like ash now. “We can hang out by the pool. Unless you have other plans.”

“You’re going to skip golf?” she asked, her brows raising.

“I hate golf anyways.” I shrugged. “Consider it self-preservation. Besides, a masseuse is coming in...” I checked the time on the stove, “...twenty minutes, so you’ll be preoccupied for the next hour.”

She blinked at me. “What?”

Play it off. “Comes standard with this villa. You might as well use it,” I lied.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:00 am

“Oh,” she said, her fingers wrapping loosely around the mug again. “You don’t want to?”

“Honestly? I had a massage two days ago in preparation for this weekend. You could probably use it more than me,” I lied again, taking a bite of toast and crunching it between my teeth. “If I change my mind, I’ll just request another one later.”

“Thank you?—”

The sound of urgent little footsteps pattering across the tile had me crouching down on instinct, toast forgotten. A second later, Zach rounded the corner at full speed and launched himself straight into my arms with a “Daaaaddddy!” so loud it echoed off the villa walls.

I caught him in time to keep us both from going down, wrapping an arm around his legs and the other across his back as I lifted him clean off the ground. My grin stretched wide, automatic, and unstoppable. “Hey, bud. Finished your banana?”

“Uh-huh.” He nodded and held up the empty peel in front of my face like it was a medal before carefully laying it on my shoulder like a sacred offering. “Can I have another?”

I plucked it off my shoulder and dropped it in the trash can. “Manners?”

“Pleeeeeease,” he drawled.

I pressed a kiss to his tiny, too-soft cheek and pulled another banana off the bunch

before depositing it in his eager hands. “Of course.”

“Thank you,” he grinned, one little tooth missing from his bottom row from when he lost it last week. “Also, also, also, the dinosaurs ended, and I don’t know how to do the buttons here.”

“Sounds dire,” I chuckled, straightening and shifting his weight to my hip instead. “Want to meet someone?”

I flicked my gaze to the breakfast bar, where Sienna sat frozen, halfway through a bite of toast like she wasn’t quite sure if she should interrupt. Zach followed my line of sight, perking up immediately.

“This is Sienna,” I said. “Sienna, this is Zach.”

Zach blinked at her, his head tilting slightly like he was deciding whether or not he approved.

“You’re pretty,” he said, finally, like he was letting her off the hook. I rolled my eyes as he wiggled in my arms. “Can she fix the TV?”

Sienna laughed, a genuine one and not one of the for-show ones from last night, and set down her toast before sliding off her stool. “I might have some experience with pesky remotes. I can try.”

“Okay!” He wiggled again, his legs kicking out on either side of my body—his way of requesting being put down—and I let him slide down my body before his little feet landed square on the floor. He clutched his banana in one hand and rounded the corner of the breakfast bar, taking her hand in his other like it was the most casual thing in the world. “It was on T-Rex Time Jam and then it stopped and now it’s on boring people.”

“Tragic,” she said with a completely straight face, letting him lead her toward the living room. “We can’t let that stand.”

I watched them go, my son chattering non-stop and Sienna wholeheartedly listening like every word was important, and tried not to let the itching feeling in the back of my head take over at all.

The sun burned harsh and golden overhead, filtered through palm trees swaying and the occasional cloud. The villa’s private pool sat beneath a pergola covered in vines and white gauzy curtains that fluttered in the soft breeze, and Zach splashed happily in the shallow end, his floaties strapped to both arms, squealing every time he managed to send a wave high enough to hit the tiled edge.

Poor kid didn’t get to play in a pool nearly as much as he wanted to. I made a mental note to get a quote on getting one installed at home as I sat back in the lounge, sunglasses on, some kind of fruity mixed drink in my hand that Sienna had insisted on making a batch of after her massage for “sun time.”

Zach started to inch his way toward the deeper end, one hand trailing along the edge of the pool like that somehow made it safer, and my stomach knotted.

“Hey, bud,” I called, sitting up a little. “Let’s stay in the shallow end, okay?”

His head flopped back in exasperation. “But I got floaties,” he whined. “I won’t sink.”

“You’ve also got exactly zero lifeguard certifications, and so do I. Margot’s not out here,” I said. “Back it up for me.”

He huffed in exaggerated defeat but turned around without protest, paddling weakly

back toward the center. “I wasn’t gonna drown,” he muttered, pouting at me. “I’m like, half shark.”

“Terrifying,” I said dryly, sitting back again and taking a sip of my drink. God, okay, that’s good.

The sliding glass door opened with a muffled creak, and Zach’s face lit up like I hadn’t just scolded him for going beyond where I’d told him not to. I turned, looking over my shoulder, and dear God, I should have prepared myself.

Sienna stepped out in a black one-piece, the front of it plunging in a deep V, the sides high on her hips, like that wasn’t the most absurdly flattering piece of clothing I’d seen her in, and my brain short-circuited for half of a second. A coverup hung over her shoulders and arms, gauzy and see-through and hiding barely anything.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:00 am

I forgot how to breathe.

I didn't hear what Zach said, but she was laughing at it, full and bubbly and stupidly distracting, her hair pulled back in a loose braid, her sunglasses resting high on her nose.

Effortless. Lethal.

She squatted down beside the edge of the pool, setting her glass of fruity-whatever-it-was on the concrete before shifting and dipping her feet in. "You want to learn how to float without the floaties?"

Zach nodded furiously.

She grinned and slipped the coverup off her shoulders, her skin still slick from the massage oil and what I could only assume was sunscreen, and I had to swallow the sound threatening to claw its way up my throat with another sip of my drink, my shorts suddenly feeling far too tight. I lifted my leg to mitigate the damage as she slid into the pool.

She helped him out of his floaties and guided him through the water, hands careful and patient, her voice so effortlessly encouraging. She didn't hover, and most of all, she didn't baby him — she let him try, fail, try again.

And he loved her for it.

I'd never seen him take to someone so quickly. But Sienna was good with kids — I'd

known that the moment I'd realized who she was. She was a teacher, and she loved her job. I shouldn't have expected less.

But it still made my chest feel slightly too tight when she held him gently as he practiced floating on his back, his eyes squinting from the sun, and praised him. "You're doing amazing," she said. "I swear, if you keep practicing, you could swim laps in a week."

Zach beamed up at her, his little curls floating in the water around his head. "Maybe Daddy will get us a pool so I can swim more when we're home."

Sienna grinned down at him. "You could ask him really nicely and I'm sure he'd consider it."

"I'll text my contractor," I chuckled, slipping my phone from my pocket.

I heard their exchange as I typed out my questions about in-ground or above-ground, square footage, and depth.

"Maybe we can swim together at home," Zach said.

There was a brief pause—so quick that he probably didn't notice, but I heard it. Heard the way she breathed in, the way the water sloshed around them as she hesitated.

"Yeah, maybe," she murmured, her voice a little softer. "If your dad invites me."

Zach didn't miss a beat. "I'll invite you."

My heart thudded hard against my ribs. Fuck.

Sienna laughed, a little breathier than she'd been before. "Well, that's hard to argue with."

Later, when Zach was curled up on a towel in the lounge to my left with his iPad and a popsicle, I let myself look at her for longer than a few fleeting seconds.

I shouldn't have.

But I didn't stop myself.

She was lying back in the grass to my right, her body stretched over a towel, one leg bent just slightly, her skin lightly bronzed by the sun. Her sunglasses were off and discarded near her head, her arm flung across her eyes like she was shielding herself from more than just light.

Her one piece clung to her like a second skin now, damp and drying in the breeze, and I had to force myself not to stare at the little crease between her thighs. Water droplets glinted at the edge of her collarbone, sliding down over her shoulder, over that same little freckle that had caught my attention when I'd been buried inside of her halfway over the Atlantic. Her braid was starting to unravel at the nape of her neck, damp strands curling against her skin, and God, I wanted to brush them back, wanted to touch.

The rise and fall of her chest was steady, nipples pressing into the wet fabric. Her lips were parted like she'd dozed off mid-thought, pink and soft and maddeningly close to me, and I couldn't decide what part of me I wanted them on most.

But then she moved.

Her fingers twitched first, then her arm, sliding down just enough to reveal her face. Her eyes blinked open, straight at me.

I didn't look away. I didn't want to.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:00 am

Zach was sprawled across the living room's rug, deep in a make-believe dinosaur battle with Margot, who was shockingly making some of the most convincing T-rex snarls I'd ever heard despite being in the tail end of nausea from what she'd eaten yesterday.

She sat cross-legged in linens, a warm blanket draped over her shoulders and a mug of peppermint tea in her hand. She looked up and gave me the faintest smile as I stood in the doorway, dressed in tailored charcoal slacks and a white button-down rolled to my elbows.

"You look handsome, Matt," Margot deadpanned, "but the T-rex says you're going to get eaten."

Zach let out a vicious roar and body-slammed a plush stegosaurus into the carpet.

I shook my head, a grin tugging at the corner of my mouth. "You know you don't have to do this," I said to Margot. "I already ditched on golf. I don't have to go to the rehearsal dinner, Sienna and I can stay back and let you get a bit more rest."

Margot rolled her eyes. "I'm okay enough to watch him. I'd say if I wasn't."

The sound of a door clicking open down the hall drew my attention away from the living room. Heels sounded on tile, clicking one step, then two, three?—

Sienna rounded the corner, stepping into the space like it was just another Friday, and for a second, I nearly forgot how gravity worked.

This was worse than the blood red dress last night. This was worse than her in her oversized, thin shirt this morning, worse than seeing every part of her I'd wanted to drag my hands over in that black swimsuit.

This was downright torture.

She stood there under my gaze, her black dress hugging every curve, every line of her body like it had been designed with her in mind. The faintest bit of shimmer, almost woven into the fabric, caught the light — and God, I nearly dropped to my fucking knees. Thin straps, a neckline that tested every bit of composure I had in me, and when she turned to grab her purse from the counter, the low-cut back was almost enough to send me spiraling. Her hair was pulled back again, a thick braid that wrapped around her head like a crown, little pieces framing her cheeks.

I swallowed my own saliva wrong. I choked.

“Jesus,” I muttered, coughing into my elbow.

Zach looked up at me. “Daddy? You okay?”

“Fine,” I rasped, my eyes still glued to her like I had no choice.

She tried to hide the smirk that was so clearly dying to break free.

“You look pretty,” Zach announced, telling her for the second time today, his teeth showing in a wide grin as he lifted his dinosaur high like it could somehow measure that on a scale.

“Thanks, tiger,” she said, and fuck, my heart stopped. She couldn't call him that. I called him that. But I wanted to hear her say it again. “You've got great taste.”

I finally found my voice. “He’s right.”

Sienna glanced at me again, her brows raised. “You gonna survive over there?”

“Barely.”

The faintest shade of pink crept up her neck and into her cheeks.

“I’m Margot,” Margot cut in, extending a hand toward Sienna without rising from the floor. Sienna took it. “Since the walking hormone over there forgot his manners.”

I huffed a breath. “Margot?—”

“Sienna,” Sienna grinned. “Nice to meet you. You’re Zach’s nanny, right?”

“Only when he’s good.” Margot pinched Zach’s cheek, and he squealed, laughing as he squirmed back up onto the couch. “When he’s not, I’m apparently the devil.”

Sienna snorted. “Yeah, I’m a teacher, I know how that goes.”

I leaned down over the couch, grabbing Zach by either side of his head and pressing a kiss square in the center of his forehead despite his protests. “See you in the morning, yeah?”

He frowned and crossed his arms over his chest. “Why can’t I come?”

“Because tomorrow is the big wedding that we have to endure, and you’re gonna need a lot of energy for all that boredom before you can hit the dancefloor.” I ruffled his hair as I stood back up to my full height.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:00 am

“Thanks for hanging out with me today, Zach,” Sienna added. “Same tomorrow?”

He beamed so wide at her that I almost worried another tooth would come loose. “Okay!”

I hooked an arm around her waist and led her out into the warm night, the sky above turning pink and orange above the palms. The other villas lining the path were coming to life, with groups of wedding guests dressed in formalwear heading toward the main building, soft chatter and laughter ringing out across the resort.

Sienna tucked her bag under one arm, watching the parade of rich idiots in flowing linen and silk wander past us. There was something I couldn't quite place in her expression, something guarded, something stashed away like it was either treasure or a weakness.

I slowed as we reached the turnoff that would lead us toward the dining area, something clicking in my head.

I didn't want to go.

Not because I couldn't tolerate the guests. Not because I wasn't capable of stomaching another night watching Ryan try to flourish in attention bought by my money.

I knew she was dressed for revenge, dressed for combat, but I didn't want to share her. I didn't want to give them that.

At least not tonight.

My feet dug into the wooden walkway as I pulled her to a stop. “Do you want to go to this?”

She raised a brow as she looked up at me. “Are you seriously asking me if I want to make small talk with people I don’t know, eat overpriced mass-cooked seafood, and stare at my ex-boyfriend and ex-best friend all night?” she asked, the breeze pushing her little waves across her cheeks and lips. “Because the answer is no. God, no.”

I reached up and caught the strands with my finger, tucking them behind her ear. “Let’s ditch it.”

“I spent three hours getting ready?—”

“Let’s go somewhere else,” I said, cutting her off. “Not back to the villa.”

Her eyes flicked between mine, her brows shifting almost imperceptibly.

“Just you and me,” I added, my voice a little lower. “Real food, real drinks, zero Ryan and Lauren.”

She blinked and turned her head back toward the spot everyone else was heading to, hesitating, before turning back to me, her gaze dropping just briefly to my mouth before locking on my eyes again. “Yeah,” she breathed. “Okay.”

That was more than enough confirmation for me.

I slipped my hand around her waist and led her away from the main building, down the opposite path toward the taxi rank and private vans. She didn’t ask where we were going. She didn’t even look back.

The restaurant was tucked behind an unmarked gate on a winding road, fifteen minutes from the resort but far more upscale than anything Ryan could dream of conceiving. Dark wood, low candlelight, and a wrap-around terrace that overlooked the ruins of a Mayan pyramid, the cliffs, and the water, like it belonged to us alone.

Our server, a woman with a thick accent and a friendly smile, took one look at us and offered a quiet table for two on the terrace. No menus, just drinks and chef's choice small plates.

There was an ease to the way we settled in. It wasn't awkward or overly charged like when I'd met her in that first-class lounge, and it certainly wasn't as stressful as it had been last night with Ryan's gaze trailing us. It was simple, calm, like we weren't two people actively trying to ruin my brother's weekend. Like it had been all day.

By the time the first course arrived, we were halfway through our second cocktail. Sienna leaned in, chin resting on her knuckles, the dim and flickering candlelight twinkling off the greens in her eyes.

"I keep waiting for this to feel weird," she said casually.

I quirked an eyebrow at her as I set my drink back down on the table. "And?"

"It hasn't."

"Disappointed?"

Her lips twisted up at the corners. "Mildly."

We fell into a rhythm — easy, strange, and dangerous in its simplicity. She asked

about Zach's favorite movies. I told her about the time he'd tried to mail his dinosaur back in time. She told me about her classroom, about how her students were already planning to stage a mutiny because they were expected to do math differently now. I told her I was surprised she hadn't gone for something easier and more financially stable than wrangling hormonal pre-teens for a living.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:00 am

She shrugged as she looked at me, her gaze holding far too much in it. “They’re honest,” she said. “They haven’t had enough time to learn that the world rewards you for lying.”

The next round of drinks came — a high-end scotch for me, something with lavender and gin for her. She sipped it, made a bit of a face, then took another sip anyway.

The silence that followed wasn’t awkward, though. None of this was. I’d been sitting here just like her, waiting for the other shoe to drop, waiting for the moment everything shifted and one of us got irritated or ran out of things that engaged us. But it didn’t come.

She leaned back, her eyes on mine, her voice a little quiet. “So...”

I waited, resting my chin on my palm. “So?”

She swirled her drink, her eyes catching on the lavender sprig dancing against the rim of her glass. “You’re forty-seven. You own an airline. You’ve got a kid who adores you. And I highly doubt you have trouble finding someone to sleep with.” Her eyes flicked back up to mine. “So... what’s the catch?”

I let out a slow breath as I sat back in my chair. “Why do you think there has to be a catch?”

“Come on. Men like you don’t just float around from woman to woman unless they’re hiding something,” she smirked, one brow raising as she sat a little further forward, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper, a laugh already being

suppressed. “So, what is it? Tax evasion? Blackmail? Pending SEC investigation? Erectile dysfunction? Tell me, Matt, is that why you waited two hours on that flight to ask me to get a drink with you, so you could pop your Viagra with dinner?”

I nearly choked on my scotch, a laugh bursting out of me before I could hold it back. “Jesus?—”

“I’m serious!” she chirped, fully beaming now, her shoulders shaking with giggles, her hand flitting about as she spoke. Fuck, she’s cute. “Don’t tell me it’s something weirder like, I don’t know, funding and running a whole cult on the side, or maybe you’ve got some private island where all the monkeys have dubbed you king?—”

I caught her by the wrist, grinning, my thumb dragging along the base of her palm. “I don’t have a private island. I don’t run or fund a cult,” I chuckled, smirking at the way her cheeks warmed just a hair as her gaze flicked to our hands. “And I sure as hell don’t have erectile dysfunction or any of the ridiculous ideas your brain can come up with.”

She sat back with a huff, her hand slipping out of my hold, and crossed her arms over her chest. “There’s got to be something,” she said, nudging my foot with hers beneath the table.

“Sienna James, are you playing footsie with me?—”

“Shut up,” she hissed, but she was still laughing, her cheeks and neck still warm. “What are you hiding?”

I watched her as I rolled the words between my teeth, tempted to let them out, tempted to see what she’d do with them. She lifted her glass again, her eyes boring into me in a way that screamed curious, like she wasn’t going to let this go until I gave

her something.

And fuck if I didn't want to reward that.

"You want the honest answer?" I asked, lifting my head from my palm and wrapping my fingers around my drink instead.

"Obviously."

"I don't let people in." There. Said, done. "I don't do relationships. It's cleaner that way. Easier."

She blinked at me, her smile faltering, but she didn't interrupt this time.

"But you," I huffed, pausing as I tried to find the words, my tongue dragging over the back of my teeth. "You were chaos in a yellow sundress, sitting in a seat that should've belonged to someone else, looking like you didn't give a damn what anyone thought when you clearly did."

Her lips parted, her brows knitting together like she wanted to cut in.

"I didn't plan this outside of showing up, making my brother feel small, and going home. I didn't plan to sleep with you on that flight. I sure as hell didn't expect tolikeyou, but now you're here, at a dinner with me that neither of us planned on attending when we could've just stayed in the villa in our respective rooms for the evening," I said, the words falling out easier now that I'd said the hard part. "Hell, Sienna, I could be watching T-Rex Time Jam with Zach curled up in my lap if I wanted to. And I'm not."

The silence stretched for a beat, her eyes searching mine, her chest rising and falling just a little bit faster. "No," she said softly. "You're not. But you don't know me,

Matt?—”

“Maybe not yet. But if I’m being entirely honest, I want to.”

Chapter 11

Sienna

The morning came too quickly.

Warm light through the slated blinds, the quiet whoosh of the ocean beyond the glass. Somewhere in the villa, the sound of Zach’s giggles rose and fell like music. For a moment, just one, with my head still buried in the pillows and the blankets still pulled around me, I let myself imagine this was mine.

Not the room. Not the view. But the laugh, the life.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:00 am

I don't let people in. I don't do relationships.

His words from last night pinged around in my head as if I were a pinball machine, and the illusion shattered in an instant.

I pushed up from the king-size mattress that suddenly felt like far more space than I needed, the weight of the day smacking me square in the chest.

It was Ryan's wedding day.

Moving to the edge of the bed, I sat with my elbows on my knees, staring blankly at the wall like it might offer me any reason to not crawl back under the covers and scream into the mattress. My dress was already hanging on the bathroom door, emerald, silky, and enough to turn heads. My makeup bag sat open on the desk, curler, and hairdryer beside it. Everything was laid out and ready to go.

As if preparation could make all of this any less ridiculous.

I ran a hand through my hair, trying to breathe through the weight in my chest. It wasn't heartbreak, not anymore, but it was something adjacent. A pathetic echo of the pain of a relationship I was well and truly over breaking down, the memories almost black and white instead of screaming color. But it felt weird in a way I wasn't sure I'd be able to explain if Matt asked me how I was doing.

Today, the friend I thought I'd known like the back of my hand was going to put the final nail in the coffin of our friendship.

Today, the man I once thought I was going to marry, was going to marry someone else.

And I was going to smile like it didn't gut me as I stood on the arm of the person he hated the most.

I was here for revenge and a paycheck, and as my mind started to drift toward Matt, I had to tell myself that again. And then again as I brushed my teeth, twice more as I pulled on my pajamas and wandered out into the villa in search of desperately needed coffee.

The scent of it hit me before I'd reached the kitchen, along with the sound of Matt's low voice and Zach's louder, higher one, both of them mid-debate over the best fruit to blend into a smoothie.

Zach looked up from where he was perched on the counter, dinosaur pajamas on, with Matt crowding him protectively to make sure he didn't fall off. "Sienna! You like mangos?"

"I do," I grinned. "Not as much as strawberries, though."

Matt's sneaky grin as he looked down at his pouting son told me everything about what side I'd accidentally taken.

He looked so relaxed like this — a soft gray T-shirt that could have been four hundred dollars or from the clearance rack at Walmart, checkered pajama bottoms, barefoot. He was somehow exactly the same and so intensely far from the man I'd watched last night with a scotch in hand and candlelight flickering in his eyes, vulnerability cracking open in front of me like it surprised even him.

But he was still warm. Still loving with Zach. Still casual with me.

His head turned, just a little, just enough to catch my gaze over his shoulder, and gave a small, unreadable smile. “There’s coffee,” he said softly, tipping his head toward the full pot on the counter.

I nodded, thankful for the excuse to turn away, to do something with my hands.

The silence that followed between me and him—Zach was still babbling away—wasn’t uncomfortable. It was just heavy. We both remembered dinner last night, both remembered him leading me back to the car with his hand on the small of my back with no one to show me off to, both remembered the way he’d lingered at my door for a startling second before he’d swallowed and said goodnight.

And it felt like neither of us knew what to do with that now that the sun was up.

“Sienna?” Zach chirped, his feet dangling off the side of the counter, Matt still crowding him just in case. I set down the pot of coffee and turned to him. “Can we swim again today?”

I forced a bigger smile than necessary. “We’ve got time. The...wedding doesn’t start until five, and I won’t need to start getting ready until one, maybe two at the latest.”

Zach grinned wide, triumphant, like that settled it.

“But,” I added, holding up a finger, “you’ll have to ask your dad first. He’s the boss.”

He twisted instantly, his little hands grabbing fistfuls of Matt’s shirt as he leaned in and looked up at his father with the most absurdly adorable face I’d ever seen, his hazel eyes wide and wanting. God, he looks so much like Matt. “Pleeeeeease?” he asked, dragging the word out like he knew it’d hit home. “I’ll wear sunscreen, and I swear, I won’t even cannonball!”

“That’s exactly what you said yesterday,” Matt deadpanned, blinking down at him.
“You cannonballedtwice.”

He pouted. “I didn’t splash anyone, though.”

“You splashed me!” Matt laughed.

I snorted as I lifted my mug to my lips, taking a blessed sip of coffee, I desperately needed, and Matt’s mouth cracked wide into a grin as he wiggled his fingers against Zach’s sides, tickling him. For a quick, fleeting second, Matt’s gaze flicked to mine, and whatever was between us from last night seemed topulsein that gaze before it was gone.

Page 36

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:00 am

“Fine,” Matt said eventually, faux-exasperation written all over his face. “But you’re taking a nap after. No exceptions.”

“Daaaaa—”

“Nope,” Matt smirked, putting a finger to Zach’s lips to shush him. “You were up earlier than usual, and you want to exhaust yourself in the pool. That definitely warrants a nap.”

I spent the morning in the pool with Zach, both of us calling it quits as the sun started to reach its highest point in the sky. But only one of us took a nap willingly.

Matt woke me up around one-thirty in the afternoon with a quick knock on my door and an announcement that there were spare dinosaur-shaped chicken nuggets on offer as well as pan-seared snapper, but my stomach had churned the moment I’d open my eyes and looked at that goddamn dress.

The last dress.

Emerald.

I’d thought it was hilarious when I’d tried it on at Regale. I’d stepped out of the fitting room with it pinned in place and nearly laughed myself sick at how good it looked — tight in every right place, a slit up the side that bordered on illegal, and a neckline that plunged so deep it almost reached the bottom of my sternum. It had

been a joke. A petty one, one with a visual punchline to Ryan's specific brand of pain.

It was a dress that looked like it had been stitched by the devil himself, in the same jewel tone as the engagement ring I'd asked Ryan for.

The one I'd never gotten.

But now, hanging there against the bathroom door, it didn't feel clever anymore. It didn't feel like power. It felt more like a dare I wasn't sure I had the guts to follow through on, like I'd invited myself onto a stage I didn't want to be on anymore.

But the bitter part of me, the sharp-edged and exhausted and angry version of me, whispered that I had to wear it. If I didn't, he won — if I let myself hide, if I made myself disappear tonight, then Ryan and Lauren got everything they wanted.

A wedding without consequence.

An affair wrapped up in gossamer and roses and far too much gold.

Fuck him.

Every piece was perfect by the time I'd finished. My hair, down and flowing tonight, pinned away from my face and flowing down my back. My makeup, done and removed and redone, flawless, sharp. My jewelry, bought on Matt's card, gold and perfectly complementary, with two sharp points hanging from my ears. My heels, difficult to walk in.

I looked like I was dressed to kill.

When I finally emerged from my room, Margot was waiting by the door in her royal

blue midi dress, the fabric sleek and pressed and starched, her grey hair swooped back in a styled bun. Zach stood beside her with a stick of string cheese hanging out of his mouth, his back flopped dramatically against the door, looking absolutely adorable in his tiny black suit and emerald, green tie.

Apparently, Matt was color coordinating me with his kid, now, too.

“Look at you!” I grinned, crossing the space and squatting down beside him with about as much balance as a baby learning to walk. I adjusted his collar, tucking it back under his little jacket where it had popped out.

Zach wrapped his hand around the string cheese and bit down. “I look like a grown-up,” he grumbled.

“Maybe, but you’ll be the best-dressed one there,” I chirped, tucking a stray curl back behind his ear. I looked up at Margot, her brows halfway up her forehead as she glanced down at me in my dress. “Are we all sitting together at the ceremony?”

“You and Matt are,” she said. “I’ll be at the back with the little terror, here, in case he tries to make a scene. He’s not quite old enough to trust him to sit through the vows.”

I huffed out a breath. “Wish I had that excuse.” I stood on shaky legs, glancing back toward the living room, looking for Matt — but the rest of the villa was silent.

“He had to go down there a little earlier,” Margot said. “We’re meeting him. Ryan called about something-or-other.”

My stomach turned. It shouldn’t have bothered me, having to walk in without Matt by my side, but it did. The thought of being seen here without him felt like walking into a slaughterhouse as a fucking cow. “Okay,” I swallowed, trying to cover the discomfort prickling the back of my neck.

We walked in sync to the main building, other guests fluttering past in oranges, pinks, and creams that looked more in line with a sunset than a ridiculously overpriced wedding venue dripping in gold. Zach babbled on about triceratops and how their brains were roughly the size of limes as Margot and I held his hands on either side, occasionally swinging him with a rowdy giggle.

But I paused when I heard it.

The low hum of voices came from the terrace, just beyond the glass door and down near the beach —no. Not just voices, butmen; the top end of their anger cut off through the glass, leaving nothing but the bitter bass.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:00 am

I knew both of them.

I slowed near the doors, mostly out of sight with the sun reflecting off the glass, rising up that little bit more on my tiptoes than my heels already had me, and spotted them as Margot and Zach kept on toward the ceremony space. Zach was far too busy babbling to even notice my absence.

I didn't need to hear the words to know it was tense. It was there in the muffled sound of their voices, in the sharp gestures and stiff postures, in the way Matt stood with his arms crossed and his suit jacket pulled taut across his shoulder blades, and the way Ryan was pointing angrily in an arbitrary direction with his brows furrowed and his forehead vein bulging. This was hidden, separate from the guests, removed in a way that clearly sought privacy. And whatever the conversation was, it wasn't civil.

I didn't get closer.

There wasn't a part of me that wanted to chance being spotted by Ryan, so I shifted, leaning back against the wall opposite the glass door. I slipped my phone from my clutch and shot off a quick text to Matt.

Me:

I'm here. Waiting in the lobby.

I stared at the doors, the twist of adrenaline curling in my stomach. Arguments between Ryan and Matt were something I'd heard a lot about from Ryan in particular, but from the way Matt had looked—even with his back to me, tense as a rock—I

could tell it wasn't what Matt claimed were the standard I need money arguments.

I counted the seconds. Then the minutes.

Two, then three, then Matt filled the glass frame of the door before he wrenched it open, pausing the moment his eyes met mine over the threshold, his pristinely pressed black suit wrapped around him like a glove, his tie a perfect match for mine, his mostly-grey hair slicked back away from his sharp features.

For a heartbeat, he just looked at me, eyes scanning me from head to heels as if he needed a second to take it in and recover. But he shook his head with a quiet curse under his breath and shut the door behind him.

"God," he murmured. "You look..." His Adam's apple bobbed, words dying on his tongue.

I breathed out a chuckle, my cheeks heating. "Should I take your speechlessness as a compliment?"

He scrubbed a hand over his face, swallowing and resetting his jaw. "Yeah," he huffed. "You fucking should."

That shouldn't have flustered me, but Christ, it did. The way he was looking at me, like he wanted to do more than devour me, set my pulse spiking until I could feel it pounding against the inside of my wrist.

He crossed the space between us, calmer now, like whatever storm had been spinning outside had finally snapped shut and he was able to focus on this alone. His hand found the small of my back, warm through the fabric and boning of the dress, pulling me just an inch closer to him — enough that I could feel the heat rippling off of him, enough that I could smell the hint of whiskey on his breath. He'd already had a drink?

“Are you okay?” he asked, his voice low enough that only I could hear as a handful of guests passed behind him.

I swallowed. No, I wanted to say, Ryan’s getting married, and I still don’t know what the hell that dinner was with you last night. But those weren’t what made it out of my mouth. “Yeah,” I breathed.

His brows furrowed almost imperceptibly, his mouth thinning to a hard line, his eyes searching mine. My pulse pounded once, hard, before he leaned in, his breath fanning across my ear. “Think we both need to get a little better at lying if we’re going to survive tonight,” he murmured.

Before I could even form a response, his free hand came up to cup my jaw, his other pulling me just a little closer, enough that my breasts brushed his jacket on an inhale. His lips pressed against my cheek, just gently, just enough to make my breath hitch.

It’s just the act.

His hand lowered gently, his touch soft enough not to smudge my makeup, until he was cupping the curve of the side of my throat, his thumb gently brushing across my jawline. “Just say if you need a minute. Doesn’t matter when, we’ll just fuck off somewhere private so you can catch your breath. Okay?”

I nodded.

“Words, Sienna.”

Something curled low in my stomach at that. “Okay,” I rasped.

“Good.” He pulled back, his gaze locking with mine, hazel eyes sharp and searing a hole straight through me. “Let’s get this over with.”

I let him lead me toward the ceremony space, his hand heavy on the small of my back, my heels clicking with every step. I told myself I wasn't leaning into his touch, told myself this wasn't comfort, that I didn't need the attention he was paying to me or the way it made me feel.

But I knew I was lying to myself.

By the time the ceremony began, the sky was lit up in deep blues and oranges and pinks, the sun setting over the Yucatan peninsula behind us, the Caribbean lapping at the back steps of Ryan and Lauren's stupid stage for their vows. Matt and I sat on the right side of the seating area, a few rows back from the front, because, of course, Ryan didn't want us anywhere close to him, despite Matt being his closest living family member. The chairs around me were filled with either people I'd met who knew exactly who I was to Ryan and couldn't stop glancing at me, or people I'd never met that he'd invited for the status of it all.

Matt took my hand in his the moment we all stood for the bride, a soft squeeze settling my nerves, and I watched in numb silence as Lauren walked down the aisle alone in a stupidly, perfect, strapless dress that I was almost positive was the same one she'd pointed out to me in a magazine six months ago, a giggle crossing her lips as she'd said, "You should wear that one when he finally plucks up the nerve to ask you."

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:00 am

I squeezed Matt's hand back. He tucked it in against his stomach, his other hand wrapping around our joined ones, just for added support.

When the vows began, I didn't hear a word, hardly noticed her veil floating in the wind or the way she grinned at him like he'd hung the moon.

All I could think about was how close I'd come to being her, how much I'd wanted that.

And whether sitting here now, clutching Matt's hand in mine like I wanted to meld mine into it, made me any different.

The reception was a cream-and-gold, over-the-top spectacle. Long farmhouse tables under chandeliers hanging from the trees like they'd grown right out of them, waiters in all white floating between guests with champagne flutes and hors d'oeuvres with literal edible gold, a string quartet mangling a pop song in the name of 'elegance.'

And Lauren was still shooting daggers at me with her stare from the head table.

I didn't flinch — not even when she whispered something into Ryan's ear that made his jaw clench, not when one of her bridesmaids turned to glare at me like I'd committed war crimes by showing up in a dress that fit me like a glove.

"Let them look," Matt had said simply the first time I'd noticed it when I sat down, his attention half caught between me and Zach's complaint about the lack of chicken

nuggets.

He was right. I could let them look, let them see me as I was. Here, not broken. Better off. And more importantly, for the first time in two months, no longer feeling like the one wholost.

I sipped my champagne, let the annoying string music wind around me, and smiled the next time Lauren's eyes met mine like I wasn't imagining destroying their wedding cake before they could even get to it.

The moment the string quartet packed up, the speeches finished, and the DJ got set up, Zach tugged on my hand.

"Are we allowed to dance yet?" he asked, eyes wide and grin fierce like he already knew the answer but just wanted to be toldyes.

I glanced at the open-air dance floor. It was empty for now, waiting for someone to break the ice. "Who says we need permission?" I said, grinning back at him.

Zach's face lit up in an instant.

I met Matt's gaze as he spoke to Margot, pulling him from the conversation for half a second as he followed Zach's pleading eyes toward the dance floor and chuckled. "I would lovenothingmore than for you to make a scene with my son," he said simply, his lips twitching up at the corner.

That was all the encouragement we needed.

Zach and I marched together onto the floor, hand in hand, my eyes glued to nothing but him. It was easier when I thought about it less as a bold thing I was doing to get under Ryan and Lauren's skin and more as something I wanted to dofor Zach, and the

moment his gaze met mine, I spun him once right as the music started.

And the music was perfect.

The tempo picked right up, something jazzy and old-school, and Zach let loose like he was born for both the dance floor and annoying the bride and groom.

People started watching — not necessarily in a bad way. But he got attention, and I could feel the tension leaking out of me as he giggled and laughed and pulled me out of my uptight bubble that had formed from sheer stress alone.

A few of the guests clapped in time with the music as I tried to keep up with him. One of the groomsmen laughed and shouted encouragement at Zach from the sidelines. Someone made a whoop sound when I dropped into a silly, low move, and Zach mirrored me with a fall-and-roll that looked more like he was under fire from snipers than dancing, but it was adorable.

Matt watched from his seat at a table back from the floor, one arm draped across the back of his chair and his mouth curled in a smile he didn't even try to hide. It was there again — the softness in his eyes he'd had last night, the look of almost-vulnerability he'd had when he'd said, "You were chaos in a yellow sundress."

I had to force myself to look away.

Eventually, Zach stumbled back to the table, breathless and flushed, flopping against Matt's chest when he pulled him into his lap like a tired puppy. He zonked out completely not long after, head tucked up against the lapel of Matt's suit jacket, his fingers wrapped loosely around Matt's tie.

Watching them like that — Matt's hand resting protectively on his son's back, his eyes flicking to me every so often between gentle kisses on top of Zach's head or

sipping his champagne — forced something open in my chest.

Not a wound. Something far more stupid than that.

It was awant.

“Thought he took a nap earlier,” I chuckled lightly, tapping the side of Matt’s shoe with my own.

He rolled his eyes, but there wasn’t any real irritation behind them. “So did I.”

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:00 am

Margot took him a few minutes later, lifting Zach with practiced ease and managing not to wake him fully. Matt murmured a quiet thank you to her, promising we'd come back to the villa soon.

But then it was just us. Well, us and two hundred odd people that either hated us or didn't know we existed.

I didn't let myself overthink it and stood up beside him, offering him my hand. "Your turn."

He looked up at me, a single eyebrow raised, a little spot of damp where Zach's head had rested against his chest. "Mine?"

I bit back my grin. "You're supposed to be my charming boyfriend, right? It's in the job description."

"I don't love dancing," he said simply, but the corner of his mouth was already lifting.

"Neither do I." I reached down, taking his hand, and he didn't fight me in the slightest. "Come on. Let's ruin this wedding with at least a little joy."

He laughed, not fully but it was there, and let me pull him up and out of his seat, toward the dance floor. "This feels like a trap," he smirked.

"Only if you dance badly," I grinned back at him, crossing onto the mostly-empty dance floor and squeezing his hand. "So maybe fake that, too."

His free hand landed at my waist, strong and steady, pulling me in until I was flush against him. I curled my fingers behind his neck, letting them drift just barely into his hair, my pulse pounding a little too hard at the intimacy of it — but then he met my gaze as he started to move us, guiding me like this was easy, like we'd done this a hundred times.

"I'll have you know," he murmured, dipping his head slightly toward my ear so only I could hear, "I'm a decent dancer. I just avoid doing it."

"Oh, so this isn't your first time?" I teased, but it clearly wasn't. He was far too confident with his steps for this to be the first time he'd moved to music with a crowd of people around. "I never would have guessed."

He laughed, faking offense as he pulled back enough to meet my gaze. "I've been to enough corporate galas to fake some moves, thank you very much," he said, rolling his eyes. "I usually avoid weddings, though. Too much optimism in the air."

I shook my head, barely holding in the giggle working up my throat. "Right. Got to have the ulterior motive of revenge."

He shrugged. "And obligation."

I tightened my grip on the back of his neck, watching the way his breath hitched a little. "You're being a very good brother," I said, the words feeling too weighty for how casually they slipped out. "Even if it is because of obligation."

He hummed his response, his gaze scanning the room once before landing back on me. "Don't look," he said softly, his thumb brushing my waist where he held it as he moved us slightly across the dance floor, "but they're staring."

I stared up at him, not daring to look away. "Good," I said. "Let them simmer in their

anger.”

He huffed a chuckle. “You don’t want to give them a break on their wedding day?”

I grinned, then, wild, and bright and a little manic, and dropped his hand to wrap my arms around his neck. He didn’t question it — just pulled me in tighter, his hand splaying out across my back, eyes glued on me as I beamed up at him unashamedly and far too sweetly for the words behind my teeth. “I’d rather give them food poisoning.”

He snorted, his forehead dropping against mine. “You are chaos,” he said, but there wasn’t a hint of bite to it.

The music shifted into something slower, something far more romantic, and neither of us moved to leave. His free hand wrapped around me, resting right between my shoulder blades, not bothering to lift his head from mine.

It was too easy, being this close to him.

“Thank you,” he said, his voice going a little raspier as he lowered it. “I should have said that earlier.”

I blinked up at him, his face slightly too close to focus on. “For what?”

“For dancing with Zach,” he said gently. “And for being so good with him yesterday and this morning. He hasn’t really loosened up like that with anyone but Margot. You didn’t have to put so much effort in.”

My throat tightened. “He’s a great kid,” I murmured. “You don’t have to thank me. I liked it, like him.”

Matt lifted his head enough to look down at me properly, his gaze weighty, flicking across my face like he was trying to memorize it. His thumb moved again, just gently, tracing a line across the back of my ribs. “Still,” he said. “Thank you.”

I swallowed down the part of me that was screaming that there was something here, forced it to understand that this conversation wouldn’t mean jack shit if we were two meters apart and not wrapped up in each other’s arms because of a part we were playing. “You’re a lot softer than you pretend to be,” I said, smirking just a little, trying to lighten it enough so I could get a grip on myself.

“Yeah, well, don’t spread it around,” he chuckled. “I have a reputation to uphold.”

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:01 am

Apparently, my body didn't want to listen to the words I was hammering into my brain, because I went up on tiptoes out of instinct, bringing my face just a little bit closer, my body swaying an inch when he tried to move us another step. "I'll keep your secret," I grinned, dragging my teeth over my lower lip. "For a price."

He huffed a breath, leaning down to meet me just short of halfway, his gaze shifting between my eyes and my lips. "What, a hundred grand doesn't cover secrets?" he murmured, his hand coming up to cup the back of my neck, his grip firmer than I expected, his thumb pushing up against my jaw just enough to tilt my head back a little more.

My cheeks heated immediately, my throat working desperately on words that wouldn't seem to come.

"Name your ridiculous price, then, Sienna," he said. "Or are you too scared to, since I called you out for it last time?"

Kiss me.

Are you asking me because you want me to or because you want him to see it happen again?

I wanted to answer him, wanted to shoot something at him that was smart and deflecting and entirely unserious so he would stop looking at me like that, but I couldn't. I was locked in place, my mouth not working, my brain skidding to a halt, my cheeks so warm they burned.

He leaned a little closer, his breath ghosting across my lips, and before I could do something reckless like close the distance or push away, his mouth brushed mine in the barest kiss anyone had ever given me, my brain short-circuiting and turning into TV static.

And then he pulled away again.

No. No?—

“Too easy,” he rasped, his lips pulling up at the corners. “You’re too easy to rattle, sweetheart.”

I stared up at him, trying to process, trying to figure out what the hell he was doing, but he wasn’t moving, wasn’t coming back, wasn’t leaning down to kiss me again.

The thoughts hit me all at once — we were leaving tomorrow. The charade would be over. Unless we were saying goodbye to them in the morning, which I highly doubted, right here on the dance floor before going back to our villa would be the last time Matt’s hands would be on me like this, the last time Matt would be this close.

And he wasn’t even kissing me properly.

My heart pounded against my ribs. I should have been okay with that. I should have been relieved that this was almost over.

But, fuck, I wasn’t.

I didn’t want to feel anything at all, but with his hands on my back and my neck and the lights of those stupid chandeliers hanging softly above us, I felt like the only people in the room were the two of us. Not Ryan, not Lauren, not anyone who’d ever made me feel like I wasn’t enough, not the guests I didn’t care about or the resort

staff.

Just Matt. Just me.

And the horrifying realization that this, whatever it was, felt too real and dangerously, stupidly, heartbreakingly easy.

Every part of me screamed to grab him by the tie and pull him back to me, but I couldn't. My pride wouldn't allow for it.

Shit.

Shit.

We left before I'd even had the chance to consider running my fingers through the uncut cake.

Matt made the call, leaning in while the DJ switched to something upbeat and exciting, his breath hot against my ear. "If we want this whole new and obsessed with each other thing to come across right, we should slip out a little early. Sell it."

I didn't hesitate. I needed air that wasn't tainted with the scent of his cologne desperately. "God, please," I mumbled, forcing words to come out, but they felt hollow. "If I have to see Ryan feed Lauren a piece of cake, I might commit an actual felony."

We slipped away through a side path winding past the edge of the reception space, laughter and clinking glasses getting quieter behind us as we walked. The sky was thick and black above us, the stars obscured by all the lights, the air still sickly with

salt and flowers and the occasional waft of perfume when the wind blew.

Matt walked beside me, one hand tucked in the pocket of his slacks, the other brushing against mine more often than not.

“You’ve been a very convincing fake boyfriend,” I said, hating the words as they slipped out.

He glanced over, his lips twitching up at the corner. “I do like to commit to a role.”

Page 41

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:01 am

I huffed out a breath. “You deserve an Oscar.”

He chuckled lightly, tilting his head back and forth like he was thinking. “Do you think I should thank my fake girlfriend in my acceptance speech? Or is that too sentimental?”

I bumped him lightly with my shoulder. “Definitely too sentimental. Got to keep it cool, Strathmore, since you’re so worried about your reputation.”

“Right, right,” he grinned. “Emotionally stunted. Got it.”

I chuckled but hated the way the air between us was settling, hated the way things were softer, the act dropping.

By the time we reached the villa, the windows were dark, the porch lanterns the only light still flickering as we talked idly about work. He walked up the steps ahead of me, holding the door open while I peeled off my heels before stepping inside, half out of not wanting to wake Zach with the clicking and half from just how badly my feet were killing me. Beautiful shoes, but my God, they were torturous.

“...so, then she tells me that she can’t finish her vocabulary test because Mercury is in retrograde and it’s making her feel too ‘emotionally volatile’ to spell,” I continued, dropping my heels by the door as I shut it behind me. “I was impressed she even knew what volatile meant.”

Matt chuckled quietly beside me before ushering me toward the hall. “That might be the most creative way I’ve heard of a kid trying to get out of schoolwork.”

He followed as I walked, my bare feet almost silent against the floor, my dress strap falling off one shoulder. “I gave her extra credit,” I snorted, pushing open the door to my room and stepping through. “She got a B in the end.”

I turned back toward him, half expecting him to respond, but he’d stopped at the doorway. I caught the last flicker of amusement in his expression before it faded into something quieter, something still, and oh, shit, I hated that.

I hated that more than I hated anything else this evening.

“You can come in,” I said, my voice far breathier than I’d intended.

He didn’t move. “Sienna,” he said carefully.

“Oh my God.” I rolled my eyes and set my clutch down on the dresser. “It’s not an invitation to sleep with me, Matt.”

His mouth twitched. Thank God. He hadn’t shut off completely. “You sure?”

I stared at him for a long second, my hand wrapping around my wrist out of nerves. “Fuck,” I muttered.

He arched a single brow at me.

“Look,” I said, taking a step back. “We were mid-conversation, and I don’t feel like whispering about retrograde-vocabulary-trauma in the hallway while praying it doesn’t wake your kid. That’s—that’s all.”

He held my gaze for a second, and then another. Idiot, my brain screamed. Desperate.

Matt let out a breath I hadn’t realized he was holding and crossed the threshold,

shutting the door behind him.

“Do you honestly want to keep talking about your students?” he asked, leaning against the door frame to the en-suite.

I dragged my teeth over my lip, turning from him as I unfastened my earring and opened up my jewelry bag. “No,” I said. “But there is something I wanted to ask you.”

“Go ahead.”

I popped out the other earring and dropped it into the with the first before starting to turn the chain of my necklace to reach the clasp. “I saw you and Ryan earlier,” I said softly. “Before I texted you. I didn’t hear anything, but it looked... heated.”

I paused, waiting to see if he offered up any information without me directly asking. He didn’t.

“Can I ask what you were arguing about?”

He let out a rough breath, but he didn’t answer.

I slipped the chain from around my neck and dropped it in the bag. “Matt?” I asked, turning?—

I startled slightly, my breath catching. He was far closer than he’d been a second ago. Too close. Close enough to smell his cologne, close enough that I had to tilt my head up a bit to look him in the eyes.

“Christ,” I muttered. “Warn a girl next time.”

Page 42

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:01 am

His gaze dropped to my mouth, hovering, before lifting dangerously slowly back to my eyes.

“Matt,” I said again, but my voice was too strained, too obvious. I couldn’t move, didn’t know how to anymore — just stood there, my heart slamming against my ribs like a caged animal.

His hand came up slowly, brushing a strand of hair that had fallen from the pins back from my face. His fingers lingered against my cheek, light and careful, but warm, so fucking warm?—

“You.”

That was it. One word, but it landed like a blow to the head.

My breathing stuttered.

“Me?”

Matt said nothing, but he took a step toward me, closing the distance further, my heart pounding erratically.

“Like, meme?” I asked, blinking at him in confusion, my brain stalling as I tried to make sense of both hit and how close he was, how he was looking at me. “Okay, but, what do you—what about me? Like, was he mad that I was here? Or mad that you’re, no—were with me? Or...or—fuck, Matt—what do you mean?—”

He kissed me.

He kissed me, and I lost my goddamn mind. Again.

This wasn't like the ones before, the ones in front of Ryan, the ones where he'd been showing me off. This wasn't like the ones on the plane, stupid and reckless and lost in the fantasy of I'll never see you again.

This had no audience, no witnesses, no script. This had consequences.

His mouth was hot and firm and impossibly sure, his tongue prying my lips open with his hands on the curve of my jaw, anchoring me, pulling me in like gravity. "Fuck," I breathed against him, and he took the opportunity to deepen it more, like he'd been waiting for the chance.

It wasn't careful. It wasn't polite.

And as he walked me backward, my knees hitting the edge of the mattress, I realized it felt horrifyingly real.

Chapter 12

Matt

The second I caved and let myself kiss her, it was over. There was no pretending now. No posturing. No performance.

Her lips parted beneath mine as she spoke, and I stole it, delving into her mouth unabashedly. She only sank further into it, letting me lead her, letting her feel like she'd been desperate for it.

And I knew damn well she had been.

That look she'd given me at the reception, the way her breathing had faltered before and after I'd given her the weakest kiss of my goddamn life, the way she'd practically begged me without words for more than that before giving up and letting it go — it told me far more than she thought it did. Maybe far more than she knew.

I didn't touch her at first — at least not really, outside of the way I was cupping her cheeks and the way I was crowding her. I just kissed her like I couldn't help it, like if I stopped, I'd forget how to breathe. But then her hand curled into my shirt, her fingers fisting in the fabric and pulling at my tie, and I broke.

My hand slid around her waist, fingers splaying across her back over that goddamn fabric that had been clinging to her all evening and driving me insane. The other two dresses she'd worn had been enough to make me spiral, but this one, this stupid fucking dress, had nearly made me throw her over my shoulder and take her somewhere private in the middle of the ceremony. But now I didn't need to.

I pulled her flush against me until there wasn't a fraction of space left between us. Her body arched into mine, into me, warm and soft and too much, and I knew without a doubt in my mind that I was screwed. She was addictive in a way I wasn't used to.

"You're beautiful," I murmured, pulling back just enough to look at her, to take her in like this. The words came out far more like a confession than I was used to — not just because she was beautiful, because dear God, she was, but because she was something I would never allow myself to keep.

Her cheeks heated, her mouth opening to respond, but I cut her off with another kiss. She gasped as I finally pushed her that little bit backward, making her lose her balance against the edge of the bed, my knee coming up onto the mattress, my hands holding her up. I lowered both of us together, refusing to leave her mouth, until her

body had sunk into the soft sheets and I was over her, my jacket halfway down my shoulders from her incessant pushing, lipstick smeared across her chin.

I kissed her deeper, harder, hungrier than I had been in years. And she met me every step of the way.

I didn't care. I didn't fucking care anymore.

I wanted her.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:01 am

I wanted her more than I wanted to admit.

I broke it, just barely, when my jacket hit the floor, my mouth hovering against her jaw. “This isn’t part of the plan,” I murmured, my voice low, too rough, too jagged. “Fuck, this isn’t—this isn’t the act, Sienna.”

Her breathing stuttered as she looked up at me, her fingers frozen around my tie.

“I’m not pretending right now,” I added, swallowing past the gravel in my throat, my hand sliding to the back of her neck and lifting just enough to make her throat extend. My blood rushed south the moment I let myself kiss her right in the center of it. “Don’t know if I ever was, if I’m being honest.”

I could feel the whimper reverberate through her. “Matt?—”

“You make me feel something,” I interrupted, my voice barely above a whisper. My other hand moved, raking down her side, settling in the narrowest part of her waist. “You make me feel real. Human. You fucking get to me, like you’ve dug these claws in, and I can’t pry them out. Don’t even know if I’d want to if I could.”

I kissed lower, down along her collarbone, the exposed part of her chest.

“I know you wanted that line to exist. But you already crossed it. We both did.”

Sienna was still for a second, nothing but the rapid rise and fall of her chest moving in short, shallow little bursts.

But then her fingers closed around my tie and pulled with a desperation that bordered on frustration, dragging me back up her body and right to her mouth.

She kissed me this time, and any lingering resolve I had was gone. She kissed me hard, hungry, like she didn't have words left to give me and this was all she could manage. But God, it was enough.

My hand met hers at my tie, hooking into the knot and pulling until the short end slipped free and it fell to the wayside. "Zipper," I mumbled against her mouth, pushing the straps of her dress from her shoulders. I'd undressed enough women in my life to know damn well that I wasn't going to easily find the zipper on a dress like this.

Her hand left my chest and fumbled along the side of her body, and I followed her, my fingers hooking on the tiny bit of metal hidden beneath a fold of fabric and pulling it down. I found the tiny hook-and-eye at the top and cursed, a half-laugh breaking from me as I shifted, kissing her jaw, her neck, clumsily pinching the metal together once, twice, three times until it released, the fabric around her loosening.

She didn't waste a second.

She shimmied, just enough, her hand slipping through the sides until the fabric was pooling uncomfortably around her waist and her upper half was bare, bits of boning sticking me in the stomach.

I didn't even have a second to appreciate the view before I was sick of being stabbed. "Dear God, we need to get this off you," I huffed, pulling myself from her enough to actually move. "Lift up, sweetheart."

She bit back a laugh and raised her hips, letting me tug the green nightmare that had almost made me fully hard the first time I'd laid eyes on it down over her ass and

thighs. “Don’t like my dress?” she murmured, her cheeks bright pink, her lipstick close to ruined.

“Exact opposite,” I rasped, shoving it off the bed before I took her face in my hand, my thumb rubbing over her lower lip, destroying the last of the color on her lips and dragging a line of red across her cheek. Fuck, she looked good with her makeup ruined. “You’ve no idea the thoughts that have been invading my head all goddamn night watching you move around in that.”

I didn’t let her answer.

My hand clamped over her mouth when I hooked my fingers on the black lace of her underwear. “Listen to me,” I said, pulling the fabric down until she was bare, a sinful string of her arousal clinging to them and connecting the fabric to her core before it snapped. “My son is two walls over. You’re going to be good for me and keep those pretty sounds nice and quiet like before, understood?”

Her eyes widened as I let myself sink between her thighs again, my free hand pulling at my shirt buttons.

“You don’t have to be silent,” I clarified, popping the first, then the second, the third. “Just quiet. No louder than we are right now.” I moved my hand enough for her to speak and let my shirt fall away.

“Okay,” she breathed, her chest rising and falling faster the moment I moved to my belt. “Fuck, we shouldn’t—Christ. Okay. Okay.”

“No use fighting yourself now.” The clink of my belt buckle freeing seemed to echo between our breaths, and her fingers wrapped around the leather, pulling it out of my belt loops frantically. My lips met her neck, her collarbone, her chest, the swell of her breasts from sheer need alone, my control gone, my body acting on instinct.

“Shit,” she hissed as my teeth grazed a raised nipple.

I hesitated, glaring up at her through my lashes. “Oh, I’m sorry, were you expecting me to just undress you and not touch you?”

“I don’t know,” she huffed, her brown eyes narrowing and breath stuttering when I dragged my thumb over it instead. “I—fuck—figured you’d keep pretending to have self-control.”

I snorted and nipped at the skin of her breast before soothing it gently with my tongue. “No,” I murmured, hooking my hands around the back of her thighs and lifting them up, up, up, and back, my bare chest dragging across her lower half and the sheets as I placed open-mouth kisses down the expanse of her stomach. “I’m well past pretending.”

She opened her mouth to speak, but I closed mine over her heat — and all coherent thought dissolved into thin air.

Shit. The taste of her was fucking intoxicating, slick and sweet like overripe fruit, like something I wanted to ruin myself with. Her thighs quivered against my temples and cheeks as I dragged my tongue through her, slow and precise, savoring the whimper she let out before she bit down on the meat of her palm, that same noise muffled and broken when I flicked the tip over her clit.

Page 44

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:01 am

I shouldn't have let myself do this. I knew that, knew it in my bones.

But I didn't stop.

Her free hand sank into my hair, fingers twisting in the waxed strands, tugging hard enough to border on pain. I groaned quietly against her, pressing my mouth firmer, hungrier, licking into her like it could be my goddamn salvation.

She pulled tighter. "Matt—" It was half a sob, half a whisper, her bite marks visible on the back of her hand.

I gripped her hips hard in answer, pinning her in place when she tried to wriggle away from the intensity. No escape. Not when those soft, pretty noises were morphing into ragged gasps and making my cock throb where it was pinned between me, my slacks, and the sheets.

Her body arched off the bed the moment I sucked her clit between my teeth, my tongue ravaging, one hand sliding around her thigh and through the outpouring of her dampness to press two fingers inside of her, curling them as she sunk to the hilt.

She tightened around them.

"Fuck," I groaned, the singular word muffled.

My tongue circled her mercilessly, her heels digging into my shoulder blades, my own head spinning. I didn't want to stop. God, she sounded so good, tasted like sin, and knowing it was her—Sienna—the woman who had driven me mad with a fucking

yellow sundress and bare feet in first class, who had tested my patience, who had played with my son like it was the most natural thing in the world, who had told me countless times up until now that she wasn't going to sleep with me again—it was too much. It was hell and it was heaven.

And I wanted to break her as many times as I physically could.

“Matt, please?—”

Her broken whisper undid me more than any scream could have. Her voice was shattered as my tongue dragged over her clit with relentless precision, my fingers curling inside of her with every thrust, her muscles locking around me and her back arching like she was mid-exorcism.

God.

Her thighs trembled, not gently but violently, her fingers tightening so hard I was positive she was pulling strands out of my fucking head.

And then she broke.

I watched—fuck, I watched—as her muffled groan turned into a muffled shriek and then muffled sobs, as her back slammed down into the mattress, as her hips lifted helplessly against my tongue as wave after wave tore through her.

The taste of her flooded my mouth, sweet and acidic and her, and my eyes nearly rolled back in my head. I was ruined. More than I'd been when she'd lost it so beautifully on the flight when she'd just been a stranger.

Because now I knew.

Now I knew the stubborn set of her chin when she was irritated, knew the way she grinned at my son like he was the brightest star in the sky, knew the way she held her ground even when it cost her, knew the way she looked at me when she was desperate but too scared to admit it.

Worst of all, though, I knew those fingers digging into my scalp belonged to a woman who could absolutely be the death of me.

But all I wanted was to watch her break again and again and again, until her brain was nothing but TV static and her body was wrung out, until I was out of stamina and then some, until I'd lost my mind in her.

Her eyes were glassy and unfocused as they lowered to me, half-lidded and wrecked, makeup smeared and teeth marks in her hand. Beautiful. Wrecked. Mine.

"Look at you," I rasped, pressing a kiss to the inside of her thigh, letting my stubble rake over the sensitive skin. "One fucking orgasm and you're already useless."

She blinked dazedly at me, the words clearly taking a moment to process, before she laughed. Clear and bright as day, her lips pulling up in a genuine smile, not a smirk or a taunt, but a goddamnsunburst, cheeks swollen and pink and her hair half undone. "I hate you."

The way she said it, the way she looked at me — it did things to me that I didn't dare admit to myself, made my chest feel tight in a way I actively fought. "No," I chuckled, nipping at her flesh before pushing myself up onto all fours, "you don't."

The slacks around my thighs suddenly felt like a prison as I worked my way back up her body. I made quick work of them with absolutely no help from her clumsy fingers, despite her trying to get the fly down, and sighed in relief the moment my cock was free and pressing against her thigh before I was on her again. I kissed her

deep enough to let her taste herself on my tongue, swallowing down the needy sound she made as I angled myself to drag my length through the mess I'd made of her.

“Do you have any idea,” I growled against her mouth, digging my fingers into her thigh to hitch it higher on my hip, “what you do to me?”

Her hands cupped my cheeks, her nails raking against the sides of my neck, and I almost,almost, couldn't bite back the strangled noise desperate to spill from my throat. “I?—”

“You don't,” I interrupted. “You don't.”

I lined myself up, the tip of my cock catching on her opening, both of us shaking — her from the aftershocks, me from desperation. She was so goddamn wet, so warm, and I could feel her clamping down around nothing as I settled at the entrance.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:01 am

I gripped her by the chin. “Look at me, sweetheart,” I ordered, waiting for her eyes to focus at least halfway. “I’m going to watch you come again. And again. And again.”

She swallowed, her throat working, words gone.

“And I want to feel every goddamn second of it,” I gritted out, holding her gaze unwaveringly as I shoved in with one relentless thrust, my vision blurring for half a second as I sank to the hilt.

She whimpered, beautifully, brokenly, her body stretching to take me, her walls so impossibly tight around every inch. Her legs locked around me as her nails pressed in harder like she’d simply die if I pulled out, her mouth opening in a pretty little O.

She didn’t dare look away from me.

I didn’t give her the chance to.

It started frantic. Our bodies crashed together with the same desperate hunger that had fueled us our first time on the flight, but this was different. There was no partition to lower, no flight attendants to hide from, no performance, no pretending. Just skin and sweat and the way her hands mapped every inch of me like she was memorizing the way we fit together.

I kept my word. I watched it all.

Every hitch of her breath, every desperate, fluttering squeeze of her thighs around my hips, every trembled and helpless noise she tried to swallow down for Zach’s sake. I

drank it all in like I'd never get enough, and when she came the third time, her whole body locking around me with a choked, "Matt," I nearly lost myself right then from the way she looked at me.

Like I was the only thing in the world that mattered. Like there was far more behind those eyes than either of us would admit to.

We slowed after that. Not because the hunger faded, but because I was desperate to savor this, savor her, wanted to feel the way she melted under my hands or the way her nails traced my shoulders between tremors, the way she whispered my name like it was something holy and blasphemous all at once.

She came twice more before I finally let go — once with my fingers twisting in her hair when I'd flipped her onto her stomach, and once with my mouth sealed over hers to swallow her sounds as she rode me. And when I finally followed her over the edge, it wasn't the frantic release I'd found weeks ago on the flight. It was deeper, fuller, like every nerve in my body had been waiting for that exact moment, this exact woman, to finally fucking shatter.

We didn't speak after. There were no cursed regrets or hesitant small talk. It was just tangled limbs and slowing breaths, her back pressed against my chest, my hand splayed possessively over her stomach. The silence stretched, comfortable in a way it had no right to be.

The realization hit me like a fucking freight train — I wasn't ready for this to end. And God, that scared me more than anything else.

I didn't do this. This wasn't me.

But then she turned in my arms, her nose brushing against my collarbone, my fingers idly plucking the bobby pins from her hair, and for the first time in years, I wasn't

sure I cared if it scared me.

I didn't even remember falling asleep.

Chapter 13

Sienna

Sunlight was strewn across the bed by the time my eyes opened. It was far later than I was meant to wake up, but the light was warm, painting the bed in soft gold and heating the white linen sheets.

For a few seconds, I didn't move. I just lay there, tangled in warmth and the scent of Matt's cologne that had seemed to cling to my skin, a pleasant ache between my thighs drawing my mind back to last night. His mouth, his hands, the way he'd held me after, like I was something precious — not a distraction this time, not a mistake.

Please still be here.

There was no heat against my back, no even breathing to settle the nerves creeping up my neck. I didn't want to find out, didn't want the crash if he'd left.

But I couldn't hear anything besides the low hum of the AC.

I already knew before my hand reached through the empty sheets.

I rolled over, the blankets slipping off my shoulder as I lifted myself onto my elbow, chest tightening as I stared at the empty space beside me.

No note. No sound of the shower. No hint of movement in the villa at all.

I sat up fully, dread blooming like I'd swallowed down ice. I pulled on the robe hanging over the wicker lounger and cracked the bedroom door.

Silence.

No voices, no clatter of Margot making coffee, no eggs sizzling in a pan, no little footsteps, no shrieking over T-Rex Time Jam. I padded barefoot down the hall, quickening, heart thudding louder with every step.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:01 am

Margot's door was open, empty.

The two single beds in Zach's room were made.

The sheets were stripped in Matt's, folded and waiting at the foot of the bed.

There was no luggage, no shoes by the door, no food in the fridge. A half-empty pot of coffee sat in the machine, still hot on the hot plate.

They left. No message, no goodbye, just gone.

My breath hitched once, twice, shaking, wrong.

This couldn't be right. He wouldn't—he couldn't just vanish, not after last night, not after how he'd touched me like he meant every second of it, not after how he'd held me in the comedown like he didn't want to let go. My hands shook as I moved back to my room, staring at my clothes strewn about the place, my jaw wobbling.

I packed quickly, grabbing out the first casual clothes I could find—a pair of jean shorts and a plain white shirt—and pulled them on, moving on autopilot as I tried to convince myself they were just down at the beach or waiting in the main building.

I didn't even know when my flight was.

I dragged my suitcase down the path, the wheels making a racket against each slat of the wooden walkway, the air too bright, too hot, too cheery for the hollowness that seemed to swallow everything inside of me like a black hole.

A voice stopped me dead in my tracks.

“Oh, wow,” he said, and I spun on a dime, realizing too late that I hadn’t even bothered to look in a mirror after Matt had thoroughly ruined my makeup last night. Ryan stared at me, grinning like he’d just witnessed a comedy sketch of someone slipping and falling down ten flights of stairs, his short-sleeved shirt unbuttoned and blowing in the breeze. His hair was damp, a drink already in his hand, his sunglasses perched on his nose like he didn’t have a care in the world. “Didn’t think I’d see you this morning.”

“Ryan,” I swallowed, taking a single step back. No, no, fuck, you’ve lost the edge, Sienna. “Do you—have you seen Matt?”

I cringed at myself. I sounded broken.

His smile faltered, just slightly, before he blinked at me behind his shades. His head tilted to the side, his grin stretching into something sharp.

“You mean your boyfriend?” he asked, drawing the word out like it was a joke.

“He’s not, uh, he’s not in the villa,” I said, willing my voice to sound stronger than I felt. “Sorry, I just—I just woke up. Do you know where he is?”

He snorted. “Right now? No. But I saw him loading up one of the vans earlier. Him, the kid, the—shit, what’s her name? Magpie?” He spoke like he was living on cloud fucking nine, his drink sloshing over his hand before it was even noon. Did he sleep? “They were all packed and gone before sunrise. Saw ‘em drive off while I was on a piss break.”

My stomach dropped through the center of the Earth.

Matt had left.

Genuinely, fully, really left.

He wasn't down at the beach, he wasn't waiting in the main building.

He was gone.

Ryan watched me, pulling his sunglasses down and off his face with a look that was nothing but smug. "Guess it wasn't that serious, huh?"

I didn't answer. I couldn't, I wouldn't — I didn't trust what might come out of my mouth.

"Oh, come on," he laughed, taking a step toward me. "Don't look so heartbroken. You know he's a piece of shit, Si. You didn't think he'd actually stick around, did you?"

I clenched my teeth and yanked the handle of my suitcase back up, taking a deep breath and trying to convince myself that I didn't care. That I hadn't let myself believe, even for a minute, that it wasn't an act. That maybe the look in his eyes when he'd said you're beautiful wasn't something more than heat and convenience and a pretty dress.

"Guess you served your purpose," Ryan added with a shrug, popping his sunglasses back on and taking a sip of his drink. He raised it toward me as he took a step back, then another, and another. "Hope it was worth it."

I turned before he could shoot anything else my way, forcing my feet to move toward the main building.

I still had Matt's credit card. I fished it out of my bag along with my phone, scrolling through my emails until I found the reservation booking for my flights, biting back the burn that was threatening to rise behind my eyes. Four in the afternoon — just enough time for me to make it back to the Cancun airport if I left in the next thirty minutes.

Page 47

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:01 am

I didn't want to be here a second longer than I needed to be. My bag rattled as I headed for the curb.

Out by the driveway of private hire cars, a cluster of the women I'd seen in passing for years huddled in a half-circle, their orange dresses long gone and replaced instead with casual clothes, harsh whispers leaking from the group.

"...know, did you hear them last night?"

"Oh, my God, I couldn't sleep. Full-on screaming match."

"They were down at the beach, I think. Ryan was drunk off his ass."

"I swear, they won't last a month."

I didn't slow down. It wasn't my problem anymore. Maybe none of this ever was.

A driver opened the door to one of the sleek black SUV's I'd arrived in, dark sunglasses reflecting my face back at me, showing me just how much of a fucking wreck I was.

"You take card, right?" I asked.

He nodded. I jumped in.

I sat in the back seat, arms in my lap, eyes on the palm-lined road bleeding by outside the window. Tulum disappeared behind us, the gorgeous, sun-drenched, postcard

fantasy charade dissolving, and all I could feel was empty.

The driver didn't speak. The only sound was the soft classical music through the speakers and the thrum of tires over uneven pavement, and the occasional thud of the faux white orchid hanging from the rearview mirror hitting the glass.

I hadn't cried. Not yet at least. It was there, building, threatening me with every breath, but I was too angry to let it happen. Too tired, too stupid.

I said I wouldn't sleep with him again.

I had said it, out loud, with conviction — over and over, had thought it more times than I could count on my fingers and toes combined twice over. And still, somehow, I'd let myself fall into him, let his mouth end up on mine, let his body overwhelm me, let his fingers and his tongue and his cock in places I'd sworn I wouldn't, let him look at me like I was needy, not aware, not aware, not aware. He'd broken my heart. I'd wanted to believe that it was real because I wanted him.

And now he was gone, vanished, not a word, not a goodbye, not a text, not even a fucking thanks for being something warm to put my dick inscribed on a note.

Just gone.

My phone vibrated in my lap.

I swallowed, not wanting to turn it over, something that felt a lot like disgust crawling up my throat. Because I knew what it would be. It wouldn't be as sorry, something came up or thanks.

I glanced at the screen. My suspicions were correct.

StarStripe Banking: Deposit Received from M. Strathmore.

I wanted to throw up.

I tapped it, staring at my balance with rippling nausea.

\$100,242.67.

I should've felt relief. The practical part of me, the teacher with an empty savings account that had two hundred forty-two dollars before I'd flown to Tulum, the woman who used to split grocery bills with a man who forgot her birthday, should have cheered. But I didn't even want to celebrate.

I sat back in the leather seat, the app still open on my phone, and tried to level my breathing enough not to be sick.

Because now last night didn't just feel like a mistake I'd made or a connection he wanted to run from. It felt like a transaction.

He'd paid me. Not before, not when I could've at least pretended it was about the arrangement. No, he'd waited—waited until after he'd touched me like I was more than some pawn in a war with his brother, until after I'd let him in, until after I'd let myself believe him.

It felt like a slap in the face.

You make me feel something.

Page 48

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:01 am

You make me feel real. Human.

What a fucking joke.

I looked out the window again, my vision blurring, my hands clenching so tight that pain bloomed from where my nails dug into my palm.

Of course it meant nothing. He was a Strathmore, and they didn't love. They won.

Fuck him.

Fuck Ryan.

Fuck all of them, everyone that had been there this weekend, save for Zach.

But most of all, fuck me for letting him in, for believing anything that came out of his mouth.

Chapter 14

Matt

The view from the top floor of StrathOne's headquarters stretched across downtown Atlanta, all glass, metal, and money. On paper, from up here, I should've felt like a king.

In reality, though, I couldn't stop checking my goddamn phone.

I sat at the head of the boardroom table while half a dozen department heads updated me on projections, ad performance, and cargo margins. I heard every word, but none of it stuck, it just passed through me and disappeared out the other side.

Instead, my head was too focused on her.

Sienna.

The way she'd laughed in the candlelight at that restaurant. The way she'd spun Zach on the dance floor, not a care in the world for who was watching her, breathless and grinning. The way she'd looked up at me from the bed after the third time I'd undone her, her eyes heavy and her mouth parted, far too much hidden behind her irises. Worse—the way she'd sobbed my name into my neck in the dark, trusting me with every inch of her body like I'd earned it, like I deserved her.

I closed my eyes for a second, just long enough to hear her voice in my head again.

It's not an invitation to sleep with me, Matt.

I'd meant to prove her wrong. But not likethat.

"Matt?" someone said. Marketing—Emily, maybe.

I blinked, forcing myself back to the present. "Yeah. Continue."

She didn't look convinced. I wasn't sure I cared.

I left the meeting early, pushed the door open before the PowerPoint had even gotten to anything useful and ignored the shuffle of chairs and hushed voices behind me. I could feel a migraine building behind my eyes, a pulsing throb that had been there since the moment I'd gotten on my plane back in Tulum.

No. Since the moment I'd left her bed.

I'd told myself it was better this way, cleaner, leaving before it got messy, before it blurred into something I couldn't fix. But I'd fallen asleep with her in my arms.

I never did that. Not with anyone but Zach, not in years.

And instead of waking her gently or saying goodbye or letting her see me in even one honest moment outside of my cock being in her, I did what I'd trained myself to do so well — I'd left. Disappeared. Cold sheets, no note, nothing.

Normally, I could do that. I could leave and feel nothing. But this was too much, too long, and she was lingering. I'd known she would the moment I'd slipped out of the bed, second-guessed myself as I'd pulled away from her as gently as possible and heard her whimper of protest in her sleep, hated myself as I'd stood there and watched her until I was sure she wasn't going to wake up fully.

And now there was nothing. No response to the first text I'd sent a few days after, just a hesitant text asking if the money went through.

None to the second text I'd sent, following up.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:01 am

I'd tried calling, and it had gone straight to voicemail.

It shouldn't have mattered. She'd received it — I knew she had, just wanted a reason to reach out, but that had been the agreement. A clean break, neatly paid for.

But Zach had asked about her last night over grilled cheese and broccoli.

“Is Sienna coming over soon?”

I'd told him no. Not why, just no, and he'd managed to pick up on my tone enough to not bring it up again.

I unlocked my phone again, stared at the texts I'd sent, days old now. Still nothing.

Traffic on Marietta crawled so slowly that I wanted to slam my head against the steering wheel. I loosened my tie with one hand, cracked the window with the other, letting the warm air rush in and ground me with its humidity and heaviness.

I didn't think about it this time. I'd embarrassed myself enough already, I might as well add more fuel to the fire.

I grabbed my phone from the passenger seat and typed out a text.

Me:

Please just talk to me, Sienna.

My throat almost closed when I saw the three little dots pop up, dancing across the bottom of the screen like a threat.

Sienna:

leave me alone. you're just as bad as ryan.

I stared at the words, each one hitting like a slap.

She meant it. I could feel it in the punctuation and the lowercase carelessness, in the bitterness bleeding through every character. Low anger, high dismissal, high resignation. Like I was already filed away in the same drawer as my brother.

That stung far more than I'd expected.

I set my phone in my lap as I crawled forward approximately half a car's length, my jaw aching from how hard I was clenching my teeth. She thought I was like him.

She'd looked me in the eye, gave me her body, her trust, her fucking laughter, and still ended up believing the one person who'd destroyed her.

Because I'd made it easy to.

I slammed my palm into the steering wheel, huffing out a breath of anger. I hadn't told her anything, not really. Hadn't corrected the story. I'd let her believe what she wanted because I'd figured she'd walk away anyway, but she hadn't.

I had.

Fuck, I had.

My thumbs hovered over the screen as I picked it back up, forcing myself to breathe before I typed, drafting and deleting in my head before I sent something I regretted.

Me:

If you come over, I'll tell you everything. The full story. Ryan, the inheritance, all of it. Anything you want to know.

I stared at it, hoping to God she'd reply, before adding:

Me:

I'm heading home now. I can send a car. Just say yes, Sienna.

Page 50

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:01 am

I waited. Waited through the red light, then the next green, then the next red, my car moving at a snail's pace. My hands curled around the wheel as I finally broke free from the traffic, away from the chaos, toward home.

Ding.

Her name again. I glanced down, just briefly.

Sienna:

fine.

Chapter 15

Sienna

The ride to Matt's house was silent, smooth, and far too long for comfort. I sat in the back of the black car he'd sent, the windows tinted and leather soft, every inch of it expensive and impersonal, and tried to convince myself that this wasn't a mistake.

I wasn't going over to see him. I was going to hear him out.

Closure.

That was it. The truth about Ryan, the inheritance, the tangled history between two brothers who somehow managed to destroy everything in their goddamn path, including me. Curiosity was the only thing that drove me. Had to be.

But that wasn't the whole truth. I knew that.

I could have said no. I could've blocked his number, ignored the offer, slammed the door on whatever this had turned into, and lived my life one hundred thousand dollars richer. But I hadn't. I'd gotten in the car.

Not for closure, not entirely.

Because of him.

Because I still remembered the way he'd looked at me in the dark, like I was one of the only real things in his life. Because I still felt the warmth of his hands on my skin, still heard the softness in his voice when he'd asked me if I was okay. Because despite him giving me every reason not to, part of me still wanted to believe in him.

The gate opened without a sound after the driver punched in a code, the car gliding onto the property with ease. His house was all dark stone and glass, two stories, modern and clean, if it weren't for the toys on the front porch. Every other part of it was intimidating and imposing, like him.

I stepped out of the car with my pulse thudding hard, already rehearsing exit lines in my head in case this went sideways. But it would be fine. It had to be. Margot would be here, and Zach. We had buffers, reasons not to say something stupid, reasons not to scream at each other.

The door opened before I could knock.

Matt stood there, his hair styled but his clothes casual—just a t-shirt and jeans, barefoot—like he'd come home from work and immediately changed out of whatever he wore to the office. His stubble was longer, his eyes tired, his face unreadable.

My throat closed.

“Where’s—”

“They’re not home,” he said, his voice like gravel. He stepped to the side, motioning for me to come in. “Margot took him to the aquarium. He wanted to see the tiger sharks.”

I didn’t know why that hit me so hard. I blinked too quickly, looking away, my jaw steeling. I should’ve gotten back in the car. I should have turned and walked?—

“He’s been asking about you.”

I froze.

That wasn’t fair. He knew it wasn’t, knew he was hitting on a nerve, knew damn well without even asking that I’d grown a soft spot for Zach.

I swallowed down the lump forming in my throat and shouldered past him, stepping inside.

The house smelled like cedar, laundry, and him. Dark floors and slightly lighter walls, everything in its place as I stepped into the living room. Expensive leather furniture and trinkets up on the shelves beside the massive television, a gold airplane that looked like some kind of award next to an Atlanta Fire hockey stick and a framed stick figure drawing in crayon. Lived in, but not quite homey.

He came up beside me, gesturing toward the doorway to the kitchen on the other side of the living room, walking in front of me with an expectation that I would follow. And I did. Warily.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:01 am

“I told you I’d explain,” he said, opening the fridge and pulling out a bottle of white wine like this was some kind of date night. He plucked two glasses from a cabinet and set them down in front of me on the marble island, a piece of printer paper at one end with scattered crayons that Zach had abandoned.

“You’ve got five minutes,” I said, willing my voice to sound cold.

He didn’t flinch, didn’t even rush as he pulled a corkscrew from a drawer and worked at the top of the wine. “My parents were old money,” he said, the words calm and collected. “Like, Vanderbilt. No love, really, just legacy. I’m sure you’ve seen if you’ve googled my last name.”

I hadn’t. I never saw the need to when I was with Ryan, didn’t see the need to now.

“My mother thought affection was undignified, as she’d called it. My father only paid attention when you disappointed him,” he continued, and I blinked at him, not having fully expected that. “Ryan was the golden child. He was charming, loud, wild. They loved that. Thought he’d bring the Strathmore’s into today’s era, thought he’d turn into someone that would give us relevance again.”

He poured out a glass and pushed it across the counter to me, not quite meeting my eyes. “I’m fine,” I said.

“Have a fucking drink with me, Sienna.”

My eyes met his instantly. There was a bite there, irritation behind his words, and I stared at him, not quite sure whether I needed to go or if the anger simmering behind

his eyes was about me at all.

“Sorry,” he sighed after a moment, pouring himself a glass and downing nearly half of it like that was a completely fine societal norm. “This isn’t... It’s not easy for me to talk about my family. You don’t have to drink it if you don’t want to.”

My fingers closed hesitantly around the stem.

He took a deep breath and pushed his free hand through his hair, clutching at the strands briefly before letting go. “Ryan got everything. Every cent he asked for, every ounce of approval. They didn’t even try to hide it. I mean, for fucks sake, I was around for twelve years before they had him, and it was like I didn’t exist. Like didn’t have a son until they had him.”

Matt’s jaw worked as he leaned forward onto the kitchen island.

“I was just the spare. The one who worked. The one who tried to build things honestly. Ryan was the one who got rewarded for doing nothing but spending, for going out and getting drunk on the weekends, for wrecking Dad’s Aston Martin when he was fifteen and decided to go on a joy ride. I had nothing handed to me, which is saying a lot when you grow up in a family as wealthy as mine was.”

I took a hesitant sip of my wine. “Why didn’t you fight them on it?”

His brows furrowed as his gaze snapped to mine. “I did,” he huffed. “You think I didn’t fight? You think I didn’t argue, beg—beg, Sienna, for the seed money to start StrathOne? I had to sit there while they handed Ryan a condo in St. Lucia and a Porsche before he even had a job, and I had to pitch to them like I was a CEO looking for an investment from people I didn’t know.”

Matt started pacing, his glass clutched in his hand, his eyes everywhere but me — or

maybe nowhere.

“They didn’t believe in me,” he continued, taking another gulp of wine. “Not really, at least. They humored me, gave me a tenth of how much they’d easily spent on Ryan by the time I’d turned twenty-eight. And you know what? I made it work. I built the airline. I earned every dollar I have now. And you know what they said when I started to turn a profit?

He stopped, his gaze cutting across to me, a fire behind his eyes.

“They told me not to be smug about it. Told me not to tell Ryan because he was still ‘finding his path.’ Told me to keep it all to myself, not to tell family.”

My eyes widened for a split second. “Christ.”

He went silent for a moment, his tongue raking over his teeth, his breathing loud enough to hear. He set his glass down on the counter as he stopped, watching me carefully. “They left everything to him,” he said quietly. “That part of what he told you was true. But they left me as a trustee. Nothing in my name except a responsibility.”

I blinked at him in confusion. They left nothing to Matt?

“I can show you the will if you don’t believe me, if it matters,” he huffed. “But I never stole his inheritance. Everything was in his name, that wouldn’t—I couldn’t do that if I wanted to. But I did cut him off.”

I sucked in a breath. “So, you did?—”

“I didn’t do it lightly,” he explained, his fingers rapping against the countertop. “Fuck, I didn’t want to do it at all. He was supposed to have to go through me when

he wanted to remove money, at least until he was fifty. Those were the rules on the account. Our parents were smart enough not to give him full access. But they failed to consider how sneaky Ryan could be.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that a few months after everything was in place, he snuck into my fucking house and found the log in details for everything.”

My throat closed. “Hewhat?”

“He started making withdrawals without needing my approval, scrubbed the notifications. Was blowing the money on anything and everything, Sienna. Cars, vacations, cruises, throwing massive fucking parties in our parents’ estate. All the while, occasionally asking me to release ten grand here or there to keep up the act. I wasn’t looking at the balance, I wasn’t paying attention until it was almost too late—until I authorized a seventy grand request so he could put a down payment on a house, and it came back with transaction declined.”

I blinked at him in horror. I didn’t know how much money the Strathmore’s had when they left it all, but it was certainly in the millions. “How had he...?”

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:01 am

He shook his head, his lips going thin. “I don’t know. I don’t know half the things he was spending it on. All I know is that almost all of it was gone,” he rasped, pouring himself another glass. “I could have called the police for it, could have put him away from fraud, maybe I should have—but I couldn’t. I didn’t want to make it worse, not when he was already furious.”

“Hewas furious?”

“I told him I couldn’t approve the transaction because there wasn’t enough in the account, told him I knew what he’d been doing, and he didn’t apologize. Just tried to convince me to sell the house, to sell the liquid assets instead, to keep funding him. I told him no, and he lost his mind.”

I took a deep breath, and then another, trying to make sense of it all. Ryan hadn’t seemed wealthy when I dated him. He seemed somewhat well off, would take me to nice dinners, and had bought us that trip to the Amalfi coast, but that was as far as it ever went. He never drove a fancy car or had a nice house, he’d lived in an apartment. “That’s not—I hate him, but that’s not the Ryan I knew.”

“He sold what he’d accumulated,” he said simply. “About four years ago. I told him I wouldn’t give him money until he got rid of the things he didn’t need, and even then, what I’ve given him has come out of my accounts, not from the trust. I had to change all the passwords, had to talk to the bank and set up a PIN that they’d ask me for if I called to discuss anything so they wouldn’t accidentally think Ryan was me if he got through.”

He huffed a dry, irritated laugh.

“Used Zach’s birthday. Ryan never cared enough to know it.”

A breath punched out of me at that. Somehow, I wasn’t surprised, not after what he’d said when I was leaving the villa. The kid. Magpie. Ryan didn’t seem interested in Matt’s life at all. “So even after all of that, you still give him money,” I said, taking a sip of my wine. “You paid for his wedding.”

Matt’s jaw tightened. “Because I promised my parents before they died,” he muttered. “And because it was one of the things the trust was meant to cover.”

I nodded, more to myself than anything, the pieces clicking into place. “And Ryan knew that. He used it to his advantage.”

“Yes, he used it,” Matt said, irritation bleeding into his tone. “Guilt tripped me over it. Used it to get what he wanted. Used you, too, the last couple of years. ‘I need to take my girlfriend out to dinner.’ Or, ‘I need to pay the bills, so she doesn’t think I’m broke.’ It pissed me off. He was more than capable of getting a job, but he used you to make me feel bad about it?—”

“Don’t.” The word came out harsher than I’d anticipated. “Don’t do that. Don’t act like you cared about me back then. You didn’t even know me. We’d never met. And you were more than happy to use me, too.”

He flinched, but he said nothing.

The room—the massive kitchen, the massive house—felt too small, too hot. My skin flushed, and I didn’t know if it was my anger simmering beneath the surface or my shame or both, rubbing together like flint and iron. “He told me you ruined his life,” I swallowed. “That you turned your parents against him before they died, convinced them to cut him out of everything, and made yourself look like a victim.”

Matt laughed, then, bitter, and flat like a stale beer. “Of course he did,” he scoffed. “Because God forbid Ryan be responsible for his own mess. He ran his inheritance into the ground, Sienna. Almost all of it.”

I swallowed down another sip of wine, and then another, wishing it was stronger, wishing it burned. “Why didn’t you tell me all of this from the start? Why let me hang in limbo thinking there was a chance Ryan was better?”

Matt’s expression darkened as he stared straight at me. “Because you’d already decided I was worse. I wanted to prove you otherwise without completely throwing him under the bus. He’s still my fucking brother, even if I can’t stand him.”

My jaw clenched tight. He wasn’t wrong— Ryan had painted such a clear picture for me of a cruel, cold older brother with a bank account for a heart. “You were doing a great job of making me believe you were better than him,” I said slowly, heart pounding in my chest. “And then you threw it all away. For what? For what?”

Matt looked down at his glass, completely silent.

“Jesus fucking Christ, Matthew,” I snapped, setting my glass down on the counter a little too hard, a little too antagonistic.

He stilled.

Completely and utterly stilled.

A haunting quiet crept over us, thick and angry.

His jaw twitched first. His posture shifted, his gaze locked on the counter.

“You don’t get to call me that,” he rasped, his voice low, gravelly.

I blinked at him. “What?”

“That name. Matthew. You don’t get to use it. That’s not what you call me.” His tone was sharp enough to cut diamonds. “That’s his name for me. My parents’ name for me. I let it slide with Ryan because it’s always been like that, but not from you.”

Shit. “I didn’t mean—fuck, Matt, I didn’t even realize?—”

He shook his head, knocking back the entirety of his glass of wine. “It’s fine,” he said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “Just don’t.”

My stomach twisted. I hadn’t meant to be cruel, and from the look of horror that was lingering beneath his irritated exterior, I’d done just that. “No, I’m—I’m sorry,” I insisted. “I wasn’t trying to throw it in your face. Genuinely. I didn’t even notice I’d said?—”

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:01 am

“I know,” he clipped. “That’s the worst part.”

That shut me up.

He let out a breath, slow, tired, and exasperated. “I didn’t want to use you. Not like he did. Not like that. I just—” He cut himself off, his throat working, the words either lost or like he was weighing up whether he wanted to say them at all. “I know you’re upset that I left.”

“No shit,” I breathed.

“I told you I don’t let people in. I don’t do relationships.” He swallowed. “If I’d stayed, I would’ve told you more. Would’ve told you everything. Not just about Ryan, or the inheritance, or how much of aleechhe is, but the parts I don’t say out loud. Like how I stopped believing in family when my parents handed him everything with a smile and told me to be the bigger man, like my success without help was a reward for being forgotten. Like how I’m doing everything in my goddamn power to make sure Zach never feels like that in his life. Like how I can’t fucking breathe when I think about him ever having to look at someone and feel like he’s not enough.”

The silence felt too loud.

He hadn’t moved. Neither had I, but it felt like everything had shifted. My chest tightened, cracking. I didn’t know how to respond to that, didn’t know how to handle it, and part of me wanted to accept that he just wasn’t capable of anything past what we’d done, but the other part had seen the way he’d looked at me, the way he’d held me, and knew that he was. And it still hurt. He’d still chosen to hurt me

instead of being honest, still made me feel used and stupid.

“You made me feel like an idiot,” I said, my voice far smaller than I wanted it to sound.

He hesitated. “I know. I know. I fucked that up.”

“You think?”

“I panicked.”

I laughed, then, the sound punching out of me ugly and sharp. “Panicked?” I croaked. “You could have stayed, you could have woken me up and told me that was it and it wasn’t going further, you could have apologized. Or was I that terrible in bed that you had to run?”

“Don’t,” he bit out, taking a step toward me. “Don’t do that.”

“What, make jokes before I cry? Sorry, forgot I was supposed to be the stable one right now,” I snapped, my eyes burning, my chest aching. “Fuck.”

“I freaked out,” he insisted, his voice rising, another step taken toward me. “I don’t—I don’t sleep in the same bed as anyone. It’s a line I draw. That partition came back up on the flight, you know that. Not since I made that call for myself, since?—”

“Since you became too emotionally unavailable to function like a human being?”

He flinched. “I sleep alone,” he said, his jaw clenching. “I always sleep alone. Except when Zach climbs in after a nightmare or because he’s lonely. That’s it. He’s the only exception. And then you...”

He stopped, breathing hard, pushing a hand into his hair.

“You were still there.” His voice was quieter, a little broken. “Still fucking there when I opened my eyes. I didn’t mean to fall asleep beside you, I didn’t mean to feel?—”

He looked at me like he wasn’t sure if he should finish that sentence or if I already knew what he meant without me saying it.

“I didn’t know what to do. So yeah, Sienna, I fucked it. I left.”

My throat closed. “You could’ve said something.”

“I know.”

“You could’ve woken me up.”

“I know.”

“You let me feel like a fucking one-night stand when you know me now. You let me feel like I got paid for sex?—”

“That’s not what it was,” he insisted.

“Then what the fuck was it?” The words came out loud, angry, broken as the dam started to leak. “Because from where I’m standing, it feels like I was just a warm body in a pretty dress you could use to piss off your brother and get your dick wet! It feels like I’m insane, Matt?—”

“You really think that’s all you were to me?” he asked, his face twisting like I’d slapped him.

“Idon’t knowwhat I was to you! That’s the whole fucking point!” My voice broke, the tears hitting, hot, fast, and furious. I tried to blink them back, wipe them away, but it was too late. “I let myself believe for one goddamn night that maybe there was something there. That maybe it wasn’t fake. You said—Yousaid. Fuck.”

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:01 am

“Sienna.”

“No,” I croaked, shaking my head, taking a step back. “I’m so goddamn stupid. I let myself feel something for someone who disappeared the second things got real. This is... This is worse, Matt. I can’t do this.”

I turned, my heart hammering in my chest, pulse loud in my ears, hands shaking as I moved toward the door. I needed to get out. I needed air, needed to go home, needed to be as far away from him as possible.

I didn’t get far.

His hand closed around my wrist, not painful or rough but firm, and in a single breath, he spun me back toward him.

I didn’t have a second to react before his mouth crashed into mine.

Hard. Angry. Desperate, like he needed it to breathe.

I didn’t move — just froze, stunned, tears still hot on my face, but his hands cupped my cheeks, holding me to him, warm and stupidly regretful and everything I didn’t want to want from him.

Then he pulled back. Just barely, just an inch between us, his breathing ragged, hovering over my lips like he didn’t dare take more until I gave him permission.

I looked up at him. My chest heaved, my throat closed — and fuck, his eyes burned

into mine with a thousand apologies I didn't want to accept.

But something in me snapped.

My fingers knotted in the front of his shirt, and I yanked, pulling him back down to me. He groaned against my mouth like it was splitting him open, but I didn't care.

My back hit the wall a second later, his hands cradling my jaw like he didn't know how to be gentle right now but couldn't help trying. I pushed mine into his hair, pulling him closer, deeper, his breath hard against my lips, his body pressing into mine like he was trying to anchor himself here.

His mouth moved against mine with need, no control, no restraint. And mine answered with fury, with anger, with an ache he'd put there in the two weeks I'd tried to bury him.

I kissed him like I hated him.

I kissed him like I missed him.

I wasn't sure when his hands had moved to my waist or how we'd moved from anger to something rougher, darker, hotter. But he kissed me like he'd been starving, like he'd been holding back every second he'd known me, and it was all snapping at once, and I met him right there in the goddamn wreckage.

His fingers dug in like he needed proof I was still here and real and didn't hate him enough to stop. His knee nudged between my thighs, pinning me in place.

I was already shaking, already wet, already too far gone to talk sense into myself and walk out the door. And he kissed me like there were a thousand unsaid things caught in his throat.

“Upstairs,” he rasped, his voice broken, destroyed. “Now.”

He bent, hands firm on the back of my thighs, and lifted me in one motion like I weighed nothing, like he needed me locked around him. Quick and uneven, he carried me up the stairs, the soft thud of each step lost between our breaths.

I wasn't thinking. Couldn't if I wanted to. I hated him, I wanted him, and I didn't know where one ended and the other began.

At the top of the stairs, he paused just long enough to press me against the wall again, kissing me like he couldn't even bear the space between rooms. My head dropped back with a soft thud against the drywall when his lips found my neck, my jaw, my collarbone, desperate and unrestrained.

“Was it worth it?” I breathed, my head spinning.

He didn't stop. But the tension shifted, walls half-erected around me.

“You got what you wanted,” I whispered. “The deal. The show, the revenge. And you ended up hurting me in the process.”

He exhaled heavy, his forehead coming up to rest against mine, his throat almost wheezing from how hard he breathed.

“Was it worth it?” I asked again.

“I would change what I did if I could,” he said, his voice broken. “I'm sorry. I should have said it before.”

I went still.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:01 am

“I shouldn’t have left like that. I didn’t know how to stay. And I know that doesn’t make it right.”

I didn’t forgive him, not yet, but when his lips met mine again, I didn’t push him away.

This wasn’t clarity. This wasn’t a fix. It was a fire, sparking and burning and destructive, and I shouldn’t have let it burn, but God, I didn’t know what else to do.

Chapter 16

Matt

Sienna’s thighs locked tight around me when my fingers dug into the taut fabric of her jeans over her ass. Her breath was hot on my ear, her spine arching into me like she was daring me to move, to get her where I’d intended to go — the bedroom. That was the plan. I just couldn’t seem to stop kissing her long enough to execute it.

Her fingers curled in my shirt as I nipped at the soft spot beneath her ear, her nails raking over cotton, and when she whimpered, “Matt,” left her lips, I could feel it wrap around my entire body and drag me into hell.

She did things to me. Things I couldn’t even begin to understand. Things that made me question my thought processes, my ideals, my choices.

My head dropped to her collarbone, my fingers tightening their hold on her. Pull it together.

This wasn't the plan. None of this was. I'd never factored her into anything, never thought I'd want her in my house, around my kid?—

Shit.

I reluctantly let go of her with one hand and slipped my phone from my back pocket, swiping it unlocked hastily.

“What are you?—”

“Checking if Zach's still at the aquarium,” I grunted, flicking over to my tracking app and checking his little dot from the AirTag I'd attached to his backpack. Sienna's head turned toward me, locks of brunette hair falling against my cheek, her breath heating the inches between our mouths.

A choked little sound left her mouth as she watched me zoom in on Zach's dot, still at the aquarium, still with the tiger sharks. “You weren't supposed to be like this,” she murmured. “It's not fair.”

My brows furrowed. “What do you mean?”

She huffed, the puff of hair fanning across my cheeks. “You were easier to hate when I didn't know you had too many redeeming qualities.”

I chuckled—a genuine one—and shot a text to Margot that just said, ‘take Zach out to dinner please’ before I turned my head enough to kiss her again. “Am I meant to apologize for checking on my kid?” I murmured against her mouth, shifting my body to take her weight again as I finally pulled her from the wall.

“No,” she whispered. “Just... stop making it so damn hard to protect myself.”

I hated that, hated that she felt the need to, but I knew damn well I was only kidding myself to think I could do this without inevitably hurting her.

Her legs tightened around me, her fingers sliding into my hair. She wasn't gentle, and she certainly wasn't hesitant, but she was needy, and God, so was I. She pressed her lips to mine, kissing me like she was daring me to change my mind right now and take her back downstairs, like she expected me to pull back at any second and tell her this was just sex.

Fuck.

It wasn't. But it needed to be.

I carried her down the hall, her weight easy in my arms, her pulse hammering where my thumb pressed against the side of her throat. Every step sent her hips rocking against mine, every ragged breath she let out feeling like another crack in the wall I'd built between wanting and keeping.

I should've dropped her onto the bed and taken what I needed. I should've been rough, efficient, controlled. I should've proven to myself that this was just physical. But the moment her back hit the mattress, my hands moved on their own, skimming the curve of her waist, framing her face like she was something delicate, and I didn't stand a goddamn chance.

Her lips parted, blown pupils watching me, waiting.

I didn't give her words. I couldn't. I didn't trust myself to.

Instead, I dragged my mouth down her neck, slow, savoring the way her breath hitched and the way her hands fisted in the sheets. Her skin tasted like salt and something floral, that same scent from the flight enveloping me, and God, I just

wanted to ruin her.

But then her fingers found the hem of my shirt, shoving it up, her nails scraping over my stomach, and my control wavered.

It's just sex, I told myself, even as I caught her wrists and pinned them beside her head. Even as I kissed her like I was starving, like she was the only goddamn thing in the world I'd ever needed. It has to be just sex.

Page 56

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:01 am

Her hips arched up, pressing against me, and a broken sound slipped past her lips, half in frustration and half in surrender. “Matt.”

It was just my name, just my goddamn name, but the way she whimpered it like she was desperate, like she’d missed me, unraveled something inside of me.

I let go of her wrists, my hands sliding down, gripping her hips hard enough to leave marks.

“You’re killing me,” I rasped against her mouth.

She laughed, short and breathless, before pushing herself up that fraction of an inch and kissing me like the world was ending.

There was no thinking after that.

Her jeans hit the floor. Mine followed. My hands moved over her, taking off her shirt, memorizing the dip of her waist, the shiver of her stomach when my fingers skimmed the edge of her underwear. I wanted to take my time, wanted to drag this out until neither of us could breathe right, but when her nails dug into my back, needy, demanding, and urgent, I lost the fight.

I lost every fight.

The moment I sank into her, she clenched around me like she’d been waiting for it, like we were finally where we were supposed to be. And I let myself fucking believe it.

Her thighs tightened around me, her breath hot against my jaw, her body yielding in a way that had far too much to do with trust I hadn't earned.

I didn't deserve this.

I caught her mouth again, swallowing her gasps, masking my own. "You're—fuck, sweetheart, you're everything," I croaked, my nails digging in hard enough to leave little half-moon indents.

I could lie to myself all I wanted. I could call this just sex, just need, just lust. But the way my hands gentled when they threaded through her hair, the way my lips lingered on the flutter of her pulse, none of that was casual.

I knew that.

She knew that.

And when she came apart beneath me, shaking, her fingers clutching at me like she was afraid I'd disappear, I let it happen.

Even though I knew I shouldn't.

Even though I knew it was reckless.

Even though she'd hate me in a few minutes.

Because she wasn't just under my skin anymore, she was in my goddamn bones, and I had next to no resilience to keep myself from wanting her enough to fuck up everything.

Chapter 17

Sienna

When our breathing finally slowed from frantic panting, when every aftershock had run its course, neither of us spoke.

The room was quiet in a way that didn't feel gentle. It didn't come with comfort or peace or the steadying realization that this was okay or right or fixed. It was more like an aftershock, like the eerie stillness of the eye of a hurricane.

His chest rose and fell beneath my cheek, one arm still curled loosely around my back. I wanted to let myself enjoy it, wanted to linger in the sound of his heartbeat thrumming away or the sight of his chest hair stuck down from sweat and friction.

But I couldn't stop focusing on how still he'd gone beneath me. Too still. Not the calm, deep still of sleep, but worse.

I willed myself to breathe fully as I sat up, slowly pulling the sheets up to cover my chest. The space between my thighs ached satisfyingly, but my chest was clamping down, filling with questions, filling with dread.

He didn't stop me from moving. But he didn't stay still for long either.

Before I could question it, he was leaning off the side of the bed, grabbing his discarded t-shirt from the floor like we were done here, like whatever this was had clearly ended. I wrapped the sheet tighter around myself, tucking it under my arms, and stared at him, heart thudding against my ribs.

"Matt," I rasped.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:01 am

He didn't answer. That didn't stop me.

"I don't know what that was." My tone was soft, gentle, the same one I used when I was trying to talk seriously with the pre-teens in my class who were flunking. "But it didn't feel casual."

He froze, one arm pushed through the arm hole.

I saw it, then — the way his lips parted, the way his body locked. "Matt?" I tried again, willing my voice to stay steady.

He blinked once, twice, before his jaw clenched and he sat up fully, pulling his shirt over his head like it gave him a wall to hide behind.

"I'm sorry," he said carefully.

No. No, no, no.

When he spoke again, it was as if every word had been selected with the express purpose of trying not to upset someone when that was inevitable. "I shouldn't have let it get this far," he continued. "That's on me."

My stomach dropped straight through the floor. "What the fuck does that mean?"

"It means I led you on," he said, his Adam's apple working, his gaze far off in the distance. "I'm not... Fuck, Sienna, I'm not looking for anything. I should have been clearer about that."

I stared at him, blinking like that would somehow make him make sense. “You’re not looking for anything?”

“I told you I don’t do relationships,” he said, the words a little tighter now. “I told you why.”

“When you were apologizing for panicking and running away. And then—that.” I gestured to the sheets beneath me, to my bare body wrapped in them.

He looked at me then, his gaze cold, controlled, locked down. I almost wished he’d stayed looking at the fucking wall.

“No,” I scoffed, pushing off the bed, dragging the sheet with me like armor as I stood.

“No, you don’t get to do that, Matt. You don’t get to act like that meant nothing. You don’t get to just?—”

“I never said it meant nothing,” he said. “What I meant was that it wasn’t supposed to mean anything.”

“Oh, fantastic,” I snapped. “Glad we’re figuring out the semantics here.”

“I’m being honest.”

“No.” My volume climbed, my anger biting through, because fuck him, this wasn’t fair. “You’re being cruel. You’re trying to walk it back again because you’re scared of what that was.”

He pushed off the mattress, calm, even, grabbing his jeans from the floor and stepping into them. “I never made you any promises.”

I physically recoiled, the breath leaving me all at once, half angry and half absolutely

blown away by how insane this was. “Wow,” I whispered.

He winced, just barely, but I noticed it. He didn’t even try to take it back.

I shook my head, a bitter, angry laugh crawling up my throat. “I must be the dumbest woman alive. I mean, really, sleeping with my ex’s brother? Again? After telling myself that I wouldn’t, that I needed to keep my distance so I wouldn’t end up falling and then fucking falling anyway?—”

“Don’t do that,” he said, the words punching out of him. “Don’t be self-deprecating. Don’t make it about?—”

“What?” I interrupted, my stomach twisting, my anger rising. “About me being stupid enough to believe that you actually cared about me? That maybe, just maybe, this wasn’t some fucked up game to you?”

“It wasn’t a game!” He shot back, the boom of his voice cutting through the air. “Don’t put words in my mouth.”

“Then tell me what it was, Matt!”

He stared at me, his chest rising and falling too quick, too wild.

The silence stretched too long.

I dug my fingers into the sheet, my heart beating so hard it made my sternum ache. “You know,” I said quietly, “I told myself I wouldn’t fall for this again. I told myself that I was just coming here to hear you out, that I could handle you, that I could handle this. That if I just didn’t believe it was real, it couldn’t hurt me.”

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:01 am

He opened his mouth to speak, but I kept going.

“But then you opened up. You apologized. You kissed me like you fucking meant it, Matt—youfuckedme like you meant it. You fucked me like you couldn’t imagine walking away. And I let myself think, just for a goddamn minute, that maybe I wasn’t being stupid, that maybe you weren’t going to run this time.”

His nostrils flared, his breathing evening out as he regained control. “I’m not running. I’m telling you what this is.”

I wanted to scream. I wanted torun. My eyes stung, my chest ached like a ton of bricks had fallen on it and caved it in, and I was left splattered on the floor surrounded by my own damn viscera.

He raked a hand through his hair, watching me with an expression that either saidI want to kill you,orI can’t let you leave, and I couldn’t figure out which one it was. I wasn’t even sure if I wanted to know. “I never wanted to hurt you.”

I turned my back to him, not trusting myself to stare without tears forming, and grabbed for my clothes, hastily pulling them on one by one, my bra two hooks looser than I wanted and my shirt hanging wrong in a way I didn’t give myself time to try to fix. I thanked whatever God existed that I’d worn my easiestshoes to get in and out of before I headed straight for the bedroom door and wrenched it open.

I could still feel his hands on my skin, his mouth on mine, his breath on my ear when he’d whispered that I was everything.

And all I wanted, still, was for him to take it back. To tell me he didn't mean it.

But he didn't.

He didn't stop me, didn't move, didn't say a word.

I managed to make it halfway down the stairs before the front door flew open.

"Sienna!"

Zach's voice cracked through the hallway like sunlight breaking through storm clouds, shrill and happy and pure in a way I wasn't sure how to be right now. His tiny sneakers slammed into the floor as he barreled through the living room, backpack bouncing, and the second I stepped off the stairs, he launched himself into me.

I caught him mid-jump, my breath catching as I hugged him tight against my chest, his arms wrapping around my neck. "You're here!" he chirped, feet kicking on either side of my hips in excitement.

The sound of footsteps on the stairs behind me only made this so much worse.

God. God fucking dammit.

My throat burned as I kissed the top of his head. "Hey, tiger."

He pulled back just enough to look at me, eyes wide, beaming, a little tiger shark pin stuck into his shirt. "Guess what? I got a gold star today at school. That's worth, like, ten green stars."

"You did?" I asked, faking enthusiasm as best as I could. "What for?"

“‘Cause I knew all the months in order! Even got March and May in the right spots.”

“Look at you!” I grinned, my eyes going wide. “I get those ones mixed up all the time.”

He giggled like it was the funniest thing in the world. “Ms. Broderick said I should get a prize, and I told her that I wanted it to be going swimming and then I thought about you and how you taught me to float on my back like a big kid and oh, I got new dinosaur sheets and they glow in the dark.”

I laughed, a genuine one, despite his father’s stare burning a hole in my back. “Glow in the dark dinos? Are you kidding me? Those sound amazing.”

“They are!” he said, wriggling enough that I knew I should probably put him down. He immediately grabbed my hand. “C’mon, you gotta see ‘em. There’s triceratops and everything!”

He pulled me back onto the stairs, and I turned, watching as Matt took the last few steps down in complete silence.

I went to see the dinosaurs anyway.

My room felt suffocating now.

I’d left as quickly as I could manage without completely disappointing Zach, oohing and ahing when he showed me all the little things he was proud of in his room. But Matt hadn’t said a word to me as I’d gone to the door, his gaze locked on me, his throat working like there was something there he wanted to let out but just couldn’t manage it.

So, I'd left his credit card on the table by the door and walked out.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:01 am

But here, in the dark, my face buried in the pillow and the covers pulled too tight around me like they could somehow hold the pieces of me together, I let all of it sink in.

And I hated myself.

For falling again. For being so simple to crack. For believing so easily, that maybe I wasn't just a temporary comfort or an easy tool for him to play against Ryan.

I should have known better. I did know better, and I still let it happen, still let him in, still let him touch me like it meant something to both of us, to him.

A sob slipped out before I could stop it. Then another. And another.

I cried until my throat stung, until my chest ached, until I'd gone well past the gasping, shuddered breaths and the snot and the feeling like I was dying, until I had nothing left to give and my head pounded, until I could barely remember what it felt like to believe that things could go right.

But even through the tears, a stupid, angering thought remained, so latched on what I couldn't scrub it off if I tried. What if it was real?

What if that first look in the first-class lounge, that first spark, the broken crystal and the banter and the way he'd spoken to me like I was interesting—what if that was some kind of insane, idiotic, love-at-first-sight nonsense?

Instant. Illogical. All-consuming, sticking around for far too long when and where it

shouldn't.

If that's what this was, if that's what I'd fallen into, then this was so much worse. Worse than Ryan, worse than Lauren, worse than any betrayal that had come before. Because I'd let this happen to myself.

I hadn't turned it off when I should have.

I'd let myself believe in him. I'd let myself believe I could have him.

I knew better now. But it didn't make it hurt any less.

Chapter 18

Sienna

Two months later...

I tried to forget him. Christ, I tried.

I deleted his number. I archived every text, tossed the dresses I'd worn the three nights in Tulum into the back of my closet like they might destroy me if I saw them. He reached out — three times exactly. A text, and two calls, leaving one voicemail that wasn't even a message, just silence before a click.

It didn't matter. I didn't respond.

I knew what would happen if I did, knew I'd fall right back into his gravity, knew I'd be too goddamn stupid to pull myself out of it.

So instead, I just kept going. Kept living my life, finished out the last couple of weeks

of the school year like a zombie, threw myself into prep for next year's students the second the bell rang on the last day. I tried. I tried to ignore the aching in my chest and the twisting in my gut anytime I thought about him.

Except the twisting got worse.

It wasn't as bad at first. I blamed him, blamed the humid Atlanta heat getting to me, blamed the end-of-the-school-year stress, the long days, and too little sleep. But then it wasn't just twisting. It morphed, turning into nausea and bone-deep fatigue, stress that had built so high I would snap at the smallest things and then cry over it two minutes later because I felt too overwhelmed to handle it. I barely made it into summer break, and when I flaked on Jules for the third time in two weeks, she showed up at my door unannounced, with coffee, and only slightly annoyed.

"You're clearly not okay," she'd said, sitting sideways on the couch beside me, her iced latte sweating in her grasp. "You look like you've been hit by a bus."

I'd glared at her as I sucked my iced americano through the soggy paper straw. "Wow. Thanks."

"I'm serious, Si," she'd murmured, her deeply tanned, manicured hand resting gently on my knee. I'd winced at the nickname — she didn't use it often, but Ryan had used it constantly. God, even Ryan hurt to think about nowadays. "You've been off for a month. Maybe longer. I've barely seen you, and the last time we went out, you cried when you saw a golden retriever."

"He looked like the one I had when I was a kid," I'd retorted, steeling my jaw.

She didn't push it again that day. She'd stayed with me for a few hours, watched a couple of episodes of some terrible reality show that she swore was the best thing on television, and made me promise to go with her to get classroom supplies for the new

school year a few days later.

But when I'd opened the door for her that morning, my face sheet white and my stomach uncooperative, my brain fuzzy and my head pounding from throwing up three times already that morning, she didn't give me a choice.

"Urgent care," she said, grabbing my purse from the kitchen counter and pushing me out the door, an unused cooking pot in one hand.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:01 am

I grumbled, protested, and called her overdramatic. But deep down, I was scared enough to go.

I'd spent weeks, almost months now, trying to convince myself that I was okay and just dealing with either the stupidest heartbreak of my life or a really shitty stomach bug. But it was becoming more and more unmanageable.

Jules had let me go in alone, opting to sit in the car and wait for me instead. The nurse I spoke to was nice enough — she took my vitals, asked the usual questions, furrowed her brows when I told her how long the symptoms had been going on, jotted it down in her notes with a nod. She took my blood pressure, my pulse, listened to my heart, checked my weight, and glanced at me when I cringed at the number that was definitely lower than it had been months ago.

“Let's run a blood panel,” she said calmly, wheeling over to me with a cart full of needles and tubes. “Just to rule some things out. Okay?”

I rolled my lips between my teeth, taking a deep, shuddering breath. “Okay.”

I didn't ask what “things” meant. I wasn't entirely sure I wanted to know.

When I got out, I had a missed call and about ten texts from Jules profusely apologizing for needing to run, but that someone had called out of her summer job and she got called in. She'd sent me the money for a ride with at least twenty hearts in the reference line and a, “Please call me when you know what's going on.”

So, I stepped out into the stupidly hot Georgian heat with a band-aid on my inner

elbow and my stomach in a nervous knot, only half as nauseous as I was before but just as panicked, and walked.

I wasn't sure where I wanted to go, wasn't sure if I should just book an Uber, but I didn't want to be at home. I felt too antsy to sit still, but too queasy to go far.

I ended up at a little coffee shop a few blocks away after spending approximately ninety seconds in the bookstore next to it before deciding that the candle burning on the counter was so intensely sickly smelling that I couldn't be in there a second longer.

The AC was too cold and the sound of steaming milk and banging metal too loud inside the cafe, so I took an iced coffee to go and sat at one of the little tables outside, watching the street like somehow it would solve my problems and give me solutions to questions I wasn't sure I wanted answered.

A few hours. That's what they'd said.

So, I left my phone face-up on the table, waiting, not quite panicking, but nervous.

In my head, I was trying to give myself the least damaging possibilities — iron deficiency, stomach ulcer, mono. But the worse ideas crept in instead, something autoimmune, something unpronounceable and incurable, something permanent. I tried to tell myself not to spiral, but my chest was tight, my skin too warm, and the longer my phone screen was off and without a notification, the more it felt like the floor was crumbling beneath my feet.

By the time I'd managed to take a sip, the ice in my coffee was almost fully melted, people had come and gone, the world moving around me despite as I sat stationary, locked, stuck, checking my phone every two seconds to see if anything new had popped up.

Nothing.

My list of already-read emails taunted me every time.

I willed myself to look at anything but my phone. Stared at the massive oak beside the cafe, stared at the stones on the sidewalk in front of me, stared at the pigeon with a foot missing standing on the table two over from mine.

Stared at the man across the street.

The man with mostly silver hair and a phone held to his ear, walking with his back to me, a boy with dark curls walking beside him with a dinosaur backpack and his hand clutched in his father's.

For a second, I convinced myself that I was losing my mind, now, too — that it wasn't just the nausea, the exhaustion, or the way I felt like death, but now I could add hallucinations to the list.

But the world wasn't that kind.

Zach's head turned in my direction, and he stopped in his tracks, nearly losing his balance when Matt failed to notice in time and almost pulled him along with him. A smile so wide it cracked my fucking chest in two broke across Zach's face, and then he was being hauled up, one arm around his waist as Matt easily lifted him onto his side without so much as a question.

I didn't know what to do. Didn't know if I should do anything at all.

But Zach was pulling on his dad's shirt, trying to get his attention, and I didn't know if I was going to be sick again or if my heart had actually just given out on me out of pity.

Matt paused. Looked down at Zach, furrowed his brow, mid-step and mid-sentence on the phone, the kind of stillness that had nothing to do with hesitation and just screamed what do you mean?

But he turned.

He looked straight at me.

Straight across the street, straight through traffic, straight through two months of silence and nights neither of us had spoken of again.

I couldn't breathe.

Page 61

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:01 am

Zach was saying something, too far for me to hear it, but Matt just held my gaze, his mouth parted, and his arm clutched around Zach, his lips unmoving despite the phone in his hand.

Adingechoed out from my table. I nearly jumped.

The sound cut through everything — the tension, the confusion, the question of whether I was really hallucinating him this vividly or if the world just hated me, and my eyes dropped to the screen of my phone.

One new email.

Lab Results Available, read the subject line.

I fumbled as I unlocked it, briefly forgetting my passcode when it didn't recognize my face, and I opened the email, my throat closing, the air in my lungs feeling too thin.

I skimmed, trying to make sense of medical jargon I didn't understand, vitamin levels slightly lower than they should be with a note next to it that said, Struggling to keep food down.

But lower than that, three letters in a row that I didn't know the meaning of stood out in bold with multiple notes beside it: HCG.

Note: Patient is positive for pregnancy. Approx 8-10 weeks. Inform and refer on.

It didn't register at first.

I just stared at it like the word might morph into something else if I blinked hard enough, something more manageable, something I could laugh about, something that didn't have anything to do with the man I might have just hallucinated.

But it didn't change. It didn't fucking change.

Positive for pregnancy.

I was pregnant.

I was pregnant.

My breath caught as I finally managed to suck in air. The noise around me faded into TV static and my rapid pulse. My hands shook, badly, barely holding the phone. Everything, everything, seemed to tilt, the world shifting on its axis.

I looked up, half expecting to find him still standing there, still staring at me, but the sidewalk across the street was empty.

Matt and Zach were gone, if they'd ever been there at all.

I sat there, frozen, overheated in a cracked plastic chair outside a run-down cafe, clutching my phone that had just detonated the entire future I'd already thought I'd gotten a handle on the moment Matt's money had hit my account two months ago.

Pregnant.

Fucking pregnant.

Chapter 19

Matt

I knew it was her before my eyes could focus properly in the blinding sun.

The shape of her, the waves of deep brown hair falling around her cheeks, the grey sweatpants and white tank top like she didn't give a damn who was looking at her in the middle of the afternoon — but that wasn't in the way that had drawn me to her in the first place. When she'd worn that stupid yellow sundress, it had been an act of defiance.

But the way she sat there, her lips parted, her shoulders rising and falling too quickly, the messy hair and the equivalent of pajamas on her body, she looked like she'd surrendered.

She was still her, still a fucking magnet, still glowing, but it was like she was some kind of malfunctioning neon sign. It wasn't right.

I didn't even hear what my accountant was saying. My brain stuttered, like someone had hit me square in the face, Zach's insistent pulling at my shirt and pointing and whining of "Sienna!" falling on deaf ears.

Because our eyes had locked, and I couldn't see or hear or feel anything but the choices I'd made that night. The one I hadn't been able to stop replaying in my head since she'd walked out of my house.

She looked pale, with dark circles under her eyes that I could see all the way across the street, her nails biting into the wood of the table she sat at.

Alone.

Still beautiful. Still enough in her eyes to make every part of me want to cross the street and wrench her into my arms.

But by the time my brain seemed to want to work again, by the time I'd found even an ounce of control over my limbs to want to do exactly that, she broke her gaze away, looking down at her phone as if it were far more interesting.

At the dinner table that night, Zach wouldn't shut up about her. Not that he'd really stopped in the last two months — but today, after seeing her, it was a whole new level. One that I wasn't coping with well.

“Yeah, tiger, that was her,” I said, answering the same question for the fifth time now in the last six hours. Zach hummed his response at me around a mouth full of dinosaur-shaped noodles drenched in artificial cheese sauce. One of these days, I was going to have to insist that he didn't need to have at least one meal of dinosaur-shaped foods a day.

He swung his feet under the table, chewing gleefully as if the question wasn't eating away at me every time he asked it. “I thought that maybe it was her but then you didn't wanna look so I thought maybe it wasn't her but then I saw her hair and I knew it had to be her.”

I poked a piece of broccoli with my fork.

“She didn't wave,” he said, his voice a little quieter. “She just kind of stared.”

My throat worked around nothing, the piece of broccoli still sitting on my fork, my chin resting on my fist. “I know.”

“I never got to swim with her,” he added.

I’d never wanted to jump off a fucking cliff more in my life.

“Can you ask her to come over?”

My grip tightened so hard on my fork that it scraped loudly on the plate. I fought to regain control of myself, taking a deep breath in and out, so I could answer my kid, my perfect kid, with as much patience as I could physically muster. “She’s really busy, Zach.”

He looked at me for a second, gears turning behind his eyes, and I would’ve given anything to know what was going through his head. But he didn’t question it, just kept eating and swinging his feet like the world was made of safe truths and simple answers, and it only made it worse.

A minute passed in silence, and I finally swallowed down that goddamn piece of broccoli, before he spoke again.

“Is Sienna somebody’s mom?”

My hand froze halfway to my mouth, loaded with another stem of broccoli. “What?”

Zach met my gaze again, all wide-eyed and curious. “A mom. Is she one? Like to another kid?”

I blinked at him. “No,” I said, careful not to let the word sound too tight. “She’s not.”

He nodded to himself, his brows furrowing a little. “Okay.”

He paused. I took the bite, watching him like a hawk.

“I wish she could be mine.”

The air in my lungs punched out of me all at once, something wild and broken cracking in my chest. He wasn’t just hitting on the anger I had for myself over the Sienna situation — this was years of knowing that at some point, he was going to put pieces together. Years of knowing he’d ask properly at some point. Years of knowing I couldn’t give him what he would inevitably want, and now he wanted it, and he wanted it to beher.

He shoveled another spoonful of macaroni into his mouth, his gaze locked on it as he moved the little dinosaurs around in his bowl, utterly unaware of the landmine he’d just stepped on.

I pushed up from my seat as calmly as I could muster, doing everything in my goddamn power not to make it look like I was angry or upset or effected in the slightest, and took the few steps from the kitchen table to the fridge. I pulled open the door, staring into it, not looking for anything in particular but just needing to feel the rush of cool air on my face, needing the door in the way to cover Zach’s view of my face while I tried to calm myself down from that one fucking sentence.

I’d spent the better part of my adult life avoidingfamily.I knew what one looked like when it rotted from the inside, knew what it meant when love came with price tags or bloodlines or being born in the wrong order or expectations that choked you until you either became exactly what they wanted or dissolved trying.

And now my kid was casually mentioning his want for one. For something more. For someone else as well as me and Margot.

I didn't know what to say to that.

It took me too long to school my face back into softness, but I sat with him again regardless, my fingers digging into my thigh beneath the table.

"Zach," I said carefully, saying my words twice in my head before I let them out. "Sienna's really great. But being someone's mom isn't just about being fun or nice or teaching you how to float on your back. It's a lot bigger than that."

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:01 am

He blinked at me, the words not really registering. “Okay. Do I have a mom?”

I took another breath. This wasn’t the first time he’d ever asked, but it was the first time he was old enough to understand an answer. “You did,” I swallowed. “But she’s not around. And that’s not because of you, okay?”

He nodded slowly, almost like he got it, but I could tell he didn’t the second his mouth opened again. “She didn’t like me?”

“No, that’s not it.” The words came fast, quick to squash that idea. “She just didn’t know how to be a mom. That’s not your fault, bud. It had nothing to do with you as a person.”

He thought about it for a second, his macaroni making an awful squelching noise as his spoon mashed around in it. “I don’t get it.”

I swallowed. “Your mom didn’t know how to be a mom,” I explained. “Some people, moms, and dads, aren’t ready to be parents. Some aren’t... I don’t know, built for it.” Mine weren’t.

Zach blinked at me, his head tilting to the side, a stray curl falling in front of his eyes. “Are you built for it?”

I almost laughed. Almost. “I’m trying, tiger,” I said, the words cracking just a hair, my throat too tight. “Every day.”

Somehow, by the grace of whatever God existed, he seemed to accept that and went

back to his food.

I tried to shake the weight bearing down on my chest, but his line of questioning kept replaying in my head alongside the image of her sitting alone at that fucking table, looking far worse than I'd ever seen her. I couldn't stop hearing the quiet, innocent ache in Zach's voice when he spoke about her, when he said he wanted her.

I couldn't stop wondering what it meant that I did, too. Even after every fuck up I'd made. Even now.

I glanced at the clock on my bedside table, watching the eleven turn into a twelve. Zach had been asleep for hours, the house dead quiet — the kind of silence that normally brought me peace and the knowledge that I'd at least get six good hours of sleep in before I inevitably woke up to a five-year-old in my face or the sun in my eyes. But tonight, it felt suffocating.

I'd read the same page of a quarterly report six times. I'd poured myself a drink I didn't touch. I'd stared out the window at the clouds rolling in and blocking the moon and the stars, thunder low in the distance, a storm rumbling north from Florida.

But none of it brought me closer to sleep. None of it brought me closer to peace.

Because all I could think about was her.

Her face at the cafe. The exhaustion written all over her. The way she'd looked a second from breaking, shaken by something, enough to have caused her to look like that. Not just me.

Something was wrong. Something had to be wrong. I'd seen her angry, seen her done

up to the nines, seen her makeup-less and casual, seen her freshly fucked and dazed.

I'd seen her shaken by Ryan.

Whatever this was, was worse.

And maybe it was me. Maybe what I'd done to her had fucking destroyed her over the last two months. But it didn't feel right, it didn't feel like that was it.

And I couldn't help myself as I reached for my phone, desperate, unable to find the dignity in myself to care if she hated me for reaching out again. I still cared about her. I still wanted her.

Fuck, I wanted her more than I could comprehend. If anything, even if I couldn't fix whatever was wrong, I just wanted to apologize. Just wanted to make this right.

Me: I need to talk to you.

I stared at the screen. Watched the message change to delivered.

Minutes ticked by. Nothing.

I sent another.

Me: I made a mistake. Please.

Still nothing.

I swore under my breath and hit the call button before I could second-guess it, lifting my phone to my ear, my heart thundering in my chest and matching with the same outside my window.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:01 am

It rang once. Twice. Three times.

The ringing stopped. There was nothing — no voicemail box, no “hello?,” no swearing at me for calling at this hour or calling at all.

But then I heard it. The smallest breath.

It hitched. Trembled. It wasn't steady, wasn't anywhere close, and then it broke, a sob tearing through the phone, small, sharp, and raw, and my heart dropped into my stomach.

“Sienna?” I rasped, sitting forward in bed, my pulse spiking.

She didn't answer. Another sob came down the phone.

My breathing went shaky. I gripped the sheets and pulled them off me, swinging my legs out of the bed. “Sweetheart, talk to me. What's going on? Are you okay?”

She sniffed, trying to catch her breath. “I—Matt, I?—”

I pushed up from the bed, already moving, already grabbing, and pulling on the easiest clothes I could find — a t-shirt and a pair of joggers. “Are you safe? Are you at home?”

“Yes,” she croaked. “I just—I don't know what to do?—”

“I'm coming.” I didn't care how it sounded, how it looked, how it came across. Just

wrenched open the door and padded as quietly down the hall as I could before hitting the stairs. “Text me your address.”

“But—”

“Text it. Now.”

“O-okay.”

I snagged my keys from the kitchen island and passed through the back hall to Margot’s room, tucking my phone between my ear and shoulder, and knocked hard enough on her door to wake the dead.

She cracked it open, her eyes half open, her greyed hair braided back, her nightgown on. “What in God’s good name?—”

“I need to go,” I said quickly, seriously, breathlessly. “Zach’s asleep. I just need you on in case he wakes up.”

She looked at me, her eyes widening the moment she took in my face. “Okay—yeah, go, I’ve got him,” she said quickly, already moving, already stepping out into the hall.

My phone buzzed against my ear, Sienna’s broken breaths still echoing down the line.

“That your address?” I asked, trying to keep my voice steady as I moved back through the house, stopping for a split second to pull on the easiest shoes I could find.

“Yeah,” she said, her voice cracking clean down the middle.

“I’ll be there soon.”

The rain had started by the time I was halfway there, fat drops hammering the windshield between my wiper blades, the streets slick and reflective and blurry beneath my high beams. I ran a red light. I didn’t care. The image of her crying, alone, into the phone wouldn’t leave me alone.

I pulled up in front of a small, dimly lit townhouse, the porch light on and the garage door closed, every window dark. She sat on the front steps, just barely out of the reach of the rain, in just a hoodie that was too big for her and no shoes, her arms wrapped around her knees like she was trying to hold herself together by force.

She pushed up the moment I threw the car in park and opened my door.

I got out fast, not caring if I got wet, not caring about anything but her, and slammed the door behind me. “Sienna?—”

“I didn’t know how to tell you,” she croaked, taking one step down, and then another, stepping into the rain like it wasn’t even happening. Her hands shook, her hair slicked down and clung to her cheeks the more the rain hit it, and her eyes—fuck, puffy, red-rimmed, and glassy—looked like they hadn’t closed properly in weeks. She gripped the cuffs of her sleeves.

I wanted to grab her. I wanted to pull her into me, wanted to shield her from the rain and from whatever had caused this, but I didn’t know how to do that when she very likely hated me, when I didn’t deserve that privilege. So instead, I stood a few feet back, feeling my clothing gluing itself to me, feeling the chill of the rain as the wind picked up. “Tell me what?” I asked gently, trying to show her with just my face, just my being here, that she could say whatever it was.

She stared at me, her jaw working like she was trying to find the words, rain, or tears

or both sliding down her cheeks.

Then she said it.

Page 65

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:01 am

Soft. Scared. Unmistakable.

“I’m pregnant.”

Everything seemed to stop.

The rain, the cold, the ache in my chest — for a split, splintering second as the sky filled with a flash of light and her face illuminated, broken and raw, I didn’t feel any of the bad things that had weighed me down for months. Years, maybe.

Just her words.

I’m pregnant.

The ground folded under me. My heart stopped beating.

I’m pregnant.

I opened my mouth, finding words, trying to make something happen, but it just kept pinging around in my mind and making me lose sense.

I’m pregnant.

She stood there, blinking fast, her lower lip trembling violently, her arms wrapping back around herself like she could shield herself from a potential fallout.

I’m pregnant.

“It’s yours,” she added, her voice cracking. “If that wasn’t obvious.”

The fucking world shattered beneath me.

Chapter 20

Sienna

The rain was cold. At least, colder than I expected. It had been hot earlier, muggy in that way that’s suffocating until the storm breaks, but now the wind sliced through my hoodie without a hint of warmth to it and the soaked fabric clung to my skin uncomfortably. I couldn’t feel the tips of my fingers, could barely feel the way my heart was hammering against my ribs.

Matt just stared at me.

He didn’t blink, didn’t move, didn’t breathe.

I wrapped my arms tighter around myself, my voice cracking as I tried to fill the chasm forming between us with something, anything, before the silence could swallow me whole. “T-this isn’t some kind of trap,” I said, the words coming out so quickly I had to focus not to stumble over them. “I’m not asking you—Christ, I know what you said. I remember. You didn’t want anything. I’m not trying to—fuck.”

I took a shuddering breath, my jaw simultaneously too loose and too tight. But still, he said nothing.

“I’m not expecting anything from you,” I croaked, my mouth going dry. I couldn’t figure out what that fucking stare meant — whether he was shocked or horrified or seconds from getting back into his car or throwing himself off the Bank of America Plaza. All I could do was spiral. All I could do was beg that he didn’t think I was

trying to trick him or cage him into ridiculously high child support for the next eighteen years. “You don’t have to do anything. I...I just—I had to tell you. It wouldn’t have been fair if I didn’t, and I didn’t know how, and then you called?—”

A choked sob worked its way out of my throat, cutting me off, and I tried to catch my breath.

“I don’t know how this happened. I took every fucking pill.” My voice cracked. “But I’m keeping it. The baby. And I’m not asking for anything, Matt, I swear to God, I just needed you to know?—”

“Come here.”

His voice cut through the rain, cut through the thunder, cut through everything, soft but sharp, commanding. I froze, my breathing too heavy, my eyes burning.

Matt took a step forward and wrapped his hand around my elbow, warm and firm, and guided me backward as another flash of lightning cut through the sky. Back, back, back, his eyes locked on me, until the wind chill ceased and the constant thumping of thick raindrops on my head disappeared, both of us under the small amount of cover the recessed, closed garage door gave us.

The cold still bit through everything.

I leaned back against the metal door, my arms crossed tight across my chest, soaked to the bone, willing him to say something more, something human, something that gave me any hint of what he was feeling.

He took a deep breath in through his nostrils and ran a hand through his hair, smoothing back the soaked strands to unstick them from his face. His gaze broke from me, and then he was moving, stepping in and out of the rain, his soaked shirt

clinging to his chest, pacing a slow and tight line in front of me like he had to move, or he'd implode.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:01 am

He nodded to himself. Or me. I wasn't sure.

Like he'd finally caught up.

"I'll take care of it," he said, voice sturdy, unwavering.

My stomach dropped. "What—? What does that mean?"

"I'll cover everything." His gaze met mine as he moved, back and forth, back, and forth. "Medical costs. Furniture. Supplies. If you want a better apartment, I'll pay the rent. Hell, I'll buy it outright. Whatever you need. Just tell me."

I went still. He kept going.

It only got worse. "You should consider taking the year off if you can, or you'll be going on maternity leave right before the next school year ends. And I'll get you a proper OB, best one in Atlanta, or fuck it, I'll find the best one in the country. I'll make sure you've got whatever support you need. Prenatal care, a driver, anything."

I stared at him, my eyes widening. "Jesus fucking Christ," I breathed.

"I'm not going to let you do this alone," he said, as if it were the most generous thing anyone had ever offered me. "I'll make sure you're safe. Both—both of you."

I stared at him, blinking hard to try to negate the pain behind my eyes, trying to process the tangle of emotions piling in my throat.

He'd called me tonight. He'd said he needed to talk, that he'd made a mistake. But none of this sounded like a man who realized he missed me, if that's what it was — it sounded like a man signing a check to placate a problem.

“Was that what you were going to tell me when you called me?” I asked, my lower lip quivering despite my desperate grasp on myself. “That you'd changed your mind and wanted to co-sign a lease with me for a life you don't want?”

He winced. “That's not?—”

“That's what you're doing, Matt.”

“I'm trying to help. I'm trying—God dammit, Sienna.” He tipped his head back, his Adam's apple working as he looked skyward for a moment, then dropped his gaze to mine. “I'm processing this. I'm trying to work out the best solution here.”

“No. You're trying to fix a problem.” I swallowed. “Except I'm not a problem. We're not a problem.”

Measured breaths slowly raised and lowered his chest. His jaw steeled, his hands turned to fists at his sides, silence creeping between us again in the hazy aftermath.

“I don't want anything from you, Matt,” I said again, low, and even and honest. “Not your money. Not a new apartment. Not a driver.”

His eyes locked with mine in a flash. “Don't be proud.”

“I'm not,” I bit back. “I'm protecting myself. I don't trust you. Not after Tulum, not after that night at your place, not after the way you shut me down—fuck, not after everything.”

Something flickered in his expression, something I couldn't quite place.

My throat ached from how hard it clamped shut, my words coming out breathy and broken. "You made me feel like it was real," I choked. "Then you took it all back before I could even catch my breath."

"I didn't take it back, Sienna, I?—"

"You did." My chest cracked on the words. "You did, and you're trying to do it now, but you're dressing it up with dollar signs and pragmatic problem-solving."

The tremor in my hands came back, but it wasn't from the cold now. It was the adrenaline coursing through me, tearing me to shreds, standing here in front of this man who had somehow thoroughly wrecked me far more than his brother ever had with far less.

And Matt, for all his power, arrogance, certainty, and control, stood there like a man who didn't know how to build something that wasn't transactional.

I didn't want to be a fucking transaction. Not again. Not for him.

"I want to be there for this," he said quietly. "All of it. If you'll let me. I didn't get to with Zach."

I blinked, caught off guard. "What do you mean? Zach?—"

He cut me off with a shake of his head, his feet finally slowing to a stop in front of me. "It's complicated."

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:01 am

I didn't push. But I wasn't sure if I was supposed to be moved by that or furious that he thought this was the moment to bring it up.

"I'm sorry," he said carefully. "I'm not trying to fuck this up. I'm just..." He shook his head, droplets flinging. "Can I come in?"

"No." The words were fast, decisive.

He exhaled like he'd expected it. But he didn't back away.

Another flash of lightning came through, and I forced myself to focus on it, to count in Mississippi's until the roll of thunder boomed out. Fifteen. Three miles out. Further, I was sure, than the last time.

But the storm in my head raged on.

I shifted under the porch light, trying to take a steadying breath. "I don't know what I'm doing," I said, but the words were barely more than a whisper.

His face softened, the hard lines and fine, minuscule wrinkles smoothing. "You're scared."

I pressed the butt of my palms against my eyes, willing them to stop leaking, willing my body to calm down. "Fucking terrified," I choked.

He didn't try to touch me, didn't reach out, but he took a step toward me, his voice dropping. "Then let me prove I'm not walking away, sweetheart," he said softly.

“What does that even look like to you?” I asked, rubbing my eyes once before pulling my hands away, looking up at him with nothing but the raw emotion coursing through me. I didn’t have the energy to try to hide it anymore. “Don’t tell me you’re going to drop to one knee like the olden days so we can do it right?—”

“No,” he said, blinking a little quickly like he was caught off guard by it. “I’m not ready for that.”

At least he was honest.

“I’m not going to pretend like I’ve figured this out, either. Yes, I have Zach, but that doesn’t mean I’m an expert at this. I’ve stumbled through it like everyone else. But I don’t want to miss this part. Not this time.”

A choked laugh punched out of me, but there wasn’t a hint of humor in it. “You say that like you have any idea how to stay.”

His jaw twitched. “I stayed for Zach.”

“Zach is a part of you?—”

“So are you, now,” he said, his voice calm but the words charged. “Both of you.”

I didn’t trust him. That was the overarching problem here, maybe the only one that mattered, but the horrifying part of all of this was that I wanted to trust him still, wanted to believe him, even just a little.

So, I gave him something small. Not a promise, not a chance to step in and solidify a place in this, but something.

“I have an ultrasound next week,” I breathed, barely louder than the rain. “Thursday.

Two-thirty. Central Women's." It wasn't exactly an offer. I wasn't directly asking.

His gaze widened a little. "I'll be there."

The words were strong, confident, like he meant every single one. But I just couldn't bring myself to believe him fully.

Chapter 21

Sienna

One week later...

The cafe was too loud.

There wasn't anything in particular that stood out above the rest — just the ambient buzz of life that seemed to crawl under my skin and amplify. The hiss of milk steaming, the loud knocking every time they pulled an espresso, chairs scraping across tile, laughter from a couple behind me that cut through everything in sharp bursts.

Even Jules's breathing was getting to me.

She stirred her coffee across the table from me, her body just slightly rigid, her worry there in plain sight but partially hidden. Her dark curls were pulled back, her tanned skin almost glittering in the warm sunlight leaking in through the window beside her. But her eyes, always too perceptive, didn't miss a damn thing as I rubbed my wrists raw from nerves.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:01 am

“You’re panicking,” she said softly.

I nodded, but it felt stiff, like I wasn’t fully in control of my body. My stomach had been in a knot since waking up, and although I’d been able to get more sleep in the last week than I had in the first two months, my morning sickness hadn’t budged at all — and I wasn’t sure if the bile working its way up my throat was from that or how terrified I was that Matt wouldn’t show up.

Part of me wished I’d never invited him so I wouldn’t have to sit here and wonder.

“He said he’d come.” I wasn’t sure if I was trying to settle myself or her.

“And if he?—”

“I know.” I looked down at my hands, the way my left wrist had gone red from wringing it. “You’ll come with me.”

“Damn right I will,” she scoffed. “I’ll be, like, twenty feet from the door. If they call you back and he’s not there, call me.”

I nodded, trying to give her a smile, but it didn’t go far. We’d made the backup plan two days ago, rehearsed it this morning like it was a fire drill when she’d driven me over here. Jules hadn’t said anything outright to me about Matt, but the way she watched me when she thought I wasn’t looking made me assume she was bracing for him to disappoint me.

And so was I.

But it didn't stop the quiet part of me from hoping he wouldn't. He was good at that — making me believe there was a good side to him even in the worst moments. It wasn't fair.

I flipped my phone over again, glancing at the time, then back to my coffee that I'd barely touched. It was probably cold by now.

"You know," she said gently, leaning a little harder onto her elbows, "you don't have to act like you don't care what he does today."

I didn't look up. "I'm not."

"You're terrified."

I shot her a glare.

"Si."

I sighed and leaned back, trying to ignore the way my stomach only twisted more. "I just don't want to get my hopes up."

She gave me a soft, knowing smile. "How's that going for you?"

"Shut up."

Her nails tapped lightly on the table, her gaze locked with mine. "I know you," she said. "You get this look when you're lying to yourself. Kind of like a kicked puppy and a scrappy raccoon had a baby."

I huffed out a weak chuckle. "I can't tell if that's a compliment?—"

“You love him.”

I blinked at her, caught entirely off guard. My gaze dropped to the half-eaten croissant on her plate and the condensation dripping down her cup, my throat closing in. I didn't even realize how tightly I was holding my wrist until I felt the throbbing in my hand.

I hated that she wasn't wrong. Hated it.

I'd known it, somewhere inside, weeks ago. Knew there couldn't have been another reason I was that broken up about what happened between us. But it didn't make it any easier to admit out loud, let alone to myself in my bedroom.

“Yeah,” I whispered.

She nodded once. She wasn't smug, wasn't surprised, just... nodded. Like she'd known it, too.

“I don't... I don't know if he's capable of loving me back,” I said. My voice cracked halfway through. “I don't know if he's even capable of letting himself try.”

“That's not your job to fix, Si.”

“No, but it's going to be my job to cope with it if he skips town.”

I stood beside the door of the OB/GYN, leaning against the concrete wall and forcing myself to breathe. He would show. I had to tell myself that. Thinking that he wouldn't only made it twenty times worse, but avoiding thinking about it made me want to sob from just how hard I had to actively put it out of my head.

I scanned the parking lot, eyes snagging on Jules's car where she sat in the cool air conditioning, then roaming again. I knew what I was looking for — Matt's dark blue Maserati with the red interior he'd shown up in at my apartment last week.

But I didn't see it anywhere.

I swallowed down the nausea that was trying to force its way up my throat. There were still five minutes until my appointment—five minutes left for him to prove to me that he wasn't running from this.

But I needed to sign in, needed to tell them I was here for my appointment, so I pushed down any residual hope to try to help myself and walked through the front door expecting fully to do this alone.

Hazel eyes locked with mine the second the air conditioning blasted me in the face.

The air left my lungs in a heartbeat.

Matt stood off to the side of the receptionist in a dark grey business suit, his mostly grey hair styled back out of his face, his jawline clean-shaven. His hands were tucked

in the pockets of his slacks like he wasn't quite sure what to do with them, and his eyes looked a little sunken, a little dark, like he hadn't been sleeping well.

He straightened, clearing his throat like he wanted to say something, but nothing came out.

"Hi," I said instead, the word almost squeaked from how badly my throat was closing in.

"Hey."

I felt awkward, unsure in the formality of it, not used to holding back the bullshit I wanted to say to him —shocked you actually came, are you expecting a medal?— but the relief that was washing over me, wave after wave, kept me from opening my mouth again.

"Let's get you signed in," he said softly, taking a single step toward me to usher me to the counter. I wrote my name down and the current time beside it, then slid it across the counter to the woman waiting with a paid-for smile across her cheeks.

We sat down across from each other to wait, his gaze holding mine, his jaw tight. He must've come from work based on his clothes, and I couldn't help but wonder what he'd told his employees, if he'd said anything at all or just walked out. If he'd mentioned me.

"I didn't see your car." The words came out smaller than I'd intended, and I cringed, knowing damn well what he'd pick up from that.

His expression softened just a hair. "I took the Range Rover today. Dropped Zach off at school before work."

Christ, I felt like an idiot.

“Sienna?”

I nearly jumped at the sound of my name, but the nurse at the doorway smiled softly at me. Matt offered me a hand up and I ignored it, pushing up with a stifled grunt, my head spinning just a little.

The hallway was quiet, the fluorescent lights above making me squint as they hummed faintly. The nurse led us into a room that smelled overly sterile, the exam bed coated with a thin paper that crinkled under me as I climbed up onto it and lay back. Matt lingered awkwardly beside me, hands in his pockets again, his gaze flicking about the room like he wasn’t sure if he was allowed to be part of this.

And maybe I wasn’t entirely sure either. But it was strange seeing him no longer be the ever-confident version of himself.

The doctor came in with a clipboard and a kind smile, introduced herself as Dr. Hayworth, and explained how this would work in a calm, practiced voice like she’d done this a million times for women who had never gone through this before. I tried to breathe through the anxiety building in my chest — the room felt both too warm and too cold, my thin cotton shirt sticking slightly to my back as I adjusted myself on the bed at her request.

I pulled the fabric up when she asked, baring my stomach, and winced when I realized this was the first time Matt was actually seeing it like this.

A little swollen. Not much, just a small bump, but it was there. Small, but undeniable, normally hidden beneath a loose shirt or, like when Matt had come, a hoodie. But seeing it here in the clinical lighting made something twist inside of me.

Real. It was real now.

Dr. Hayworth spread the jelly over my skin, and I flinched a little from the chill, her soft “sorry, it’ll warm up” lost to the loud pulse in my ears. The wand moved across the curve of my stomach, and the screen flickered on, confusing images flashing up that I didn’t understand how to read.

Warm, lightly calloused fingers found mine.

It wasn’t a dramatic gesture or some sweeping apology. Just his fingers, hesitant but firm, curling gently around mine and threading through the gaps, warm and steady and something to hold.

I looked up at him, expecting a reassuring glance or a tight-lipped smile, but his eyes were glued to the monitor, his mouth parted, jaw tight, like he was just as anxious as I was to know that whoever was growing inside of me was healthy.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:01 am

I didn't let go of his hand. Just squeezed, just once. It wasn't forgiveness, not even close, but it was something — a thread between us in the silence.

"There we go," Dr. Hayworth murmured, shifting the wand slightly. Her brows furrowed a little as thumping heartbeats echoed out, mine and the baby's, I assumed. "Strong heartbeats."

I exhaled a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding. Alive. Of course, I knew the baby was alive, but it was another thing entirely seeing and hearing direct proof. My eyes were locked on the screen, the swirling black and white and gray, and I knew somewhere in that grainy image was the little life I was growing.

The doctor angled the wand again, her lips forming a thin line as her eyes flicked back and forth across the screen, her fingers tapping the buttons. The room filled with the echoing beats —one, two, three, one, two, three, one, two, three.

Matt leaned over me, blinking quickly. "Is that?—"

"Hold on," Dr. Hayworth said, cutting him off. "I'm just making sure."

I blinked up at Matt, my hand tightening around his, hearing one heartbeat on the monitor kick up wildly—my own. "What's going on?"

She made another small adjustment with the probe, just half an inch, adjusting the angle, and paused. "All right," she said softly. "One's tucked a little behind the other, it's making the image a little off. But I should be able to get clear visuals on both separately."

I blinked.

Both?

Both.

“Oh, my God,” I croaked.

“Both?” Matt whispered, eyes flicking from the screen to me.

Dr. Hayworth turned to us, her expression softening with something that felt like kindness and caution laced together. “Congratulations. You’re having twins.”

I stared at her like she’d just grown a second head.

My brain couldn’t catch up. The words rattled around in it, pinging off the sides and echoing into the ether, my breath hanging.

Twins.

She pointed to the monitor, tracing over the hazy shapes. “Here’s one,” she said, highlighting the small curve of a head. She moved the wand drastically, over to the other side of my stomach, angling it back. “And here’s the other. They look a little funny right now, but that’s just because you’re, what, two and a half months along? They look a bit like bean sprouts at this stage. A little too early to tell the sex...”

She kept talking, but I couldn’t hear her.

Two. There were two.

I couldn’t move, couldn’t blink, couldn’t think. Matt stared at the screen wide-eyed,

shock and awe warring in his expression, and I saw it really hit him in real time, saw the ripple of emotion, the way his breath caught, and his eyes glassed over.

His gaze dropped to mine. His hand squeezed impossibly tight.

Chapter 22

Matt

I couldn't sit still.

My foot tapped restless patterns into the floorboard of my Range Rover. Every red light, every turn, every second felt too slow, like the world was dragging its feet around me and all I wanted was to sprint—not away, but head-on. My chest was full, but not with panic, not even with nerves.

It was fucking hope. The real kind, the kind I hadn't let myself feel in years for anything other than Zach.

I was going to be a dad again. From the start this time. From the first breaths they took, with her.

"I've already started a list." I glanced to my right. Sienna was curled in the passenger seat after agreeing to let me drive her home instead of having her friend do it. I wanted the time with her, wanted to figure this out together. "Not names," I clarified. "But—you know, prep schools. There's one in Buckhead that starts at sixth grade. Zach's on the waitlist already. It feeds right into Yale and Princeton like clockwork, it's got a full IB curriculum, a gifted program, everything."

She didn't answer.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:01 am

“We could look at Montessori for the first few years of school, too. Zach loves it already. We could get them on the waitlist for that, too, if you want. Whatever they need, we’ll make it happen.”

She stared out the window, her feet perched on the dash, her knees up toward her chest.

I didn’t know what to make of that. But I couldn’t stop myself from talking now that the words were coming. “We should start thinking about nurseries, too,” I said, realizing that I’d just put myself in an awkward situation because neither of us knew what we were doing yet — whether she was going to stay living in her apartment or move in with me, whether we were co-parenting or trying to do it together. “We can—shit, we can handle it however you want to. I could bring in contractors to your apartment if you have a spare room, get the whole nursery built and fix up the whole place, add a clean-air system, noise-dampening walls, anything that could help you sleep, or them sleep, whatever’s harder.”

I swallowed, bracing myself for what I was offering.

“Or I could have it all set up at mine, if you’d rather,” I rasped. “Or have a guesthouse built for you and them, or I can add an extension to the ground floor?—”

“Matt.”

The single word stopped me cold. It wasn’t loud, wasn’t angry, just tired.

I hesitated. “Yeah?”

“You don’t get to do this.”

My heart thudded hard against my ribs. Please don’t mean that like I think you do. “Do what?”

Her head turned, his gaze finally meeting mine for a fraction of a second as I tried to keep my attention on both her and the road. They weren’t cold, not really, but there was a dullness behind them that made my stomach knot. “Throw money at this. Throw plans. You don’t get to decide we’re awe just because you showed up one time. This isn’t some grand Matt Strathmore project, this is two—fuck—three people, me included.”

I lost the air from my lungs. “That’s not—Christ, Sienna, that’s not what I’m doing?—”

“Isn’t it?” she asked. “Because it kind of feels like you’re trying to build something out of plywood and blueprints and hoping that I won’t notice the foundation’s already cracked and crumbled and fucking rotting.”

I steeled my jaw. “That’s not fair. You know it isn’t. I’m trying.”

“No,” she snapped, lowering her feet from the dash, turning in her seat toward me. “What’s not fair is you showing up now, acting like everything’s fine because you decided to be involved. Like that erases the fact that you fucking left, apologized, and then left again.”

I gripped the wheel tighter, my knuckles going white. “I came back. Both times, Sienna. And I haven’t run from this?—”

“Sure, but what happens next time you panic, Matt?”

I flinched.

“What happens when it’s the middle of the night and both of them are crying and I have a mental, fucking breakdown because the man who is supposed to be their father ran away again because he thought we looked too much like a family for his peace of mind?—”

“You don’t get to say that,” I cut in, my voice rising, something akin to anger but far more broken building alongside it. “You don’t get to decide how I’ll feel down the line.”

“But you don’t get it, Matt!” she snapped, her eyes shimmering as she stared me down, my gaze flicking to her every chance I could find. “I don’t have the ability to walk away from this if that want were to hit me. But you do. And you’ve walked before, twice. So, I have to sit here with some kind of blind faith that you won’t just up and leave and fucking break me again when I know damn well you wouldn’t be sitting next to me if it weren’t for them?—”

My chest felt like it had cracked open. “Sienna?—”

“Do you honestly believe that showing up to one appointment and promising prep schools and Montessori when you know I’m a teacher myself is enough? Am I just supposed to forget the last, what, four-ish months of knowing you? Am I supposed to wholeheartedly believe you won’t bolt the second it gets real again just because you say that’s the case?”

My jaw clenched. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“You say that now,” she laughed, but the sound was broken, jagged, hollow, her breath catching halfway through. “But you made me think that in Tulum. And again, in your house when you fucked me like I mattered and then basically shoved me out

of your bed two seconds after catching your breath.”

“I never shoved you?—”

“You left. Whether that’s what you want to think happened or not, you pushed me away the moment you felt something. And don’t try to tell me you didn’t feel something, Matt, because I swear to God?—”

“I did. I never tried to say that I didn’t.”

“Then tell me what the hell happens when one of them gets sick and I can’t cope,” she croaked. “Tell me what happens when I’m up at three in the morning, crying, and I don’t even know why. Tell me what fucking happens when I beg you to tell me what we are, and you don’t have answer.”

Silence fell thick between us, the tires humming over the road the only sound filling the space between her jagged breaths. I didn’t know how to make her believe me. I didn’t know how to fix it, how to show her I wasn’t going anywhere, how to even broach that request without opening wounds I’d stitched up years ago.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:01 am

“I know I’ve fucked up,” I said carefully. “But you have to understand that I’m simultaneously fighting my own problems with this while trying to keep in mind what Ryan did to you. I’ve never gone out of my way to actively hurt you, and I’ve never hidden anything. I’m not him, Sienna.”

The bitter laugh that crawled from her throat made my chest cave in. “No. You’re not him. You’re worse, because I actually let myself believe that you were completely different.”

That one hit hard, cleaving its way through my sternum. “You know how I am with Zach,” I countered, trying to keep my voice steady despite the ache tightening my throat. “You’ve seen how I am. I’ve had him since he was six months old, and not once have I looked for a way out. I stayed.”

“You—”

“No. Let me talk,” I insisted, pulling into her apartment complex. “I stayed. Every night, every bottle, every meltdown. I stayed. You think I’d abandon my own kids? You think I’d walk away from this willingly? You think there is a single part of me that could stomach that, could stomach leaving you to pick up the pieces and fend for yourself?”

“You don’t know that?—”

“I will fucking fight for this,” I snapped, shoving the car into park in her driveway. “I am fighting for this.”

She unbuckled her seatbelt with shaking hands, pushing open the door. “No, you’re just hoping I roll over and let you back in again.”

I reached for her, but she was already climbing out. “Wait.”

“No,” she said, brushing me off. “I’m not doing this right now, I have enough to come to terms with.”

The door slammed, shaking the car and Zach’s car seat in the back, and I wrenched my seatbelt off, pushing out clumsily for the first time in my goddamn life just to catch up.

I wasn’t walking away from this. Fuck that.

“Sienna, stop,” I called, not bothering to shut my door as I stepped hard across the concrete, my longer legs eating the distance. “Please, for the love of God, just listen to me for two goddamn seconds without throwing my failures at me.”

I grabbed her by the wrist as I reached the bottom of her stairs, gentle but firm, pulling just enough to drag her attention back to me. “There’s no point?—”

“I haven’t stopped thinking about you.”

She froze, gaze meeting mine.

“I mean it,” I said, voice hoarse. “Every second of every fucking day for the last few months, I haven’t stopped hating myself for what I made you feel. I haven’t stopped wondering what you were doing. I haven’t stopped wanting you.”

Her throat worked, her jaw tensing, her pulse fluttering in her wrist beneath my fingertips.

“Not since the flight,” I continued, my voice shaking just enough to make me hate how broken it sounded. “Not since you sat in the lounge in that goddamn yellow sundress like you knew exactly what you were doing and didn’t give a fuck what anyone thought. Not since I realized you were the first woman in probably more than a decade who made me want anything more than what I had.”

Sienna blinked at the sky, the sun reflecting off her eyes too much, too shiny. “You were the one who pushed me away,” she rasped, slowly bringing her gaze back to mine.

“I know.”

“Twice, Matt. Twice.”

I dropped her wrist, my hands balling into fists at my sides instead, and I exhaled hard through my nose, forcing myself to calm down enough. “I go over that every goddamn night, Sienna,” I whispered. “I lie there, awake, wondering how the hell I ever let myself hurt you like that. I hate myself for it.”

She didn’t blink, didn’t move, just watched me with parted lips and quickening breaths like I was doing it again, like she was expecting everything to fall apart if she let herself believe me.

“I was scared,” I admitted, the words clawing their way out. “It’s not an excuse and I’m not expecting you to take it like one, but it’s the truth. I haven’t had anything like this, I’ve never let myself. There have been women I’ve fixated on a little longer, but none of them have been anything close to this, anything close to you.”

I took a single step forward, my feet touching the step she stood on. Even a few inches taller, she still had to look up at me, and the way her eyes glistened now told me I was either making progress or about to be shut out forever. I had to gamble.

“I panicked. I pulled back, both times,” I swallowed. “But not because you didn’t mean something, but because you did, and I didn’t know how to keep myself from ruining it. I didn’t think I could handle it without hurting you or me or Zach in the process, and it scared the living shit out of me. But I’d rather fuck it up trying than spend the rest of my life wondering if I missed the only thing besides my kid that’s ever actually mattered.”

The air between us felt like it had teeth, like it was seconds from snapping me in its jaws and tearing everything down.

“I texted you, I called you, last week,” I continued, my voice raw, the words spilling out now. “The day I saw you. The night you answered, and I ended up right fucking here. That was before I knew, before the twins, before any of this. And it was because I wanted to fix it, Sienna. It was because I missed you so goddamn much that it made me sick, and then I saw you there at that goddamn cafe looking like the world was caving in on you, and Zach spoke about ten times as much as he normally did, and I couldn’t breathe because of it.”

She blinked, two tears falling free, a choked little sound breaking from her throat.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:01 am

“I wanted to try before I knew about them,” I reiterated. “I don’t—I didn’t—want to give you a half-assed version of what I thought I could handle. I wanted you, just you.”

I hesitated, my breath a little ragged, my hands shaking, but I took her face in them before I could let myself overthink it. My thumbs dragged across her cheeks, wiping away the damp, and thank God, she didn’t fight me on it.

“I get it if you don’t trust me,” I rasped, pressing my forehead to hers. “I do. I’d hate me, too. But I’m not backing out this time, sweetheart, not from them, not from you.”

Her eyes squeezed shut, another few tears spilling free. She sucked in a breath that sounded more like a sob, her fingers digging into the sides of her upper arms, her shirt catching on the small bump of her stomach as the wind picked up around us. “Matt?—”

“I will show up every time,” I murmured. “Whether you want me there or not. Whether you scream or cry or slam the door in my face. I’ll keep trying until you believe that I’m not running. Until you believe me?—”

She surged upward, cutting me off with the press of her mouth on mine. There was no warning, no words — she kissed me like the air between us had become unbearable, pushing my hands off her face and wrapping her arms around my neck, like she’d been trying to stop herself from doing it, like she was furious, heartbroken, and still somehow mine but was angry about it.

I nearly stumbled back from the surprise. She stole the breath from my lungs with it,

from the need in it, as if she didn't know whether to kiss me harder or shove me back onto the concrete. But I grabbed her waist and hauled her into me, held her against my chest, drank her in the way I'd been aching to for months now. Warm, desperate, honest, with everything I was capable of giving her.

And still, throughout, I clung to the hope that maybe, just maybe, this was me finally doing something right when it came to her.

Chapter 23

Sienna

It took me all of thirty seconds to drag him into my apartment.

The moment my front door slammed behind us, Matt's hands were on me, his palm splayed against the small of my back, the other knotting in my hair, tugging just hard enough to angle the kiss better.

Asshole.

I arched into him, nails digging into the crisp cotton of his shirt, the heat of his mouth brutal against mine. The kiss was all teeth, all hunger, his tongue sweeping in like he was trying to rewrite every doubt he'd carved into me. I bit down on his lower lip hard enough to make him wince, and he groaned, not in pain but in approval, his grip tightening.

"Still mad?" he murmured against my mouth, his breathing ragged.

"Of course I'm still mad," I hissed, but my voice cracked as his hand slid under the hem of my shirt, rough fingertips skimming the swell of my stomach. His thumb traced the almost non-existent line of my hipbone, possessive and reverent, like he

was mapping the proof of the twins between us.

“Fair,” he said.

Before I could process it, he was lifting me, one arm under my thighs and the other cradling my back, my legs instinctively wrapping around his waist. He didn’t stagger, didn’t so much as hesitate, just carried me through my cluttered living room like I weighed nothing, past the leaning towers of lesson plans on the coffee table.

He set me down gently on the cushions, following me down, laying me out like I was something to ravish as he braced himself on one forearm to keep his weight off my stomach. The other hand slid from my hip to my throat, not squeezing, just resting, his thumb brushing against my pulse like he wanted to feel just how fast it raced for him.

His eyes were dark, pupils so blown they were swallowing every bit of hazel. “Tell me what you want.”

I glared up at him. “I want you to stop talking,” I hissed, rolling my hips up toward him.

He laughed, low and rough, and dragged my shirt up, his mouth following the path of exposed skin — from my stomach, to my ribs, to the curve of my breast, the tight peak of my nipple. He bit down gently, and I gasped, pain like lightning arcing through my body, back bowing off the couch.

“Christ, you’re sensitive,” he murmured, sucking a bruise instead on the tender skin just beneath.

“Because I’m fucking pregnant,” I shot back, pulling at his shirt but getting almost nowhere with it.

He, on the other hand, made quick work of my jeans, yanking them down my thighs with a frustrated grunt when they caught on my hips. “Fucking hell, Sienna, do you not own maternity?—”

“Buy some for me,” I taunted.

His nostrils flared. “I’ll buy you a whole goddamn wardrobe if it means I don’t have to fight denim next time.”

Next time.

Okay. So, this was different.

His fingers hooked into the waistband of my underwear, and all coherent thought dissolved into nothing. His fingers stroked once, twice, through my arousal, and I whimpered, thighs trembling.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:01 am

“Still so wet for me,” he murmured, pressing a kiss to my collarbone. His platinum ring glinted in the sunlight as he slowly sank a finger into me, crooked just right. “Even when you’re pissed. God, especially when you’re pissed.”

I choked on a moan as he added another finger, his palm grinding against my clit. “Matt—fuck, please?—”

“Not yet.” His lips brushed my jaw, his hand repositioning just slightly between my thighs. “Want you to come for me first. Just like this.”

The tips of his fingers pressed harder against that spot that made my mind go fuzzy, the one that made my body burn, the one that blurred my vision, and I cried out, my back bowing off the couch.

“Look at me,” he demanded.

I did.

His gaze held mine as the coil in my gut tightened, my body locking around his fingers, and just as my release started to crest, his palm moved, taking away stimulation to my clit and leaving me with just his relentless drags. I whined, but my body persisted, tightening harder, muscles locking, cresting higher, higher, higher?—

My vision whited out, the orgasm ripping through me like a wildfire, a ragged cry tearing from my throat as he swallowed it with another kiss.

“God, you moan so fucking pretty,” he muttered against my lips. I hadn’t even

stopped shaking when his belt clinked as he freed himself, the thick length of him resting just beneath my stomach.

The moment he pushed inside of me in one hard stroke, I nearly sobbed. He was unfair. It wasn't normal for someone to just feel like fucking heaven inside of me without even moving, but he did, like he was crafted to sit perfectly where I wanted him most.

His groan vibrated through my chest as he started to move, my walls fluttering around him. The angle was brutal, my legs hooked over his elbows, his hips driving deep with a pace that stole the air from my lungs, but he was careful in the same breath, avoiding my stomach, not putting his weight on me, not even so much as a slip up.

I clawed at his biceps, his shoulders, his hair, anything I could reach, every part of him solid and warm and real beneath my hands.

“Still think I’m running?” he gritted out, his forehead dropping to mine.

I couldn't answer. I couldn't breathe, not when he felt like this, not when his fingers dug into the backs of my thighs like he was afraid I was the one who'd disappear. The friction was too much, the stretch too perfect, the way his body loomed over mine like a shield against everything but him.

He kissed me through the second orgasm, and then the third, his rhythm finally stuttering as he followed me over, his groan muffled against my mouth. For one trembling moment, we were fused, sitting in the aftermath, our breaths mingling between us, my pulse hammering so hard I wondered, briefly, if it was an emergency.

I just wanted to stay like this. Right here, right under him, words not needed and silence screaming.

But then he was moving.

His lips brushed my temple, slow and soft, his hand coming up to cup my cheek. “I meant it,” he said. “All of it. I’m not leaving. I promise.”

My throat closed in. I didn’t want to let myself believe it, not again, not when he’d shown me he couldn’t be honest like that.

But last time, he’d switched back to cold-Matt right after we’d finished. And he wasn’t right now. He was here, he was soft, and he was holding me like the world might fall out from under us both if he didn’t.

I closed my eyes, hesitant, and let myself believe him.

Chapter 24

Matt

“You’re not telling me where we’re goingbecause...?”

“Sienna,sweetheart,” I drawled, pushing my sunglasses up my nose as I guided her down the tarmac with a hand at the small of her back. “I’ve told you, what, four times now? It’s a surprise.”

She rolled her eyes, muttered something under her breath about control issues and“money-bags behavior,” but she didn’t stop walking. Her oversized grey t-shirt hung loosely around her leggings-wrapped upper thighs, her multi-colored knit sweater clutched in her grasp. I’d told her to bring something at least a little warm, but otherwise to be herself. She didn’t need makeup if she didn’t want it, didn’t need an overnight bag. There and back in one day was the mission.

And even with her hair up in a haphazardly done bun, even with nothing but mascara, and especially with the way her clothes were starting to catch on the not-so-hideable bump, she looked so fucking good it made my jaw ache from clenching it.

“Most people apologize with flowers. Or maybe food,” she deadpanned, glancing up at me as we reached the bottom of the stairs for the jet. “But a jet? Come on, Matt, that’s not casual.”

I tried to bite back my grin. “I never said food wasn’t the plan.”

She groaned and forced herself up onto the stairs, clinging to the railing for dear life. “I swear to God, if you’re taking me somewhere fancy without me dressed decently, I might genuinely scream.”

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:01 am

I quirked a brow at her, gesturing to my casual jeans and white button-up. “We’d both be woefully underdressed for that.”

She shot a glare over her shoulder at me as she reached the top. “I wouldn’t put it past you to have a just-in-case suit stored somewhere in this jet.”

I had to hold back the laughter creeping up my chest — she was absurdly good at reading me sometimes. There was definitely a spare tailored Tom Ford suit hanging in the closet on board.

The moment she stepped through the door and turned to the right, she stopped dead in her tracks. I came up behind her, my hand naturally gravitating to the space between her shoulder blades.

“Going to complain again?” I asked.

She loosed a breath like it pained her. “If I asked you how much this cost, would you tell me honestly?”

I leaned against the wall of the plane, watching her carefully. There wasn’t really a part of me that was ashamed to admit how much I’d spent on it — not when I knew planes like the back of my hand, not when this was half for work and half for personal travel. But I had a sinking suspicion she might actually lose her mind if I answered that. “Before or after the renovations?” I asked, glancing toward the cabin with its sleek, dark wood interior and black leather seating.

She winced. “After. Just rip off the band-aid.”

“About thirty-one,” I answered honestly.

Her head whipped around toward me. “Please tell me you mean thirty-one thousand.”

“If this cost me thirty-one thousand,” I said carefully, trying to stifle my chuckle but failing miserably, “I would be truly terrified that it wouldn’t even make it off the ground.”

“Christ.”

She slowly sank into the seat on the right-hand side of the plane, closest to the front, and sighed with almost performative exasperation as she glared up at me. “This is so much worse than you just being a cocky asshole in first class.”

I smirked and sank down to my knees in front of her, fishing the seatbelt out from where it had been stuffed between the cushion and the armrest. “Do I need to remind you how you agreed to sleep with that cocky asshole in first class?”

Her nostrils flared as her gaze met mine, stubborn, defiant, and so fucking cute when her fingers wrapped around my wrist. “I was drunk,” she said simply.

I snorted. “Sweetheart, you’d had two drinks at most.” Her hand slipped away with a huff as I clicked her seatbelt into place, my fingers brushing against the small swell of her stomach before I rose back up. “You don’t get to use that as an excuse.”

We were up and off the ground within twenty minutes.

We didn’t talk much during the flight — she curled up in her seat, footrest out and bare heels dug in, a dog-eared paperback resting on her lap. I watched her read more than I should have, couldn’t help it. There was something about her when she wasn’t doing anything, when she just was, that made the cabin feel warmer, more lived in,

more alive.

Two hours and thirty-eight minutes later, we landed.

The air was far cooler in western Massachusetts than it had been in Atlanta, thinner and tinged with the crisp edge fall brought sooner up here than it did back home. I'd taken Zach a couple of times last year, just the two of us, him clambering over rocks and demanding to know if bears actually lived in the woods. He'd fallen asleep on the drive back to the airport, sticky fingers curled around the empty cider cup I'd bribed him with.

The trees had been a full blaze that time — but now, so early in the season, they were only just beginning to change. Greens mixed with yellows and reds and oranges, and part of me almost wished I'd waited until everything had turned fully, but there was a softness in this, too. One I didn't want to put a name on, one that seemed like a goddamn mirror staring back at me as I drove us up the winding road.

Sienna sat in the passenger seat, her gaze locked out the window, eyes wide and taking in the view as we climbed higher and higher. Golds and burnt oranges and deep, dark green painted every hillside, bleeding into one another, and I saw the exact moment it hit her that this wasn't a spa, or a hotel, or some ego-driven date. She turned to me as I stopped the car in the secluded spot, brows slightly furrowed like she was trying to decide if I was about to murder her somewhere remote or sweep her off her feet.

She didn't ask any questions. I didn't offer her any explanations.

I helped her out of the car beneath the shade of the trees, not a building in sight for miles, and walked her past the trail marker for a hike I didn't intend to take us on. On the other side of the tree line, a grassy expanse was level before sloping downward to another crop of trees, a little meadow of sanctuary overlooking the

Appalachian mountains turning from burnt fall colors to dark blue in the distance, the sun starting to dip low in the sky.

And just at the edge where the grass began to angle downward, a little picnic set up on thick blankets and throw pillows waited. A basket sat open, half its contents already laid out — soft breads, hot apple cider in a flask to be served, roasted vegetables, a spiced chicken salad that didn't use soft cheese, and enough fruit to make Zach lose his mind if he were here. Everything pregnancy-safe. Everything perfect.

She squinted at the display like it might explode.

“You flew me three hours from home,” she said slowly, “for a picnic.”

I started walking toward it backward, watching her. “I thought you'd kick me if I'd taken you somewhere overly high-brow.”

She blinked, taking slow steps forward, following me. “This might actually be worse. You're lunatic.” Her feet came to a stop at the edge of the blanket, her arms crossing, her eyes surveying the spread as if it had personally offended her. “This is a rich man's fever dream. Are there three different types of bread there?”

I bit back my grin and held out a hand in offering. “Would you rather I'd just packed Lunchables?”

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:01 am

She rolled her eyes and took my hand, using it as leverage to lower herself onto the blanket. “Don’t knock Lunchables. The nachos one is top-tier.”

“I’ve had the nachos one,” I said, sitting down beside her with the quietest humph. “Zach went through a phase of eating them every day for about four months. They’re mediocre at best.”

Her head whipped toward me. “You, money-bags McGee, let Zach eat Lunchables?”

I snorted. “Okay, firstly, you’ve seen him eat. Do you think his dinosaur nuggets are gourmet? Do you think I bring in a chef to prep them with the finest ingredients money can buy and then toss them in the freezer? Because I’ve tried it,” I laughed. “He hates it. He’d happily survive on strictly Tyson nuggets and Kraft mac and cheese if I let him. And secondly, I’m not a monster. I know they’re not nutritious, but if he likes it, he likes it.”

She shook her head as if that was somehow the most shocking sentence I’d ever said, leaning back on her hands as she surveyed the food. “You’re a good dad, Matt.” Her eyes met mine, just briefly, before looking back out at the view.

“Wow,” I mused, picking up one of the seasoned crackers and carefully balancing a wedge of cheese on top of it before holding it out to her. “I must have done something seriously right here if you’re openly complimenting me.”

“Don’t get used to it,” she smirked. Her fingers hesitantly took the cracker from me, studying it, before levelling me with a glare. “What kind of cheese is this?”

“Brie,” I said carefully. “Triple checked it’s pasteurized. I gave the chef the list of food you can’t have.”

Her eyes widened. “You didn’t.”

I shot her a grin and cut off a slice of a different cheese for myself. “I did. I was a little paranoid,” I admitted, popping the cracker between my teeth. “Everything’s labeled. The cheese on your side is safe.”

She nearly choked on her cracker, her hand coming up to cover her mouth as she coughed. “Myside? Youzonedthe charcuterie?”

“Heaven forbid I keep you and the babies in mind,” I teased, lifting one of the glass containers on her side to reveal a “Sienna-Safe” label beneath it, a descriptor of the food under that. “In fairness, the chef did it. But it was at my request.”

She blinked at me before picking it up and reading it aloud herself. ““Sienna-Safe. Roasted carrot with cumin and maple, served warm.”” She turned her attention back to me, her eyes narrowing. “You’ve taken me on a picnic with food made by a private chef when I was literally crying in a Wendy’s drive-through this morning. You realize I’m going to get whiplash, right?”

I huffed a laugh and popped the lid off the hot flask, picking up the two little mugs sitting empty in front of us. “Are you going to tell mewhyyou cried in a Wendy’s drive-through or...?”

She shot me a glare. “They weren’t selling Frosties yet. Obviously.”

I’ll buy you a fucking Frosty machine, I almost said. But I bit my tongue and poured her out a mug of cider before setting it down beside her like it was the most normal thing in the world. “Tragic.”

She thwacked me lightly with the back of her hand as she sat forward, picking up her mug. “This is non-alcoholic, right?”

“Yes.”

Her shoulders relaxed just a fraction.

“Did you genuinely think I’d give you alcoholic cider when you’re carrying our kids?”

She shrugged. “It’s not a comment about you,” she offered, her lips quirking up a little. “I’m just... I don’t know. I’ve been overly cautious lately. And considering you’ve got a wholeSienna-Safesection of the charcuterie, I thought maybe you’d have aSienna-Safebottle andMatt-Onlyflask.”

I nudged her shoulder with mine. “Nope. I’m not drinking.”

“Aww, you’re showing solidarity with?—”

“No,” I said, cutting her off. I reached out absentmindedly, tucking a stray hair of hers that kept blowing across her cheek behind her ear instead. “I just didn’t want to drink. That’s it.”

The temptation flared to tell her that almost every time I’d been real with her, I’d had at leastonedrink to loosen myself up. From the flight, to the dinner in Cancun, to the night of Ryan’s wedding, to the night she’d agreed to come over to hear me out. The only exception was right after the scan.

I didn’t want to drink with her.

I wanted tobewith her.

“All right, weirdo,” she huffed, but her cheeks warmed in that way that made my chest ache, her gaze darting from me to the sprawl of the trees around and below us.

We fell into a comfortable silence, her sipping at her cider with a mumbled complaint about it being the best cider she’d ever had, me plucking off bits of fruit and handing it to her so she didn’t need to reach. It was easy. So goddamn easy with her.

Her hand twitched on her stomach.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:01 am

“You feel okay?” I asked, keeping my voice level even as my brain began to turn. Nauseous? Pain? Perceived a threat like a startled deer?

She glanced down at her stomach, at her twitching fingers, and lifted them away. “Yeah. Sorry. I keep...touching it. Them. Like, subconsciously,” she murmured. “I’m not nauseous or anything, if you’re worried. That’s usually just the mornings now.”

“That’s an improvement, right?”

“Yeah. It was constant the first two months.” Her legs folded in as she sat forward, picking up another glass container with her name on the bottom. A little laugh crept out of her as she spoke again. “I still cry at commercials, though. Especially those stupid SCPA ones. And I swear, my boobs have gone up a cup size and are actively getting in the way of everything right now. But, hey! I’m not throwing up ten times a day and I haven’t sobbed over anything but a lack of Frosties since last night, so that’s progress.”

My lips twitched up. “Still can’t believe you cried over Wendy’s.”

She shot me a look that said do not start with me. “I was emotionally compromised.”

I grinned wholeheartedly and shoved a grape in my mouth. “And now you’re emotionally compromised in the woods with an overpriced picnic. You’re welcome.”

She rolled her eyes at me. “True. Now I can cry surrounded by a curated charcuterie board that I can’t even eat half of.”

I chuckled. “All right, all right, that’s my bad. Next time, I’ll make sure I just get Frosties and cider.”

She beamed at me. Fully, ridiculously, beautifully beamed. “Next time?”

“Don’t push your luck, sweetheart.”

She didn’t even make it through takeoff.

One minute she was yawning, teasing me about the twins ending up thriving on dinosaur-shaped nuggets instead of formula if Zach had his say, and the next, her head was slumping gently to the side before landing on my shoulder on the bench seat of the jet. Her legs were tucked up to the side, her seatbelt done loosely around her waist, boots off, and arms half wrapped around herself.

Her breaths evened out. Her face relaxed in a way I’d only seen once that morning in Cancun — no barbs ready behind her teeth, no fire in her eyes, just calm, just soft, and unguarded sleep. The small bump of her belly pushed against her sweater, rising and falling in a rhythm that matched mine without even trying.

I didn’t move. Not a single inch.

Some selfish part of me hoped we got stuck in a queue waiting to land just so I could stay like that, with her curled against me like she, for once, trusted me not to ruin everything.

But outside the window, Atlanta glowed under the night sky, a scatter of white and gold lights over blackness. The hum of the engines was steady and low, and even through the change in pressure, she didn’t stir once. Not even when the wheels hit the

tarmac. Not even when I popped her seatbelt buckle open.

I waited until the jet parked up near the hangar before gently brushing my knuckles across her cheek. “Sienna,” I said, my voice soft. “We’re home.”

She stirred slightly, her brows twitching, her body naturally curling into me just a little bit more, her eyes blinking quickly but blearily in a daze. “Mmm,” she mumbled. “Fuck, I drooled on you.”

I did my best to chuckle without my shoulders shaking. “It’s fine. It was cute.”

“Liar,” she muttered, pushing herself upright and rubbing her eyes. “What time is it?”

“Late. Let’s get you home.”

She didn’t argue with me. Instead, she let me help her up, her sweater slipping off one shoulder until I righted it, her eyes still heavy as she looked up at me without a single bit of fight behind them, just bare honesty, and exhaustion. Her movements were sluggish, her voice calm, and she nearly zonked back out in the car on the short drive.

She leaned against the window of my Maserati, watching the streetlights blur past in silence. I didn’t say anything. I didn’t ask her to come back with me, didn’t even let the temptation show on my face. I could have easily talked her into my bed, touched her quietly, lost myself in her before inevitably finding my way to another soft surface in my house to sleep, but today wasn’t about that. That wasn’t my end goal. She was quiet, and comfortable, and still letting me be a part of this, and that was enough.

When we pulled up to her place, I got out first, opened her door, slipped an arm around her back to help her up the stairs. She didn’t ask why I wasn’t trying harder to

come inside, and I didn't explain. Just pressed a single kiss against her forehead before helping her unlock the door and urging her inside with a "Text me in the morning."

And as she turned and shut the door, locking it behind her, I didn't feel like she was shutting me out.

For the first time in a long goddamn time, it felt like progress in a direction I never usually tried to go. It felt like this could be real, and more importantly, it didn't scare the hell out of me. It felt like words I had always been terrified to use with anyone except Zach, felt like the world was finally letting me breathe, felt like I hadn't ruined everything.

It was enough.

She was enough.

Chapter 25

Sienna

Six weeks later...

Somewhere between the ultrasounds, the constant exhaustion, and the sudden cravings for salt oneverythingand pickled foods, my world had quietly rearranged itself to include Matt without either of us ever saying it out loud.

I had his card back. Not in a weird, sugar-baby,buy what you want foreverkind of way, but in ayou're carrying my children and if you dare try to buy a stroller with your own money I will just transfer it back to youkind of way. I had a driver, too, which was probably the weirdest addition. His name was Chris, and he always had water bottles ready and somehow knew exactly when the music started to grate on my ears and would turn it down. Matt had insisted — “You’ll end up causing a twelve-car pileup trying to eat pickles from a jar and drive at the same time.”

He wasn'twrong.

We had a rhythm, though. I'd see him a few times a week, usually weekend nights when I wasn't so exhausted from teaching and Zach had already gone to bed. Dinner, laughter, the kind of ridiculous sex that left me breathless and aching in places I couldn't talk to my OB about. But when it was over, we didn't curl up and whisper things in the dark, we didn't linger, we didn't drift off like we had in Cancun. He'd kiss my shoulderand tell me to text him when I got home if I was leaving his, or I'd fall asleep in my bed and wake up to empty sheets and a note to have a good day.

There wasn't a conversation. There wasn't a commitment laid out in spoken terms, and there weren't promises outside of "I'm not going anywhere."

But, weirdly, it didn't feel empty. Probably because he kept showing up, every time, never running completely and always coming back.

I hadn't asked him to prove anything, not directly. But I knew he could feel me waiting to see if he'd slip again, if he'd vanish when things got too hard. So far, he hadn't flinched, even when the hormones got messy and I'd sobbed when Zach drew a stick figure of me. He'd just pulled me into his chest in front of his kid and kissed the top of my head like he understood.

I didn't know exactly how much of our situation he'd told Zach, but Zach seemed content and unquestioning anytime Matt was affectionate with me around. He'd asked a handful of times about the babies. He knew he was going to be a big brother, but at least around me, he didn't ask about my role in all of this or what it would mean. Not that Matt and I had even fully had that conversation yet.

So, when Matt had asked me to spend a few evenings around his place while he was in Tokyo for business, just to help keep Zach's routine somewhat normal and give Margot a bit of a break, I'd said yes. A million times yes.

It wasn't babysitting. Just spending time with him during the easy periods, even though I'd tried to insist I could do more. Matt had very gently suggested I let Margot handle anything harder, like taking Zach out or getting him ready for swim lessons. "You're growing two people," he'd said. "You're allowed to sit down and watch cartoons, Sienna."

I still got to help him with his homework, though.

But today, while Margot did the grocery run and Zach and I made a tower out of

couch cushions with T-Rex Time Jam playing in the background, the doorbell rang.

Zach turned his head toward the sound, his little brows scrunched up. “That’s weird. Margot never rings the doorbell.”

“Maybe it’s a delivery,” I said, pushing up carefully from the floor with one hand on the edge of the couch. Matt and Margot hadn’t mentioned anything was coming, but unless it was a couple of Jehovah’s Witnesses here to try to convert us, I didn’t have a better guess.

He hopped off the cushion stack and followed me, trailing right behind. “I don’t think so. Delivery people use the buzzer. Daddy never tells them the gate code.”

“Maybe Margot forgot her keys, then.”

Zach didn’t look convinced, but he nodded and skipped right up to the front door anyway. I paused with my hand on the knob, leaning to the side to glance through the peephole.

I froze.

Of course it was him.

“Zach, can you go check the pillow fort?” I said, trying to keep my voice light as I straightened up. “Make sure it’s not falling over. I think your T-Rex might’ve knocked something loose.”

Zach, in all his innocence, didn’t even question it and perked up immediately. “Okay!” he chirped, darting off, pretending to speak into a non-existent walkie-talkie with words like “rescue mission” and “operation rex is go.”

I waited until he was fully out of sight, then unlocked the door and wrenched it open two inches.

Enough for me to look Ryan in the eye.

He stood there in his button-up shirt, sleeves rolled up to the elbows, mousy brown hair a bit of a mess, his tie askew. His brow twitched a little as he registered my face, but then he rolled his eyes and took a step toward the door like I was a problem in his way.

“I didn’t say you could come in,” I snapped, shutting the door an inch.

“Right, like you have authority.” He hooked his fingers on the door, pushing back, forcing it back open. “MATT!”

“Jesus, Ryan, stop, you’ll freak out Zach,” I said, letting the door open but stepping in the way of him.

Page 79

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:01 am

His brown eyes clashed with mine. “I need to speak to Matt.”

“He’s not here,” I bit out, pushing him back with a hand to his chest, guiding him backward out the door, and he almost fought me on it, almost pushed against me, until his eyes dropped.

My shirt was tight. There was no hiding it.

And his eyes zeroed in on my stomach.

“Jesus,” he rasped, a scowl rippling across his features. “What the fuck?”

I shut the door behind me, trapping him on the porch and shielding Zach’s ears from whatever words he wanted to spew. “Are you really going to pretend you care and make a big deal out of this or do you want to leave?”

His lip curled just a little as he took another step back, blinking at my stomach before dragging his gaze back up to my eyes. “Neither. I need to speak to Matt,” he repeated.

“Okay, well, as I said, he’s not here. So, if you need money, call him.”

“I tried.”

I slipped my phone out of my pocket and checked the time, doing the mental math quickly. “It’s, like, seven in the morning for him right now,” I said, trying to keep my patience. “He’s probably just waking up.”

His nose scrunched. “Where is he?”

“Tokyo. Which you would know if you cared in the slightest and didn’t just want to speak to him to get paid.”

He stared at me for a moment, something simmering in his eyes that I couldn’t quite place. “You think that’s why I’m here?”

I rolled my eyes. “Is there another reason? Did you just come up with it?”

“Wow,” he murmured, his tongue pressing into his top teeth. He dodged my questions entirely. “How much money has he given you?”

I recoiled, just a hair. “What?”

“Clearly, he’s buttered you up enough to believe him.”

“He hasn’t buttered me up,” I snapped.

Ryan leaned against the pillar on the porch, his eyes narrowing. “Don’t tell me getting pregnant was enough to sway you.”

“I believed him before I even found out.”

“Gullible, Sienna,” he mocked. “So, fucking gullible.”

“Yeah. I was, when I was with you.” I crossed my arms over my chest, trying to ignore how weird that felt now with something to almost rest them on. “Last I checked, Matt hasn’t cheated on me with my best friend while pretending to love me, so forgive me if I find him far more believable.”

“Yet.”

“Yet?”

A ripple of something entirely unreadable flickered across his face before smoothing out. “How do you think Matt ended up with the kid?”

I frowned, trying to conjure up anything Matt had told me about it. The air around us thickened, heavy and brutal, like a storm about to snap. “He said he’s had Zach since he was six months old,” I said slowly. “But it’s not your place?—”

Ryan huffed a laugh, dry and half-removed. “Is that what he told you?”

My arms tightened instinctively.

“His ex gave him full custody, Si. Handed Zane?—”

“—Zach—”

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:01 am

“—to him willingly. You know why?”

I didn't answer. I wasn't sure I even wanted to hear, especially not from Ryan's mouth.

“Because he cheated on her,” Ryan said, each word sharp, each word measured. “Repeatedly. Lied straight to her face throughout her entire pregnancy, just like he's probably doing to you. She couldn't handle it when she found out. She couldn't even look at Zach without seeing him.”

I blinked, once, twice, three times, faster. “That's not?—”

“She was a mess, spiraled hard. She gave up everything. Said she didn't want anything to do with him and couldn't keep Zach 'cause it was fucking her up. And Matt... he played the part of the hero, obviously. Took the kid, cleaned up the wreckage he caused. That's what he does.”

I wanted to laugh, wanted to call it bullshit, but the words caught in my throat.

Matt had never once mentioned Zach's mom. Not in any conversation we'd had about parenting, about life, about the things that had shaped him or the things he wanted to fix this time around. And I hadn't questioned it — I thought it was painful, or private, or something he'd mention when the time was right. I thought?—

Fuck.

I said nothing. I didn't know what to say, didn't know what to think. Matt didn't seem like that kind of person, but neither had Ryan, and I knew damn well now that

both of them were more than capable of hurting me.

Ryan pushed off the pillar and adjusted his sleeves like he hadn't just flipped my world on its side. "Figured you deserved to know what you're getting into before you tie yourself to someone worse than me," he said casually, then let his eyes drop to my stomach again. "Apparently I'm a bit too late for that, though."

He walked off without another word, down the steps to his car, and slammed the driver's side door behind him.

And I...

I felt like the world was caving in.

Chapter 26

Matt

The Tokyo skyline stretched endlessly beyond the floor-to-ceiling windows of the hotel suite, but it didn't mean shit when the screen of my phone was still black.

No notifications. No texts, no missed calls, just the same photo of her and Zach playing in the living room filling my lockscreen like it could anchor me from halfway around the world.

Two days. Two goddamn days of silence.

I stared down at the screen like I could will her to answer me. Like maybe if I just looked hard enough, something would change, that little typing bubble would pop up, and she'd send one of her usual dry and sarcastic check-ins.

I checked her location even though I'd told myself I wouldn't. She was still at her place, not at the hospital, not vanished — but that didn't make me feel better. Silence from her wasn't normal, not after everything, not after the way she'd curled into me on that flight back from Massachusetts, not after I'd touched her the night before I had to fly out here and she'd whispered something half-asleep that sounded far too close to "please stay."

I stood from the suite's desk and shoved a hand through my hair, pacing the wide, lush space like I hadn't built my entire life on composure. I had meetings lined up with our Japanese partners, expansion talks that could shift profits wildly higher. I'd flown out without really thinking of anything other than the logistics—make sure Sienna and Zach were both safe and cared for—but hadn't considered what normally happened to me with Zach, happening to me with Sienna as well.

I missed her. I missed them, all of them, Zach, and Sienna and the two little ones she was growing, so much that it cracked my chest open.

Mornings weren't right without her texts about weird cravings or morning sickness. I couldn't fall asleep properly without the knowledge that she wasn't more than a thirty-minute drive from me. I'd built a life on keeping people at arm's length and somehow, somehow, she'd slipped right past every defense I had, and the spaces without her now felt brutal.

By the fifth day of the trip, I was making excuses to cut meetings short. By the sixth, I didn't even pretend anymore.

I skipped dinner with our execs and arranged to fly home instead. They'd understand, or they wouldn't, and I wasn't entirely sure if I cared either way. I just wanted to be home.

The second the wheels hit the tarmac in Atlanta, I texted her again.

Me:

Landing now. Coming to you. If you need space, tell me to back off.

Still nothing.

The city looked odd when I hadn't slept. It wasn't the first time I'd come back tired, but there was stress now, anxiety ashitty blanket on top of the exhaustion that blurred the edges of everything, filled my ears with static, made every light too sharp in the dark. But the moment I saw her front door, some small piece of me relaxed.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:01 am

I didn't knock. I used the key she'd given me in case of emergencies.

The air left my lungs the second I saw her.

She stood in her small kitchen, barefoot and wearing one of my shirts, her phone on the counter next to a half-eaten bowl of oatmeal, her palms flat down and her shoulders hunched. She didn't even look at me as the door clicked shut.

"Sienna," I said warily.

She stiffened, her shoulders straightening just a little, but she didn't turn.

I took a step closer, narrowing the gap between us, desperately trying to keep my erratic heart from beating out of my chest, stress rising. "You've been ignoring me, sweetheart."

She still didn't speak.

"I've been in Tokyo losing my fucking mind. Do you know that?" My voice cracked, just barely, and I took a deep breath, trying to rein myself in. "I couldn't focus. I couldn't sleep. I kept checking my phone, hoping you'd just—hoping you'd say something."

"I saw your texts," she said, too calm, too cold.

I blinked at her. "Why didn't you answer?"

She finally turned to face me, expression unreadable. There wasn't anger, or hurt, or anything else I could pick up on — just emptiness. "I needed time."

"For what, Sienna?"

She looked at me for a long moment like she was weighing words up in her mind, blinking as though it was obvious. "Were you really in Tokyo for business, Matt? Or were you just off fucking another woman?"

I didn't know how to do anything other than stare.

That question, that stupid fucking question, hung there in the space between us like a live wire, crackling and angry. For a terrifying second, I couldn't speak, couldn't move, just looked at her, heart slamming against my ribcage, wondering what the fuck had happened while I was gone to turn her into someone who could even ask me that with a straight face.

"Of course I wasn't," I rasped. "Sienna. No."

She didn't soften in the slightest.

I took a slow breath, trying not to let the frustration erupt. A part of me knew that fears of this were likely to pop up at some point after what happened between her and Ryan, but I couldn't wrap my mind around why now. "I'm not him," I said softly. "I would never do that to you. You don't have to be afraid of that with me."

The laugh that bubbled up through her was bitter. "That's not what Ryan said."

Ice prickled down my spine. "What?"

Her jaw clenched. "You want to know why I haven't answered your texts?" she

asked, crossing her arms over her chest. “While I was building a pillow fort with Zach, Ryan showed up at the door uninvited.”

I took another step forward, pulse pounding in my ears. “Hewhat?”

“He came looking for you. Noticed I’m pregnant, obviously. Told me I shouldn’t trust you,” she said, her gaze flicking away from me. “He said I was gullible. Told me I was tying myself to someone worse than himself. Told me about Zach’s mom.”

Zach’s mom? “What do you mean? How is that related?”

“He said you cheated on her while she was pregnant and postpartum. Repeatedly. Said she couldn’t even look at Zach afterward, that you broke her so badly she gave you full custody just to get away from you.”

Ifeltthe blood leech from my face.What the fuck?

“And considering you’ve never told me anything about her?—”

“Because there was nothing totell,” I snapped, taking a step back. I didn’t know how to look at her, let alone process this. Wrong, wrong, all of itwrong. “You believed him.”

She blinked at me.

“You believed him,” I repeated, my voice a little lower, the disbelief coating each word. “After I’ve been doing everything in my power to show up, over and over, even when it’s scared the shit out of me. After going toeverydoctor's appointment, spendingeveryevening possible with you, fucking admittingto myself that Iwantthis — you believed him.”

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:01 am

Her mouth popped open, an unsteady breath crossing her lips. “What am I supposed to think when you haven’t told me what?—”

“You’re supposed to fucking trust me, Sienna!” I said, the words exploding out of me harsher than I’d intended. I didn’t take it back. “He’s my son. I was waiting until I knew that you trusted me so you wouldn’t think it was a goddamn sob story for your affection, but that moment’s never coming, is it?”

Her face twisted. “I don’t know how you expect me to trust you when I’m still terrified that you’re going to leave at any second. I don’t know what you want me?—”

“I want you to stop putting me on trial for things I haven’t done because of what my brother says,” I rasped, my chest rising and falling too quick, too angry. “I want you to look at how I’ve treated you since I let myself want you and maybe give me more credit than the man who fucked your best friend for a year behind your back.”

Silence. Deafening silence.

I shook my head, jaw tight, fingers curling into fists. “But if, after everything between us, you still think I’m the kind of man who is even capable of what you’re accusing me of, then what’s the goddamn point?”

This wasn’t fair. This wasn’t okay. This was every single thing I’d tried to shield myself from for years, almost every single thing I was worried about happening if I even let myself consider the idea of ‘family’ again. This was every argument with my parents.

“I’m not going to stand here and defend myself against hisbullshitwhen you actually believe it.” My voice dropped, my anger surging. I took a single step back toward the door. “I’m done.”

Her mouth opened, but I kept going before she could get a sound out.

“I’ll be there for the twins.Always. But I’m not going to spend the rest of my fucking life hoping you’ll eventually choose to believe me over your piece-of-shit ex andmypiece-of-shit brother. You want to think I’m like him? Worse? Fine. I’m not going to beg you to see me for who I actually am.”

I turned before I said something worse.

The door slammed harder than I meant it to.

Chapter 27

Sienna

Jules slid my mug across my kitchen island, black coffee steaming in the drab of my apartment. I stared into it like maybe, if I looked hard enough, I’d find the version of myself that knew what the hell she was doing.

No such luck, unfortunately.

“He ended it,” I said quietly, my voice still raw even after a week. “Told me he’d be there for the twins, but that was it. Said he was done.”

Jules’ brows knit together, but she didn’t say anything, just left the floor open for me to keep going like she was expecting it all to tumble out.

“It wasn’t, like, screaming,” I added, wincing a little. “Wasn’t like any of the times I argued with Ryan. It wasn’t messy. But he walked out.”

I let out a slow breath, watching the way it curled the steam rising from my mug.

“He can be their dad. That’s fine, he should be. But I’m done, too.”

The corners of Jules’ lips tugged down. “Okay. But hear me out, why?”

I blinked at her. “What do you mean, why? I told you what happened, what Ryan said. She couldn’t even look at her own kid?—”

“Yeah, okay, but why exactly are you still trusting Ryan?” she asked, standing up straight and crossing her arms. “I’m sorry, Si, but I might actually be on Matt’s side here.”

I opened my mouth. Thought better of it. Closed it.

“Seriously,” she went on. “You told me all the ways Ryan hurt you. He cheated on you for a year, with your best-friend-at-the-time—which, thank you to him by the way, without that I wouldn’t be here now—but still. He tried to pin the inheritance mess on Matt, which Matt was right about. So why does Ryan suddenly get credibility now? You’ve upset Matt in the past by believing Ryan over him, so you chose to do it again?”

“I—” I started, then stopped, wringing my left wrist with my right hand like it could somehow soothe me. “I don’t know. What would Ryan even gain from lying about something like this? He’s had reason to lie before, but I can’t see the reason now.”

Jules levelled me with one of her looks. “You’re asking me what Ryan would gain by sabotaging one of the only good things Matt has in his life?”

“That’s not?—”

“Yes, it is,” she cut in. “You said yourself that Ryan was pissed you showed up to the wedding, that he argued with Matt over it, that he was a dick to you when you were leaving Tulum. And now he pops in, drops a bomb, and suddenly you’re done with Matt forever? He didn’t need a plan, Sienna, he just had to whip up a quick story and watch it burn.”

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:01 am

I pressed my lips into a line.

“And let’s not pretend this is about protecting you,” Jules added, leaning forward onto the counter again. “He’s never had your best interest in mind. So why would he start now?”

I didn’t have an answer for that.

I didn’t have an answer for any of it.

“Fuck,” I choked, heart pounding hard, the weight of it all starting to catch up with me. My elbows hit the counter, my face falling forward into my hands. “I—fuck, Jules, what the hell am I supposed to do here? Believe him instead? Backtrack, fall over backward apologizing? It’s not like he offered me an explanation?—”

“Si. Babe,” she huffed, a little bit of her patience slipping. “He probably didn’t offer you one because you wouldn’t have believed him anyway. You let Ryan get too into your head.”

“I know.” The backs of my eyes burned, hormones taking over, emotions running at full force every time I had them because of the two little gremlins growing inside of me. “I know. I know.”

I sank back against the cushioned barstool, wrapping my arms around myself like they could hold me together.

“I love him,” I croaked. “I think I’ve loved him since Tulum. And I don’t—I—What

do I do?”

“You trust?—”

“But love doesn’t mean trust.” I wiped under my eyes, hating the dampness I found. “I don’t know if I’ll ever have both, not with him. Not after what happened at the beginning.”

“Do you think he hasn’t been trying?”

“No, he has. That’s the worst part,” I said, voice cracking. “He’s been showing up and saying the right things and being there for every single thing I need him to be there for, and I still can’t stop waiting for the other shoe to drop. I don’t feel secure.”

“Because of Ryan.” Jules’ finger stabbed into the linoleum on top of the counter. “Not Matt. Yeah, Matt fucked up early on, but the reason you don’t feel like you can trust him to be the man he claims he is, is because of Ryan.”

God, she was right. She was so right. “Yeah,” I whispered. “I-I want to go back. I want to fix it. But I don’t even know if it is even a thing to fix anymore.”

For a long second, Jules didn’t speak, just watched me with her lips pressed into a thin line. Then, gently, as if she was trying not to startle a spooked animal, she said, “I’m not going to tell you what to do.”

I swallowed, my throat closing in.

“But if I were you? I’d reach out. Not to fight, not to punish him or whatever the hell else your hormonal pregnant brain wants to do. Just open the door,” she sighed. “Ask him what really happened with Zach’s mom and give him the space to tell the truth. If you want to trust him, that’s got to be where it starts now.”

I nodded.

Right. Okay. That makes sense. Even with everything a mess and the anger still simmering in my system.

I just had to do it.

Chapter 28

Matt

The Tokyo expansion had been greenlit.

After months of negotiation, back-and-forth legal wrangling, late-night calls with board members and zoning consultants, my trip, it was done. A new international hub, a deal worth more money for the company than I knew what to do with, and the stamp of approval from every smug executive who'd said it was too ambitious.

This was the kind of win that was supposed to feel like the world's sweetest victory. Instead, it felt like static.

Congratulations rolled in. Clinking glasses and obligatory toasts with overpriced whiskey and champagne. I laughed where I needed to, nodded along to conversations I wasn't listening for, but I hadn't been present. Not really. I should have felt something — pride, relief, adrenaline, something. But all I felt was hollow.

We ended up at one of those rooftop lounges in Midtown where everyone looked like they were trying too hard or too little. I'd been here before, knew the script, knew to smile at the right people and let others buy me drinks, knew to pretend I wasn't calculating which minute I could slip away without drawing attention so I could go home and crawl into Zach's bed with him like I'd found myself doing for the last few

nights.

Someone handed me a glass. Someone else clinked it against theirs. Across from me, one of the new hires to handle starting the expansion, a woman named Helena who seemed to be made of long legs and red lipstick, leaned in close to me.

“You should be celebrating,” she said, smiling up at me.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:01 am

“I am,” I murmured, but I didn’t believe it.

Her hand brushed my forearm, light, deliberate. She wasn’t subtle and I wasn’t blind. Normally, I’d have leaned in, flirted back, let the game play out — but instead, I froze.

The second she touched me, all I could see was Sienna.

The way she looked when she was fighting back a smile. The way her lashes had fluttered when I woke her up gently on the flight home from Massachusetts, her voice thick with sleep and trust. Her hands curled over her stomach, her nose crinkling at something I’d said. Her laugh. Her presence.

And I realized, too late and too deep, that I was in love with her.

It sucked all of the air from the lungs the moment the realization hit.

I pulled back, practically sucking in oxygen like I was suffocating, offering some half-formed apology that probably sounded like gibberish, and stepped outside without waiting for a response from her. The city sprawled out below me, glass, motion, and light, but none of it registered.

I was still angry with her. Horribly, brokenly angry. But God, I fucking loved her, and she was pregnant with my kids and hormonal and struggling?—

I shouldn’t have broken it off. I could have walked out, taken time to come back, and walked into a new conversation with a clear head. But I hadn’t.

I slipped my phone from my jacket pocket. I needed to text her, or call, or something. I didn't know. I just needed her.

But when I unlocked the screen, her name was already there. A text, timestamped ten minutes ago, sat unread on my screen.

Sienna:

I'm sorry. Can we please talk?

I didn't answer her text.

I didn't need to. Some things didn't deserve to be sorted through a screen, especially not after a week of silence and the mess Ryan had left in his wake.

I left the lounge without a word to anyone, climbed into my car, and drove the entire way across the city with her messaging burning a hole in my goddamn chest.

I wasn't wired to ignore her. Not when I couldn't fall asleep without her invading my dreams, not when I saw her face every time I closed my eyes, not when I fucking loved her.

Throwing the car into park at an angle in her driveway, I left it running and took the stairs up to her door two at a time. My heart pounded erratically in my chest, not with anger—at least not entirely—but with something tighter and more desperate.

I hadn't realized just how much I missed her until she opened the door.

She looked tired, pale, her eyes squinting against the glare of my headlights. Her hair was thrown up in a bun, one of my sweaters hanging loosely around her shoulders but clinging to her stomach, which I swore had grown again, her breath stuttering as she

looked up at me.

“Sienna,” I rasped, breathing a little heavy. “Get in the car.”

She blinked. “What?”

“Shoes. Jacket. Let’s go.”

“You didn’t text me back.”

“No,” I said, my jaw flexing. “I didn’t.”

She took half a step back. “You’re still mad.”

“Yeah,” I admitted. “But that’s not why I’m here. Just—just get in the car, sweetheart.”

“Is Zach okay?—”

“He’s fine, just please. Get in the car.”

Something in my voice must’ve cut through her hesitation. She slipped on her cardigan hanging by the door, shoved her feet into a pair of slides, and followed me without another word.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:01 am

The ride was silent. She didn't ask where we were going, didn't look at me, and I didn't offer her anything either. I didn't know how to, not with the way my stomach was coiled tight with what I needed to do.

I parked across the street from Ryan's house, exhaling once, sharp, and heavy and stressed.

She turned to me slowly. "Matt?—"

"You need to hear the truth," I said, pushing out of the car.

I helped her out before crossing the road and climbing up the driveway of Ryan's small suburban home, two cars in the driveway, the porch light on. I didn't check if she was following — I could feel her behind me.

Ryan opened the door with a scowl, his expression twisting into something smugger the second he saw Sienna standing behind me. He leaned against the door frame in his pajamas, crossing his arms like this was hilarious.

"Welcome back, Sienna," he grinned.

"Shut the fuck up," I breathed. "You're going to tell her the truth. Now."

His brows rose dramatically. "Truth? I already told her the truth."

"No. You spun some bullshit lie to get under her skin, and maybe that's what you do best, Ryan, but you don't get to twist Zach's life around like it's gossip. You don't get

to use myson to win your petty little war of making her feel small and causing me as much fucking stress as possible.”

Ryan rolled his eyes. “Jesus, you’re dramatic.”

“I’ll release the rest of the assets if you just fucking tell her.”

He laughed — genuine, full-body laughter, and dragged his tongue over his teeth. “Damn, you’re desperate.”

“Matt—”

“No,” I said to her over my shoulder, keeping my gaze locked on Ryan’s.

He glanced from her to me, sighing like this was exhausting for him despite causing it. “Fine,” he huffed. “Zach’s mom was some woman from Buckhead. One-night stand. Met at some business thing? I don’t fucking know, Matt, I don’t remember.”

My jaw ticked.

“You didn’t even talk to her again, right? And then boom, what, a year later? Some guy from child services showed up.”

I turned, slowly, to Sienna, watching as her eyes flicked between us. “Her name was Vanessa. We were never in a relationship, not even close. I barely remembered her name until the paperwork was handed to me.”

Her eyes widened, her mouth popping open.

“She’d surrendered Zach under the Safe Haven Law,” I said carefully. “She didn’t leave any of his information, so it took them a little time to find out who he was.

DFCS called me when he was about five months old, and I was given the option to step up or let him go into foster care. I didn't hesitate. I filed for custody immediately."

She swallowed, her throat working, one hand on her stomach.

"I fought for him. Raised him," I continued, keeping my voice as level as I could. "There was no cheating. No betrayal. Just me not letting him end up alone in the system."

Ryan snorted behind me. "Well, that's your good deed for the decade."

I glanced back at him. "You're lucky you're still standing."

"Ooh, soscary, Matthew."

Sienna wasn't looking at Ryan. She was looking directly at me, and I couldn't tell what was upsetting her more — the fact that she'd believed the lie, or that the truth wasthisinstead.

"Matt—"

"You know, it tracks," Ryan said, pushing off the door frame. His lips curled with the same smug venom I'd known since we were kids, his gaze flicking to Sienna like she wasn't anything. "You, knocking up my ex. Giving me back the shit that's rightfully mine. Wouldn't be surprised if she ditches you, too."

I shot him a glare. "Don't."

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:01 am

“What? Zach’s already half-fucked from all your trauma bonding — why not give him siblings to match?”

The world went red.

I didn’t think, didn’t speak.

My fist cracked across his jaw so hard I felt the bones shift beneath my knuckles, heard the tell-tale crunch of something in my hand breaking.

He stumbled back into the doorframe, swearing, a hint of blood on his teeth, clutching the side of his face like he hadn’t thought I’d actually do it, like he didn’t realize I’d wanted to for years.

“You talk about her again, you even breathe something like that about my fucking kid, and I swear to God, Ryan, I will end you,” I said, my voice eerily calm despite the words slipping through my teeth. “We’re done. You’re cut off. You can have what’s left in your trust and survive on that, but I’m not funding you anymore.”

He laughed, but the sound was thin. “Yeah, sure. Whatever you say.”

I turned my back on him without another word.

Sienna hadn’t moved — she was still standing there frozen on the walkway, her eyes wide, one hand covering her mouth and the other resting on her stomach. “Matt,” she breathed. “You just—you hit him.”

“Yeah,” I swallowed, shaking my hand and wincing when I felt something inside rub the wrong way. “Felt good until the?—”

Her mouth opened, but no sound came out.

A sharp gasp.

A strangled sound that didn’t belong in her throat.

Both hands clutched at her stomach.

My fucking heart stopped.

“Sienna?”

She bent forward slightly, eyes squeezed shut, pain etched across her face, and no, no, no, no. She was only just over five months. “Ow—Matt—Matt, shit?—”

Every last ounce of anger vanished. Fear took over.

Chapter 29

Sienna

Hospitals had a way of feeling silent even when machines beeped and nurses moved briskly down fluorescent, chemical-scented halls. Everything felt too clean, too bright, too much. I was lying in a private room that was far too large for what I needed—Matt made sure of that—wearing one of those thin gowns that barely covered anything, especially with my still-sticky stomach in the way, the ultrasound tech having just left. My legs ached. My arms felt heavy. My brain wouldn’t stop spinning.

It felt like my blood had been replaced with pure panic.

The pain had passed, mostly. It had come on so fast that it had stolen the breath from my lungs, sharp and searing and enough to make my vision haze at the edges. Matt had rushed to me, terror in his eyes, and ushered me into the car as fast as he could manage. But it wasn't labor, wasn't anything disastrous, per what the doctor said — instead, it was a particularly nasty episode of round ligament pain. Common. Scary, yes, but not dangerous.

That part was fine. Manageable. But it was the ultrasound that struck us both down.

Matt squeezed my hand like his life depended on it as we stared at the grainy black and white screen, the tech pointing out movement between them. Two tiny heartbeats beat away like they didn't know how much they'd scared me. They were perfect, still. Healthy.

And both girls.

Matt had choked when the tech told us, his eyes going glassy with relief and excitement and the crash of too much fear ebbing away. But I didn't cry. I didn't even smile, not at first — I just looked and desperately tried not to fall apart entirely.

“That's the cervix,” the doctor said. “Unfortunately, Sienna, it's already started to shorten. It's early, way too early.”

My pulse picked back up again. I could hear it on the monitor.

“What does that mean?” Matt asked for me, our entwined knuckles on his not broken hand pressed to his lips.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:01 am

“It means,” he said gently, “that she needs to go on strict bedrest. Effective immediately. No work, no errands, no stress, no sex.” His eyes flicked down to mine. “You’re already past five months, and with twins, your body’s going to feel that harder. If we don’t take this seriously, we’re looking at a very real, very high risk of preterm labor.”

My whole world tipped.

“No teaching?” I asked, voice breaking. “I-I have lesson plans, I have?—”

“You have two daughters,” Matt said, his voice a little strained, “who are relying on you to keep them safe.”

A soft knock came on the door as the doctor was packing things up, and then Jules slipped in, her face tense and eyes wide. “Matt texted,” she said, moving straight to my side. “Are you okay? Are they okay?”

“They’re girls,” I said weakly, swallowing through the rising dread in my body. “And they’re okay. Me, on the other hand, not so much.”

Matt did most of the talking for me, explaining to Jules what had happened, what it meant for me now. I’d tried not to press my hands to my eyes and sob, but it hadn’t fully worked, and instead I’d ended up stubbornly staring at the ceiling while tears slipped out of my eyes. Jules perched on the windowsill to my left, Matt sat in the chair to my right, and even with both of them here, it felt like everything was falling apart.

“Move in with me.”

I blinked, wiping the tears from my temples as I turned my head to Matt. “What?”

He took a breath, his voice wavering just a hair. “Move in. Now. Tonight. I’ll get the downstairs suite set up for you. Everything you need. You won’t have to lift a finger.”

“Matt—”

“I’ll work from home more,” he went on, like he’d been rehearsing this in his head since the doctor said bedrest. “I can hire in a nurse, or Margot and I can just swap shifts making sure you’ve got what you need. You’ll rest. You’ll focus on the girls. And more importantly, you won’t be alone.”

Jules raised an eyebrow but didn’t say anything.

“I’ll—fuck it, Sienna, I’ll sleep in there with you if it sways you. I want to.”

My breath caught in my lungs. “Matt, you don’t?—”

“I want to be there,” he breathed. “Every night. Not just the ones when things are easy. Please.”

“You can’t mean that.”

“I do,” he insisted, squeezing my hand so hard I worried it’d end up bandaged up like his. “We’ll do it properly. Labels and everything, if that’s what you want. No more confusion, no more waiting for me to catch up. I just—I can’t bear the thought of you at home alone like this.”

I hesitated. I knew how hard this was for him, how much it cost him to say it out loud. He wasn't someone who just offered pieces of himself lightly.

But still. "I need to hear it, Matt."

He stilled. "Hear what?"

I almost didn't want to say it, didn't want to admit that I needed to hear it. "That you love me."

A wounded, soft, broken noise escaped him. "Sienna," he said, his voice low, shattered. "It should be obvious."

Jules cursed behind me and shifted off the windowsill. "Give us a minute, Matt."

Matt blinked, surprised, glancing between us like he didn't want to leave. But something about the way Jules was looking at him made him second-guess it, and he stood, reluctantly letting go of my hand and quietly closing the door behind him.

The second it clicked shut, Jules rounded on me.

"You need to give him a break."

I stared at her. "What?"

"He's trying, Sienna. Christ, he's been trying. We just talked about this. I don't know what more you want him to do, bleed on command? Tattoo your name across his forehead?"

I looked away, jaw steeling. "It's not, like, a test."

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:01 am

“Bullshit,” she snapped. “It is a test. You know it is.”

“I’m scared.”

“That doesn’t give you the right to punish him for every awful thing Ryan did to you, or every time Matt made the wrong call months ago. You asked him to show up, and he has. You asked him to be present, he is,” she said, counting them on her fingers. “If you keep standing there waiting for him to say one thing you know he struggles with, you’re going to lose him.”

The crack in my chest widened.

“So, he didn’t say ‘I love you’ in a dramatic monologue. Maybe that’s not how he’s wired. But you know it.” She gripped the handle on the side of the bed, leaning over me. “I mean, fuck, Si, I know it and I’ve known him for all of ten minutes.”

I wiped hastily at my eyes again, hesitating before nodding once. “Yeah. Yeah, okay.”

“Good,” she breathed. “God, babe, I know you’re psycho-pregnant right now, but you’ve got to chill out. Just try not to ruin this.”

Chapter 30

Matt

Traffic was shit.

It always was around now, just enough time lost between leaving the office and getting on the interstate to ensure I hit the red lights, construction zones, and people who were clearly lost and didn't know how to merge.

But even with the frustration of it, the weight that had clung to my shoulders during my usual drive home before, wasn't there anymore. Not like it used to be.

Because going home stopped feeling heavy.

Even now, weeks into our new routine, I caught myself thinking about her being there like I wasn't used to it yet, like it still surprised me to have someone waiting for me who wasn't an almost-six-year-old or Margot.

Sienna, even confined to bedrest, somehow still found ways to take care of me. I didn't know when or how she was finding the time to do it, but most work mornings, there was a packed lunch waiting for me in the fridge, whether I was going into the office or working upstairs. Each one had a little Post-It note on top, something ridiculous scribbled on it each time.

Today's? Don't forget to eat lunch this time, or I'll send an anonymous email to all of your employees with that security camera footage of you doing Zach's dino-dance out back last night.

I'd snorted when I read it this morning, and now the Tupperware sat empty on the passenger seat.

She'd managed to keep her dry, ridiculous humor, even while stuck horizontal and never fully comfortable, no matter how many fancy maternity pillows I bought her. Some mornings when I checked in on her, I'd find her already awake, scrolling on her phone, hair a mess, legs half-tangled in the sheets. Sometimes she was sick. Sometimes she was still out cold. Every time, though, my chest tightened in that way

I wasn't used to with someone who wasn't my kid.

I liked coming home to her.

When I pulled into the drive, the porch light was on, the faint flicker of the television lighting the window of the downstairs suite. I kicked off my shoes at the door, loosened my tie, and followed the soft trail of Zach's giggles through the hall.

He was curled up beside her on the bed, one leg thrown across her knees like he'd claimed her completely. Sienna was propped up against the headboard, hair in a messy bun, laughter bubbling as Zach proudly read a line from the book in her lap with all of the emphasis of a failed theatre kid.

He looked up when he saw me, eyes wide. "Daddy!"

I grinned, already stepping toward the bed. "Hey, tiger."

He launched himself across the mattress and into my arms without hesitation. I caught him mid-air, lifted him against my chest with one arm, and squeezed, pressing a kiss to the top of his head. He was starting to get too big for this, but neither of us cared. I'd milk it as long as I could.

"What book are we on today?" I asked, tossing Sienna a grin before looking down at Zach.

Zach's nose scrunched. "I dunno the title."

Sienna lifted it from her lap, showing me the cover. "Bookthreenow of Dinosaur Treehouse."

"Wow," I said. "Have they actually built the treehouse yet or...?"

Sienna snorted. “Nope. Still gathering materials.”

“They foundscrewstoday,” Zach chirped.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:01 am

“In the Mesozoic Era? That’s impressive,” I smirked.

Sienna exaggeratedly mouthed, Don’t question it.

I chuckled and ruffled the top of Zach’s hair. “How about you go tell Margot all about it? I need a minute with Sienna.”

Zach nodded, already wiggling to get down, and the second I let his feet hit the floor, he bolted with a, “Margoooooot!”

Sienna rolled her eyes as I climbed onto the bed. “Did you eat your lunch today?”

“I did,” I grinned, shifting until I was beside her, taking Zach’s spot, leaning back against the headboard shoulder-to-shoulder with her. “No need to blackmail me.”

“I wouldn’t have to if you just ate your lunches with a normal regularity?—”

“So, you admit to blackmail? Tsk tsk,” I teased. “You’ll be hearing from my lawyer, Ms. James.”

Her eyes narrowed. I kissed her on the forehead, right where her brows had scrunched.

“How was today?” I asked softly.

“Oh, you know, so eventful,” she grumbled. “Finished another show that I barely remember half of. Started another book for myself, then Zach got home. Yours?”

“Better, now.” My fingers caught a lock of her hair, hooking it behind her ear gently. “You’re antsy.”

“Of course, I am.” Her head slumped forward onto my shoulder, her hand fisting in the fabric of my dress shirt. “I did need to talk to you, though.”

My brow rose. “Shoot.”

“I’m not trying to overstep,” she said carefully, picking her head up just enough to look at me. “But I used to work with kids around Zach’s age when I was a teacher’s assistant, and... I learned how to pick up on certain things.”

I shifted, a little more alert. “What kind of things?”

She rolled her lips between her teeth. “I’ve been helping him a lot more with his homework,” she said. Her eyes flicked between mine, a little uncertain. “And we’ve been reading books, obviously. He’s smart, Matt. Seriously smart, especially for his age. But he gets... stuck, in weird places. Swaps letters sometimes, guesses words instead of sounding them out. He hides it really well, especially when he’s reading out loud, but I’ve time to really sit with him?—”

“You think he’s dyslexic?” I asked. The words slipped out, easy, calm, unsurprised. But a pang of guilt hit me—I should have noticed that.

“...Yeah,” she breathed. “That doesn’t mean he isn’t?—”

“I know.” I cupped her cheek, stroking her skin gently with my thumb. “I’m dyslexic, too.”

She went utterly still.

“Wasn’t diagnosed until I was ten. Think it’s one of the reasons my parents were so uninterested in me,” I said, my jaw tightening for just a second before calming. “I’d been branded as the kid who didn’t try hard enough before a teacher caught it. Too lazy, too distracted, too difficult.”

She didn’t say anything for a second, just watched me, her gaze softening. “Zach’s not difficult. Neither were you.”

“I know.” I sighed, running a hand down my face. “Fuck, I should have caught this.”

She shook her head. “No—no. Do not blame yourself. I’ve been here for weeks with him, and I only just caught it today, and I know what to look for.”

“Surely, I should too,” I said, huffing out a weak laugh that I didn’t mean. “I’ve lived it.”

“Yeah, forty-odd years ago before you got help.”

My lips quirked upward. “Don’t?—”

“You’re a good dad, Matt,” she said, grinning softly, her provocation left to the wayside. “A great one. Don’t doubt yourself on that. Zach’s lucky to have you, and the girls are too.”

I looked at her, really looked—tired eyes, bare face, swollen belly, still fucking beautiful—and before I could even think twice, the words slipped out of me. “Yeah, well, they’re all lucky to have you as their mom.”

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:01 am

Sienna blinked at me. The words settled in for both of us, the air shifting, not tense, awkward, or startled, but full.

It didn't scare me like I thought it would.

We sat in the quiet for a long moment, everything shifting, everything almost slotting into place. I'd always been afraid of this, of family, of depending on someone else and letting them depend on me. No escape hatch.

But now, looking at her, seeing the way her lips twitched up, the way she sank into the idea like it felt right... There wasn't a hint of fear in me. The thought of her being Zach's mom was easy.

She leaned back against the headboard again, fighting a grin, staring up at the ceiling. "Don't get any stupid ideas that I'm in love with you or anything just because I'm becoming his mom."

I laughed, quiet and low, and took her hand in mine. "Wouldn't dream of it."

"Good," she smirked, eyes closing. "Because it's definitely not true."

My mouth scrunched as I fought back another chuckle. "Of course. You just moved into my house, are helping raise my kid, and are carrying two more of mine. Very normal, platonic arrangement."

"Exactly. You get it."

Chapter 31

Sienna

I was starting to feel like a whale. A sarcastic, mildly charming whale with excellent taste in maternity loungewear that I didn't need to pay for, but a whale, nonetheless.

Seven months in. I'd officially reached the point where rolling over was a three-step process and putting on socks felt like scaling Everest, and my stomach was the size of a normal full-term pregnancy — maybe bigger. Bedrest hadn't been that bad the first couple of weeks. I'd at least been able to coordinate shifting my job to a maternity cover hire and talk lesson plans and course material from bed, but once the handover was done and the forced relaxation, naps, snacks, and endless hours of streaming lost its luster, I well and truly felt like I was inching into prison territory.

Still, though, I masked the restlessness as much as I could with Zach and let it out around Matt instead — with sass and sarcasm and a revolving door of threats about Matt eating his packed lunch.

But just after nine, with the house quiet, Zach tucked in upstairs, and Margot off for her usual couple of days, I wasn't as agitated as usual. I scrolled through my phone, half-watching a baking competition rerun, waiting for Matt to finish whatever business call he'd said he needed to take over an hour ago.

But then he was there, filling the doorway, his eyes a little brighter than usual as he watched me. "Put your phone down," he said softly, his lips twitching upward. "I've got a surprise for you."

I raised a brow at him. "If it's another pair of those socks with the rubber grippies on the bottom that make me feel like a mental patient, I'm staging a coup."

He snorted and crossed to the bed. “It’s not. Promise,” he grinned, leaning down and hooking an arm under my legs. “Come on.”

“Oh, my God, you’re not carrying me,” I laughed, trying to squirm away from his arm, but I was too goddamn big to move easily. His other came around my back. “Matt, I’m enormous?—”

“You’re glowing.”

“I’m the size of a fucking sedan.”

In one quick movement, he hoisted me up against his chest without so much as a grunt. “Then let’s take you for a test drive.”

I snorted. “Romance truly isn’t dead.”

“Well, I wasn’t going to let you penguin-waddle across the floor in your non-grippy socks,” he smirked, turning sideways to get us out the door of the downstairs suite. “Just keep thinking of it as romantic.”

“You’re deranged,” I said, letting my head fall against his collarbone.

“Just humor me, sweetheart.” His lips pressed against my temple, quick, fleeting, as he carried me through the kitchen and toward the already-open back door.

I blinked at the change. The usually quiet, secluded back patio had been transformed — blankets and cushions spread out across the floor, twinkling fairy lights strung along the railing, soft music playing low from a hidden speaker. There was a candlelit tray with an assortment of desserts, and a bottle of chilled rosé sitting in an ice bucket in the center, a little bouquet of white tulips sitting in a vase next to it. The bite in the air was minimal tonight, the southern swing of cold to freezing having swung back to

almost-spring temperatures.

“Is that non-alcoholic?” I asked, blinking at the setup. What is he planning?

“Obviously.”

“Can’t believe you went with the picnic theme again.”

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:01 am

He snorted, crossing the decking toward the array. “Don’t start.”

“You havesucha type,” I grinned, looking up at him.

“Yeah, well,” he started, slowly setting me down on the cushions like I weighed nothing, “I’d have taken you back to Massachusetts for another one if the trees weren’t dead and we wouldn’t freeze our asses off. And I’m pretty sure your OB said no more flying.”

“Aww,” I teased. “You missed our first date.”

He rolled his eyes as he threw a blanket around my shoulders before sitting down opposite me. “You thinkthatwas our first date? Not the restaurant back in Tulum?”

I leaned back into the cushions, lifting my knees a little and resting my hand on my stomach. “Nah. Tulum was nice, and don’t get me wrong, it had first-date vibes, but you weren’t serious then. Massachusetts was serious-Matt.”

“What was Tulum then?”

“Horny-Matt-who-had-feelings-but-had-no-idea-what-to-do-with-them,” I said simply. “Obviously.”

He rolled his eyes, but his lips played at the corners. “Eat your damn dessert, you menace.”

We sat in easy quiet as I picked at all the little desserts he’d arranged, trusting him

this time not to poison me. He poured out two glasses of the zero-percent rosé, and I picked mine up, tilting my head toward the sky. “Full moon’s out,” I said, tilting my chin toward it high up in the sky. “If we get attacked by werewolves, I’m not waiting for you to fight them off. I’m beelining inside and locking the door.”

He snorted. “Appreciate the loyalty.”

“I’m just saying,” I grinned. “Putting the mother of your kids in danger just for a date? Shameful.”

He laughed, stretching his legs a bit, one hand reaching over casually to cover mine. But he was fidgeting — just barely, his thumb tapping, his weight shifting on his rear. His jaw clenched a little, then relaxed, like he was mentally cataloguing every little movement he made.

I sniffed at the wine once, then took a sip. “This tastes like the grapes got cold feet and chickened out of being wine.”

His mouth twitched. “It’s the best zero-percent I could find.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “The best? Are you trying to bribe me into silence, or seduce me?”

“Yes.”

I snorted. “You’re still going to have to wait another few months for much more than a hand job,” I said.

“You say that like you’re not begging me every night to say, ‘fuck the OB’s rules’ and take you,” he countered, his head turning to me, something flickering behind those stupidly attractive hazel eyes.

“Yeah because I haven’t had an orgasm in over a fucking month,” I whined. “I’m desperate.”

Matt tutted. “Too risky.”

I glared at him.

He chuckled, his fingers squeezing mine. “I promise I’ll give you so many that your brain stops working the second you’re not on pelvic rest anymore,” he said softly. “Don’t think I’m not forever grateful for you going through this. I’ll be severely in your debt for the rest of my life for it.”

I blinked. That—that was sweeter than I was expecting from him.

He turned slightly, his body angling toward mine. “I wanted to talk to you about something,” he murmured, his voice a little quieter.

Heat prickled my cheeks. “Right, it’s all making sense now,” I teased, but the normal spark in my voice was dampened, my nerves rising just a little. “Is this the part where you finally say you love me? I mean, you’ve only moved me into your house and rearranged your entire life for me. The suspense is unbearable.”

Deflection. It was stupid, but it was the only way I knew how to deal with things right now.

He smiled, but it was a bit crooked, his gaze flicking away from me and then back like he wasn’t entirely confident for once.

“I meant it,” he said, “when I told you I wanted to do this properly, back at the hospital. I didn’t know exactly what that meant at the time. I just knew that I desperately didn’t want to keep making you feel like you were holding your breath,

just waiting for me to disappear.”

I stilled.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:01 am

He shifted again, sitting up until he was cross-legged, fully facing me. “The beginning was messy, Sienna. I know that. I handled it horribly. I didn’t know how to do any of this without pulling back the second anything felt real. And then I wanted to fix it, wanted to try, but you told me you were pregnant, and I’d already fucked up twice, and the stakes were so much higher, and I thought—fuck, I thought there was no way you’d believe me with just words that I was all in. I know I tried, but all I could do was show you.”

My throat closed in. “You did,” I whispered.

His lips twitched up a little. “I fell in love with you somewhere in the middle of all that showing,” he continued, his hand tightening around mine, his gaze dropping to it. “I didn’t notice it at first. But I know it now. It’s not—Fuck, it’s not the kind of love that comes with strings or conditions, not the kind I was terrified of. It’s just there. Everywhere. Overwhelming. All-consuming.”

I blinked, my eyes burning. “Matt?—”

“I love you,” he said, lifting his gaze back to mine. “I have for a while. I just didn’t know how to say the words right. And I—shit.”

He reached behind him, hand shaking just a little as he fumbled around beneath a pillow.

He pulled out a box.

A very, very small box.

My brain completely short-circuited as he opened it.

Inside, a ring sat on a little pillow that was just ostentatious enough to look like it belonged in a goddamn museum. A delicate yellow diamond, oval shaped, with two clear, square diamonds on either side, a gold band that shimmered under the soft twinkle of the fairy lights — it was warm and bold and nothing like the ones I'd imagined in the past. This was me. Or maybe us.

"You were wearing that stupid fucking yellow dress in the lounge when I first met you," he said, his voice hoarse, rough, cracking at the edges. "I've never been able to shake that memory. You looked like summer was sitting in the middle of the room and was daring me to try not to melt around it."

I choked on something between a laugh and a sob, my hand covering my mouth.

"I know it's fast," he murmured, "and we've done everything backward. But I don't care. I want this, I want you, I want our girls. I want to do every hard thing, every stupid fight, every long day. All of it, with you."

My jaw quivered, a shaky, broken breath escaping me.

"Sienna, marry me."

I choked on a sob. "You asshole," I whispered, tears sliding over my cheeks. "You romantic, ridiculous asshole."

His lips quirked up at the corner. "Is that a yes?"

I laughed, nodding when my mouth wouldn't work properly, trying to take enough of a steady breath to actually respond. "I love you. Christ, I love you, yes, of course, yes."

He let out a harsh breath, his hand shaking as he plucked the ring out of the box, barely holding it steady enough to slip over the first knuckle of my ring finger.

I could barely see through the blur of tears, but I felt the pressure when he got to the next knuckle, the way it didn't want to move forward any further, the way his shoulders started to silently shake with laughter.

"Fuck," he muttered, barely containing his laugh. "I'm, uh—I'm just now realizing that maybe I shouldn't have relied on the ring sizes that the stylist at Regale took of you pre-pregnancy."

A full-blown cackle burst out of me. "Matt, my hands have been swollen for, like, four weeks!"

He tipped forward, his head falling onto my shoulder, his body shaking with laughter. "I'm an idiot," he laughed. "There's no point in resizing this for two months."

"No," I snorted. "None at all."

"I'll get you a placeholder one in the meantime." He slid it off my finger, tucking it neatly back in the box before setting it beside him.

"You don't need?—"

"I'm not having you walking around ringless as my fiancée," he grinned, lifting back up to look me in the eyes. He took my face in his hands, his face softening as if I were something precious, all those hard lines smoothing out, and kissed me like I was the only thing in the world that mattered.

Well, me and Zach and the girls.

“Matt,” I deadpanned, my voice barely a whisper against his lips. “I’m not walking around anywhere. I’m basically decorative at this point.”

Epilogue

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:01 am

Matt

The villa overlooked the Amalfi Coast, all crumbling cliffs and soft sunlight, the sea stretching out so far it blurred into the sky. The ceremony was private—lavish, but intimate—mostly the way Sienna had insisted when she'd caught me attempting to book a cathedral that could accommodate four hundred guests. "We're not throwing the fucking Met Gala, Matt," she'd said.

I'd let her win that one.

It didn't matter where it was. Didn't matter who was there, outside of us, Zach, Bea, and Bella. What mattered was her becoming mine, really and trulymine.

We'd planned it fast. It had barely been more than six months after the twins were born that she'd looked at me and said, "Amalfi Coast?" as if we'd been spit balling ideas for it — we hadn't. It took me zero convincing, and within a week, we'd had almost everything booked, and within a month, we'd flown across the Atlantic.

Sex on the plane had been much easier this time with Margot minding the kids and a private room on my—our—jet.

I'd invited Ryan. Purely out of spite. I'd imagined him standing somewhere near the back, Lauren on his arm, facetight with fake support while I married the woman he'd broken and tried to scare away from me. But he didn't show. I wasn't surprised — just a little disappointed I couldn't gloat in person.

Anyone who mattered was there.

Jules looked like she'd stepped out of a Vogue editorial on my dime in her pale, light green dress, smug as hell because apparently she'd known we'd end up here before we had. Margot wore more of a deep, muted green, a two-piece set of flowing pants and a dress shirt, ever prepared in case one of the kids needed wrangling. And when the ceremony music started and Zach walked out in his little suit, six and taller and proud as he pushed the twins' stroller down the aisle like it was a royal parade, I didn't stand a chance against the burning behind my eyes.

My chest cracked open watching them.

My boy. My girls. All of them, a part of this.

But then the music shifted, swelling, and nothing in the goddamn world could've prepared me for her.

She didn't wear white. That was the first thing I noticed. Instead, she'd gone with the one color she knew would get a fucking rise out of me — soft fucking yellow.

It was delicate, sweet, off the shoulders on her arms, but clinging all the way down to her thighs. It was barely a wedding dress, but it didn't matter. It undid me all the same. It fit her like a glove, hugging every inch of her that made me weep, and her hair was twisted back and out of her face with gold pins, brunette waves cascading down her back with ease. But it was the look in her eyes, steady and sharp and locked on mine, that hit harder than anything I'd felt in my life.

The way she'd looked in Tulum was nothing compared to this.

This was psychological warfare. This was against the Geneva Convention.

She smirked when she saw my face, like she knew, and of course she did. She knew exactly what she was doing when she picked that.

The ceremony wasn't long. We kept the formalities brief, just enough to satisfy the officiant, just enough to keep the illusion of tradition. But then it was our turn to speak.

She went first.

"Matt," she said, holding both of my hands in hers, her eyes locked on mine. "When I met you, I thought you were an emotionally stunted, rich asshole who couldn't commit to dinner plans, let alone a relationship. And I was right."

I snorted.

"But," she carried on, "you learned to show up. You made space. You let me eat all of the pickles out of your fridge without complaining. You built a life with me, one layer at a time."

Her throat worked, her eyes starting to go glassy.

"Even when you were scared," she added, her voice cracking. "You—You've given me the world and then had the nerve to act like I was the one doing you a favor." She squeezed my hands. "So, this is me saying yes to every part of it, not just marrying you. Yes to you. Yes to Zach. Yes to Bea and Bella. Yes to the long nights and the hard days and all the weird shit we'll probably fight about later. I'm in, all the way, for as long as you'll have me."

My throat ached as it tightened. I lifted a hand to her cheek, swiping at the tears that had slipped free, and started mine. "Sienna," I said, trying not to sound like I was choking. "I used to think that love had to be complicated. I used to think it was dangerous, something you ran from or outgrew. And then you showed up and tore every goddamn rule apart. You ruined my peace?—"

She laughed, wet and loud.

“—hijacked myhouse, insulted my charcuterie orders, teased me mercilessly, and made me fall so stupidly in love with you I forgot how to be afraid.”

I rolled my lips between my teeth, letting myself breathe for just a second as I dropped my forehead to hers.

“So, I promise,” I went on, a little quieter, mostly just for her, “to never run. To never disappear. To let the kids tell everyone that their mom is cooler than me, even when they’re wrong. I promise to fight for you, to show up for you, to let you insult me for as long as you want to, to let you threaten me with stupid Post-It notes and never tell the police.”

“Big of you,” she murmured.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:01 am

I grinned. “I love you,” I whispered, pressing a kiss to her cheek. “And I’m never letting you go.”

The officiant hadn’t even finished the sentence before she grabbed me by the lapels and had her mouth on mine — like she’d been waiting the whole damn day to do it.

It wasn’t formal. It wasn’t traditional. But it was ours, and it was perfect.

The sea stretched out in every direction, quiet and infinite under the stars, the shoreline just a warm glow in the distance. The yacht cut through the water in silence, sleek and decadent — it was over the top, absurd, and exactly what she’d accused me of owning over a year ago.

She’d disappeared into the closest bathroom the second she’d stepped on board, rifled through my bag, and come out dressless and barefoot in one of my white button-downs, murmuring something about her dress being uncomfortable and her breasts being sore. Now, Sienna leaned against the railing, her hair flowing in the breeze, relaxed in a way I hadn’t seen since before the twins, before the bedrest — probably not since she’d fallen asleep on me on the way back from Massachusetts. The rings on her fingers caught the moonlight, yellow, gold, and perfect, and God, I’d won.

“Can’t believe I was right about your stupid yacht,” she said, her gaze locked on the water reflecting the low-hanging moon. “So, gaudy.”

I grinned, crossing the deck toward her, my undone bow tie hanging loose around my

neck. “You wanted to see it,” I reminded her.

“It’s disgusting.”

“True.”

“So,” she said, glancing back at me. “How many girls have you seduced on this floating palace?”

“Honestly?” I smirked, coming up behind her and wrapping my arms around her waist, letting my lips fall just beside her ear. “None. I bought it to use whenever I wanted to take Zach around Europe. But you’re welcome to be the first.”

She snorted, pushing back against me just enough to make my blood start to pool between my hip bones. “That sounds like a lie.”

“It’s not. Swear on the girls’ lives.”

She gasped exaggeratedly. “Matt,” she laughed. “You can’t just swear on their lives when you’re so obviously lying. This is supposed to be the part of our wedding night where you ravish me, not where you risk the safety of our children with whatever tricky, God is out there listening.”

I smirked, trailing my lips down her neck, breathing in the perfume that smelled so intensely familiar. “Not a lie, sweetheart,” I murmured. “And besides, this is the part where I’m supposed to tell you what to do and you’re supposed to follow orders without complaint, since you’re my wife and I believe, technically, that means I own your soul.”

She cackled. “You wish.”

“It’s a legally binding contract, Sienna.”

“You’re insane.”

“It’s my right,” I teased, dragging my nose against that spot beneath her ear that made her breath catch every time. “You should probably start addressing me as ‘sir’ now?—”

“Matt.”

My hand went flat against her stomach, pulling her entirely flush against my body. I popped open a button. “Yes, Mrs. Strathmore?”

“You—ahh,” she paused as my fingers drifted across bare skin beneath the shirt, “—you realize I’m never going to do what I’m told, right?”

I hummed a chuckle against her skin, nipping at her earlobe. “Not even a little bit?”

Her hand lifted, slid into my hair, and pulled. “Not even if you beg.”

I groaned, half laughing, half aching for her. “You should respect your elders,” I teased. “What kind of example does that set for our kids, hmm? I’m a very fragile man of nearly fifty.”

She burst out laughing. “You’re forty-eight, you psycho. I’ve seen your workout routine,” she grinned, turning her head just enough to look at me. “You’ve got more core strength than the average twenty-year-old.”

“I could still throw out my back,” I countered.

“You are the most dramatic man I have ever?—”

I twisted her slightly in my arms as I pressed my lips to hers, not quite sweet, not quite loving, but heated in every way she was igniting in me. I turned her more, twisting her body to mine, pinning her against the railing as I deepened it, my fingers sliding into her hair and sending little pins skittering onto the deck beneath us or into the water below.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:01 am

I kissed her like I wanted to ruin her, my teeth catching her lower lip just to hear that sharp little gasp she'd make. Her body arched into mine, her fingers twisting in my hair like she still thought she was in charge.

She wasn't.

But if she wanted to fight me for it, I'd let her.

Her breath hitched as I pulled back just enough to smirk down at her. Her lips, swollen and pink, parted on a ragged exhale.

"You're a hazard," I murmured against her lips, sliding a hand down to her bare thigh and hitching it around my hip. "All these fucking pins. You're lucky one didn't take my eye out."

She scoffed, but it turned into a moan as I bit at her earlobe. "Maybe I wanted to maim you."

"Liar." I hauled her up into my arms before she could protest, her other leg wrapping around me on instinct. She was light but warm, the heat of her already burning through my suit. "You like me fully functional."

Her arms tightened around my neck as I carried her across the deck, the yacht swaying gently beneath us. The master suite was all dark wood and low light, the bed already turned down—planned, obviously, because I'd known damn well we'd end up here tonight.

“This your grand seduction plan?” she asked, giggling as I dropped her onto the mattress, her hair fanning out around her wildly against the sheets. “Manhandling me like cargo?”

I braced a knee between her thighs as I shrugged my jacket off, popped a few buttons of my dress shirt, and then leaned over her. “Sweetheart,” I murmured, pushing her borrowed shirt up to her waist—of course she wasn’t wearing anything beneath this, God fucking dammit—and higher, over her breasts, forcing her arms up to peel it off her inch by inch. “If I were treating you like cargo tonight, you’d be tied down.”

Her breath caught. I grinned.

The sight of her sprawled out beneath me in nothing but the moonlight and the two lit sconces on the wall was enough to make my pulse roar in my ears. I dragged my fingers up her inner thigh, not quite reaching where she wanted me to, as the yacht swayed again.

“You’re overdressed,” she muttered, her nails scraping the front of my half-open shirt in protest.

“I know.” I caught her wrist, pinning it to the pillow above her head. “And you talk too much.”

She let out a weak little noise when I leaned down, my lips brushing the curve of her breast, close, so close. I wanted to make her writhe, wanted to make her squirm, wanted to make her fucking beg for once.

“Matt—”

I chuckled against her skin, nipping at the underside of her breast, just hard enough to make her hips jerk up into me. “We’ve been at this long enough for you to know how

this goes, Sienna.”

She whined, her hips rising again, testing me, always fucking testing me. I gripped her hip with my free hand, pushing her back down into the mattress. “I know,” she hissed. “But I also know you hate losing.”

I dragged my tongue over her nipple, reveling in the curse that fell from her lips. “Then it’s a good thing I never do.”

Her laugh was cut short when I finally sucked her into my mouth, her back arching off the bed in surrender. I kept her wrist locked tight in my grasp, but her other hand fisted the sheets as I took my time, slow and deliberate swipes of my tongue, the graze of my teeth, until she was twisting beneath me, her chest flushed, whimpered little sounds falling from her lips.

“Tell me what you want,” I murmured against her skin, nipping at her collarbone as I made my way back up to her mouth.

“You know what I?—”

I caught her mouth in another bruising kiss before pulling back just an inch. “Then ask me properly.”

Her eyes darkened, frustrated and needy, as I slid back down her body, pressing open-mouthed kisses along her ribs, her hips, my grip on her wrist loosening entirely. The salt air clung to her skin, mingling with the scent of her as I settled between her thighs.

Of course, she didn’t heed my request. She ignored it like she was made for testing my patience.

She gasped as I dragged my tongue up the expanse of her, slow and filthy, tasting the proof of just how much my touch affected her.

“Still so fucking stubborn,” I murmured against her, closing my lips around her.

Her legs tensed around my head, her back arching. “Matt?—”

“Mmm?” I flicked my tongue, relentless, drinking in every little twitch of her beneath me.

“I swear to God if you stop?—”

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 8:01 am

I laughed, low and rough against her, and did it again, slower this time, letting her feel every stroke before pulling back just enough for my breath to ghost across her skin. “You’ll what?”

Her fingers fisted in my hair, trying to push my mouth back to her. “I’ll shove you overboard.”

“Try.” I kissed her inner thigh before dragging my lips back to her center. “I dare you.”

She didn’t. Just rocked against my mouth instead with a desperate little whimper that made my cock push painfully against my suit trousers. I could feel her trembling, her breathcoming faster, her body tightening, but Iknewher. This isn’t how she wanted to fall apart.

Right on cue, she pulled hard on my hair, yanking like she had a vendetta against me, pulling me back up to her mouth and crashing her lips to mine, tasting herself on my tongue. Her nails dug into my shoulders, harsh andneedy, her hips rolling up against me and grinding shamelessly, all that defiance dissolving away.

“Please,” she whimpered against my mouth, biting down on my lower lip hard enough to sting.

I groaned. Like I could ever fucking deny her when it wasn’t medically necessary. I unbuttoned my shirt the rest of the way, shrugging it from my shoulders and letting it fall onto the sheets. “Since you asked so nicely,” I murmured, popping my belt open, and then my slacks, moving hastily until there was nothing left between us.

I slid into her with one smooth thrust, watching every flicker of pleasure cross her face as she clenched around me. She moaned, her chin tipping up, her head digging into the sheets beneath her as I pushed her thighs further up above her ribs. “Finally,” she moaned.

I wasn’t easy on her just because it was our wedding night.

I set a brutal pace, my hand gripping her hip hard enough to leave bruises. The boat rocked beneath us, the rhythm only driving me deeper, harder. Her legs locked around my waist, pulling me closer, taking every bit that I gave her, moaning my name like I was somehow both her savior and her sinner.

“Say it,” I ground out, my voice raw, as I felt her body start to constrict again.

She laughed, breathless, her nails raking down my back. “Say what?”

“That I win.”

She arched into me, her breath hitching. “Fuck you,” she grinned.

I rolled my eyes, angling my hips just right for her, watching the way she shattered beneath me like the world was collapsing. I didn’t stop, couldn’t, dragged her through every second of it, chasing my own release as she gasped and cried beneath me, biting down on her hand to muffle another cry.

I pulled it away from her. “Kids aren’t here,” I reminded her, panting. “Let me hear you.”

The earth-shattering moan she gave me in answer had me falling apart, buried so deep inside of her I swear I saw stars. I kissed her, a stuttered groan spilling into her mouth, my cock twitching as I let go inside of her.

Still half-dazed, my kiss slowed, soft and still wanting, but she broke from it with a shaky breath.

“Fine,” she murmured, her brows creasing in the center. “You win.”

I laughed and pressed my lips to her chin, drinking in the way her eyelids fluttered. “Every time, sweetheart,” I grinned, pressing my hand into hers, our fingers interlocking, the warmth of her wedding rings pressed against my palm. “Every time.”