



# Risk It All

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**Category:** Romance

**Description:** I needed a miracle.

What I got was a cocky, late-as-hell comedian with too many jokes and a smile that could ruin lives.

Sharing a cross-country road trip with Anthony Bronson wasn't part of my five-year plan, but when a once-in-a-lifetime job interview lands on the opposite coast and my bank account laughs in my face, desperate times call for cocky measures.

He's messy where I'm meticulous.

Loud where I'm quiet.

And somehow, in between pit stops, comedy clubs, and too many shared hotel beds... he starts to feel like home.

This was supposed to be a ride. Just a ride.

So why does it feel like fate?

**Total Pages (Source):** 17

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:28 am*

E merson

My heels pinch my toes as I walk faster down the busy sidewalk. People keep bumping into me, but I'm too excited to care. I just keep grinning, no matter how many dirty looks I get, and continue on my way.

My cell phone is still clutched tightly in my hand, my crossbody handbag bumping against my hip with every hurried step that I take. My apartment building comes into view and for the first time since I moved into the place, I smile when I see the old, crumbling brick building.

I jog up the stairs, wincing when the strap of my heel digs into my toe. I live on the fourth floor with my best friend, Layla. She's a writer, so I know that she's home and will be excited to hear my news.

I burst into the tiny apartment, tripping over Layla's yoga mat and catching myself on the wall by the door. I kick off the offending high heels and dodge shoes, stacks of books, and a laundry basket full of clothes that I'm not sure are clean or dirty on my way to Layla's bedroom/home office.

The door is cracked and I push it open, smiling when I hear her favorite ASMR soundtrack playing. Layla is at her desk in the corner of her bedroom, her black curly hair is tied up messily in a bun on top of her head as she hunches over her laptop.

She looks like the words are really flowing and I bite my lip, twirling a strand of my dark auburn hair around my finger as I debate interrupting her or waiting to tell her my exciting news.

She saves me from having to decide a minute later when she lets out a frustrated snarl and starts slamming down her finger on the delete button over and over again.

“Hey,” I say, startling her out of her writer’s funk.

“Hey! When did you get home?” she asks as she spins around in her desk chair.

“I got the call today.”

“For the interview? You’re moving to New York?” she asks excitedly, leaping to her feet in excitement.

“If I get the job, I will,” I say with a mile-wide smile.

I knew that she would be just as excited about the news as I am. She’s always been my biggest cheerleader.

We met in college at the University of Chicago. She was there as an English and creative writing major, and I was there to study art history. We had been partnered up as roommates and had hit it off right away.

It seems a little surprising that we became such good friends since we’re opposites in a lot of ways.

Layla is bubbly, always excited about something, and she can walk up to anyone and strike up a conversation. She’s lean with coal-black hair and striking light blue eyes.

I’m more of a wallflower and a homebody.

I’d rather be walking around an art gallery or at home watching TV than at a nightclub or some party.

Layla dragged me to a few parties when we were freshmen, but she learned quickly that me and frat parties just weren't a good mix.

I had been so uncomfortable at them that after the second one, she had just let me stay in our dorm room, curled up in my bed with a bowl of popcorn.

She's tan, compliments of her Italian heritage from her mom's side. I'm so pale that I could be mistaken for Casper the ghost. My hair is a deep red color with shades of copper threaded in and is bone straight, hanging around my shoulders.

"When is your interview?" she asks, dragging me out into the living room.

"Next Thursday. In New York," I say, dropping the bomb.

I'm excited about getting this interview. Working at the Malhoy Gallery is a dream come true, but the one thing that is tripping me up, is how I'm going to make it to the interview. When I had applied, I had hoped that they would do it online or over Skype or the phone.

Apparently not.

I've been working at a smaller gallery out here in Los Angeles since Layla and I first moved to town, but I'm just a lowly assistant and my paychecks barely cover my share of the rent and ramen for the month.

There's no way that I can afford a flight to New York and back and then a hotel while I'm there.

"Yikes. How are you going to swing that?" Layla asks, pulling out our half-empty bottle of wine from the fridge and pouring us each a glass.

“I was thinking I would drive it. I did the math and it would be cheaper to drive and sleep in the car or at some cheap motels than it would be to get a flight last minute and some hotel in New York for a few days. Even still, I’m not sure that I have enough in savings to cover gas and everything,” I admit.

She nods, pausing with the wine bottle suspended in air as a thought hits her. I’m hoping that it’s some solution to my problem, but knowing Layla, it could be that she figured out a scene that she was working on or a new idea for a book just hit her.

I slide my glass across the counter, picking it up as she works whatever out in her head. I take a sip, trying not to gag on the bitter taste. This bottle was a different brand that was a little cheaper but it tastes like trash. Should have stuck to our boxed wine.

“I might know someone that could help with expenses,” Layla says, and I raise my eyebrow at her, encouraging her to continue.

“I have a friend who is trying to get to New York soon too. He’s a comedian and has a chance to do a stand-up and audition for some fancy comedy club out there next week.

He was just talking about trying to figure out a ride out there. ”

“I’m not sure that I want to drive across the country with some guy that I’ve never met,” I start, and she waves me off.

“He’s harmless! He’ll help you pay for gas and food or whatever. He can even help drive. Maybe you wouldn’t even need to pay for hotel rooms then!” she says, getting excited with the idea the more that she thinks about it.

It does make sense, I guess. I’m just not really looking forward to climbing into my

little station wagon with a stranger for the next few days.

“How do you know this guy?” I ask, needing more details before I say yes.

I love Layla, but she has some friends that make me a little nervous. Hazard of being able to talk to anyone, I suppose.

“I went to a comedy open mic a few months ago and he was there performing. He’s really funny and he was at the bar afterward.

I went to grab a drink during one of the other guy’s sets, he was really awful by the way, and I told Anthony that I thought that he was hilarious.

We started talking and I’ve seen him at a few comedy clubs now and then.

I just ran into him last night when I went out with the David guy. That’s why I thought of him.”

I nod, biting my bottom lip.

“How was your date with David, anyway?”

“Boring. The guy has no sense of humor. I mean, he took me to an open mic and then bought me one glass of wine and he expected me to sleep with him at the end of the night. He didn’t even laugh at any of the comics, so it was weird,” she says, her nose scrunching up as she remembers last night.

Layla is always going out on first dates but never second ones. She claims that she hasn’t met anyone who is worthy of her, and I have to agree. She is pretty awesome. I just wish that I had that kind of confidence or was even half as self-assured as she is.

“So, do you want Anthony’s number?” she asks, getting us back on track.

I tug on the ends of my hair as I roll my options over in my head.

Do I really want to drive across country with some random guy?

No, but I want the Malhoy Gallery job more than anything and if spending a few days in my car with this Anthony guy is what I have to do to have a shot at my dream job, then that’s what I’m going to do.

“Yeah, give me his number. I guess it can’t hurt to talk to him for a few minutes and ask if he wants to road trip with me.”

Layla grins, running back to her room to grab her cell phone. I pick up my wine, taking a big swallow as I already start to wonder if I’m making a mistake.

“Just sent it to you!” Layla calls from her bedroom and I feel my phone vibrate in my hand.

I take a deep breath before I open the message and type out a new text to Anthony.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:29 am*

Anthony

UNKNOWN: Hi, my name's Emerson. I'm a friend of Layla's. She gave me your number because she heard that you needed a ride to New York. I need help with expenses so if you're willing to help with gas and hotels, then I can give you a ride.

I stare at the new text on my phone for a solid minute, trying to remember who Layla is. I meet a lot of people at the different comedy clubs and it takes me a few minutes to place a face to the name. Black hair, talkative girl. I've seen her here and there at different clubs.

That shouldn't be the part of the text that I'm worried about though.

I had just gotten the call yesterday about auditioning for The Comedy Vault but I was at a loss as to how I was going to make it out there.

I have a million things to do before my audition next week. I should be tightening up my set, working on new jokes and perfecting my timing. If I can nail down my details on making it to New York though, then I would only have to focus on my craft for the rest of the week.

I grab my phone and my fingers hover over the screen as I think of what to say.

ANTHONY: Hey, man. Yeah, I need to get to New York by next Friday night. When are you leaving?

EMERSON: I'd like to leave Sunday morning. Before noon, but the earlier the better.



I need to be there by Thursday so that should give us plenty of time.

ANTHONY: Sounds good. I'd like to stop in a few major cities so that I can hit up some open mics.

EMERSON: I'll have to check the route. I was hoping that we could drive straight through and take turns sleeping.

Jeez, doesn't this guy sound like a barrel full of fun. I roll my eyes, studying the text messages. Maybe I should just suck it up and ask my brother to help me pay for a ticket or something. This Emerson dude seems super uptight with his schedule and routes, but if he can get me to New York....

It's only going to be a few days , I remind myself. You can handle a few days with this guy.

ANTHONY: Okay. Do you need me to meet you somewhere? I live on North Soto Street.

EMERSON: That's on the way. I'll pick you up at ten.

ANTHONY: See you then.

I smile, sliding my phone into my pocket. It feels good to have one part of the trip figured out at least.

The apartment door opens and my friend and roommate, Theo, comes stumbling in, dragging a case behind him.

"Hey, man!" he calls out, grinning as he kicks the front door closed.

“Hey. How was the shoot?” I ask him as I stand and head into the kitchen to grab something to eat.

Theo is my roommate. We’ve been close friends since we were kids, grew up playing at each other’s houses, but we had lost track of each other when we went off to different colleges.

I had been back home when my mom told me that Theo had moved out to the west coast. He’s a kickass photographer and was trying to break into the industry.

I had messaged him and asked if he needed a roommate.

Luckily for me, his last roommate was just about to move out to go live with his girlfriend back in Chicago and I was able to move in two weeks later.

Theo has been working his way up from photographer’s assistant to running his own shoots. In the last few months, he’s managed to snag a few high-profile jobs but he’s gone a lot, flying to New York or Europe for shoots.

“It was great,” Theo says with a sigh.

He looks tired and I try to remember where he just flew in from. I think it was Florida.

“How have things been here?” he asks as he grabs a beer and leans back against the countertop.

“Same as when you left. I heard back from The Comedy Vault. I audition next week.”

“No shit?” Theo asks, grinning at me.

“No shit. I’m leaving Sunday morning.”

“How you getting there?” Theo asks, well aware of my current financial situation. “Is Alexander footing the bill?”

Alexander is my millionaire younger brother. He owns a real estate investment company out in New York City and I’m planning on staying with him when I get out there but I haven’t told him that yet.

I could ask him for the money or to buy me a plane ticket. I know that he would do it, but it doesn’t feel right to ask him for money. I’ve always been proud and I want to make my own way in life. I have enough in savings to split the trip with that Emerson guy.

“No, I found someone who is driving out to New York too, and I’m going to get a ride with them and split gas.”

“Who?” Theo asks, his head disappearing into the fridge as he looks for something to eat. Joke’s on him, because I haven’t gone grocery shopping since he left on his trip.

“Some guy named Emerson.”

Theo looks confused, probably trying to remember when I mentioned him before. I reach past him, grabbing the milk that’s about to expire out of the fridge and dumping the last of it on my bowl of cereal.

“Did you put in your notice for work yet?” he asks and I shake my head no.

I work at a little bookstore in downtown Los Angeles. It’s probably going to go under soon. Not many brick and mortar stores can compete with the online retailers. That’s part of the reason why I’m so excited for this audition.

Getting into The Comedy Vault would open a ton of doors. I could hire an agent, start booking some shows, even if I'm an opener. I could start touring.

"Will you be moving out then?" Theo asks, and I notice that he doesn't seem that upset about if I were to.

"If I get the spot, then yeah. I'll be moving to New York."

"I got offered a few contracts out there and with Fashion Week and stuff coming up, I was thinking about moving out to New York too," he admits and I'm shocked to hear this.

I thought that Theo loved Los Angeles. He's right though. He has been spending more and more time out there lately, and I know that the modeling scene is big out there.

"Maybe we can room together," Theo suggests, and I jump on the offer.

"That would be awesome. Otherwise I was going to have to crash with Alexander and Eden."

"Aren't they newlyweds?" he asks and I nod, wincing as I think about what a nightmare it's going to be to stay with him for a night or two.

I love my brother and his wife, but of the two of them, Alexander is the more uptight of the two. His wife, Eden, helps to make him more laid back but I'm not thrilled to spend time with the newlyweds. The last time that I saw them, they hadn't been able to keep their hands off of each other.

"Cool, then we'll wait until next week before we start looking for apartments or making any decisions."

I nod, shoving a bite of cereal into my mouth as I lean back against the countertop and watch him look through the cabinets for something to eat.

“Is that all of the food we have?” he finally asks and I give him a cocky grin.

He curses under his breath before he looks at his watch.

“Don’t you have a show tonight?”

“Yeah, in an hour and a half.”

“Perfect. Let’s go get something to eat and then I’ll catch your show before I come home and pass out.”

I finish off my cereal, rinsing out the bowl before I grab my notepad, cell phone, and keys and follow him out the door.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:29 am*

Emerson

Sunday morning comes faster than I wanted it to. Layla helped me carry my two bags down to my car and then we hugged each other for a solid five minutes. I had laughed, hugging her tighter as we both reminded each other that it was only for a few days.

It's just been a while since we've gone more than a day or two without seeing each other.

I know that we'll be texting and talking on the phone all week.

I made Layla promise to check in with me every twelve hours to make sure that her friend hadn't murdered me.

Layla is avoiding a deadline so I know that she'll be looking for any excuse to be away from her laptop.

From the few text messages that we've sent, I have a feeling that this is going to be the road trip from hell.

The guy can't seem to stop calling me dude which is a huge pet peeve of mine.

I had wanted to correct him so badly when he first called me that, but I was hoping that it was just a slip or some kind of mistake.

I pull onto North Soto Street and park outside of the apartment building that Anthony

sent me last night when I checked that he would be ready by ten a.m. He had called me dude— again — but had assured me that he would be downstairs and waiting for me on time.

I have to circle the block twice before I can find a parking spot and I notice that there's no one waiting out front. I pull into the spot, happy that I was able to find one right by the front door. I text him, letting him know that I'm in the navy blue station wagon out front.

My old Subaru Outback has already been gassed up and I've set my stuff on the right side of the trunk so that there's room for his bags on the left.

When he still isn't down a few minutes later, I grit my teeth and send him another message, growing even more annoyed.

By quarter after ten, I'm seriously debating just driving off.

I'd have to survive off of peanut butter sandwiches the whole way and sleep in my car but maybe it might just be worth it.

I'm checking the traffic, about to hit my blinker when a tired, disheveled looking man in his late twenties comes rushing out of the apartment building, dragging a black suitcase behind him.

He looks around, spotting me in my station wagon, idling out front of the building.

He looks confused for a minute and goes back to searching the streets and I shift into drive, thinking that I dodged a bullet.

I didn't want to drive across country by myself but I really don't want to drive across country with some man-child who can't be on time to save his life.

I'm about to hit the gas and block the dude's number when that man runs over to my car and jumps in front of the bumper.

I frown, not in any mood to deal with this lunatic.

"Are you Emerson?" he shouts, his hands resting on the front of my car as he bends over the hood and meets my eyes.

I debate shaking my head. This guy is... not what I was expecting.

Even with wrinkled clothes, messy hair, and bloodshot eyes, he's heart-stoppingly beautiful. His eyes are like sapphires, sparkling in the morning sunlight and framed in the thickest lashes.

Those eyes are locked on me and I stare back, debating if I should drive off or admit that I'm who he's looking for.

His hair is dark brown, almost bordering on black, and is sticking up in every direction. I wonder if he just woke up.

He's more muscular than I expected. I thought most comedians were either out of shape with beer bellies or super skinny and pale. This man is neither.

He's a bit lanky and is easily over six feet tall but I can see his biceps straining against the sleeves of his shirt he rests on the hood of my car. He's not super ripped but the beer belly is nowhere in sight.

"Are you Emerson?" he asks again and I jerk my eyes away from his arms to meet his dark blue eyes.

"Yeah. You're late."



He pushes off of the hood and grabs his suitcase as he heads for the rear of my car. I reluctantly hit the button for the trunk and try not to grumble as he tosses his suitcase in the back and slams my trunk closed a little too hard for my liking.

He slides into the passenger seat, somehow making it seem like he's taking up all of the space in my car and I roll my eyes, turning onto the street.

The weather is beautiful and I slide my sunglasses on as I merge into traffic and head for the highway. Anthony shifts in his seat, trying to flip down the passenger seat visor but it hasn't worked since I bought it.

"I have an extra pair of sunglasses," I tell him reluctantly, not wanting him to break my car.

I pass him the extra pair of Ray-Bans that I have and he mumbles a thank you as he slides them onto his face.

We hit the on-ramp of the highway and I reach over to turn on the radio. I broke down and updated the stereo a few years ago so I can hook my phone up and play music that way. It was getting really hard to find cassette tapes.

"I thought you were a guy," Anthony says out of the blue and I look over at him, wondering if he's crazy.

"Why?" I ask, confused about what I could have said that would give him that impression.

"Your name. Emerson sounds like a dude's name."

"Stop saying dude," I say, an edge to my voice as I glare over at him.

“Okay,” he says, drawing the word out like he thinks I might be the crazy one.

We drive in silence for a bit and I’m starting to hope that he falls asleep when he speaks again.

“Where are we stopping tonight?” he asks me.

“I was hoping we could make it to Cedar City, Utah.”

“How about Las Vegas instead?”

“Las Vegas? That’s only like four, maybe five hours away!”

“Yeah, but I can hit up a few open mics. Plus, it’s not like we don’t have the time. We can stay for cheap in Las Vegas and then get an early start tomorrow morning. As early as you want,” he says like he’s being charitable.

I chew on my bottom lip. If we started really early tomorrow, then we could get to Denver, Colorado tomorrow night. Or maybe he could drive tomorrow and we wouldn’t have to stop or get another hotel room.

I look over at him. Do I trust him to drive my car? He almost broke the visor when he first got in and he slammed the trunk so hard I was worried that he was going to break it.

“If we stop in Las Vegas tonight, then we leave at six in the morning tomorrow and drive to Denver.”

“Deal,” he says way too quickly and I realize that he probably has another open mic set up in Denver.

“Wake me up when we get to Las Vegas,” Anthony says, closing his eyes and pushing his seat back as he crosses his arms over his chest and promptly falls asleep.

I roll my eyes but I don’t mind really. This way I don’t have to worry about making small talk.

I need gas right outside of Las Vegas and pull off of the highway and into the first gas station that I see. Anthony wakes and stretches as I pull to a stop, sitting up in his seat.

“I’ll pay for gas,” he says through a yawn as he climbs out of the car and I start to feel better about having him with me.

Maybe he isn’t such a dick.

I let him pump the gas as I run inside to go to the bathroom. I finish quickly and am headed outside to the car when I see that there’s a McDonald’s attached to the gas station. My stomach rumbles and I turn, heading over there when Anthony walks inside.

“Do you want anything?” I ask, nodding to the fast food chain.

“Big Mac meal with a Coke, please,” he says as he heads to the bathroom.

I order our food and grab a bottle of water from the gas station before I head back to the car. Anthony is outside, stretching his legs and he grabs the food from me as soon as he spots me.

“Thanks,” he says, popping some french fries into his mouth.

“Thanks for getting the gas.”

“Did you want me to drive?” he asks as I grab my keys out of my hoodie pocket.

“No, we’re almost there. I can do it.”

He shrugs and climbs into the passenger seat as I shove a chicken nugget into my mouth and start the old station wagon.

We finish off the food quickly and then silence stretches between us. It’s a little awkward and I search my brain for something to say. What the heck do people talk about when they want to make small talk?

“Why are you headed to New York?” he asks me and I tell him about my interview.

“So are you an artist?” he asks, wiping his hands off on a napkin.

“No, I mean I can draw some but I’m not going to be the next big artist. I just love art. The talent, the way artists can use nothing but a brush or some paint to make you feel whatever they want.”

I have a feeling that I sound like a dreamy, gushing fool, but I can’t stop myself.

Surprisingly, he doesn’t make fun of me or seem put off by my monologue. Instead, he asks me about my favorite artists and I’m surprised when he knows who they all are.

“Are you into art too?”

“I kind of have to be. My dad is an art history teacher at Harvard,” he says and I gape at him.

Luckily, we’re at a red light, so we don’t get into a wreck.

I can't contain myself and I think that I ask him about a million questions but he's a good sport and humors me. The conversation moves onto comedy as we hit the Las Vegas city limits and I ask him about his audition on Friday.

"Or is it bad luck to talk about your set before you do it? Are there rules?" I ask, unsure if he's superstitious or something.

He laughs. "No, you can talk about it."

Anthony convinces me to drive down the Strip so that we can see all of the cool hotels. We're going to be staying in one of the older motels on the old Strip since it's cheaper but since I want to see the sights too, I swing left onto Las Vegas Boulevard.

Traffic is rough but it gives us time to look around. Anthony points out the Excalibur and the Luxor and we debate which hotel looks like the coolest one to stay at. He says the Luxor but I choose the Bellagio. I remind him about the fountain show and he relents and chooses the Bellagio too.

"Are you going to come to the open mics with me tonight?" He asks.

"I don't know. It depends."

"On what?"

"Am I going to have to pretend that I loved your set and that you were great afterwards?"

I expect him to be offended or to make some sarcastic snide retort back but he surprises me by laughing.

The sound is full of confidence and it skitters across my skin, leaving goosebumps in

its wake.

I turn to him, wanting to see the smile that goes along with that laugh and I catch a glimpse of a cocky, self assured look on his face.

“Oh, trust me. It won’t be pretend,” he promises me and I can’t help but smile at how sure of himself he is.

It’s a little strange to meet an artist who doesn’t seem to have any doubts about their work.

I could barely handle critiques in college. I can’t imagine getting up on stage every night and having to deal with drunk unruly people.

What if you bomb?

I don’t think that I could handle that and it makes me respect Anthony in a way that I would any artist who is brave enough to get up on stage.

As we drive past the Bellagio, he promises to take me to see the fountain show after his set tonight.

I start to think that maybe stopping in Las Vegas won’t be so bad after all.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:29 am*

Anthony

I'm struggling to keep my eyes open.

I promised Emerson that I would be up and ready to go by six a.m., but I underestimated how tired I would be after spending half the night walking around Las Vegas and checking out the sights.

She wants to make it to Denver tonight and that's an eleven hour drive, closer to twelve and a half with stops for food and gas.

She had let me sleep this morning while she drove and while I'd like to think she was just being nice, I have a feeling that it's because she's too much of a control freak to let me have a turn driving her precious car.

I mean, I like Emerson. She's cool, a little nerdy, but I kind of dig her brand of nerdy.

She seems a little tightly wound, a little uptight, but for some reason, I can't seem to stop checking her out.

Usually I go for the more aggressive girls.

Women who know that it's just a one-night stand kind of thing with me. Emerson is not that kind of woman.

So why is she having this effect on me?

I push thoughts of Emerson and me tangled up in bed together from my mind and look out the window.

I had caught a few hours of sleep when we first hit the road and woke up when we were somewhere in Utah.

I hadn't loved Emerson's taste in music but when I woke up and found that she had switched it and was now listening to some romance audiobook, I was wishing that she would put on some of that alternative rock crap that she seems to love so much.

As the narrators drone on over the speakers, my eyes droop and drift shut. My mind flashes back to the open mic last night. I had been on fire, had the crowd roaring with laughter.

I had even seen Emerson laughing. We had sat at a table up front, one of the only ones left in the crowded Las Vegas club. She had seemed nervous when we first walked in, her bright blue eyes wide as she stared around the space.

She had ordered a glass of wine and I'm pretty sure that they had to dig to the back of the storage room to find a bottle. This wasn't exactly the wine and mimosa crowd.

Emerson hadn't seemed that impressed with the first few comics who went up. I had been starting to worry that she didn't have a sense of humor.

I had ordered a beer and nursed it until it was my turn. When they introduced me, Emerson had turned to me with a wide smile, clapping enthusiastically as I climbed to my feet.

Something weird had happened to my heart at the sight of her sitting there, cheering for me. The rest of the room gave me a lukewarm reception but Emerson watched me with wide fascinated eyes as I climbed up onto the tiny stage.



Being on stage has always felt natural to me. I like being the center of attention, the class clown, the one who makes people laugh. It was only a ten-minute set and it flew by.

Every time that I looked over to Emerson, she was laughing or smiling at me. I can't remember the last time I had someone at my show who looked at me like that. Like they were amazed and proud of me. Like they were always going to be in my corner.

A light tapping starts on the roof and I open my eyes as the rain picks up. Emerson sighs, slowing down as she leans over the steering wheel, trying to see the road better.

"Do you want me to drive? My eyes aren't as tired," I offer and I see her bite her bottom lip.

When she doesn't answer after a minute, I try again.

"Or we could put on something that wasn't designed to put us to sleep," I suggest.

"You don't like audiobooks?" Emerson asks.

"I know, it's shocking isn't it," I deadpan and I watch as she smiles.

I grin.

She really is beautiful.

I push that thought aside, reaching for her phone to put on some music. Emerson doesn't stop me and I scroll through her music library before I find something that surprises me.

"You like The Front Bottoms?" I ask, hitting their latest album.

The music starts to play, filling the car and I start to hum along. We're in the middle of nowhere, nothing but desert stretching out on either side of us. The rain picks up, turning torrential and I nudge Emerson.

"There's a little spot on the shoulder that you can park at until the rain slows down."

She nods, inching her way over to it with the hazards on. We pull off of the two lane highway and onto the shoulder. We leave the hazards on but turn off the windshield wipers. They aren't helping much anyway.

"How was last night?" she asks me after a minute and I glance over to her.

"It was fine. I lost twenty dollars on some slot machines and walked around for a bit. The best part was the Bellagio fountains."

"Cause I was there?" she asks and the joke catches me off guard.

I let out a startled laugh, surprised to find that she can be funny, but the truth is that she's kind of right. The Bellagio fountains were cool, but exploring and wandering around with Emerson had been the best part of Las Vegas. Besides the open mic, of course.

"Yeah, because you were there," I say.

She smiles over at me and suddenly it hits me how intimate this is. We're alone, cocooned in her car, the rain pouring down all around us. I search my brain, trying to figure out a safe topic to bring up.

The weather saves me though. Just as quick as the rain had started, it's stopped.

"Did you want me to drive?" I ask again and I can see her trying not to yawn.

“Yeah, that would be great.”

We climb out of the car, switching seats and I take off down the empty highway.

Emerson and I talk about music for a little bit and she asks me about open mics tonight.

I found a few that I could try to stop by and she asks me a few questions about comedy and coming up with jokes but I can see that she's struggling to keep her eyes open now.

I turn down the music and Emerson is asleep within minutes. I sneak a glance at her, taking in how peaceful she looks as we drive down the deserted highway.

I had been shocked yesterday when I found out the person that I had been messaging and who I had agreed to drive across the country with wasn't some twenty-something boring guy, but a drop dead gorgeous girl who looked to be just a few years younger than me.

Copper hair, bright blue eyes, and bee stung lips. She was a total babe.

I was used to girls fawning over me and as I had stared at her over the hood of her station wagon, I had thought that she seemed interested in me.

Then I remember how it had seemed like she wasn't going to answer me.

I'm pretty sure that she wanted to drive off without me.

Hell, she might still wish that she had driven off without me.

Why does that thought turn me on?

Emerson wakes up a couple of miles away from Denver and starts looking up hotels for us to stay at. I'm starving and I don't really care where we sleep at. As long as it's cheap.

"Are you hungry?" I ask as she continues to search for the cheapest place to stay.

"Starved," she admits.

"There's some barbecue place. Or a little Italian restaurant," I say, reading out the signs as we pass them.

"Italian sounds good. And it will be filling since we kind of skipped lunch."

"Sounds good to me."

I pull off onto the off ramp and Emerson gives me directions to the restaurant. The place is only about half full and I check the time, surprised to see that it's already almost eight o'clock.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:29 am*

E merson

“We’re sharing a bed,” I hiss into the phone as soon as Layla picks up.

“What?” Layla asks and it sounds like she’s out somewhere.

I look over to the bathroom door that Anthony disappeared through just a few minutes ago. He said that he was going to take a shower before he went out to some open mics. I had told him that I would come with him, but now I’m second thinking that.

“The hotel only has queen size beds left and Denver is expensive. Every other hotel is twice as much money.”

“Who said that the queen bed was okay?” Layla asks and I wonder why she thinks that’s the most important question to ask right now.

“He did,” I say, remembering how Anthony hadn’t seemed to think it would be a problem for us to sleep in the same bed.

Maybe he doesn’t think it will be a problem because he has no interest in sleeping with you, my mind whispers to me.

“Okay, then what’s the problem? Anthony is hot. I always thought that the two of you would be perfect together.”

“You did?” I ask, shock clear in my voice.

“Yeah. He’s smart and funny and you need someone smart and funny. Someone who will help you remember that there’s more to life than art and TV shows.”

“So what, you were hoping that we would just fall in love on our way to New York?”

“That was the plan, yeah.”

I don’t know whether to laugh or scream at that so I just remain silent.

“How’s the road trip going, anyway?” Layla asks, a slightly sarcastic edge to her tone and I can’t help but laugh.

“Good. We stayed in Las Vegas last night so that Anthony could do an open mic. Then we drove all day today. We just got to Denver.”

“How was Vegas? Did you two get married?” she jokes and I snort out a laugh.

“No. I watched him do stand-up and then we went and watched the Bellagio fountain show. He walked me back to the hotel after that and went out to check out some casinos or something.”

“Bummer.”

I roll my eyes at that.

“It was fun. Today was long. We drove for over twelve hours.”

“What are you doing tonight? Hopefully each other,” I hear her whisper under her breath and I laugh.

“He’s going to a few open mics and I told him that I would go with him. We already

had dinner and I'm tired. Who knew driving all day could be so exhausting?"

"What did you think about his stand-up?" Layla asks and I can hear the Los Angeles traffic in the background.

"He's really funny. He killed last night at the club. Was easily the funniest guy in there," I realize that I'm gushing about him and cut myself off.

"You like him," Layla sings and I wonder if she's drunk.

"No, I don't. All that I said was that he's funny."

"Uh huh."

I can tell that Layla wants to say something else about Anthony and me, but someone calls her name in the distance and I take her distraction to tell her goodbye.

"I'll talk to you tomorrow," I promise, knowing full well that I'm not off the hook. Just delaying the inevitable.

"Okay. Go do something that I would do!" she calls before she hangs up and I laugh, ending the call.

That might have sounded dirty but I'm not sure that Layla has ever even had sex before. Sure, she dates more than me, but a monk dates more than me. I never had time for dating and boys.

I've never found anyone who could distract me the way art could. I had to work all through high school and save so that I could buy my car and pay for my college tuition. Then I worked all through college to keep up with next years tuition,

Even in my senior year, I was working so that I could put money aside for after graduation. Every spare minute was spent on homework, work, or at galleries and museums in Chicago.

I kept telling myself that I would focus on dating after I finished school. I'd find a good job and get settled and then I would start dating but I've been in Los Angeles for a year now and all that I have to show for it is a now deactivated online dating profile.

The bathroom door opens and Anthony steps out, straightening his new clothes. He's wearing a black t-shirt with some kind of design on the front and a pair of dark blue jeans.

"Are you ready to go?" he asks as he sits on the bed and tugs on a pair of black boots.

"Yeah, let me just grab my purse."

We decide to walk down to the first comedy club.

"Maybe you should move here instead. It seems like it's got a pretty big comedy scene," I say as I spot the second comedy club that he wanted to do an open mic at across the street.

"It has gotten bigger but Los Angeles and New York will probably always be the top two. I've spent the last few years in Los Angeles and I think it's time for a change. Hopefully New York will help my craft too."

"How so?" I ask, curious about how stand-up comedy works.

"Crowds are different. Different states find different things funny."



“So will you tailor your stand-up depending on states or regions then?” I ask as we head inside the club.

“Not necessarily tailor, but there will be some jokes that I might not necessarily do. That way I don’t piss off whole crowds and bomb.”

Anthony leads me over to a table and orders me a glass of wine from the waitress as we sit down.

“Okay, so you think the crowds in New York will help you get better as a comic.”

“Yeah, there’re comedians who only do stand-up in Los Angeles and it shows. They can’t do comedy anywhere else.”

Open mic starts and Anthony is one of the first to go up. He does a set similar to the one from last night but this time I watch the crowd, waiting to see how they react to him.

This open mic is only five minutes and it feels like it’s over way too soon. The crowd laughs, just like last night and I wonder if we’re still too close to the east coast or if he’s just that good of a comedian.

He walks off stage, that now familiar cocky swagger in his steps as he makes his way toward me. A few people stop him to tell him that he did a good job or to clap him on the back as he passes.

“Ready to go to the next one?” he asks as he picks up his glass of water and downs it in one gulp.

“Yeah, let’s go.”

He hits up three open mics that night and at every single one, I watch him walk on stage and own it. He comes alive up there, growing more confident as soon as he's in his element.

I'm giddy and half drunk as we walk back to the hotel at the end of the night.

"That last guy was pretty funny though," I say as we talk about a few of the other comics that we saw tonight.

"He wasn't bad, but he's not as good as I am."

"Uhhh," I say, teasing him and he gives me a playful glare.

"Say he's not as good as me, Emerson," Anthony says, trying to look serious but I can see the smile in his eyes.

"I mean," I start as we walk into our hotel room.

Anthony reaches out, tickling my ribs and I giggle, darting away from him.

"He's not as good as you! He's not as good as you!" I say as he makes a move to tickle me again.

"I know," he says confidently, "but it's nice that you agree with me."

I roll my eyes as I kick off my shoes and set my purse down on the dresser.

"I'm exhausted," Anthony says as he sits down on the bed to untie his shoes.

"Me too. Are we going to leave bright and early again tomorrow? I wanted to make it to Chicago tomorrow and then we can be in New York late Wednesday."

“Sounds like a plan. How far is it to Chicago?”

“About fifteen hours,” I admit with a wince.

It’s only been two days and I’m already sick of driving around.

“Damn. Alright, better get to bed then.”

I nod, grabbing my pajamas, toothbrush and toothpaste and heading into the bathroom to get changed. Anthony is changed by the time I come back out and we pass by each other as he heads into the bathroom to brush his teeth.

I slip under the covers, my earlier ease dissipating as I wonder what sleeping with Anthony will be like.

Oh god. What if I cuddle him or something? What if I talk in my sleep or snore?

Anthony comes out and hits the lights as I plug my phone in and pull the covers up more.

“Did you set an alarm?” he asks and I nod before I realize that he can’t see me.

“Yeah, another six a.m. morning.”

Anthony groans and my mind can’t help but think about him doing that in bed in a different context. My nipples pebble inside my thin cotton sleep shirt and I try to discreetly scoot away from him.

“Night, Emerson,” Anthony whispers in the dark and a shiver runs through me.

“Goodnight, Anthony.”

I close my eyes, begging for sleep to take me. Right before I fall asleep, a thought hits me.

Layla is right. I am into Anthony.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:29 am*

Anthony

I spend all day Tuesday in the car with Emerson.

We play I Spy games, debate our favorite bands, books, and movies, before we move onto TV shows. Somewhere after we cross into Colorado, we start to play two truths and a lie and I learn a lot about her.

She hates peanuts but loves peanut butter, couldn't wait to leave home, always wanted a sibling but since that never happened, so she settled for Layla.

She tells me about the embarrassing time that she went to a high school party and fell asleep in a guest room.

Her parents had been furious, thinking that she had been fooling around with some boy and had grounded her for two weeks.

I tell her about the time Ames, Alexander and I snuck out when we were teens. We got caught climbing back in the window and grounded for a week. That hadn't stopped us from sneaking out again the next weekend.

I tell her about school and some of my family trips. She asks me a bunch of questions about when I first started doing stand up and I embellish quite a bit. No comic is great when they first start out but I tell Emerson I was killing it from day one.

I don't think that she believes me.

We take turns driving, eating snacks that we grabbed at a gas station so that we don't have to make more stops for food.

Emerson already booked us a hotel room for Chicago and I would never tell her, but I'm hoping that we get another room with only one bed again. I haven't shared a bed with a woman before but sharing one with Emerson had been nice.

She was a snuggler.

She had fallen asleep and then rolled over almost immediately and curled up against my side. I always thought that I would hate cuddling. Just the idea of someone hanging on me drove me crazy, but with Emerson, I didn't seem to mind. In fact, I liked having her close.

We pull into Chicago around eleven p.m. and we head straight for the comedy club. Open mic only lasts another hour so I have to hurry if I want to perform at the first club.

Emerson goes to find a table as I check in and they tell me that I can go on right away. I look around the club for Emerson but the place is dark and packed with people and I don't catch sight of her as I follow the announcer up to the stage.

The announcer gives me a half assed introduction and I get this feeling in the pit of my stomach that tells me this is about to go badly.

It's too late to back out now.

I climb up the stairs, trying to force the feeling in my gut aside as I grab the mic and launch into my routine.

The first joke kind of lands, but the second one bombs.

Then the heckling starts.

The set is fifteen minutes and each one feels like torture. I can feel my heart starting to beat faster with each minute, with every punchline that fails to hit its mark.

By the end of my time, I'm shaking and actually eager to get off stage. A cold sweat is covering every inch of me and my heart is racing out of control.

No one likes to bomb of course, but I take it especially bad.

I take comedy seriously. It's been the only thing that I've cared about for most of my life, aside from family and friends. It's my passion and I want to be the best at it.

As soon as my feet leave the stage, I'm replaying the set in my mind, wondering where I went wrong. Was it the audience? Was it the way that I said one of the jokes? Did I do something different tonight from the last few nights?

I walk off stage and look up, locking eyes with Emerson. She looks pissed and when some asshole in the front row leans over to say something to me, she rushes to my side. Her tiny hands wrap around my arm and she drags me out of the club and to the busy street.

"Oh my gosh! That was terrible. Why did they act like that?" she asks as she continues to march me down the street.

"That's called bombing," I tell her, trying to lighten the mood and pull myself out of the funk that I can feel starting to consume me.

"They were vicious! Why would they keep interrupting like that?" she asks as we reach our hotel lobby.

I don't answer her, letting her rant to herself as I try to go over the set in my head. We walk up to the counter and I let Emerson take over and check us in. She's got the room keys a few minutes later and I head out to the car, grabbing our bags before I meet her on our floor.

Emerson opens our hotel room door and I drop our bags down by the dresser.

"I'm going to take a shower."

Emerson gives me a worried look as I head into the bathroom but I'm too busy beating myself up to worry about her worrying about me.

I stand under the hot water for a long time, trying to push the memories of tonight out of my head.

It's after midnight by the time I dry off and head out into the hotel room.

I forgot to grab a change of clothes so I've got just a towel wrapped around my hips when I walk out and see that Emerson is still up and waiting for me.

"Oh!" she says, hurrying to cover her eyes and just like that, my sour mood starts to change.

I can see the blush staining her cheeks from across the room and I smile as I take my time grabbing a clean t-shirt and pair of sweats. I change into them in the room as Emerson covers her eyes and I toss the bathroom towel onto the sink.

"I'm decent," I tell her.

"I'm not sure that I would ever use those words to describe you," she mumbles and I laugh.



Thank god I'm wearing something besides a towel right now. Her quick wit is a big turn on and I can feel my body starting to react.

She drops her hands and looks over to me, studying my face.

"Do you want to talk about it?" she asks quietly after a few minutes and I shake my head.

"Let's just go to bed."

I lucked out and we got another one-bed room. I wonder if Emerson requested it. She's already in her pajamas and she helps me pull back the covers before we both slide into bed.

I turn off the bedside lamp and all is quiet.

All except my mind.

I can't turn it off, can't stop thinking about the set tonight. I've gone over every line a dozen times by now and I still don't know what I did wrong. Part of me knows that every comic just has nights like tonight but I still can't stop obsessing over it.

"I can feel you thinking," Emerson whispers and I roll over onto my side to face her in the dark.

"I can't stop thinking about where I went wrong tonight," I admit, hating how weak and needy I sound, even to my own ears.

"I thought that you were great. I mean it's a little less funny now that I've heard the set a few times, but I still laughed. The crowd was just vicious," she says and I feel the bed shake as she shivers a bit.

“Are you cold?” I ask her.

“A little. The room just needs to warm up a bit.”

I scoot closer to her, telling myself that it’s just to help her warm up a bit.

“Do a lot of your crowds heckle you like they did tonight?” she asks me and I shake my head.

“You get some drunk people every now and then but nothing like tonight. At least not in Los Angeles.”

“Different town, different crowd?”

“Apparently so.”

“How do you move past it?”

“Get back out there.”

“Like riding a bike?” she asks and I nod.

“Something like that.”

“When did you know that you wanted to be a comedian?”

“Since I was a kid. I always loved to make people laugh.”

“I bet you were the class clown,” she says and I can hear the smile in her voice.

“Oh, I was,” I say with a laugh.

“Do your parents like that you went down this path?”

“Yeah, they’re supportive. They just want us to be happy and healthy. What about yours? Are they happy that you got an art degree and started working at galleries? Or did they want you to be a painter instead?”

“Neither,” she admits and I can hear the sadness in her voice.

“They wanted me to become a teacher and some guy’s wife.

Then I could stay in Idaho and pop out two perfect kids all before I was thirty.

They don’t get art, don’t think that it’s a good career path, and certainly don’t like that I live and work in Los Angeles. ”

“That sucks. I’m sorry, Emerson.”

I can feel the bed shift and I know that she must have just shrugged.

“We should get some sleep. We have another long day in the car tomorrow,” she says through a yawn and I nod.

“Goodnight Anthony.”

“Goodnight Emerson.”

As I roll over onto my back and let my eyes drift shut, I realize that Emerson has done what I’ve never been able to do.

She made me forget about how I bombed.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:29 am*

Emerson

Anthony convinces me to walk around Chicago with him for a few hours before we climb back into the car to drive the final stretch to New York. I cave, partly because I've missed Chicago since I left after college, but mostly because I'm not looking forward to another fourteen hour day in the car.

"This is where I went to college," I tell him as we pass by the University of Chicago.

"Yeah? Did you like it?"

"Oh yeah. I'm from this super tiny town in Idaho and I couldn't wait to get out and into a big city."

"Do you go back home a lot?" he asks and I shake my head.

"No, not really. I'm not that close with my parents. They fight all of the time and after a while, it gets hard to be around them. I've spent the last few holidays with my best friend Layla. She's not that close with her dad either, so we've just hung out in our apartment in Los Angeles."

I point out my old dorm room and we walk in silence for a block.

"What about you? Where did you go to school? Was it close to home?" I ask him.

"Nope," he says with a laugh. "I grew up in upstate New York but I went to Tulane University in New Orleans."

“Why there?” I ask, genuinely curious.

“Cause it was a good school but was also known for its parties. I had been to New Orleans with my parents when I was a kid and liked the city.”

“I’ve never been,” I admit.

He buys me a breakfast sandwich and coffee and we check out the bean in Millennium Park and the Navy Pier. By the time we’re packing up the car and getting ready to head to New York, it’s close to noon.

“Want me to drive?” Anthony asks as he shoves the last bite of deep dish pizza into his mouth.

“Yeah,” I say and he seems surprised that I agreed.

I climb into the passenger seat, picking out some music as Anthony climbs behind the wheel and pulls out of the parking lot. It doesn’t take us long to hit the highway.

“Did you find a hotel for tonight?” Anthony asks an hour into the drive.

“No, I guess I should do that now.”

I’m pulling up the site on my phone when he clears his throat. I look over at him, noticing that he seems almost... nervous. I’ve never seen him as anything but cocky and it makes me wonder what he’s about to say.

“My brother and his wife live in New York. He’s some bigshot real estate investor and he has a penthouse on the Upper East Side.

I mean, what I’m trying to say is that he has plenty of room if you want to stay

there...

with me,” he finishes awkwardly and I bite back the giggle that’s climbing up my throat.

“Are you sure your brother won’t mind?”

“Full disclosure?”

“Yeah.”

“He doesn’t know that I’m going to be staying with him.”

I throw my head back, laughing at the sheepish expression on his face.

“Are you sure that I shouldn’t be making a hotel reservation and offering to let you stay with me tonight?”

“I’m family. He can’t turn me away. I’ll tell our mom on him.”

“How mature of you,” I deadpan and he chuckles.

“It’s the truth.”

“I don’t want to be a bother.”

“You won’t be. You’ll actually be saving me. My brother just married his wife, Eden, and the last time I saw them, they were in that honeymoon phase where they couldn’t keep their hands off of each other.”

“Oh, so you want to subject me to that then?”

“Yeah, be my distraction. With you there, they’ll have to be on their best behavior.”

I think about the money left in my savings account and chew on my bottom lip. I don’t want to spend too much of my money in case I have to move all of my things out here and put a deposit down on an apartment. If I’m being honest, I also don’t want to say goodbye to Anthony just yet.

“If you’re sure that he won’t mind...”

“He won’t,” Anthony says right away and I smile.

“Then yes, I’d love to stay with you and your brother.”

We talk until we hit Pennsylvania.

“Do you mind if we stop off in Pittsburgh? My other brother, Ames, lives there. I’ll make him buy us dinner.”

“So is this the portion of the trip where we just use your brothers for stuff?”

Anthony laughs, hitting the turn signal and pulling onto the off ramp.

“You don’t want a free meal?”

“I think I just want to meet your brothers. Find out if The Anthony Bronson has always been funny like he claims.”

It’s seven p.m. and the traffic is just starting to lighten as we drive down the main street.

“Where are we going?” I ask when Anthony pulls the car over in front of some tattoo

parlor.

“My brother Ames is a tattoo artist. He works here,” he says, pointing up at the glowing pink sign.

“Eye Candy Ink,” I read as Anthony gets out and walks around to open my door.

“Yeah, come on. Hopefully he’s between clients.”

“Are you sure he’s even working?” I ask as Anthony grabs my hand and drags me inside.

“Yeah, he’s always working.”

There’s a girl sitting behind the counter talking on the phone and she holds up a finger to us, letting us know that she’ll be with us in just a second.

Anthony peeks down the hallway and as soon as some guy walks out of a room and I see the smile on Anthony’s face, I know that that’s his brother.

“Ames!” Anthony calls and the other guy jerks to a stop, spinning around with a shocked look on his face.

I can see the family resemblance right away. They both have the same dark brown hair and blue eyes. Even their grins are the same, although Ames’ isn’t as cocky.

“Holy shit! What are you doing here, asshole?” Ames asks as he grins and heads our way.

Anthony drops my hand to pull his brother into a hug and I smile as they do that manly clap on the back thing and then pull apart.



“Who is this?” Ames asks, giving me a charming smile.

“I’m Emerson,” I say, holding out my hand for him to shake but he surprises me and pulls me into his arms instead.

“He’s going to hate that I’m hugging you,” Ames whispers in my ear and I can hear the grin in his voice.

“That’s enough,” Anthony says a second later, pulling me away from his brother.

“So, what are you two doing here? Why didn’t you tell me that you were coming to town?” Ames asks, crossing his arms and leaning against the front counter.

“We’re just passing through. I thought that you might like to buy us dinner and hang out for a few minutes before we have to leave.”

“Buy you dinner?” Ames asks with a laugh. “I’ll buy the pretty Emerson dinner,” he says, shooting me a wink and I grin at him.

I know that he’s just doing it to mess with Anthony, but clearly Anthony doesn’t know that because I swear he growls as Ames grins at me.

“Where are you two headed?” Ames asks and I answer before Anthony can say something sarcastic.

“New York.”

“Oh, are you visiting Alexander?” Ames asks and Anthony nods.

“I just got off the phone with him and he didn’t even mention that.”

“He doesn’t know that we’re coming,” Anthony admits and there’s a beat before Ames responds.

“Oh, he’s going to love that,” Ames says with a wide grin.

“Do you have time for dinner?”

“Yeah, my next client is in half an hour though so it will have to be quick.”

“Same for us,” Anthony says as we head out the front door.

There’s a pub down the street that Ames leads us to. I guess one of his friends owns it and we head inside, snagging a table right away.

I’m mostly quiet during dinner, letting the two brothers catch up. We all order burgers and I scarf mine down, surprised at how hungry I am.

The pub is starting to get busy and Ames asks for the check when an older man saunters over to our table.

“I thought that was you, Ames.”

“Hey, Max! How’s it going?” Ames asks as he shakes his friend’s hand.

“Good, I didn’t know that you were coming in tonight. How’s the shop?”

“It’s good. Busy,” Ames says as our waitress comes back to the table.

“Dinner is on me,” Max says to the waitress and she nods, giving us a smile before she heads over to help another table.

“Anthony and Emerson, this is my friend Max. Max, this is my brother Anthony and his girl, Emerson,” Ames says and I look over to Anthony, wondering if he’ll correct his brother.

“Nice to meet you,” Anthony says with an easy smile, and we both lean over to shake Max’s hand.

“Thanks for dinner. It was delicious,” I tell him, and he gives me a warm smile.

“My pleasure. You’ll have to excuse me. I’m about to head out. I’ve got to get home to the wife. Ames, tell Cat that her mom expects her at dinner on Sunday,” Max says, pointing a finger at Ames before he waves goodbye to us and heads for the front door.

We leave right after him and I hug Ames goodbye before I climb behind the wheel for the last leg of our road trip.

“I like your brother,” I tell him as he climbs into the passenger seat.

Anthony’s head whips my way, a scowl on his face and I hold my hands up in a don’t shoot gesture.

“Not like that! I just meant that he was nice.”

“Uh huh,” Anthony says suspiciously, buckling up as I back out of the spot and head toward the highway.

“Are you ready for the last six-hour stretch?” I ask as we hit the highway.

I laugh as Anthony groans in the passenger seat next to me.

It's just after one o'clock in the morning when we pull into the underground parking beneath his brother's penthouse. He directs me over to one of his parking spots and we both climb out, groaning as we stretch.

"Maybe you should have called your brother. So he was expecting us, you know?"

"He's going to be so happy to see me, the time won't matter."

"Somehow I don't think that you're telling the truth about that."

Anthony just gives me a cocky grin as we both grab our bags from the trunk and then head over to the private elevator. Anthony punches in some numbers on the keypad before we start to move up, up, up.

We hit the top floor and the doors slide open. Anthony walks in like he owns the place, and I can't help but smile as he swaggers into the living room.

There's a woman in the kitchen, drinking a glass of water, and her eyes widen when she sees us walk in. She grins, ripping the earbuds out of her ears and runs toward us.

"Anthony!" She hugs him, grinning from ear to ear. "What are you doing here? Alexander didn't tell me that you were coming for a visit."

"He didn't?" Anthony asks, acting surprised as a man who looks like a younger version of Anthony joins us in the kitchen.

"That's because I didn't know."

"I wanted it to be a surprise," Anthony says and his brother gives him a dry look.

"Remind me to change the code to the elevator tomorrow," he whispers to his wife,

who elbows him.

“We’re so happy that you’re here! And you brought someone with you!”

“This is Emerson. Emerson, this charming asshole is my brother, Alexander, and this is his much better half, Eden.”

“It’s nice to meet you both,” I tell them, hugging Eden back when she steps toward me.

“Can we crash here for a couple nights?” Anthony asks them.

“Yes.”

“No,” Alexander says at the same time but then he rolls his eyes.

“The guest rooms are made up,” Eden says, as she starts to lead us up a set of stairs.

She shows us to a room and I set my bags down next to the dresser.

“Anthony knows his way around and we’ll be right downstairs if you need anything. It’s late, so we’ll catch up in the morning,” she says, stifling a yawn as she heads out the door and back toward the stairs.

““Night!” I call after her.

Anthony closes the door and points out the attached bathroom.

This whole penthouse is huge. I think the guest room is bigger than Layla’s and my apartment back home.

“This place is awesome,” I say, poking my head into the walk-in closet before I head into the bathroom.

“Right? Apparently I’m in the wrong line of work.”

I snort at that. “I can’t picture you in a suit, going to a nine-to-five day job.”

“Yeah, I’d be miserable. Besides, my talents and perfect comedic timing would be lost on everyone.”

I roll my eyes and open up my suitcase.

“Did you need the bathroom? I was hoping to take a quick shower before bed.”

“No, I can wait. Go ahead,” Anthony says, opening his own suitcase and sorting through it.

I grab my pajama shorts and tank top before I head into the bathroom. The shower has about four heads and more buttons than a spaceship. It takes me a minute to figure out how to turn it on but I figure it out, getting the water temperature just right before I strip and step under the water.

I think I moan as the water hits me. It eases my sore muscles and washes off the yuck of the day. I’m so happy that I don’t have to get back in my car for a few days at least. I stand under the water so long that Anthony knocks on the door and asks me if I’m alright.

“Yeah! I’ll be out in just a minute!” I call.

It takes me another minute to figure out how to turn the water off. I dry off and then change into my pajamas, carrying my dirty clothes back into the bedroom with me.

Anthony slips by me, and I hear the water turn on a minute later. I grab my outfit for tomorrow, smoothing out the wrinkles as I hang it up in the closet. I'm just finishing when Anthony comes back out of the bathroom, his hair wet and sticking up slightly.

He's just wearing a pair of sleep pants and my mouth waters at the sight. A stray drop of water slides down his chest and I can't help but watch as it runs down over his stomach.

"Ready for bed?" he asks and I nod, tearing my eyes away from his bare chest to climb beneath the sheets.

Anthony turns off the lights but the blinds are open and the lights of the city cast a glow around the room.

"It's going to be weird not to share a bed with you in a day or two," Anthony jokes and I swat him.

"I'm going to miss you too," I whisper, and the mood changes between us.

The fun playfulness shifts and turns serious.

"We can still keep in touch. Maybe we'll both be living in New York soon."

"Maybe," I say and I feel the bed dip as Anthony scoots closer to me.

"I'm not going to disappear on you, Emerson," he whispers as his hand runs up and down my arm.

I know that he's trying to comfort me but the closer his hand gets to my breasts, the more turned on I get.

Anthony shifts even closer, our legs brushing against each other and tangling together, his warm, minty breath fanning over my face.

The energy in the room shifts again and I can feel the tension, the sexual attraction, filling the air between us until we're both breathing it in, getting lost in the haze.

"Anthony," I whisper as his lips brush against mine.

"Emerson," he whispers back and the way that he says it, like it's both a plea and a curse, has me throwing caution to the wind and wrapping my arms around his neck as our lips crash together.



## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:29 am*

Anthony

The kiss starts off soft and sweet, both of us testing the waters and probably waiting to see if the other person is going to change their mind.

One taste of her though, and I can't pull away from her.

The longer we kiss, the deeper we both sink into each other.

Soon it's like we can't get close enough to each other.

I grab Emerson's hip, dragging her across the mattress toward me.

Her little fingers are tugging at my pajama pants and I can feel my cock tenting the front of them, trying its best to get closer to her.

I let go of her waist, helping her push my pants down before I kick them the rest of the way off.

My hands reach for her pajamas right away and together we work on pulling them off of her and tossing them to the floor with mine.

Her small breasts bounce slightly as she tosses the shirt aside and I groan, reaching out and molding them in my palms. They're a perfect handful and I can't wait to get my mouth on them.

"Anthony," Emerson moans, her eyes falling to half-mast as I roll her stiff nipples

between my fingers.

Some cocky reply is on the tip of my tongue but I bite it back. I don't want to ruin this moment with my ego. Besides, my mouth could be used for much better things.

I tease the sweet peaks for another minute before I roll Emerson onto her back and hover over her.

“You're so fucking pretty, baby. Fucking gorgeous,” I groan as I lean down and capture one of her nipples in my mouth.

I look up, watching as she opens her mouth, sucking in a breath as I roll my tongue over one sensitive point and then the other. I take my time exploring her and by the time I've released her breasts, her nipples are red and wet from my mouth and we're both hungry for more.

Her fiery red hair is fanned out across my pillow and I smile, brushing a few strands away from her face before I crawl down her body.

Her hands tangle in my hair as I lick a path straight down to her core.

She spreads her thighs wide for me and I look up to see that her eyes are locked on me and the dark blue depths look bottomless.

Her legs start to quiver as I settle between them and reach up, spreading her dewy pussy lips.

“Oh, baby. You're absolutely drenched for me already,” I tell her, a cocky edge to my words as my ego bleeds through in my words, and she lets out a sharp gasp, her hips shooting off of the bed in a wordless plea as I roll my thumb over her sensitive clit.

I can't resist that so I lean forward, burying my face in her soft pink folds as I start to lick. She tastes like honey and now I'm the one moaning. I plunge my tongue into her tight little hole and fuck her with it as my thumb strokes over her clit until she's a shaking, moaning, mess.

"Anthony!" she cries out and I pull away to calm her.

"Shh," I say, running my finger up her slit.

She whines, her fingers gripping the strands of my hair tighter and twisting them as I go back to her sweet pussy. I lick a path right up her center, my tongue doing lazy circles around her clit. Emerson's hips start to move with me and I smile.

"Pretty girl. Look at this sweet pussy. So ready for me."

"Anthony!" she shouts, looking down her body at me. "I need— I need..." she starts before her head hits the pillow and I grin.

"I know what you need, baby."

My tongue finds her clit against and I push down on the sensitive button, wiggling my tongue slightly side to side until Emerson's legs clamp down like a vise around my head. She moans, her fingers abandoning my hair to tangle in the bedsheets instead.

She holds me to her and I hum, adding my fingers as I work to push her over the edge. I slip one long finger inside of her, curling it to rub against her front wall and she stiffens, her whole body freezing as her orgasm hits her.

"That's it, baby," I whisper as I continue to lick her through her release.

She pulls on my hair and I crawl up her body, bracing myself on the bed over her.

“I want you,” she says, her eyes heavy lidded and filled with lust as she stares up at me.

I give her my cocky grin, reaching for my jeans and fishing a condom out of my wallet.

She watches me, her eyes tired but hungry as they look up at me as I roll a condom down my stiff length.

I reach down and fist my cock, guiding it to her wet entrance. Judging by how tight she is, I’m guessing that she’s a virgin or at least hasn’t had a ton of sex, and I need to get her ready for me.

I try to distract her, tonguing her nipples, loving them with my mouth as I fit the tip of my cock into her snug hole. I lick and suck while I work my dick into her tight channel.

“Please,” she begs and I can’t deny her anything. “I want you,” she says, spreading her legs wider as I push the rest of the way inside of her.

I give her a beat to get used to me but feeling her gripping my length so tightly has me nearly blacking out and soon I can’t control myself. I know that I should go slow and soft with her, give her time to adjust, but I just can’t.

I grip her lush ass and yank her forward, thrusting deep inside of her in the start of a punishing rhythm. She gasps, the sound loud in the quiet room as I pull back and shove forward again, fucking her deep and hard.

“Fuck, Anthony,” she shouts, the sound of my name drawn out as she wraps her arms

around my neck, holding on to me.

I palm one of her small breasts, her nipple a hard point between my thumb and forefinger. Her moans grow louder as I tease the taut peaks. It's a good thing that everyone else is fast asleep and a whole floor beneath us. My girl is a screamer.

My pace picks up and soon we're both covered in a sheen of sweat. I can feel my balls drawing up and that familiar tingle in the base of my spine but I want us to come together.

I reach between us and press my thumb to her clit, rolling it in rough, tight, circles until she's clawing at me.

"That's it, Emerson. Come for me."

I thrust hard, my thumb working her in time with my cock.

"Anthony!" she screams, her body shaking as I bury myself deep inside, my own release finding me as her pussy squeezes me in a rhythm all her own.

Groaning, I come long and hard, every muscle in my body straining as I bury my face in her neck and reach my peak.

I wrap my arms tight around her and roll her over so that she's on top of me as she comes back down and her breathing evens out.

"So that's sex, huh?" she says between sucking in lungful's of air.

"Uh huh," I say, just as out of breath.

"Hmm," she says and I grin.

“That better be a ‘you are a sex god who just rocked my world, Anthony’ hmm,” I tease her.

She giggles as I cuddle her closer and close my eyes.

I fall asleep with a smile on my face that night.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:29 am*

Emerson

The Malhoy Gallery is beautiful. Now that my interview is over, I have more time and brainpower to appreciate it all.

The walls are decorated with artwork hanging on every wall. Dark hardwood floors gleam and gives the place a glamorous feel. There are a few sculptures in the center of the bigger rooms and I'm paused studying one when my phone vibrates in my purse.

I pull it out and smile when I see Anthony's name on the screen.

ANTHONY: How did it go?

EMERSON: Good. I just got done. Now I'm looking around the gallery.

ANTHONY: I was going to suggest dinner but I'm guessing that I won't be able to drag you away from the art.

EMERSON: I could be tempted... want to grab a slice of pizza?

ANTHONY: Hell no! You could potentially be getting your dream job soon. Let's go somewhere nice to celebrate.

I look down, studying my outfit. I guess I could do that. I am dressed up more than usual so I wouldn't look out of place at a nicer restaurant.

Eden was nice enough to let me use their iron so that all of the wrinkles are out of my rose pink silk blouse and black cigarette pants. My black heels finish the look and give me a boost in confidence.

EMERSON: Want me to meet you somewhere?

ANTHONY: No, come back to the penthouse and we can head out together in a bit. I'm headed back there now too.

EMERSON: See you soon!

I walked to the gallery since I was nervous about traffic being horrendous. The gallery is only a few blocks from Alexander's penthouse anyway.

It doesn't take me long to get back to Alexander's building and I type in the code that Anthony sent me, riding up by myself in the private elevator.

Nerves hit me as the elevator rises higher and higher.

Anthony was gone when I woke up this morning. He went with Alexander somewhere and Eden was just leaving as I got up to head to work so I haven't seen him all day. That means that we haven't seen each other since we slept together last night.

How am I supposed to act? Are we together now? Was it a one-night stand?

The elevator doors open before I can decide and I'm face to face with Anthony.

"Hey! How did it go?" he asks as soon as I step off of the elevator.

He wraps me up in a hug right away and I relax. I guess this isn't going to be as



awkward as I thought.

“It was good. I think I might have gotten it. Although there were quite a few other applicants waiting when I left, so who knows.”

“Of course you’re going to get it! Did they tell you when they would make a decision?”

“Today was the last day of the interviews so they said hopefully tomorrow afternoon. They want to fill the position as soon as possible.”

“At least they won’t keep you waiting that long,” Anthony says as he leads me into the living room.

“Are Alexander and Eden here?” I ask, looking around.

“No, they’re both still at work. Eden said they might try to join us for dinner. She wants to hear more about you, and I found an open mic tonight that they might come to. It’s been a while since they’ve seen me perform.”

“Is the open mic practice for tomorrow?”

“Yeah, it can’t hurt. Maybe I’ll see some insights with the New York crowds that will help with my audition.”

“When did you want to leave?” I ask, checking the time on my phone. It’s almost six o’clock and I know by the time we get to a restaurant it will probably be closer to seven.

“Alexander should be letting us know any minute if they’re coming or —”

The elevator doors open and Eden hurries off. Alexander trails after her, walking a lot slower.

“We’ll be ready to go in ten minutes!” Eden says as she hurries down to their room at the end of the hallway.

“We made a reservation for seven,” Alexander says as he follows after her.

“That means that they’re paying,” Anthony says with a grin and I roll my eyes.

I’m distracted by my thoughts. Anthony is acting like last night never happened.

Is that how he wants to play this? Does he think that last night was a mistake? Does he want to pretend like it never happened? I don’t think that I can go all night pretending that we didn’t sleep together last night. I need to know where we stand.

Anthony heads over to the couch and takes a seat and I follow after him.

“Are we going to talk about last night?” I whisper, my eyes darting to see if Eden and Alexander are headed our way yet.

Anthony seems surprised by my question, his eyes widening.

“What about it?”

“Are we just going to pretend that it never happened? Was it just a one-night stand? Do you want something more?”

Anthony swallows hard and I feel like that’s my answer. He doesn’t say anything, the silence stretching between us until it’s like there’s a canyon separating us.

“We’re ready!” Eden calls, walking briskly down the hallway with her husband hot on her heels.

Anthony shoots to his feet, his smile slightly strained around the edges. I climb to my feet, my appetite long gone and I wonder if I should say that I’m not feeling well and sit out dinner, but before I can force the words out, Eden is lacing her arm through mine and dragging me along with her.

“How did your interview go?” she asks me and I latch on to the conversation, happy for the distraction.

I tell her all about it and the gallery. Turns out that she was just there a few weeks ago for an exhibit and I hang on her every word as she tells me all about it.

They have their own driver and Alexander, Eden, and I slide into the back of the town car while Anthony rides up front with the driver.

They take us out to eat at some ritzy place and I’m nervous at first, wondering if I’ll mess up which fork to use and embarrass myself, but then Alexander orders Eden a bacon cheeseburger and I start to relax.

I ignore Anthony all throughout dinner.

It feels too raw, like I’m an exposed nerve and I don’t want to break down in front of Anthony’s brother and sister-in-law. That would be too humiliating.

The comedy club that Anthony is doing his open mic at is only a block and a half away, so we decide to walk.

Eden is telling me all about New York and some of the sites that I just have to check out.

We've already discussed the best places to live in case I do get the job at the gallery and end up moving here.

Anthony and Alexander are talking about something but as we get closer to the club, I can feel Anthony's nerves. He's tapping his fingers against his leg as we wait outside the club and I know that he's nervous about bombing again. Especially with his brother and sister-in-law in the crowd.

Especially with his audition tomorrow.

We're let in and I move closer to Anthony, reaching out and giving his hand a squeeze. He looks down at me and I try to give him a reassuring smile.

We find a table squeezed into the back of the room. It's one of the only ones left and I look around, taking in the crowd, stage, and the bar on the opposite side of the room. I'm stuck sitting next to Anthony and I try to avoid his gaze.

Maybe him rejecting me is for the best. Neither one of us is sure of our futures and if I don't get the job, then I'll be heading back to Los Angeles and he could be moving here.

He did you a favor. This was just a road trip romance. A strange one night stand that just happened to stretch over a few days. It's about to end. You need to start letting him go now. It will be easier that way.

I keep repeating that to myself as Anthony's name is called and he stands from our table and heads up to the stage. The closer he gets, the more his stage persona starts to show and by the time he's climbed the stairs, he's in full-on cocky comedian mode.

As he starts his set, I can't help but wonder if he was just putting on a show with me

too.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:29 am*

Anthony

This is it. The day of my audition. My big chance.

I should have been thinking about my audition all day, practicing my routine, or recording myself to make sure that my timing and pacing is spot on.

Instead, I've been obsessing over Emerson all damn day.

I know that I messed up last night. I froze and didn't respond to her but she had caught me off guard.

What did I want from her?

I've been thinking about that question all day. Emerson had stayed in a different guest room last night and it had felt so lonely to sleep alone after the last few nights of having Emerson pressed up against me or wrapped around me.

She was gone before I woke up the next day. I thought that she needed her space so I hadn't texted her, but now I'm wondering if that was a mistake. I wish that she was here for my audition.

As if my thoughts have conjured her, the door opens and Emerson walks in hesitantly. She looks around the room, her eyes meeting mine and holding. She gives me a smile and a quick thumbs-up as the announcer takes the stage.

I keep my eyes on her as she finds a spot at the bar, next to Eden and Alexander, and

takes a seat to watch the show.

There are three other comedians auditioning tonight with me and I've heard of all three before.

They're good and my palms start to sweat as the first comedian's name is called.

I nod at him as he passes and climbs up the stairs to the stage.

His set goes well but the crowd isn't laughing too hard. Either they haven't warmed up yet, or they're going to be a tough one to get to react.

The second comedian is called and by the time he walks back offstage, he has the crowd in tears. My stomach tightens, sweat breaking out on my forehead as my name is finally called.

I force the nerves down as I climb up on stage, slipping into my Comedian Anthony persona as I grab the mic.

I launch into my set and when the first joke lands, I start to relax and have fun. I've always loved being on stage and as I set up the second punchline and spot Emerson laughing at the bar, I know that I'm going to nail this audition.

My fifteen-minute set flies by but I'm on fire. My pacing and timing are perfect. Each punchline lands and by the time I'm thanking them for watching, I see a few people wiping tears from their eyes.

The last comedian's name is called and I sit back down to watch his set. He's nervous and his set doesn't go as well as mine or the guy who went before me.

I study my main competition but now that the audition is done, it's too late to change

anything. I'll just have to hope that they liked my set more than his.

I head backstage after the last comedian's set and we all face Ari, the club manager as she tells us that we all did a good job.

"Good job tonight. All of you. We'll discuss it and let you know our decision tomorrow," she says, clearly dismissing all of us.

We file out of her cramped office and back to the main room. I head straight for Emerson, wanting to see her face, wanting to go somewhere quiet and get lost in her.

She's still at the bar and I head over to her. She jumps to her feet, a big grin on her face as I approach her.

"You did great!" she says and I grin, wrapping my arms around her waist and drawing her to me as my lips crash down on hers.

We're wrapped around each other in an instant. The sounds of The Comedy Vault fade into the background as I get lost in Emerson.

How is it always like this with her?

She makes all of the static in my head quiet as soon as she's near me. She made me forget about bombing and usually I'm in a funk for days after that happens.

She makes everything better.

"Where did Eden and Alexander go?" I ask.

"They left to head home."



“That’s a great idea. Let’s get out of here,” I whisper against her lips and she nods, both of us breathless.

I drag her the three blocks back to Alexander’s apartment and as soon as we’re ensconced in the elevator, I have her pinned to the wall, my hips holding her in place as I claim her lips once again.

The ride up is over way too fast and I groan, backing out of the elevator and dragging Emerson with me as I go.

We bump into the entryway table and a doorway before we break apart and make a run for it up the stairs and down the hallway to our room.

We’re giggling like kids as I slam the bedroom door closed and reach for her.

She meets me halfway, her hands and mouth just as greedy for me as I am for her.

Emerson is pulling at my clothes before our lips even connect and I let go of her waist, helping her pull them all off. We work on hers together, shoving her jeans down and pulling her shirt over her head.

Her small, perky breasts are revealed, the cherry red nipples begging for my mouth already. I groan, unable to keep my hands and mouth off of them.

“Anthony,” Emerson moans, her head rolling back as her eyes fall to half-mast.

I roll her stiff nipples between my fingers, teasing the sweet peaks for another minute before I back Emerson up another step and push her down onto the bed.

“Spread those pretty thighs for me, baby,” I order her as I brace myself on my palms and capture one of her nipples in my mouth.

She opens her mouth, sucking in a breath as I roll my tongue over one sensitive point and then the other. By the time I've released her breasts, we're both balancing on the edge. Her whole body is a rosy shade of pink and it has me ready to come already.

She reaches for me but I dodge her hands and lick a path between her breasts, over her stomach, and straight down to her delicious pussy.

Her hips rock against my mouth and I have to use my hands to pin her down to the bed. The bulge in my pants grows as my fingers inch higher and higher up her thighs. I can feel how hot and wet she is for me and I groan low in my throat as I slip my finger inside of her.

Emerson gasps, her body tensing as she sucks in a deep breath of air. She's coming already, I realize and I grin.

"Desperate for me, huh?" I ask when she's come back down to earth.

My tone is cocky but it can't quite disguise the lust that I'm feeling.

"I need you," she begs and I nod, grabbing a condom out of my wallet on the nightstand and rolling it on as I fall down over her.

I thrust inside of her in one movement, sheathing myself to the hilt.

"Jesus fucking—" I cut myself off, forgetting just how tight and perfect she feels wrapped around me.

I can't resist taking one of her nipples into my mouth as we start to move together. I graze my teeth along the nub until it's stiff against my tongue and roof of my mouth.

Emerson sighs, her breath blowing my hair back as her fingers grip my shoulders and

she pulls me closer to her. I let her nipple go with a pop and look up into her eyes.

As our eyes meet, a thought slams into me.

I love her.

Fuck! I'm in love with Emerson.

How the fuck did that happen?

I don't have time to answer that right now. Not when her pussy is doing its best to milk my cock.

"Anthony," Emerson sighs and my cock hardens even more.

She's wrapped around me, clinging to me in the perfect way. I need to get her off before I lose my nut.

It's dark in my room but the lights of New York are providing enough light that I can see Emerson's sweet face clearly. She's lost in her pleasure, in us, and I think that I fall even more in love with her in that moment.

I'm a cocky asshole who doesn't deserve for a girl like Emerson to even give me the time of day, but somehow, I've got her under me.

"Anthony," Emerson sighs, her eyes filled with lust as I palm her tits, taking turns licking and teasing the stiff points.

"Spread those pretty thighs real wide for me, baby," I tell her as I start to work my hips harder against hers.

She does as I ask, spreading her legs wide for me and giving me plenty of room to play with her. I reward her by grinding against her, rubbing the root of my cock over her clit with each pass and driving us both crazy.

“You’re so wet, baby,” I grit out and she moans, rocking against me perfectly.

“Anthony!” Emerson cries out as I work her higher and higher.

Her breath stutters as her eyes fall closed and she starts to shake. Her pussy is clamping down harder than ever around my fingers and I can tell that she’s close to coming.

“Anthony!” she shouts up to the ceiling a second later as she starts to cum.

I can feel her pussy clenching around my cock as I find my own peak and come with her.

Her pussy squeezes almost painfully around my dick as I wring the last of her orgasm from her.

I just barely catch myself before I fall on top of her and smother her with my weight.

She’s looking up at me with love drunk eyes and I kiss her, kneeling her legs apart so that I can kneel between her legs.

“Fuck, Emerson,” I say as I pull out of her and fall onto my back onto the mattress.

“I love you,” she whispers dreamily, her eyes still closed and her face flushed from her high.

My whole world is rocked by the words. I’m not even sure why. I was just thinking

the same thing but it's too much. Everything is so uncertain. Can I really trust my feelings here? I mean, I've only known Emerson for a few days.

The silence stretches between us as I talk myself out of being in love with her.

My body and attitude both grow cold and I reach for the blankets, pulling them over both of us. It's still silent, the awkwardness spreading and filling the room as we both remain motionless.

Maybe that's why it's so jarring when Emerson throws the covers off of her, crawls out of bed and heads for the door.

I know that I should stop her. I should say something—anything—but I can't. I can't force any words out of my clogged throat.

Instead, I stare at the ceiling as the door closes behind her. The fantasy that I didn't even know I had of us living in New York together, evaporates in my head and I know without a doubt that I just made the biggest mistake of my life.

Just let her calm down. You can talk to her tomorrow and explain how you feel. You can make things right.

As I close my eyes and pray for sleep to take me, I wonder if that will really be enough. Or if I just lost the best thing that ever happened to me.

Emerson

“I got the job,” I tell Layla.

She shrieks and I grin, pulling the phone away from my ear as I wander through Central Park. Layla finally calms down and I hold the phone back to my ear.

“So does that mean that you’re not coming back to Los Angeles?”

“Well, I’ll have to so that I can pack up my stuff and move it over here. I have two weeks to find a place to live, pack up and move here. I already sent in my two weeks notice to the gallery back there.”

“I’m so happy for you! You’re going to be killing it in New York,” she says excitedly.

“Thanks,” I say with a smile that only feels partially forced

Everything would be perfect, if not for the mess with Anthony last night.

“What’s new in Los Angeles?” I ask, wanting a distraction from my thoughts.

“Well, I actually wanted to talk to you about something too.”

“Uh oh,” I joke and I hear her laugh.

“Nothing bad! I promise. I’ve been thinking and well, I need a change of pace too.

Plus I miss you. I was thinking that if you moved to New York, maybe I would join you. We could find a place to rent that's even smaller than our place out here!" she jokes and I laugh but I know that she's right.

I've been looking at apartments already and we're going to have to live in a shoebox in order to be able to afford the place but I know that Layla will make it fun.

"That would be awesome! But are you sure that you want to move out here? New York is way different from Los Angeles."

"I know, I know. I'm going to have to get more black clothes and all that. It just feels like I need a change of scenery, new guys to go out with, new clubs to shake my booty at."

I laugh at that and take a seat on a nearby bench.

"Have you talked to the landlord about us not renewing our lease?"

"I will as soon as we hang up. You want me to start packing up boxes?"

"Yeah. I was thinking about buying a plane ticket and leaving my car here. Eden said that I could leave it parked in one of their parking spots until I got back. That way I could help you drive the moving truck."

"I can pick you up from the airport," she offers.

"Perfect. Let me send you some of the apartments that I saw. I wanted to sign a lease before I went back to Los Angeles."

I send her a few links and stay on the line as she looks through them.

“I like that second one. Plus, it is the biggest.”

“Yeah, and that’s the one that had an open house this morning so I went to check it out. It’s in a good neighborhood, the building seems safe and it’s not the size of a postage stamp.”

She laughs at that and I promise her that I’ll go sign paperwork as soon as we hang up. She tells me about a date that she went on a few nights ago and I fill her in on Anthony. She’s ecstatic that we slept together and says that she knew that we would be perfect together.

Then I tell her about him not answering me when I asked him what this was and she quiets down. I admit that we slept together last night—again—and how I had blurted out that I love him.

“What did he say?” she asks, her tone cautious and I bet she can hear the sadness in my voice.

“Nothing,” I whisper, blinking back tears as I remember last night.

I had just had the orgasm of my life and wasn’t thinking clearly and I just couldn’t hold the words back any longer. I don’t think that I had even realized that they had been on the tip of my tongue for days now.

“What a dick!” Layla says, immediately having my back.

I smile, loving her even more for her loyalty.

“We both just laid there afterward and it was dead silent. Eventually I got up and left the room and slept in the guest room next door.”



I wince even as I tell her that.

God, it had been so embarrassing. Both of us lying side by side, staring up at the ceiling as the silence spread and spread.

I had been close to tears when I climbed out of bed and hurried out of the room and next door. I had laid awake for another two hours, hoping like hell that Anthony would come after me, would come say anything , but he never did.

“Are you still staying at his brother’s place?” Layla asks and I clear my throat.

“Yeah, but I’m leaving today. I need to get back to Los Angeles but it’s just too awkward to be here with them now. Which sucks, because I actually really like Eden. His brother isn’t too bad either. A little antisocial but still seems like a good guy.”

“Let me know if you need anything. And text me when your flight lands so I can pick you up!”

“I will,” I promise her before I stand up and head back toward the apartment that we’re going to rent.

It takes me an hour and a half to fill out paperwork and then make it back to Alexander and Eden’s penthouse.

I run into Eden at the elevator and she congratulates me on getting the position. I tell her about the apartment that we just rented and about Layla moving out here with me and she hugs me before she makes me promise to text her about a girl’s night soon.

“I’m actually about to head to the airport and book a flight back to Los Angeles. I’ll drive the moving truck out here with Layla. Are you sure that I can leave my car parked here for a few days?”

“Absolutely! We don’t use our parking spot, so it’s no bother. Why don’t you let us help you with the plane ticket. It will be our way of saying congratulations.”

“I can’t let you do that,” I try to argue but she’s already pulling out her phone and hitting some buttons.

“It’s already done,” she says with a smirk.

“Thank you,” I say, choking back tears.

I might not be able to see her again. Not with the way things are with Anthony and I realize just how much I’m going to miss her.

“Has Anthony heard anything back yet about the audition? I haven’t talked to him all day, but he was supposed to hear back today, right?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“I know that Alexander would never admit it, but it’s been so nice to have you and him here with us these last few days. We don’t get to see family that often.”

“I haven’t heard from him either. I hope he got the spot though.”

Eden gives me a strange look, her gaze searching my face and I wonder if she can tell that my heart is breaking or that things aren’t right between Anthony and I.

“Me too,” she whispers, giving me another hug.

The elevator doors open and I head upstairs and down to my guest room. Anthony is out and I hurry to pack up my belongings and get out of there.

“I called our driver. He’ll take you to the airport. He’s waiting downstairs,” Eden says as I drag my suitcase back downstairs.

“Thank you for everything,” I tell her, wrapping her up in a tight hug.

“Anything, anytime, Emerson. And don’t worry about Anthony. He’ll pull his head out of his ass soon. I promise.”

I choke on a laugh, tears threatening to spill as I hug her tighter.

“Thank you.”

I take one last look around as I grab my suitcase and head for the elevators. The whole way to the airport, I wonder if she’s right.

And if I even want him to come after me.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:29 am*

Anthony

I didn't get the spot.

I didn't get the spot and all I want to do is head back to the penthouse, grab Emerson and curl up to talk all of it out with her.

I jog down the sidewalk, bumping into people but not caring. Look at that, I'm fitting into New York already.

I can't believe that I didn't get the spot. Ari did say that they're going to have another spot opening up soon and I'm invited to try out again. I could always get that spot, but that's three weeks away. Do I just stay in New York until then?

I need to talk to Emerson. She'll be able to help me figure it all out. She helps me clear my head.

I value her opinion, I realize.

I love you.

Her words from last night hit me and my steps falter. I can't believe how I just choked and laid there. I just let her walk away from me. The worst part is that I could tell that she was upset and I still couldn't force myself to go after her.

What was I going to say back to that? Did I love her? I knew the answer but it scared me. Actually it terrified me.

What future did we have? If I tell her that I love her, what can I really offer her? A guest room in my brother's apartment? I'm a struggling comedian who might have to go back to Los Angeles while she could be staying here.

How long could that relationship really last?

We barely even know each other. It's been less than a week since I first met her. How can I know if this is real? Can I really trust how I'm feeling about her right now?

My gut tells me that I can. Emerson is so different from anyone else. There's something about her that calls to me on a cellular level. We're meant to be.

I ride the elevator up to the penthouse, almost running over Eden as I step off.

"Whoa! Sorry, I didn't see you there," I say, reaching out to steady her.

"What's the rush?" she asks, looking up at me with a worried glint in her eyes.

"I just needed to talk to Emerson."

"Oh, she left."

Those two words have my heart, my world, screeching to a halt.

"She left? What do you mean she left?"

Yeah, asshole, of course she left. She told you she loved you and you just laid there like a fucking idiot.

"Yeah, she got that gallery position and flew back to Los Angeles to pack up her apartment. Didn't she tell you?"

“No, I... I haven’t heard from her all day,” I admit as my brain starts to work once more.

“Oh, sorry, I thought that you knew. Did you hear back from your audition yet?” she asks as she straightens her purse strap on her shoulder.

“Yeah, I didn’t get it, but I can audition again in a few weeks.”

“Oh, Anthony. I’m so sorry. I’m sure you’ll get it next time. You were hilarious.”

“Thanks, Eden,” I say, hoping that she’s done talking so that I can escape to my room.

“You know that you’re welcome to stay here for as long as you need to.”

“Does Alexander know that you just said that?” I tease, trying to lighten the mood and she laughs.

“I can handle your brother. I’m actually running late to meet him now. I’ll let you relax. There’s food in the fridge!” she calls as she steps onto the elevator.

I wave at her as the doors close and then jog up the stairs and into the room that I had been sharing with Emerson.

Her suitcase is gone, her clothes too and I want to scream.

My phone rings in my pocket and I pray that it’s her. Theo’s name flashes on the screen and I answer, knowing that I need to tell him about the audition and my new plans.

“Hey, man,” I say as I pick up.

“Hey, how’s it going?” he asks and I can hear the Los Angeles traffic in the background.

“Alright. I didn’t get the spot but I can try again in a few weeks,” I blurt, ripping off the band-aid.

“Shit, that sucks, man. At least you get to try again soon.”

“Yeah, hopefully the second time’s the charm.”

“Right?” Theo asks with a laugh and the traffic quiets, so he must have walked into a building.

“Are you going to stay in New York? Work on your comedy there for a little bit?”

I still haven’t decided. Part of me wants to run back to Los Angeles but I know that if I want to be successful, then I need to stay here and try again.

“Yeah, I think so.”

“Good.”

“That means we won’t be able to move out here together for a few weeks,” I warn him, wondering how he’s going to take the news.

“That actually works better for me. I got a contract to shoot in Paris for the next two weeks and then I’m headed to Australia for a week. I won’t be back in Los Angeles and ready to move to New York until the end of the month.”

“Perfect timing then. Are you doing Fashion Week?”

I only half listen as Theo tells me about the shoots that he booked. I can hear the excitement in his voice and I want to be happy for him but I keep thinking about how everyone is reaching that next level and I'm just left here.

"How's Emerson?" Theo asks and I'm jerked out of my pity party.

My mouth opens but just like last night, no words come out.

"Anthony?" Theo asks after a minute and I swallow hard.

"I don't know," I say truthfully.

Silence hangs in the air between us and I know that he can read my melancholy mood.

"I have a layover in New York in a few days. Do you want me to bring any of your stuff and we can meet at the airport?" he asks me, throwing me a lifesaver and changing the subject.

"No, I have enough clothes."

"What about money?" he jokes and I snort.

"I'm staying with Alexander and Eden."

"Ohhh, so you're living the good life."

"Pretty much."

He laughs and we catch up for a few more minutes before we end the call.



I look around the empty room, wondering what in the hell I should be doing now.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:29 am*

Emerson

It's been the longest, most stressful three weeks of my life.

Between packing up our old apartment in Los Angeles, driving a big moving truck across country, setting up our new, somehow smaller, apartment in New York, and me starting my new dream job, I haven't had a lot of time to process everything that's been happening.

Layla finally has the apartment set up the way that she wants. I let her have the bigger room since it also has to be her office and she's the one who spends the most time in the apartment.

We live closer to Chelsea but it's still close to Malhoy Gallery and Alexander and Eden's place.

I've been avoiding Eden and I feel bad. She seems so nice and I really like her and her husband...

I just can't handle hearing about or seeing Anthony right now.

I pass by a comedy club every day on my way to work and every single day I wonder if he's going to be performing there tonight.

If I'll run into him outside of it one day.

He's been texting me every day.

It started with him trying to apologize and asking to see me but when I didn't respond, he started having one-way conversations with me.

He told me that he didn't get the spot and my heart broke for him. I had almost given in then and called him but then I would remember how he had let me walk out of the bedroom after I told him that I loved him and I had set my phone aside.

He told me that he's staying in New York and working on his comedy until he auditions again in a few weeks. Actually, he should be auditioning again tonight.

Part of me wants to go and support him but I'm weak. I know that I would fall back into his arms if he opened them for me.

My phone buzzes in my purse and I fish it out, biting back a smile when I see that I have another text from Anthony.

ANTHONY: Alexander just asked me to move in with them permanently.

I can't hold in my laugh at that. While it's obvious that Alexander and Anthony love each other, it's always buried under a huge layer of sarcasm and ribbing. Alexander would never admit that he enjoyed having his brother stay with him.

Someone bumps into me, and I almost drop my phone. I'm still getting used to how pushy everyone seems to be here, especially around the end of the day when everyone is heading home for the night.

I just clocked out of the gallery a few minutes ago and my feet are killing me. I have to wear dressier clothes here to fit in with the New York fashion and that means slightly higher heels. Heels that I'm still trying to get used to walking around in all day.

I spot my slightly run-down apartment building up ahead and let out a sigh of relief. Another message comes through as I walk inside and head for the stairs.

ANTHONY: I miss you.

He sends me that every day without fail. I know what the next message will be before it comes through.

ANTHONY: Have dinner with me. Let me apologize and beg for your forgiveness in person.

Just like every other day, I bite my lip, twirling a strand of hair around my finger as I debate it.

I want to see him, of course I do, but I know that I need to protect myself too. I can't let him suck me back in. It would only hurt more when he pushed me away again. I need someone who is going to catch me when I fall.

So like every other day, I do my best to push thoughts of Anthony out of my mind.

I unlock our apartment door and walk by Layla's door. She's got her headphones on, her fingers flying over her keyboard so I sneak past her room, trying not to disturb her.

I head into the kitchen to start making dinner, thoughts of Anthony doing their best to sneak back in but I force them out. I need to get over this guy.

He's broken my heart enough already.

I'm draining the spaghetti noodles when Layla comes out of her bedroom a little while later.

“Hey, how’s the writing going?” I ask, turning and grabbing the garlic bread out of the oven.

“Good! The words were really flowing today,” she says with a smile.

“That’s awesome,” I say, happy to hear that New York has helped her shake the story loose.

“Want some spaghetti?” I ask her, grabbing a plate and she shakes her head, already licking her lips.

We head to our tiny corner, bumped up against the window in our living room. I take a big bite of my food, chewing as Layla stares out the window at the busy street below.

“We should go out tonight!” she blurts out excitedly.

My eyes widen. I probably should have seen this coming. Layla is a social creature. I’m lucky that she didn’t drag me out to explore the night that we moved in.

“What did you have in mind?” I ask, taking another big bite of spaghetti.

“How about Anthony’s comedy show. That’s tonight, right?” she asks casually but I can see her watching me from under her eyelashes.

My appetite vanishes as I think about seeing Anthony again. Unfortunately, for me, it’s not because I hate him and never want to see him again.

“I don’t know if I can,” I whisper.

“You can, Emerson. You’re strong and I know that he’s been texting you. Maybe it’s

time that you let him apologize. You and I both know that you are still in love with him. What's the harm in giving him a second chance?"

I bite my lip, debating.

She's right. I'm miserable stretching this out. Maybe if I see him again and just hear him out, we can both finally move on.

I look over to the clock on the microwave.

"It starts in an hour and a half," I start to say and Layla lets out a squeal.

"That gives us just enough time."

"Just enough time for what?" I ask, starting to get worried.

"To make you a knockout so that Anthony realizes just what he let slip away."

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:29 am*

Anthony

This is supposed to be my second chance, but it's not the one that I want.

I'm sitting in the same chair I was the last time I auditioned, but the nerves that I was feeling then, aren't here now.

Instead, all I feel is empty.

I haven't been able to shake this feeling since I came back to the penthouse and found out that Emerson had left without a word.

I tried to call her right away but she didn't answer.

I had tried to tell myself it was just because she was on the plane and that she would call me back after she landed.

When she didn't, I had told myself that she was just tired, but then I tried to call her the next day and she never answered. All of my phone calls have gone unanswered.

She hasn't been responding to any of my text messages either, but I can't seem to stop myself from trying to reach out to her. I know that she's reading them and every time I see that, I hold my breath, hoping that this is the time that she finally messages me back.

So far it hasn't been.

A hand comes down on my shoulder and I jerk out of my thoughts, looking up into Theo's smiling face. He just got back from Europe and stopped to see me perform before we head back to Los Angeles to pack up our place.

"Hey, man. You all set?" he asks, looking around the club.

The lights are dim and more and more people are starting to pile in. It looks like it will be a full house tonight. That should make me feel something but it doesn't.

I need Emerson.

As if my thoughts have conjured her up, she walks into the club. Layla is beside her, excitedly talking to her as she points out something on the other side of the room. I don't look though. My eyes are too busy taking in every detail of Emerson's face like I'm a man starved. I guess I am.

"Is that her?" Theo asks and I nod, not tearing my eyes away from her.

"The redhead or the one with the black hair?"

"Red."

"So I can have the black-haired one?" Theo asks and I snort, looking up at him.

I look over to Emerson and her friend, studying the two of them for a moment before I turn back to Theo.

"She looks like she would eat you up and spit you out," I warn and he shrugs.

"We'll see about that."



Theo heads across the room, squeezing by a few people on his way to her and I follow eagerly. This could be my one chance to talk to Emerson, to apologize and try to win her back.

“Hey, ladies,” Theo says charmingly.

“Emerson,” I say, far less eloquently.

“Hey,” she says shyly, her blue eyes skirting away from mine.

“Can we talk somewhere private?” I ask, wanting to reach out and touch her.

“Isn’t your show starting soon?”

“I’ve got a few minutes.”

I don’t want to let her go yet. She could be gone by the time that I finish up my set. I can’t let her slip through my fingers again.

“Um, okay,” she says, looking over to Layla.

Theo and her are deep in conversation though, so she’s no help.

I grab Emerson’s hand and lead her into the back hallway that leads to the offices and green room.

“Hey, I’ve missed you,” I say once I’m sure that we’re alone.

“Yeah, I’ve uh, I’ve got your messages.”

“I know. You left me on read.”

She looks away, her cheeks heating until they're almost as red as her hair.

"I deserved it. The way we left things... I was an asshole to you, Emerson. I just froze. I'm so sorry about that."

"It hurt. Me saying that and then you just pretending like you didn't hear me."

"I know and I'm so sorry."

She turns away from me and I can practically see the wheels turning in her pretty head. Is she going to forgive me? Will she give me, give us, another chance?

"Okay."

"Okay?" I ask.

"Yeah, I forgive you."

My whole body relaxes at her words and I didn't realize how on edge I was. Emerson gives me a smile, laughing at my expression and I give her a cocky grin. The one that I know she loves so much.

"So, what now? Do you want to start dating? We can take this slow, give this a chance. I know that I took you by surprise when I said that I—"

"I love you," I blurt out, shocking both of us.

I can't stand the thought of taking things slow with her now. It would feel like we were taking a step back and I want a future with her. I want everything with her.

"What?" She asks her eyes wide and locked on my face. "What did you just say?"

“I love you. I’ve never felt this way about anyone, I’ve never said those words to anyone, but of course I love you. How could anyone not?”

Emerson stares at me, her eyes studying my face. I wonder if she can see how much I love her. I feel like my face softens and tiny hearts dance in my eyes every time I look at her.

“Alright.”

“Alright?”

“Alright, you get one more chance. I know that you need to get ready for your set, so I’ll let you focus. We can talk more over dinner tomorrow. Text me, I’ll answer this time,” she says before she disappears back out into the belly of the club.

I grin, feeling like I’m floating on a cloud as I watch her go find her seat with Layla and Theo.

Ari comes by a few seconds later, giving me a small smirk and I know that she heard every word that we just said.

“Good luck tonight,” she says as she passes and I follow her out, sitting back down in my chair.

I go last tonight and I’m thankful that I’ll have some time to get my head on straight before I take the stage.

When my name is called, I grin, listening as Theo, Layla, and Emerson all cheer for me in the back of the room.

I walk on stage, ready to nail this audition, get the spot in this comedy club, and then

win my girl back.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:29 am*

Emerson

“I hope you know that I can only afford to buy you a slice of pizza and some water,” Anthony warns me as we walk through Central Park together the next night.

“What? I thought you were some big hot-shot comedian? Didn’t you just get that spot at the famed Comedy Vault?”

He grins. He had told me all about how Ari had called him to tell him that he got the spot at the club as he was on his way to pick me up for our date from my new apartment.

He had grabbed me and kissed me as soon as I answered the door and I could feel the excitement and happiness radiating off of him in waves.

Theo had just landed in Los Angeles and he sent him a message telling him the good news as I grabbed my purse.

By the time that I got back, he had been grinning like a lunatic and telling me that he was sure that Theo was already searching for places for them to live in out here.

I just hope that it’s close to Layla’s and my place.

It’s starting to get dark and we stop at one of the street vendors, each grabbing a slice of pepperoni pizza and a bottle of water before we make our way over to a bench.

“How’s the gallery?” he asks me as I take a bite of pizza.

“Incredible. Everyone who works there is so friendly and the artwork,” I sigh and Anthony grins. “The artwork is breathtaking. Truly beautiful.”

I tell him about each individual piece of art in great detail but Anthony doesn’t seem to mind. He’s just enjoying listening to me ramble on and I love that he’s supportive of me and what I love and am passionate about.

I’ve missed this, listening to him tell about his day, seeing his smiling face. We stay and sit on the bench long after we’ve both finished eating our food.

He tells me about Theo and him moving out here and I ask him how excited Alexander was to hear that he was moving out of his penthouse.

“He put on a brave face but I could tell that he was sad that I wouldn’t be sleeping at his place and eating all of his food.”

I giggle, enjoying his sense of humor and the way his eyes light up when I laugh.

“Eden asked me to go out for drinks with her for a girl’s night.”

“Yeah? Are you going to go?” he asks.

“Yeah, I think she and Layla will get along together, so we’re going out for some tacos and margaritas on Thursday.”

“So we’ll have to have our second date on Friday then.”

I smile at him and I know that things are going to be alright between us.

We get up and walk toward the exit of the park. We wind up back on the street close to my apartment and I bite my lip before I ask him if he wants to come up and see my

new place.

I think we both know what I'm really asking.

"Sure," he says but I can tell that he's excited.

We cross the street and I let us into the building. He follows me up the stairs and into my tiny new place.

It's small but actually pretty nice. There's color everywhere, from the rug in the living room to the dirty plate and mug on the kitchen counter.

"It's nice," Anthony says as I close the door behind us.

"It's tiny," I correct him with a laugh. "But I kind of love it."

I grab each of us a beer and we sit together on the couch that we brought with us from Los Angeles.

I still have some apartment listings from a few weeks ago and when I spot one in the trash, I tell him about them and promise to email them to him and Theo to look over.

There's even another apartment in this building that's still available and I know that he'll be texting Theo about them getting it later tonight.

"I missed you," Anthony whispers, scooting closer on the couch to me.

"I missed you too."

"Don't ever disappear on me again. Please," he begs me and I can see the pain in his eyes.

“Don’t break my heart and I won’t.”

“I won’t,” he promises me as his lips meet mine.

As soon as Anthony’s lips land on mine, it’s like no time has passed at all. He still has me burning hotter than anything ever has before. He still has me out of my mind with lust with just one touch.

I know that Layla could be home any minute so I don’t let things get too hot and heavy.

Instead, I pull away, grabbing his hand and dragging him to my bedroom.

He kicks the door closed and reaches for me but I’m faster.

I’ve got him backed up against the door and am sinking to my knees before he knows what’s happening.

“Emerson,” he groans as I undo his jeans and pull them down his thighs.

His fingers tangle in my hair as I open my mouth around the tip of him.

“Holy shit! Fuck!” Anthony shouts as I suck on him.

I look up and my eyes get trapped by his. The way he’s staring down at me... it’s almost like he’s in awe.

No, not awe.

Like he’s in love.



I lick and suck along his length until I feel him start to swell in my mouth. Anthony's fingers tense in my hair as he tries to pull me off of him.

"I need to be inside of you," he grits out and I let him go, reluctantly.

As soon as his cock is out of my mouth, he's got me on my feet and is pulling at my clothes. We stumble toward the bed, crashing down on it together.

"You need to get a bigger bed," Anthony whispers against my lips and I laugh.

"I'll look into it," I promise him as he rolls me onto my back, grabs a condom from his jeans that are still around his knees and thrusts into me.

The pace is rough, both of us desperate to make up for lost time. We move together, my hips rising to meet each of his hard thrusts.

He shifts back onto his heels and I sink my teeth into his shoulders when his cock rubs over a certain spot deep inside of me. My thighs wrap around his hips as I search for a way to take him deeper inside of me.

"Right there! Right there!" I shout, wrapping myself tighter around him as I feel myself start to rocket toward my peak.

My pussy clenches around his thick shaft and we both groan as I feel him swell inside of me.

After that, it only takes one pump and we're both coming, my teeth sinking into my lower lip, legs trembling uncontrollably around his waist. He makes a hoarse sound into the curve of my neck, his hips slamming forward, pleasure rippling in my gut, twisting it as the release burns through us both.

His muscles ripple with power and helplessness as he holds himself steady above me, and I run my hands over his skin and watch as his blue eyes go unfocused, his body seizing as my pussy throbs tightly around him.

Both of our bodies lose tension at the same time, my legs dropping from around his hips and he holds me against his chest, kissing my forehead and cheeks.

“I love you, I love you.”

“I love you too, Anthony,” I whisper as I relax against him, curled into his side.

“So, are we exclusive then?” I ask a few moments later and Anthony laughs against my lips.

“Yeah, Emerson. We’re exclusive. You’re my girlfriend... and my future,” he whispers and I melt into his side even more.

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:29 am*

Anthony

Five Years Later...

I love being a comedian but there is nothing like coming home to my wife after being on tour.

The apartment lights are all on when the taxi pulls up out front and I grin as I grab my bag and head inside our building.

I got the spot at the comedy club here in New York on my second audition. Working alongside such great comics really opened some doors for me. It wasn't long before I had an agent and was booking my first tour—as an opener of course. From there, I started headlining and doing a few festivals.

I just booked my first Netflix deal last year and Emerson was there with our kids. Theo, Layla, Ames, Alexander, Eden, and my mom and dad came to support me as well. Netflix just called me last week and offered me another contract for a second stand-up special which I was happy to accept.

Emerson and I moved in together six months after we both moved to New York. Layla and Theo had started dating by then and were happy to move in together.

We had married six months after that in a small, town hall ceremony here in New York. Alexander had tried to give me shit about that but he got married at a chapel in Las Vegas without any of the family there, so he didn't have a leg to stand on.

Emerson has worked her way up at the Malhoy Gallery and she now manages it. I let her decorate our place, just two blocks from Alexander and Eden's place. She knows more about art and design than I do and as long as she's living there with me, I'm happy.

I nod at our doorman and step onto the elevator with a few other building residents. They get off a few floors below me and I shift on my feet, anxious to get home already. When the elevator doors open, I practically sprint to our apartment door.

It's unlocked and I swing it open, spotting Emerson in the kitchen right away.

She turns, her eyes wide when she sees me. I wanted to surprise her, so I told her I was getting home tomorrow. When she stands there speechless, I realize that I succeeded.

"Surprise!" I say, kicking the door shut behind me as Emerson finally charges across our place toward me.

She launches herself at me and I laugh, catching her easily. Her arms wrap around my neck, her legs around my waist as our lips meet and cling to each other.

We live in an open plan loft on the top floor and I make my way over to our bed, laying her down as we start to pull at our clothes.

"How was tour?" she asks between kisses.

"Good, I signed that other Netflix contract," I say, trailing kisses down her neck.

"Congratulations, baby. I'm so proud of you," she says breathlessly.

"How's the gallery?" I ask, wanting to catch up with her but needing to feel her

beneath me, her skin on mine, her body wrapped tight around me.

“Later, I’ll tell you later,” she gasps and I nod against her neck.

“Much later.”

She laughs against my lips and I grin.

If you had told me that I would meet the love of my life on a cross country road trip to New York, I would have told you that you were insane, but that’s exactly what happened.

Emerson is the best thing that ever happened to me. She is my best friend, my wife, the mother of my future children, and as I look down at her, flushed and spread out beneath me, I know that she’s also my always.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:29 am*

Emerson

Ten Years Later...

“Promise me that you won’t tease your brother too much,” I tell Anthony as he drives the SUV up the long driveway.

“Babe,” Anthony says, drawing my name out like our kids do when they’re pouting about something.

Dahlia and Kinsley both giggle in the back seat, used to their dad and uncles teasing each other.

We’re headed up to a cabin in Pennsylvania. We try to do a family vacation with everyone at least once a year. Normally, it’s over the winter break but Anthony took this year off to work on a new set so we planned two.

Ames and Alexander and their spouses are meeting us at the cabin, along with the boys’ parents. I’m looking forward to seeing everyone but especially about talking art with Arthur and Aileen.

Arthur retired from teaching at Harvard a few years ago, wanting to slow down and spend more time with his wife and grandkids, but he’s always up to talk art with me.

It will be nice to see Eden and Rory again too. I don’t get to see them as much as I would like, even though Eden and I live in the same city.

“Are we there yet?” Dahlia asks, leaning over the front seat.

“Almost,” I tell her as the roof of the log cabin comes into view.

The girls are excited to see their cousins and grandparents too. I think they’re more excited to be able to run wild for a few days.

I wish that Layla and Theo would have been able to come with us. They’re off in France, celebrating their sixth wedding anniversary. I think Theo had a photoshoot there in a couple of weeks so they’re planning on staying over there for a month or two.

Layla’s hit the New York Times Bestseller and USA Today Bestseller list half a dozen times in the last ten years. She just found out that her latest release has been pitched for movie rights and I couldn’t be more proud of her.

The cabin comes into view and I laugh as the girls start to bounce in their seats.

Ames is outside with Alexander and they’re both grabbing luggage out of the back of their cars.

Dahlia and Kinsley are out of the car as soon as the car has come to a stop and I climb out, stretching before I follow after them.

“Be nice,” I call out to Anthony as I follow the girls inside.

They’ve already found their cousins and I head into the kitchen, smiling when I see Aileen, Eden, and Rory gathered around the kitchen island.

They squeal, running toward me with their arms outstretched and I laugh as I hug each of them back.

“I’m so glad that you’re finally here,” Eden says as she squeezes me tight and I smile.

“Me too.”

I wash my hands and start to help them with dinner. If you had told me ten years ago that one day, I would be married to a famous comedian, living in New York, and working my dream job, I wouldn’t have believed you.

Not because I didn’t want all of those things, but because I would have been too afraid to even wish for those things.

Then I met Anthony on a random cross country trip and he had me wishing for all kinds of crazy things.

He’s my best friend, the love of my life, and all of my wildest dreams wrapped up into one.

\* \* \*

Looking for Ames and Alexander’s books? Then be sure to check out Ames and For Better or Worse today!