



The Nanny's Bossy Billionaire (New York Billionaires #3)

Author: *Judy Hale*

Category: Urban

Description: A nanny who doesn't date should be hanging nowhere around a damaged playboy billionaire...

But, I'm scraping every penny to pay off my brother's debt, and a weekend babysitting job with a rich family seems like just what I need.

Even if the little terror has a reputation for making nannies cry.

My luck runs out when I find my charge's beloved uncle is the bossy stranger I slept with some nights ago.

I can't stand him, and he says I'm not his type anyway.

Still, he likes to end our arguments with me pressed against his hard body.

And just when I decide I've seen enough of Xavier Bennett, he makes me an offer I'd be a fool to refuse.

Xavier offers to pay off the debt, in exchange...for one date.

Seems like an easy trade.

I don't plan on enjoying his company, and falling in love definitely isn't on the cards for either of us.

And apparently, a surprise pregnancy is just what it takes to bring back the demons of his past.

Total Pages (Source): 19

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:10 pm

Brooke

I push open the back door of my apartment and step into the small, square kitchen. A shirtless man stands in the middle of the kitchen, wolfing down a sandwich. I'm not even surprised. It's the kind of thing you get used to walking into, living with my best friend Stella. He looks like all the others, attractive and with an athletic build.

"Hi," he says.

"Hey," I return cheerfully, turning in the other direction and going into the hallway leading to my room.

Stella emerges from her room, wearing denim shorts and a white tube top that shows off the butterfly tattoo on her back. Her short platinum-blond hair is messy, and so is her makeup. She squeals when she sees me. "You're back!"

"And you were supposed to be working." I smile, motioning to the man in the kitchen while dragging my small suitcase behind me .

Stella is a stylist and make-up artist. We met in our first year at Brooklyn College and have been inseparable ever since.

"I got off early, and so did Jake. He came over, and one thing led to another..."

"Stop," I say, putting one hand up. "I don't need to hear all the details."

"Come on." She follows me into my room. "I want to tell you since that's the closest

you'll get to having a good time in over a year or however long it's been since you broke up with Phil."

It has been two years, and he was my first boyfriend, the cheating bastard. I was so devastated that I gave up on dating and men in general, much to Stella's dismay, and threw myself into work.

There just hasn't been enough time between teaching and running the school's art and music club and planning trips for Regal Elementary to fit in another relationship. I'd created the after-school clubs, and while the school board was enthusiastic about having these extracurriculars, they were slow on funding, which meant fewer hands to help with projects and exhibitions.

"I don't need a man to have a good time," I say.

"Agreed." Stella nods. "If only your idea of a good time wasn't sitting on the couch watching *New Girl* while you knit."

"It's crocheting, and it helps me relax."

"Still a grandma activity," she says.

"Tell your buddy to put some clothes on." I throw my suitcase on the bed and start to unpack.

"So, how did it go?" She sits on the bed, forgetting about the dude in the kitchen.

I let out a huge sigh. "Let's just say I'll be paying them back until I die at this rate."

I found out just last week that my idiot brother has been taking out loans to fund his gambling addiction. He's dug himself a hole so deep he's dragging the entire family

into it.

I'd received a phone call from a man called Fulvio, threatening to hurt every member of my family, starting with Grandma, if we didn't pay him what Steve owed him. What an asshole.

Fulvio had known everyone by name, where they were, and what they did. Still, I refused to believe it wasn't some kind of joke. I called Steve immediately.

"What the hell, Steve?" I'd yelled when he confirmed it was true.

"I can't tell you how sorry I am, sis..." he began.

"How much do you owe?" I cut short the apology I wasn't ready to hear or accept.

"I've paid back some and I'm working on the rest."

"Not fast enough, apparently; this Fulvio person threatened to push Nan off the stairs. Did you know that?"

Thankfully neither Mom nor Nan had received any unusual texts. When Steve kept avoiding the question of how much was still outstanding, I knew it was bad. I took the next few days off work to see Mom and Nan in Providence, just to be sure they were fine. Then I went to Boston to get the details out of Steve.

I'd imagined he owed maybe fifty grand at the most. It was worse.

This is another level, I thought, even for him.

"How much does he owe?" Stella asks.

I take a breath. “Two hundred and eighty-nine thousand dollars.” My heart skips a beat every time I say that number out loud. We do not have that kind of money. Not even if we pool all our savings and sell off Mom’s struggling antique shop.

“Holy shit! That’s a lot of money.” Stella states the obvious.

My bun is suddenly too tight. I sit and whip off the band, massaging my throbbing temple. “I know. I just... I’m so tired I want to take a nap, and hopefully, when I wake up, this will all have gone away.”

“We’ll figure something out, okay,” Stella says, rubbing my shoulder.

“Thanks, babe.” Then I remember the shirtless guy. “You’re ignoring your... guest,” I say, for lack of a better word.

“Jake? Oh, he’s just leaving.” Her voice drops. “By the way, girrrl, the mechanics of what that guy’s tongue can do needs to be studied... now if only he had a personality to match, I’d be set for life.”

This is something I did not need to know. Ever. “Eww, Stella.”

She laughs. “I know, I love you too. Get some sleep.”

A few hours later, I’m still in bed when I hear Stella’s excited yelp, and in seconds, her footsteps get nearer until my door crashes open.

“Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God.” She’s fanning herself with one hand and the other one is holding her phone.

“What is it?” I sit up.

“I just booked Cherise!” she says, and my eyes pop.

“Cherise as in the Cherise?” Cherise is one of the biggest pop stars on the scene, on tour in New York next month. Stella had been raving about going to one of her concerts.

“How—” I begin.

“Word of mouth, I guess. Her manager just called. They need an extra make-up artist for both concerts—in Madison Square and Newark. I can hardly believe it!”

“Well, I can. You’re so good at what you do. She is lucky to have you on her team.”

“Aww! Thanks, babe. You know we have to celebrate, right?” She starts texting someone.

“Yeah. I’ll get champagne.” I shuffle off the bed.

“No. Forget that. We’re going out.” She puts her phone down and looks at me. I know that look. It’s almost pointless to argue with Stella when she gets like that. Still, I try. Loud music and sweaty bodies are so not my idea of unwinding.

“It’s a Friday,” she says, “and after the day you just had, you could use a drink or three.”

“Yeah,” I agree, “but we can do it here.”

“Not at home. That’s depressing alcoholic behavior,” she says. “We need a night out.”

“Stella—”

“Brooke, come on.” She holds both my hands. “I don’t want to go by myself. We’ll come back early. I promise.”

“Fine,” I say. “I’ll go with you.”

She beams, gives me a quick hug, then picks up her buzzing phone.

She looks at it for a second then sends me a look of triumph. “And I just got us into the Empire! C’mon, we need to get ready.” She’s already shooing me toward her room.

“Hey,” I protest. “I can get dressed by myself.”

“Brooke,” she says, “I love you, but I’d never let you dress yourself to go to a club like Empire. You’d get us kicked out.”

“I have nice clothes.”

“Yeah, from H&M. ”

“Fine.” I huff. “Show me my options.”

We stop in front of her closet. I can see she’s excited. Stella loves to dress and make me up. Actually, anyone would do, just that I’m usually the most available option to try out a new makeup look on. She looks at me like she’s never seen me before. “Let’s see... five-seven, great legs”—she pokes her face into her small closet—“big ass...”

“Stella!”

“I couldn’t resist.” She laughs. “You have curves a lot of women would kill for, too

bad you don't like to flaunt them." She finds her mark. "Well, not tonight, girlfriend. I have the perfect dress for you." She throws a tiny midnight-blue dress on the bed, and I pick and hold it up.

"This is the size of a sock."

"It stretches," Stella informs me, "and it's great, trust me."

I throw it back on the bed, shaking my head. I don't think so. "Let's keep looking."

"Okay, how about this?" She holds out a sleeveless short black number. "This is Ralph Lauren, and it's perfect," she announces. "It has a built-in bra and corset and will make your boobs look amazing. It's also a size too big so it's the closest thing to a size 8 I've got."

I take the dress she hands out and immediately love the feel of the thick material. I try it on. When Stella fastens the zip, and I turn to look in the mirror, I see she is right. It fits like a glove and flows over my curves without pinching or digging. And my breasts look amazing.

"Not bad actually." I tug on the hem. "Maybe a tad too short—"

"Brooke, it's perfect on you, stop fussing."

Stella changes into a backless, sparkly black halter neck minidress, then we head into her bathroom to get our makeup on. Stella does my foundation and contouring and finishes my eyes with a smokey gray shadow.

Before doing my lips, she hands me a cup that contains a concoction she whipped up in the kitchen earlier.

“Drink up. We are almost done,” she says. It’s a little stronger than I expect but I chug it. She finishes off with my lips and takes a step back.

“Perfect,” she pronounces, then turns to do her own makeup. I turn to my reflection and take in the results. She’s managed to emphasize my dark gray almond-shaped eyes, high cheekbones, and full lips, all without looking overdone.

“Wow,” I say.

“I know, I’m awesome.” She smiles, looking at me in the mirror.

We take a taxi to Fifth Avenue, where the Empire nightclub is. When we reach the high-rise building, I pause, taking in the breadth and height. Stella pulls my hand. “Come on, Cinderella, our ball awaits.”

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:10 pm

Brooke

The Empire nightclub is on the fortieth floor of the Grandeur Hotel. While I haven't been to many clubs, I know this has to be one of the most upscale ones around.

The music is loud, but I can tell the sound mixing is top-notch because rather than brutally stabbing into your eardrums, it feels somewhat more like a caress. The air isn't cloying with stale sweat and alcohol as I imagined was the case for all nightclubs. I'm thinking there must be great ventilation. This is no ordinary nightclub. Even the people look expensive, and I'm glad I let Stella style me tonight.

"They always have a different celebrity DJ on most nights, and tonight, it's Zedd." The name sounds familiar.

"I've managed to get us VIP lounge access, which means free drinks, and if we get lucky, we might get to hang out with Zedd," Stella says as we reach the bar.

I'm amazed by that. I'm still surprised she managed to get us into the club, never mind the VIP section.

"How did you manage that?"

"Remember the model I worked on two weeks ago, Natalia?" Stella asks.

"The one that canceled twice?"

"Yes. Well, she was sweet and we got talking. Turns out she knows someone who

knows the owner and she said to let her know when I wanted to go, and she would arrange it.”

We sat on the plush cushioned barstools and the bartender took our drink orders, scanning the barcode on Stella’s phone.

I take another look around, enjoying the music as I feel the tension leaching out from my shoulders. Now if all nightclubs looked and felt like this, I wouldn’t have any issues going more often. Although it would take being able to afford this kind of luxury.

Perhaps start by not drowning in three hundred thousand dollars of debt for instance.

Our shots arrive just as I push the unwelcome thought out of my mind.

“Here’s to career successes, nights out, and living the best years of our lives in the best city there is,” Stella says. “Cheers.”

“Cheers.” I raise my glass to hers and down it, savoring the rich and tangy aftertaste.

“What’s this?” I ask, licking salt off the rim of my glass.

“Not sure, ‘something Starter’,” she replies. “It’s supposed to be a house special. Nice, isn’t it?” I nod. She motions to the bartender for another round. My usual limit is two drinks but by the time Stella pulls me toward the dance floor, we’ve had three rounds and I’m working up a nice buzz.

I feel carefree and more alive than I’ve felt all week. No idiot brother to ruin my life, just great music and my best friend by my side. I lift my arms and let my body sway to the beat .

Stella and I had only been on the dance floor for what seemed like minutes when suddenly the hairs at my nape rise and I get the uncanny feeling that I'm being watched. Which is weird since there must be at least fifty people in the club.

Still dancing, I look around until my gaze falls on a tall man standing by the bar across the room, holding a glass of amber-colored liquid. And staring right at me.

His thick, midnight-dark hair falls in careless waves over one side of his temple as if he'd been running a hand through it. His sculpted jaw is dark with stubble. I can't see the color of his eyes from where I stand, but they burn in their intensity. He tilts his head backward to take a sip of his drink and I'm treated to the strong column of his throat and his bobbing Adam's apple.

Lust slams into me. I turn back quickly, but I can't shake that image from my mind. How can something as simple as a man swallowing be so erotic?

I am even more aware of his eyes all over my back, but I force myself not to look at him. Goosebumps race across my arms. What the hell was in those shots? Stella is still swaying to the music, occasionally looking at her phone, and completely oblivious to the vortex of lust I'm being sucked into.

"Hell, yass!" Stella suddenly grabs my arm. "Natalia is in the VIP lounge. Let's go. She could get us into Zedd's booth."

Leave? Now? Instinctively I turn back to the stranger. If anything, the stare has grown hotter. He looks at me as if he owns me. I've never been looked at like that before.

"Um, you go ahead." I look at Stella. "I'm going to dance for a little while longer." I glance behind me again because I can't help it.

“Who are you looking at?” Stella looks over my shoulder and sees him .

“Oh wow! Brooke?”

“What?” I say.

“Nothing.” She smiles. “He’s hot.” She looks back at him again. “And he’s checking you out.”

“He is?” I ask like I don’t know. He’s more than checking me out. He’s setting me ablaze .

“Duh! Of course. Go say hello.” She looks again. “Scratch that, he’s coming. See ya.” She kisses my cheek. “I’ll be up there trying to get into Zedd’s booth if they’ll let me.”

I watch Stella leave and when I look back, the man is striding toward me. I want to run, but I’m rooted to the spot. He’s even more attractive up close.

Tall, well over six feet, I reckon. Broad shoulders under the soft material of his thin black sweater. His hooded eyes are a deep green, framed by long sooty lashes. He’s beautiful.

“Hi,” he says. The music disappears and the rough timbre of his voice is all I hear now. He leans close to my ears. “I’m Xavier.”

“Brooke,” I say, moistening my parched lips. “Brooke Lewis.” Did I just give him my last name as well? Why stop there? I mentally kick myself. Give him your SSN too, why don’t you. I should have listened to Stella and gone out more. Can he tell how nervous I am?

“Do you want to dance, Brooke Lewis?”

Out of the corner of my eyes, I catch Stella waving down at me from Zedd’s booth with two thumbs up. She managed to get in, then I figured. That seems to be all the encouragement I need. The music gets even louder with more Zedd fans piling onto the dance floor.

“Sure. ”

Xavier smiles, and I notice the single dimple on his right cheek that somehow makes him less intimidating. I smile back and relax a little.

“Your friend approves, I see.” He motions to Stella, who is fangirling at Zedd’s booth.

I roll my eyes. “Stella would approve of me breathing on anything as long as it’s a man.”

I realize how that sounds and try to explain. “Not that she wouldn’t approve if I liked women. I don’t, though. Like women, that is. What I meant... well, I don’t get out much.” Real smooth, Brooke . I try again. “Don’t get me wrong, I do like a night out, but—actually, I don’t, the nightclub isn’t usually my scene. Although this one isn’t so bad. This is great, to be honest. But I don’t have time—” I stop my rambling.

He’s still watching me with that smile on his face. “How come you don’t have time?” he asks as if I’ve been making complete sense. He stands a little closer and starts to move in a sexy, rhythmic sway that I automatically mirror. I find myself relaxing even more.

“I teach at an elementary school in Brownsville. It’s called Regal. I also work with the arts and music club. It can be time-consuming.”

“So, arts and music,” he says, “something we have in common.”

“Do you teach as well?” I ask.

“No, I work in real estate,” he replies, “but music is one of my great passions—and weapons.”

“What do you mean ‘weapons’?”

“I mean I can get your ears to bleed by singing.”

I throw my head back and laugh. Xavier seems caught off guard for a moment and then the smoldering look returns to his eyes. Gone is the playful guy I’d been dancing with. Up close, I see the exact moment his pupils dilate and his nostrils flare.

My laughter dies as a frisson of awareness sweeps my body. My nipples harden. Attraction is too tame a word to describe this. Just at the point I’m thinking of putting some distance between us so I can think straight, Xavier pulls me closer, resting his palm on the small of my back as if to keep me from moving away. I feel the warmth of his solid chest and the scent of his skin fills my nostrils. It’s a heady combination of expensive cologne and clean male. I love it.

The music slows and we’re not dancing so much as moving together now, and every inch of me is aware of how close he is. My breasts feel unbearably heavy and achy, so I put my arms around his neck, so they’re pushed against his hard chest. I’m unable to suppress a tiny moan at the relief and pleasure that washes through me from that full-body contact. Xavier sucks in a breath and lowers the hand at my waist to cup my derriere. He pulls my lower body closer, and I feel his bulge against my belly. He’s hard as steel.

My arousal spikes even higher and I grind against him. I’m dimly aware that we

might be giving onlookers an eyeful, but I'm too far gone to care. His other hand slips into the hair at my nape, using the hold to tilt my head up as his mouth descends on mine in a hard kiss. His tongue slips in to tease in short licks, which has me craving more and straining to get even closer. The kiss turns decadent and goes on until my breathing becomes erratic, my heart pounding fast.

Xavier breaks the kiss, breathing just as hard, his pupils dark pools of lust.

I've never been this turned on by a man. And he hasn't even touched me .

I realize I want his hands on me more than I want my next breath. He takes my mouth in another hard kiss, his teeth gently dragging my lower lip in a pull I feel all the way to my clit. His mouth moves to tease the sensitive spot just under my earlobe.

"Let's get out of here."

He doesn't wait for me to respond but grabs my hand and leads me away from the dance floor and past the VIP section. I follow him to a dimly lit hall and then Xavier pushes a door open and pulls me inside what looks like a private lounge. The sounds from the club are muted as the door shuts behind me.

I barely have time to take in my surroundings when he pins me against the heavy door and crushes his mouth to mine in a kiss so savagely intense I can barely catch my breath. He kisses me like he's starving for the taste of my mouth, the feel of my tongue. As if he never wants to stop. I melt in surrender, so aroused I'm not sure how long my legs will hold me up.

He slides hands down my thighs and back up, taking the hem of my dress up to my waist, then returns them to knead my ass. I love the feel of his hands on me. My own hands slide under his shirt to feel his hard muscles, and when they twitch as I run my hands over them, I know I'm having the same effect on him as he's having on me.

He suddenly raises a hand to his back, grabs a fistful of his shirt, and pulls it off. Holy shit, he's so beautiful. His ripped torso is a work of art. I don't have time to admire the display of muscles as he's turned me around. My cheek is pressed against the warm oak door as he unzips my dress and pulls it over my head. He moves my hair to press kisses on my neck.

"Okay?" He breathes into my ear, running his hands over my naked back, the curve of my ass, and back up and around to cup my achy breasts. I can't speak, so I nod my head yes. He turns me around, and his eyes feast on me.

His heavy-lidded stare rakes me from top to toe, taking in my tousled ash-blond hair, rose-tipped breasts, and tiny black silk underwear. The lust I see in his eyes has me pressing my thighs together. He cups one full breast, pinching the tightly furled nipple, and I jerk, moaning. "You're a fucking goddess Brooke Lewis."

Swallowing my moans in a kiss, he continues to fondle my breasts while his other hand strokes down my flat, quivering belly.

He's still kissing me when he reaches between my legs and feels me through my damp panties. My breath hitches as he moves the crotch aside and strokes my slick folds, and my back arches off the door when he presses his thumb against my clit. When he slides a long finger into me and slowly starts to fuck me, I feel my legs begin to shake. I need to come. Badly.

"Please." I beg hoarsely, my nails digging into the unyielding muscles of his broad shoulders.

"Please, what, Brooke Lewis?" He looks deep into my eyes as he continues to stroke me at that maddeningly slow pace. I feel heat suffuse my cheeks at his boldness, knowing he can feel how wet I am all over my thighs. I've never wanted a man this much. I'm completely mindless with desire.

I look away, fumbling for his slacks with shaky fingers. I've managed to undo the single button when he pulls down his zipper then grasps my hand, pushing it through his now open fly to cup him. My hand instinctively curls around his length. He's thick and hot. My core clenches hard.

"Is this what you want?" he asks.

I moan, nodding and biting my lip.

"You're so fucking sexy," he croons.

And then I can't say anymore because I'm panting as his finger picks up its rhythm, moving faster against the front of my clenching walls while his thumb presses harder against my clit.

I'm wound so tight it doesn't take long before I climax with a choked scream. My vision blurs and I'm wracked with contractions as I jerk repeatedly against his hand.

"Fucking magnificent," he praises.

When my orgasm subsides and my vision clears, I find my legs are wrapped around Xavier's waist and his thick length is stroking back and forth over my sensitive folds.

"Ready?" He looks deep into my eyes and I nod yes.

"Are you on birth control?" Again, I nod lazily. He takes my mouth in a hard kiss, his tongue dueling with mine as he continues to move against me. The pleasure builds again and soon I'm squirming, needing to be filled. Thankfully he doesn't make me beg; it seems his own control is only hanging by a thread. He aligns himself at my entrance, kisses my neck, and drives home with a single thrust.

I scream.

“Christ, you’re tight,” he groans. Without missing a beat, he withdraws and slams into me again. And again. I feel shock, intense pleasure, and just a bite of pain as I’m stretched too full. He’s so much bigger than my ex, than any of my dildos, and deeper, but I’m so wet that he glides easily.

He hitches my legs higher, changing the angle, his thrusts hitting a spot in me that makes my eyes roll to the back of my head. I can’t believe the sounds coming out of my mouth, but I can’t for the life of me stop making them.

Xavier grunts as he starts to fuck me harder. Pleasure ripples from my core, spreading up my spine and down my toes and I know another orgasm is fast approaching. He puts his face against my neck and sucks on the sensitive skin there, biting down on a particularly deep stroke. I come hard, thrashing and crying out, my core rippling.

“Fuck!” he growls as his thrusts quicken. I feel him grow even harder and thicker, which intensifies my orgasm.

“Brooke,” he groans brokenly as he climaxes, spilling into me.

I wake up slowly, my head pillowed on a warm chest gently rising and falling, and muscular arms around me, one hand in my hair and the other on my... naked ass. The events of last night rush at me like a tidal wave and my eyes fly open. I slept with a nameless stranger—no, his name is Xavier.

I look up and take in his features, relaxed in repose. His long dark lashes fan over his cheekbones, and the stubble over his chiseled jaw is thicker now. His lips are slightly open, and I get a sudden urge to reacquaint myself with the taste of his mouth.

I tear my eyes away and they land on his torso. Which is when I notice the scratch

marks on his thick shoulders and biceps. My face heats as I remember how unhinged I was. Begging, screaming, scratching... Jesus, what got into me? Suddenly, I rear back to disentangle myself—and fall off the narrow couch and onto the plush carpet with a thud.

“Ow!” I yelp. I stay still on the floor for a few seconds to make sure I don’t wake him.

He doesn’t stir.

I get up quietly, finding my dress. As I shimmy into the rumpled dress, I feel a delicious ache deep in my core. My eyes are instinctively drawn back to Xavier’s naked form. His strong, muscled legs and bare feet. His semi-hard cock lying across his lower abdomen.

And that is when it hits me. He didn’t use a condom.

I let a man I hardly know fuck me without protection. More than once.

What on earth is wrong with me? At least I’m on the pill, thank God.

First, I need to get out of here. Not bothering to find my panties, I grab my shoes and scoop up my purse on the floor on the way to the door. I yank the door open with more force than necessary in order to dispel the unbidden images of the last time I was against the door. It closes softly behind me. Thankfully there are EXIT signs leading from the hallway directly to the elevators. I fish out my phone from my purse, glancing around self-consciously.

There are several text messages from Stella.

Stella:

Xavier freaking Bennett!!!

Stella:

The billionaire who owns the club, the hotel, heck the entire building we're in!

Stella:

Major playboy.

Stella:

The man you're with is Xavier Bennett. Biggest manwhore in all of New York City.
Or so Natalia says .

Stella:

Run for your life!

Or maybe don't. I kind of want to see where this is going. Actually, I think I know
wink

Stella :

...And now you're leaving with him!?

Stella:

Have fun—and be safe.

Text me, okay? Love ya x.

I'm in the elevator putting on my shoes while trying to wrap my head around Stella's messages. Xavier owns the club.

I just had the wildest sex of my entire life with a notorious playboy.

Wow. No wonder he was so good at it. I'm just another name on his long list of girls he's slept with.

"I work in real estate." There I was pouring out my life's history while he was just giving up the token information required to get into my pants. I want to kick myself in the butt.

Another text from Stella pops up on my phone.

Stella:

Please text back if you're alive. I'm worried about you.

Me:

I'm fine. omw home now.

Stella:

Yay! Can't wait for you to get here!

I let out a rueful chuckle. I bet you can't.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:10 pm

Xavier

I wake up alone and naked, her smell lingering in my nostrils. I glance at the Rolex on my wrist and see it's not even 4 a.m. Two things irritate me.

First, I've always been a light sleeper, much to Zoey, my twin sister's frustration. She would always complain that a pin drop was sufficient to wake me up. So how I managed to sleep through it while a woman who was wrapped around me disentangled herself is beyond me. Secondly, where's the fucking fire, Brooke? Why did she rush off?

The ball of irritation tightens in my belly. I stand and pull on my slacks, heading over to the mini bar on the far side of the room. I pour myself a brandy, enjoying the burn while my mind goes back to the events of last night.

I'd been in the VIP lounge with my buddy Ryan, discussing an acquisition he was planning when I suddenly began to feel restless. So rather than signal for our next round of drinks, I offered to go down to the bar to get them .

I saw her on the dance floor as I made my way down the stairs. I didn't think I'd seen her at the club before.

Perhaps one of Zedd's fans, I thought.

My eyes followed the thick blonde hair that fell in loose waves down her back, ending inches above an impossibly narrow waist.

I abruptly tore my gaze from the flare of her abundant hips and headed to the bar.

No sooner had I reached the bar than I was already turning to find her across the room again. From a different angle this time, I saw her face. She was smiling and dancing with another woman, petite with blonde hair. Friends? I wondered. She was suddenly the most interesting thing I'd seen all day.

Joe, my bartender, returned with our drinks and I asked him to send Ryan's up to him while I continued to study the woman's every move. She was sensual in an earthy, unpracticed way. Her black dress clung to her curves in a way that made my palms itch to trace them. When she threw back her head and laughed, arousal shot through my veins like a drug.

And then she turned and looked directly at me as if she knew, had felt me watching. She'd looked away at first, but not before I caught the interest in her eyes. And she kept looking back as though she could not help herself. I know the feeling, baby, I thought, as I threw back the rest of my drink and made a beeline for her. I felt like I would die if I didn't speak to her. If I didn't touch her.

When I reached her, we started to talk and dance, and it flowed easily. Still, the inexorable pull of attraction between us wound tighter with every moment until I finally snapped and put my hands on her. It was like pouring gasoline over flames .

We ended up in this room and eventually made it to the couch after fucking once against the door and again on the floor. I'd been overcome with an insane need to possess her. I wanted to come in her, on her... to stake my claim all over her.

Watching her come apart in my arms was the single most satisfying thing I'd ever experienced, and I hadn't planned on stopping until morning.

And now she's gone.

My knuckles tighten over the glass, and I realize I'm angry. And disgusted that I am when I should be ecstatic. She did me a favor, saving me the awkwardness of having to kick her out this morning. Especially before she got to know who I am. I throw back the rest of my drink, grab my sweater, and head home.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:10 pm

Brooke

It's almost five a.m. when I push open the kitchen door. By rule, I use the back kitchen door and Stella uses the front door. I find Stella in the sitting room with a coffee and a shit-eating grin on her face. It's way too early for her to be awake, especially after a night out, so there's only one thing keeping her up. I'm so embarrassed I face-plant onto the couch and groan.

"It's okay, you little whore," Stella says.

I raise my head. "What time did you leave?"

"About the time I realized you were probably not coming back," she says. "I can't believe you ditched me for a man you met in the club. I can't even say that out loud and have it make sense. Little Miss Brooke 'I love knitting' ditched me for Xavier Bennett. I'm so proud." She pretends to wipe a tear.

"Stop," I say, mortified.

"Why? Do you regret it?"

"I thought I had an intense connection with him, but after seeing your texts, I suppose every girl he's slept with felt the same way."

"I suppose." Stella agrees. "Natalia certainly didn't hold back. In fact, she sounded jealous, which makes me think she might be on the list of girls. Or wants to be."

“Jealous? Why would she be?”

“The way he was all over you, babe. Seeing you two dancing together was like watching porn.”

I flush to the roots of my hair. “You’re disgusting, you know that?”

Stella roars with laughter. “What a way to end your dry spell. Speaking of which...” she begins, and I know exactly where this is going.

“I’m not telling you anything.” I look away, and my face heats again as unbidden images flash through my mind.

“Oh my God! Are you blushing?” She moves to look at me.

“I am not!”

“Are too!” She’s giggling like a demented schoolgirl. “How was it? Was it everything I’ve heard about him? Spill, dammit!”

“Depends on what you’ve heard,” I hedge, going toward the bathroom to get my makeup off. She follows me, waiting for more. I get my cleanser out and start dabbing at my face.

“Okay, yes or no questions it is then. Was it good? How big is he? Did he make you come?”

He came inside me. Three times. God, the raw sounds he made while he spurted...

“Brooke?”

“Huh?” I realize I’d frozen with my hand halfway to my face. I resume cleansing and steal a look at Stella through the mirror .

“What?” I say when she continues to give me a knowing smile.

“Your glazed-over eyes say it all.” She takes the pad from my hands and finishes it off. “You had a spanking good time, girlfriend.”

After a pause, she says, “Does that mean we’re going back to Empire soon?”

I snort. “You’re more than welcome to go back. On your own.”

“Did you at least get the guy’s number?”

“I left before he woke up this morning. I didn’t get his number or give him mine. Yesterday was an anomaly. Stella, you know that. And he’s a playboy,” I say with distaste. “You said so yourself. I’m never seeing him again.”

“Alright.” Stella huffed. “At least I can add this to my resume: My best friend hooked up with a billionaire because I styled her .”

I roll my eyes and laugh.

By Thursday, I’d managed to push the events of last weekend firmly from my conscious mind, although my nights were a different matter entirely. Absolute torture, waking up so turned on, remnants of wildly erotic dreams clinging to the edges of my subconscious.

Steve and I negotiated a payment plan of some sort for Fulvio. We agreed to come up with five thousand dollars a month for the next three months, by which time we would have found a way to pay half of the money off. And the rest would be due after

another three months. Any default would attract consequences.

Six months to pay off three hundred grand. Great.

Even the five grand a month is more than my entire salary. Although I should only be paying half of that each month while Steve comes up with the rest. If he can. Good luck with that .

So I've started taking on extra jobs from private tutoring, babysitting—anything.

I just got back from work, and I'm putting up one of the drawings I got as a gift from my pupils on the corkboard above my desk when Stella comes in.

“Hey. Do you still babysit?” Stella asks.

“I'm taking any job I can get at the moment, so yes.”

“Cool, so Ivy's sister Coral was babysitting and the kid shaved off her eyebrow.”

“Oh my God! That's horrible,” I say. Ivy owns an upscale beauty and spa salon in Manhattan. She brings more traffic in by temporarily renting out furnished space in her salon for freelance makeup artists and beauty technicians, which was how Stella got to meet her.

Stella holds up her phone and shows me a girl of about twenty years old with bloodshot eyes and one eyebrow shaved off.

“How did that happen?”

“Coral took a nap on the job,” Stella says, “and the little monster took Daddy's shaver to her face. Coral unceremoniously quit after only two weeks on the job. Not

that I blame her.”

“Anyway”—Stella continues reading Ivy’s message—“the mom is desperate because they need to go out of town this weekend. They need a sitter from eight a.m. to eight p.m. on both days.

“The girl can’t be that bad.” I try to reassure myself, thinking of some of the terrible darlings in the class I teach.

“She’s offering two hundred an hour.”

“Are you kidding me!” I screech, snatching the phone from her hands to check she’s not pulling my leg. “Hell yes, I’ll do it!”

“What if she shaves off your eyebrows?” Stella looks concerned.

I cover my eyebrows with my hand. “No, she won’t.”

“I’m sure that’s what Coral thought too,” Stella says, reaching to take her phone back.

“So what if she does?” I quickly do the math. “I’d gladly sell an eyebrow in exchange for raking in five grand on a weekend anyway. And you can always sort me a new one.”

“Fair point,” Stella says, and we both laugh.

Stella gives my details to Ivy to pass to the mom, and in a few minutes, I receive the link for a video call.

Zoey Saunders is a stunning brunette with laughing green eyes. I don’t allow myself

to think of whose eyes they remind me of but instead focus on giving a good impression.

“Hi, Brooke,” she gushes, “thanks so much for offering to come. I know it’s so last minute, but Lisa’s babysitter is suddenly unavailable, and Dan—my husband—and I need to go out of town this weekend.”

“That’s alright,” I say, already liking her open friendliness.

“Ivy might have told you about the eyebrow incident.” When I nod, she continues. “Lisa is five and isn’t as bad as she sounds. She’s a sweet child, though sometimes she’ll throw a tantrum to get your attention. And you really don’t want her out of your sight for more than two minutes.”

“Lisa sounds delightful.” I smile, and Zoey beams. She’s really beautiful .

Zoey is pleased to learn that I teach at an elementary school. She tells me a bit more about the job.

“Listen, I’d be delighted to hire you. We’re heading out early on Saturday, so if you can get in, say, eight in the morning? Her uncle lives close by, and Lisa has a room there as well, so you can just tuck her in at her uncle’s before you leave.”

She clarifies that I’m happy with the fee (I agree, trying to play it cool) and promises to text the address while I plan to send over my details.

Stella walks back to the living room just as I click off the call. “You got the job?”

“Oh, yes.” I smile.

“Sweet,” Stella says. “I hope the kid doesn’t traumatize you too much.”

“Not a chance. Kids love me.”

“Well, then we have nothing to worry about.”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:10 pm

Xavier

Zoey:

We're home now.

The text from my twin sister finally comes in at 10 p.m., and I wonder, for what seems like the hundredth time, why they'd been out for so long.

Zoey, Dan, and my five-year-old niece—the love of my life—Lisa, are still out. Which is unusual because it's way past Lisa's bedtime. I down the glass of red I've been nursing and head to the door, hoping this isn't going to be another one of Zoey's long-winded “chats” about settling down. I'm beat. I've just flown in from Miami, having concluded a four-hour business deal with the buyer of my latest GIS software.

As kids, Zoey and I had done everything together. We are now thirty-one, and while I'm more than comfortable in my single status, Zoey thinks it's unhealthy not to want companionship. I have companionship, just not of the permanent sort.

Coming right down .

I text back as I head into the private elevator that would take me directly to Zoey and Dan's.

When I bought the building three years ago, I wanted the top floor to be remodeled as my home. Zoey took one look at the breathtaking views when she came to see how the remodeling was going and fell in love. Dan wasn't completely sold on the idea as

they'd been looking for a house in the suburbs, and this place went completely against their plans, but when he saw how enamored his wife was, he gave in.

I didn't mind in the least; quite the opposite. I was delighted to have my twin sister and Lisa close by. So, I went to town on the remodeling, transforming the top two floors into a luxury living space, connected by a private lift and with a rooftop garden, swimming pool, playpen for Lisa, and a helipad.

The elevator opens into their massive foyer, and I instantly note the darkness. Strange.

"Zoey," I call out tentatively. "I thought you just—"

"SURPRISE!" chorus about half a dozen voices. The lights are suddenly blinding, balloons, streamers, confetti... and goofy smiles on the faces of my friends and family. I hate surprises but I can't help smiling back.

"Zoey... you little..." I shake my head in disbelief.

"Come now, Xavi"—she envelopes me in a warm hug—"you seriously didn't think we'd let that pass, did you?"

I kiss the top of her head, which comes just up to my chest. It's almost unbelievable how this delicate woman is my twin sister. We both have dark hair and green eyes, but that's where the resemblance stops.

I'm big and had hit six feet by the time we were sixteen, with wide shoulders and heavy bones, while she was a slight five foot four. But what she lacked in height, she more than made up for in sass. She could talk me round in circles, and there was no point in arguing with her. She'd win one way or another. Which is why she makes a kickass solicitor.

She'd met Dan seven years ago when she interned at his law firm, and he had been defenseless against her charms.

Dan claps me on the back. "Congrats, man." He hands me a glass of champagne.

"Thanks. I was beginning to wonder where everyone was," I say, looking around at my friends who are waving at me. I notice the brunette standing with them and suppress a groan.

"Uncle Xavi!" Lisa squeals, sneaking between her parents and barreling into my arms.

"Hey, buttercup." Catching her, I plant a kiss on her rosy cheek. Lisa has Zoey's dark hair and Dan's golden eyes.

"Lisa, what are you doing out of bed?" Zoey chides gently.

"I know, I know, Mommy," Lisa says. "It is a grown-up party. I just want to see Uncle Xavi." She winds her little arms around my neck.

"Hi, Uncle Xavi. Don't forget about tomorrow."

"I won't," I reply.

Lisa hops down from my arms and runs to her room. I look at Zoey. "What's tomorrow?"

"You have her this weekend, starting tomorrow," she says. "You didn't forget, did you? We'll be going out of town."

"I haven't forgotten." I forgot.

“She’s missed you,” Zoey says.

“I know,” I say. “I’ve just been working late lately. But hey, I’m all hers tomorrow.”

“All weekend,” Zoey says.

“All weekend,” I agree .

“Good,” she says. “There’s a new babysitter. She’s only going to be here for the weekend and she might need more help than usual. So be nice, Xavi.”

“I’m always nice!” I put my hands up. “What happened to the other babysitter?”

“Don’t ask.” She hugs me again, then disappears in the same direction as Lisa, presumably to ensure the little minx is firmly tucked in bed.

Vanessa, the brunette, approaches. I haven’t seen her in three months. She looks good, her slim figure encased in a tight black dress. I suddenly remember pulling down the zipper of another black dress and baring the rich, creamy skin with a mass of blonde curls tangling in my hands... Stop. I shut my eyes against the onslaught. When I open my eyes, Vanessa stands close—too close.

“Bennett.” Her voice is sultry.

“Nessa.” I smile regretfully, knowing she thought that reaction was for her. It was. Only it wasn’t. Shit, I need to get laid. I need to wipe that woman off my mind.

“Congratulations,” she breathes, leaning in to kiss my dimple and my chin. It’s something Vanessa alone does to me. Suddenly I don’t want her mouth anywhere near me, however innocent.

The boys—Ryan, Wyatt, and Lee are making faces at me from behind her. This thing between Vanessa and me has been going on for a couple of years now. An interior designer, she remodeled Wyatt's office space two years ago and he'd introduced us. I was honest with her from the beginning and told her I wasn't in the market for a relationship and wouldn't be looking for one in the future.

Three months ago, she told me she was in love with me and that my being spotted with random women was hurting her feelings. I told Vanessa none of those girls could hold a candle to her. She was smart, sexy, and any man would be lucky to be with her. She'd replied that if what I said was true, why wasn't I with her?

I didn't have an answer for her, so she'd left. And now she's back.

"You look great." Her eyes roam over me.

"You too," I say.

The boys come over before we can say more and start clapping me on the back. Vanessa moves to chat with Dan.

I'm surprised they restrained themselves this long. Ryan and I go way back, growing up in Seattle. Our families are close. While Ryan was being groomed to become CEO of his family's shipping company, I was to take over the Bennetts' hotel and real estate business. Unlike me, my twin wasn't the least bit interested in the family business. Ryan and I became like brothers, having shared similar upbringing and interests and having the weight of the future of the family business on our shoulders. We had a falling out in high school when he found out about his sister's crush on me. I'd been out cold in Ryan's bed when she'd impulsively jumped into the bed and kissed me. Ryan walked in, fists flying first before asking questions.

We reconnected at NYU, where we also met Wyatt, an investment banker. Lee's firm

handles my accounting, and I swear he gets a kick out of giving me orders, which he likes to call “financial advice.” Lee and I formed a friendship when he became the youngest partner in his company and took over my account.

“So,” Lee says. “Five hundred million, huh? You trying for gazillionaire, Xaviboy?” I’d sold the GIS software for that much.

Wyatt chips in, “I mean, with the way you suck at poker, it’s either you do something like this or end up on the streets.”

My friends hoot loudly.

“Piss off,” I say. When it came to poker, my friends could wipe the floor with my ass. I know they cheat, but I just haven’t figured out how.

“Knock it off, idiots. He’ll start crying now,” Ryan says, and I shake my head.

I can tell they want to party. Wyatt and Ryan have been throwing me hints to come up with something so we could leave.

“Just hear me out.” Ryan points meaningfully at the ceiling. My helicopter is on the roof. “One word. Vegas. We’ll take the heli to the airport. I can have my jet ready in thirty. A mini party mile high and hit Vegas in four hours.”

“Actually, I was thinking of the club, but Vegas will also do nicely,” Lee adds.

“We are not going to Vegas!” I say before Zoey hears them.

“Can you guys pretend you at least want to be here?” Zoey has returned from tucking Lisa in and apparently heard us.

“Of course we want to be here,” Lee says. “We’re enjoying the party.”

Wyatt and Ryan sip their champagne to avoid lying to Zoey. Lee is less of an asshole compared to the others.

“You’re too nice, Lee,” Zoey says. “But I know those two would rather have music loud enough to burst their eardrums. I just wanted to show my brother how very proud of him we all are.”

“And I appreciate it,” I say, hugging her from behind. She ruffles my hair.

“Does that mean we can go?” Wyatt says, and Lee elbows him.

“They’re having a moment, dickhead,” Lee says .

“It’s fine.” Zoey sighs. “You can have him. I have to pack for the trip anyway.”

Dan dislocated his shoulder three months ago in a skiing injury in Aspen. He’d gone on the trip with the other senior partners at Morgan Walton & Saunders as a yearly tradition. Dr. Pereira, the firm’s orthopedic surgeon in Aspen, had repaired the dislocation non-operatively but advised he might need surgery on his rotator cuff if he continued to have pain. Dan had been fine for the first couple weeks while he kept his left shoulder rested, but once he returned to his usual activities, he found he struggled with swimming and golfing.

Everyone starts gathering their things, saying goodbye to Zoey and Dan, and wishing them a safe trip.

“Vegas!” Wyatt yells.

I give Zoey a reassuring look. “We are not going to Vegas. I have Lisa tomorrow.”

“All weekend,” she reminds me.

“Vegas, Vegas, Vegas.” Wyatt is still chanting in the hallway, and Lee and Ryan are right behind him.

“Did you miss me?” Vanessa links her hands to mine as we walk out.

“Of course I did,” I say but without meaning what she wants me to mean. I care for Vanessa, but that’s where it ends. I want to be careful not to stomp on her heart, though.

We take the limousine to Olympus, one of my more exclusive nightclubs.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:10 pm

Xavier

We are on the top floor of Olympus. Like Empire, it is also on two floors except that it has a wraparound sealed mirrored gallery where the dance floor can be seen from the top but those on the floor would only see mirrors looking up. One section of the VIP lounge is a completely sound-proofed strip club.

Now and then, I catch myself looking down at the dance floor. It's been a week, and I still pause every time I see a flash of blonde hair. It confuses and annoys the hell out of me.

I never care to see women I hook up with ever again. Certainly not women who disappear on me. Like Brooke Lewis.

I almost got someone to find her in the first couple of days, but I hoped my little obsession would clear up if I gave it a few more. I avoided going to Empire, but my nights were plagued by dreams of her.

When I find myself scanning the dance floor again, it occurs to me again that I have her full name and where she works. I can find out everything about her in less than an hour .

But maybe I shouldn't.

Perhaps my obsession with this Brooke is a red flag. I've never been this interested in someone I've already slept with. Even my momentary obsession with Vanessa ended when I slept with her. But Brooke is not out of my system. For the second time

tonight, I tell myself I need to get laid. Fast.

I'm pulled out of my musings when everyone lifts their champagne glasses in the air. Lee declares, "To Xavier, the fucker who makes us all look like we are not doing enough."

Everyone laughs.

"Cheers," everyone choruses.

"Seriously, congratulations, bro." Lee is tapping my shoulder.

"Thanks, man."

In another hour, the celebration is in full swing. The music has been turned up loud and strobe lights are flashing as our party gets rowdier.

I'm not sure where from, but Ryan has somehow injected what looks like twenty or so models, male and female, as well as a few strippers straight into our party, and Wyatt is coordinating what looks like a game of dares. The rest are cheering him on. A beautiful blonde model sits on my lap, feeding me olives as she writhes against me. My hand is high on her thigh, stroking the velvety skin.

Vanessa is in another section making out with some guy, and by the way she's constantly looking over at me, I hope to God she's not doing it to make me jealous. I feel sorry for her, knowing it might have something to do with the look she caught on my face earlier tonight. I'm usually not one for sending mixed signals .

The woman on my lap leans over and starts kissing my neck. I grab a handful of her hair and kiss her fully, thrusting my tongue into her mouth. Her hands snake down toward my cock. Which isn't the least bit hard.

Interesting.

She continues to stroke me eagerly as I kiss a path to her earlobe, all the while thinking she smells wrong. I freeze as the realization hits me like a bucket of ice water.

Smells wrong?

I pull back and look at the girl. My mind supplies everything else that's wrong in quick succession. Her ass doesn't fill my hands. Her eyes are not stormy gray. She doesn't have a birthmark on the side of her mouth. Her lips are not full and pouty.

She doesn't moan into my mouth when I kiss her.

What the fuck? It's official, I'm fucked.

"I'm sorry," I say, lifting her and seating her gently on the couch. "I have to go."

"What's the matter?" she asks, deflated.

"Nothing, darling." Every-fucking-thing "Stay and have fun, I need to leave."

I approach the boys on my way out.

One of the strippers is still on their table and Ryan is about to take a shot while Lee, Wyatt, and the others cheer him on. I know Ryan is well past drunk because sober, you couldn't get him to drink from the same cup as anyone, let alone take a shot from a stripper's belly button.

"Great, right?" Wyatt asks him after he's slurped it.

“Awesome.” Ryan agrees with a goofy smile, his eyes bright.

I look at my phone. It’s 2:04 a.m.

“I have to leave,” I tell them.

“But we just got here,” Lee protests .

“We got here three hours ago, Lee.”

“Really? Has it already been that long?”

“Yes,” I say. “I have Lisa tomorrow. Zoey will kill me if I get home at five in the morning.”

“Bye, Xaviboy,” Ryan says cheerfully, taking a swig of another drink.

I collect Vanessa, who has no qualms about ditching the random guy she was with when I offer to take her home. Whatever hopes she had of anything happening shrivels and dies the moment we get into the limousine and she notices my dark mood.

I’m seething. Not at Vanessa. At myself. And her.

I wake to the sounds of tiny feet. Lisa’s here , I think. Since she figured out how to work the elevator, she comes and goes as she pleases. Which reminds me again, I need to set a password on the elevator.

As much as I adore Lisa, my home isn’t exactly a place a five-year-old should come running to at odd hours because of my predilection for being unclothed. I hear her little feet run toward her room, and I throw the covers off, pulling on sweatpants and

a T-shirt.

I hear another voice that makes me pause. It's not Zoey. The voice calls out again, and I'm out of my room in a flash.

I descend the curving stairs leading from the mezzanine into the living room and my feet come to a halt when I see the woman standing by the east side glass wall looking at the view of the Hudson River. My bare feet are soundless but perhaps it is because the roaring in my head has drowned them out.

It couldn't be.

I take in the mass of ash-blond hair piled atop her head to the graceful line of her neck. She's wearing a pink cotton shirt tucked into calf-length jeans and sketchers. Simple clothes that she manages to make look downright obscene with that... ass.

Fuck, I'm hard.

Because there stands the object of my obsession. She's returned as suddenly as she left. And in my living room.

What the hell kind of game is she playing?

I walk toward her slowly, my bare feet soundless on the warm marble floor. "Brooke?" I say softly.

She jumps and whirls around in shock. Which freezes on her face when she sees me. She pales, then blushes furiously as she recognizes me.

"Wha—Xavier..." she squeaks. "Um." She tries again, clearing her throat, then it dawns on her. "Oh my God! You live here." It's a statement rather than a question.

“I didn’t know.” She tries to meet my level stare. And fails.

“Are you sure about that?” I say coldly, folding my arms across my chest.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“How did you get here? Who let you in?”

“Dan and Zoey, I’m here for Lisa. I’m filling in for her nanny.”

What were the odds of that? She came to my nightclub last week and all of a sudden she’s wormed her way into my sister’s home.

“Oh, you’re a nanny now?” I can’t keep the sarcasm from my voice. “I thought you worked in an elementary school.”

“Yes, well, I thought you were into real estate,” she shoots back .

“Okay, so what is this then? You found out I downplayed who I am and thought to track me down through my sister to get—”

“I do not want your money!” she says hotly.

“Good of you to clear that up. You should also know I don’t do repeat fucks. Ever.”

She rears back as if I’d slapped her. She takes a breath, and when she meets my eyes, hers are filled with a cold indifference. “Don’t even flatter yourself, Xavier. You’re the last person I want to be with.”

That rankles.

I step closer to her, invading her personal space. She looks away and takes a step back. I want her eyes back on me. Those gray eyes I can read so clearly. Her eyes never lie. I follow her until her back hits the glass wall.

She doesn't meet my eyes still; she turns her head to the side instead, which exposes her neck to me. I see the fluttering pulse point and catch a whiff of her rich, warm scent. Desire surges through me. Christ, that smell ...

"I don't know," I murmur into her neck, "somehow, I didn't get that impression last week. Quite the opposite actually, when—"

"Uncle Xavi!"

Lisa runs out of her room toward us. I step back from Brooke, and I catch Lisa in my arms.

"Morning, buttercup." I give her a hug.

"Mommy says I'm getting a new babysitter because I made Coral cry." She puts her face into my neck. "I have to be nice now."

Brooke says in a soothing voice, "I'm sure you didn't mean to do it, dear. "

Lisa turns to look at Brooke as if just noticing her standing there. She studies Brooke for a long minute.

"Are you my new babysitter?"

"Yes, Lisa, my name is Brooke."

Lisa looks at Brooke's hair. "I like your hair. Can you make my hair like yours?"

“Sure thing, and maybe we can even dress you like a princess too.”

“Kay.” She bobs her head enthusiastically. “But I have to be a queen. I already have many princesses.”

Lisa reaches out and Brooke takes her from me, her forearm accidentally brushing against mine in the process. I feel a crackle of electricity down my arm and my dick throbs.

Get it together, Bennett.

Lisa continues to chatter excitedly, bouncing off Brooke’s hips as they leave the foyer. “We’ll throw a ball for all the princesses, and they can all dress pretty...”

Brooke doesn’t spare me a backward glance, not even turning when she gets into the elevator, but my eyes are glued to her retreating back. It occurs to me that Lisa has never taken to anyone that fast. But more to the point, Brooke Lewis is actually here. In my house. Working for my family. I look down at my raging erection, evident through my sweatpants.

I need to better control myself around that woman.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:10 pm

Brooke

I'm seething as I leave Xavier's apartment, but I continue to chat with Lisa as we return to Zoey. How dare he insinuate I'm after his money, and worse, sex? Does he take me for one of his floozies?

Well, you did sleep with him within half an hour of meeting him. I want to kick the snarky voice in the mouth.

"Mommy, Mommy, can Brooke make my hair like hers?" Lisa squirms to get down as soon as the elevator doors open to the lower floor, and runs to her mom.

"Of course she can, sweet pea." Zoey chucks her daughter on her plump chin. "Now, do you want to run and get Daddy so we won't be late?"

Lisa giggles and skips off, shouting, "Daddy! Mommy says you must hurry..."

Zoey smiles at her, then turns to me, and I see the uncanny resemblance. My God, she's the female version of Xavier. Why didn't I see it before ?

Because I've been trying my hardest to block out Xavier from my subconscious, that's why.

I'd arrived at the Saunders' Upper West Side penthouse just before eight a.m. and was welcomed into the spacious foyer by Zoey's husband, Dan. While waiting for Zoey, I took in the massive open-plan living room and was immediately awed by the floor-to-ceiling windows, showing off a breathtaking view of the Hudson River.

People do actually live like this , I'd thought as Zoey's musical voice floated into their living room.

"Hey, Brooke, thanks for coming in early, you're a lifesaver." Zoey in person was petite and very pretty, dressed casually in a soft gray wool sweater, her shapely legs encased in black leggings. I was struck again by her unusual green eyes.

"We're super late for the airport." She'd moved into the kitchen area toward the coffee maker. "Would you like some coffee, Brooke?" she'd asked with a smile.

"Oh no, I'm good, I just had one before coming in." I'd looked around, wondering where Lisa was.

Zoey noticed. "Lisa ran upstairs when she heard her dad say her babysitter is here. She has a room there as well, so she's likely hiding there. Or maybe by the piano." Zoey got milk from the fridge. "I think she's a bit nervous about meeting you because she's been told she has to be on her best behavior," she'd said. "I'll get Dan to fetch her—"

"I can go get her if that's alright? It would help break the ice, I think," I'd said.

"Good idea," she agreed. "It's just through that elevator." She pointed to the foyer, and I noticed a smaller elevator just to the side of the one I'd come in from .

"The X button takes you up and Z is to come down." I was already moving toward the foyer when she called, "He's still sleeping. Lisa knows not to wake him so she won't be noisy because he can be a bit of a grump in the morning."

I wasn't quite sure I followed. "Who are we not waking up?"

"My twin brother, Lisa's uncle," she said. "He lives upstairs, and that private elevator

connects our floor to his. It's quite the handy thing to have really, although now that Lisa knows the buttons it can be a bit of a pain to find her these days."

Zoey has a twin brother? Ivy hadn't mentioned that. Although at the interview Zoey had said Lisa's uncle lived nearby. Anyway, nearby, upstairs—semantics. I needed to go get Lisa.

The smaller elevator opened into a luxurious apartment that was the same as the one below except that instead of the light tones of Zoey's, the upper floor penthouse was decorated in shades of brown and black and there was a massive curving staircase leading to a mezzanine floor. I spotted a beautiful, black grand piano on the far side of the living room. The thick, pleated curtains had been drawn over the floor-to-ceiling windows, all except one, which showed off an amazing view of the George Washington Bridge.

I was immediately drawn to the view, and without thinking, moved to the window. Wow. This would be spectacular at night .

I felt the hairs on my nape rise a second before I heard the sleep-roughened voice.

"Brooke?"

I'd been startled by the unexpected voice behind me, but when I turned and saw Xavier, I realized I should have known. Twin brother. Zoey's eyes, the same hair, the same smile. His gaze was heated as it swept me up and down, pausing on my chest. Unbidden memories I'd forcefully repressed came rushing back. His hands, his mouth. I blushed furiously, struggling to keep my reaction under control.

He's the biggest manwhore in all of New York City.

That helped cool my ardor. Then he started to speak, and I fought the urge to smack

his smug face. He still looked like he wanted nothing more than to devour me, but his words were angry and accusing.

I don't do repeat fucks. My hands curl into fists as I remember.

"Brooke?" Zoey calls, looking at me in a puzzled way.

"Yeah, sorry." I apologize, shaking my head to dispel the unpleasant memory.

"I was saying Lisa can have cereal—it's in the pantry, or have a sandwich—toppings and dressing in the fridge."

"Okay." I nod.

"She does have a bit of a sweet tooth, and so does her uncle for that matter, but she gets the most horrendous sugar high, so be mindful of when she has her cakes and lollies, otherwise, she could be up till midnight."

I smile. "Wow, noted then."

"Mrs. Locke comes in on Wednesdays and Saturdays to clean and I expect Titus to drop in this evening, possibly tomorrow as well to bring in some groceries. If you need anything else just tell him and he'll have it delivered the next day."

I nod again.

"I think that's everything...let's see, we're not expecting any deliveries or guests—Careful babe!" she says to Dan, who is carrying two suitcases toward the elevator.

"I'm fine, sweetheart, don't worry," he calls back.

“It’s his shoulder,” Zoey explains to me. Lisa enters the living room with an armful of about fifteen miniature dolls.

“Darling, have breakfast first—”

“Mommy, it’s the princesses, they want to play with Brooke now.”

“Great.” Zoey sighs. “Well, I’ll leave you to it then. I’ve left a sheet on the counter for you. All the numbers you might need are listed.”

“Lisa, give Mommy a kiss,” Zoey says. Lisa does that and then goes back to the princesses.

“Right.” Zoey checks the time again and turns to leave.

Just then, the smaller elevator opens and Xavier fills the doorway. He’s changed into gym shorts and a tank top. His shoulders and biceps are on display, and I avert my face to keep from ogling.

“You’re running late, Zoey.” Xavier pulls Zoey in for a bear hug.

“Xavi! I thought you’d sleep till noon considering you were out so late.”

Out late clubbing and having wild sex, no doubt . My mind is about to wander to the night we had but I violently yank the traitor off that path.

Xavier shakes his head. “Not a chance, not with all the racket you lot are making.”

“Sorry, Xavi. Well, this is Brooke, she’s great. Brooke, Xavier, Lisa’s uncle.”

There’s an awkward pause. I’m not sure if I should admit that we’ve met or hold out

my hand.

Before I can decide, Xavier pulls me in for a hug. I shut my eyes against the onslaught of sensations being enveloped in his arms evoke and hold myself rigidly. It's over in a heartbeat although it felt like an eternity .

Zoey does not bat an eyelash. She's used to this? Him embracing strange women? Something tightens in my stomach, and I tell myself it's disgust.

Dan returns with the doorman, who takes out their bags, and Xavier leaves without a backward glance at me.

Lisa is hugging her dad when Zoey pulls me away. "Listen, I think Lisa has taken to you. You'll be fine. And Xavier is great with her. Any issues, you can speak to him or call us."

I have no worries about Lisa , I think. It's her uncle I'm not so sure about .

One way or another, I'll find a way to get through this weekend.

Lisa finally settles down for a nap after hours of playing dress-up with her princess dolls and the apartment looks like a tornado has torn through it. Toys, books, and clothes litter the floor and the furniture.

There's a trail of stuffed toys and brightly colored clothes leading to the small elevator.

Lisa had changed clothes so many times, each time running upstairs wanting to show her uncle Xavi.

I clear up the leftovers of lunch and start restoring order to the living room. I follow

the trail of strewn toys and clothes into the elevator, which opens into Xavier's penthouse. It's silent. Just as I suspected, the carnage is substantial here too. I collect the toys and stuff them into the pillowcase I had taken for that purpose, wondering how someone so little could create this amount of mess in such a short time.

I spot the stuffed giraffe discarded on the top of the floating stairs and pad gently to get it. I suspect Xavier is asleep as well. It wouldn't surprise me; Lisa could wear out an elephant.

The stairs lead directly into an open-plan bedroom decorated in gold and black tones. The large four-poster bed dominates the space. There's a wide door on the opposite wall that I suspect leads into a closet or office. My gaze is drawn back to the bed. It's empty but recently slept in. I know this is Xavier's bedroom and it feels like I'm intruding into his private space.

I quickly pick up the princess doll on the bed and another stuffed animal near the bedside lamp and I'm about to leave when the wide door suddenly swings open and Xavier walks out.

He's dripping wet, has a towel wrapped around his narrow hips, and is drying his hair with another one. He spots me immediately, pausing. I'm sure I look like a deer caught in headlights.

Don't look at him!

"I was getting her bunny," I say, trying, and failing, to avert my eyes, waving the stuffed bunny in my hand. Or is it the cow? I can't tell because I'm not looking at it.

Xavier approaches slowly, his eyes taking on a predatory gleam. He stops inches from me while I concentrate on keeping my breathing even. God, he smells so good. My eyes inadvertently follow droplets of water that run over the golden skin of his

pectorals, down tight abdominal muscles which taper into a defined V. I snap my eyes back up to somewhere above his shoulder.

“So, what’s the plan?” His voice has dropped an octave.

“What are you talking about?” I’m surprised at how calm I sound .

“How long is this nanny act going to last? You can tell me. I won’t be mad.”

“Not everything is about you,” I say, feeling myself getting angry. “Some of us have real problems and have to work. I don’t care about you. If I had known Zoey was your sister, I wouldn’t have agreed to work for her.”

“Really?” He sounds incredulous. He fingers the loose tendril that has escaped my high bun, moving it behind my ear, then his index finger traces the shell of my ear. “So this is just about work?”

I back away a few steps. I don’t appreciate how my body is betraying me right now. I shouldn’t enjoy his hands on my skin this much. I back up until I feel the wall on my back. Xavier moves with me, keeping the same distance despite my retreat. He places his palm flat on the wall behind me.

“Why are you running away from me?”

“I’m not.” I lie.

He puts his other arm around my waist and pulls me against him, and I gasp when I feel his hardness. He moves more tendrils away from my face, then holds my chin, brushing his thumb back and forth over my bottom lip. Desire explodes in my groin. I turn my head away. Instead, his thumb moves to the dark spot above my lip and he rubs that instead.

“Look at me.” I avoid his gaze.

“Playing hard to get, huh?” he says. “It looks good on you.”

He takes my chin again, and I lose the battle, raising my eyes to his. He’s so close I can see the golden specks in his green irises. His gaze lowers to my lips and I can feel them start to tingle. He licks his own lips. There’s an answering clench in my core and I feel myself getting wet. Xavier lowers his head until I can feel his breath on me. My eyes fall closed and I pant softly. We stay like that, exchanging breaths until I moan and strain toward him.

He whispers into my mouth, “There’s another toy on the other side of the bed.” And abruptly releases me.

“Wha—?” I open my dazed eyes as he steps backward.

“Oh, you thought I was going to kiss you?” He smirks. “No offense, Brooke, but you’re not my type.”

Shocked beyond belief and humiliated, I say, “Oh really? I’m not your type now?”

“You never were,” he says. “Don’t get me wrong, you’re sexy. Very sexy.” I’m disgusted when his eyes rake me up and down, lingering on my chest. “You’re just not the kind of girl I would want to be seen with.”

I don’t know where it comes from but the next moment my palm flies across his face. He absorbs the blow, still smirking. I’m more ashamed that I hit him.

I feel sick, tears prickling the back of my eyes. I need to get out of here before I embarrass myself completely by dissolving into tears. I pick up the pillowcase of stuffed animals that had somehow fallen to the ground and walk out of his room with

as much dignity as I can.

“Hey.” I can still hear the stupid smirk on his face. “There’s more bunnies on the other side of the bed if you want to get them.”

I don’t break my stride or look back.

When I get home, Stella takes one look at me and cancels her plans to go out.

“Brooke, what happened? The girl can’t be that bad.”

“Oh no, Lisa’s great. A normal, albeit very energetic, little girl. It’s Xavier.”

“Xavier? Xavier Bennett?” I nod. “He contacted you?” Stella asks.

“Stella, he’s the girl’s uncle.”

“Shut the front door! How is that even possible? Ivy’s sister works for Xavier Bennett’s sister, and she hasn’t broadcast the news to everyone and their dog.”

I shrug.

“So, what happened with Xavier? Was it awkward?”

I cover my face in mortification. “He was awful, Stella. He was mean and smirking and said I was trying to get his money and into his pants.”

“Eww, douchebag much.”

“I know, I slapped him,” I say.

“Good on you. So why are you all torn up? He deserved it.”

“He’s also playing these seduction games, and I hate that I’m so attracted to him. He knows it, too, so he’s toying with me. I don’t know what to do, Stella. He turns me on, then does something mean, and then he’s nice again. I’m like a puppy on a string, and it’s so exhausting.” I take a breath.

“And he said I’m not his type.”

“There’s two reasons a man could behave in that way. Either he likes you or he doesn’t like you.”

“Wow, Stella, that’s deep.”

“Hear me out. You know in middle school when you have boys pick on you constantly, and it turns out they always liked you but just didn’t know how to behave around a girl they like. Or it could be that he’s just a mean and dumb kid.”

“Xavier Bennett doesn’t not know how to act around women.” I remember his smooth seduction. In less than ten sentences, I was against the door, on the floor, on the couch begging and screaming— No, it wouldn’t do to linger.

“So you think he’s just a dickhead?”

“I don’t know!” I throw my hands up.

“Well, in that case, avoid him. He’s a playboy, he likes to play. Right now, it’s with your feelings it seems. Step out of the ring until he makes it clear what he wants. Unless you also know how to play the game, which I know you don’t, stay away from him before your heart gets bloodied in the tussle.”

I take a deep breath. “You know, Stella, that was actually deep.”

“I try to revive a few brain cells every now and then for my best girl.” We laugh.

Okay. Simply avoid him. I can do that.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:10 pm

Xavier

I'm a complete asshole.

I run my hands through my hair and grab hold as I stare at the information on my office desktop.

It's been only two hours since she left. My gut twists as I remember the sheen of tears and the hurt, stricken look on Brooke's face. She's not the type to play these games with. I'd refused to believe she didn't somehow orchestrate her employment as Lisa's babysitter. It was just too much of a coincidence.

Ever since middle school, I have had girls throw themselves at me, and the lengths some of them have gone to get my body and money has turned me into a cynic when it comes to fate and chance.

I didn't see her for the rest of the day and even Lisa didn't once come upstairs after her nap. How Brooke managed that is beyond me, but having seen her with Lisa, whatever else Brooke might be pretending to be, she does know her way around kids .

I'd figured Brooke would have to come upstairs to tuck Lisa in before leaving and debated speaking to her then, but when she called my house phone instead, saying Lisa was now asleep and would I be kind enough to move her to her room upstairs, I knew she'd been too hurt to face me.

Who is this girl?

After she left, I'd caved and had someone look into her. It didn't take long at all.

I found out that she has only had one boyfriend in all of her twenty-four years. Some douchebag named Phil and they broke up two years ago. She teaches in a school and doesn't go on dates and hardly goes out clubbing.

Could it be that what happened between us is the first time she's ever done such a risqué thing?

She was certainly tight enough to make me believe that. I think of how her too-snug, clenching walls felt around my cock and her raw, uninhibited passion, as though she couldn't help herself, the way she came apart... I want that again.

I wonder if I'm the only other man she's ever been with and I find I'm perversely pleased by that possibility. Slow down, caveman .

Also, her brother owes some three hundred grand gambling debt. Apart from her usual job, she's applied on many job sites for work. She'll run herself ragged trying to pay off that debt . The more I find out about Brooklyn Sofia Lewis, the more of an asshole I feel.

And suddenly I know what I have to do.

The next day, Brooke is still avoiding me and is even more guarded in her interactions. I hate it. When I offer to take them out for ice cream after they return from their walk on the rooftop, Lisa hops up and down in glee, but Brooke begs off, saying she needs to clear up toys and make Lisa's dinner, much to Lisa's disappointment.

"Do you want us to get you anything?" I ask her.

“No, I’m good thanks.” She doesn’t meet my eyes and is already moving toward the kitchen island. When she gets near enough, I gently grab her forearm, stopping her.

“Brooke, I’m trying to apologize,” I say.

“Are you? How clumsy of me not to notice.” She glances pointedly at my hand on her arm. I let go of her arm, but she stays.

“You’re not going to make it easy, are you?” I chuckle. “Alright, I’m sorry.”

“Whatever for?” She walks toward the kitchen.

I move toward the counter to face her.

“Whatever made you cry yesterday.”

“I wasn’t crying.”

So stubborn , I think. “Okay, still, that was no way to speak to you.”

“I’m sorry I hit you,” she replies.

“Don’t worry about it. I deserved it.”

“Still—” she begins.

“Uncle Xavi, can we go now?” Lisa is impatiently hopping from one foot to the other.

“Sure, buttercup.” To Brooke, I say, “Seriously, it’s fine. Sure you don’t want anything?”

“No, really. Ice cream isn’t really my thing. ”

What is your thing? I want to ask. And suddenly I find myself wanting to know all of her ‘things.’

Later that afternoon, after Lisa and I return from getting ice cream, and Lisa is with Brooke at Zoey’s penthouse, Ryan swings by to return my keys.

He’d taken The Lexi , my catamaran yacht, out for routine servicing. He’d custom-built the thing for me, and I swear he’s more attached to it than I am. Might have something to do with all the partying we do on it.

We’re playing a game of billiards and discussing business when he says, “By the way, Vanessa’s been asking for you.”

“She knows how to reach me,” I reply, wishing the woman would just give up already.

“She wouldn’t be bugging me if she could reach you.”

“You know she came back for you, Xavi,” he says when I remain silent.

“I hope not. Nessa is great and she knows it. Any man would be lucky to have her.”

“But not you.”

“She wants a relationship. That’s just not something on the table for me. Ever.”

“Xavi...” He gets that stupid, pitying look in his eyes.

“Drop it, Ryan,” I snap. “Hell, you sound like Zoey.”

“Sure.” Ryan shrugs.

He changes the topic to our upcoming trip to Cancun. I had forgotten about Alex’s wedding because the last few weeks have been so hectic with trying to close the GIS deal.

Alex is a good friend of ours and the CEO of Pinter, one of the largest liquor companies in the States. His wedding is in three weeks. We had the final fitting for the groomsmen a couple of months ago.

“We should all leave early enough, on the day. Alex will blow a gasket if we miss the rehearsal and you can be the tardiest s.o.b.” Ryan has such a stick up his ass with timing. I feel the beginnings of a headache.

Ryan is saying something about everyone going separately, but I’m no longer paying attention.

“Uh-huh,” I grunt, hitting the ball with more force than necessary.

I fucking hate weddings. Too bad I can’t avoid this one. Maybe if I had something—someone—to take my mind off things...?

By the time Ryan leaves, it’s almost eight p.m. Brooke will leave at eight and return to her life. I may never see her again. I put the check in my back pocket and head downstairs to see her before she slips away.

I find her exactly the way I did yesterday morning, standing by the full-length window, admiring the Manhattan skyline. She looks serene. She turns to face me as I enter.

I catch the remnants of wonder in her eyes and the wistful smile playing across her

pouty lips before they tighten and her spine stiffens slightly, belying the tension seeping into her as I approach. She looks about to bolt although she doesn't move an inch, she only turns back to the view. My fists curl. I want her soft and open when she's with me.

I stand beside her, taking in the view I've grown bored of, and try to see it afresh from her eyes. We stand like that for some time.

"Lisa's down for the count?" I ask.

"Oh yeah, just about tucked her in. I thought it might be an issue with all the ice cream but she was super exhausted; she was struggling to keep her eyes open. Are Zoey and Dan still due in tonight?"

"Yes." I glance at my watch. "Flight lands in an hour or so."

She nods her head, saying nothing.

"You were really good with Lisa," I say.

"Thanks. She's a sweet kid. I can't believe she shaved off Coral's eyebrow."

"She likes you, trust me. She threw a babysitter's purse over the rooftop terrace once. Said she wanted to see if it could fly. Hell of a headache trying to get it back. The babysitter quit too. Same day if I remember well."

Brooke laughs incredulously. I'm shocked at how much I love the sound.

She turns back to the window. "You know, I've lived in this city my entire life, but I've never seen it from this vantage point. This is just... it's magical."

“You should see it at sunset from a helicopter.” It’s out of my mouth before I can fully process what I just said. I continue though. “Not just any helicopter. An open helicopter with your feet hanging out and the wind hitting your face.” I remember the last time I did that and wait for the flash of pain the memory brings. It doesn’t come.

“That would be incredible. Insane.” She takes a deep breath. “Well, I should go. Thanks for your help with Lisa.”

She slings her purse strap over her shoulder and makes to leave.

“Wait.” For the second time that day, I gently take her arm and bring her back to face me .

“I wanted to give you something.” I take the check out and hand it to her.

“What is it?” She looks at the check and then back at me.

“A tip. For doing amazing work with Lisa,” I say and hold it out, but pull back when she tries to take it, “on one condition. You go on a date with me.”

“What?” She seems confused. “What are you talking about?”

She takes the check away from me and stares for a few seconds before reacting.

“\$289,000? That’s an oddly specific figure.” She looks at me blankly for what seems like an eternity, then I see the exact moment the fog clears and her eyes go wide as saucers.

“How did you know—why would you even? I-I don’t understand.”

“Take it,” I say.

“I can’t—I mean, you shouldn’t...” She shakes her head. “One date?”

I nod. “You’re welcome.”

She’s silent for a beat. “So let me get this straight,” she says in a strangely cool voice. “Because you somehow found out that my brother is in trouble, you now think you know my price and you can have me? I’m not a thing you can just acquire because you have all the money in the world, Xavier.”

“That’s not—”

“You had no right snooping around my life!” She cuts me off. “I don’t even know why you would do that. You insulted me yesterday and now you’re throwing money at me to what—sleep with you?”

“Hey,” I say softly to try to calm her. “You need the money, I need—”

“A slut?”

She interrupts me again and I take a calming breath.

“Look, Xavier, I have enough problems as it is. I don’t need some dumb rich boy who thinks he can have whatever he wants whenever he wants making me feel like I’m selling myself—”

Finally losing my patience, I back her into the window. “I think you’ve made it abundantly clear that I don’t need to pay to fuck you.”

She gasps. “You smug, arrogant, cocky—”

My mouth descends on hers in a hard kiss, my hand fisting in her glorious hair. She

resists, pushing on my shoulders but my hand holds her in place while I continue to devour her. I slant my mouth over hers, deepening the kiss, my tongue sliding over the seam of her lips. Suddenly her arms find their way around my neck and her mouth opens under mine, allowing my tongue to slide across hers in languid licks. Her taste explodes on my tongue and I growl in triumph. Her answering moan radiates all the way down to my balls.

I tear my mouth away and we are both breathless. I kiss the throbbing pulse in her neck.

“Just hear me out. I’m not giving you the money for what you think. I just need you to be my date for a wedding in three weeks.”

“Why?” Her eyes are soft and dazed.

“Because I need a date.” Actually, I don’t need a date. But I can’t tell her the real reason why the idea of going to weddings makes me want to poke my eyes out.

“I thought you didn’t want to be seen in public with me?”

“I lied.”

“And what about the part about not being your type?” Brooke asks, still suspicious.

“That part is actually true,” I say with a rueful smile .

“What?” She shoves me away with surprising strength.

“Hear me out—”

She’s halfway to the door before she throws back, “You know, since you have all the

money in the world, you shouldn't have a problem buying yourself a date that's more your type. I'd rather work my entire life to pay off this debt than spend any more time with you."

She holds up the check, rips it into tiny pieces, and throws it in the air.

"The deal is still on the table if you change your mind."

"Go fuck yourself." She walks away.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:10 pm

Brooke

Who the hell does Xavier think he is? That arrogant jerk with his sick mind games. The most annoying part is that I was very tempted to take the money—until he opened his mouth. And I can't believe I let him kiss me again.

I slam the back door so hard Stella rears up from her nap on the couch.

“What did he do now?” she says as I storm past her. Stella follows me into my room.

“You're not ready for this,” I say when she sits next to me on the bed. “So, he somehow found out about the debt Steve owes and offered to pay the full amount.”

“What?” Stella sits up straighter. “No way. That's incredibly nice.”

“No, it's not.”

“Why not?” Stella asks. She stares at me for a beat. “Please don't tell me you refused.”

“Of course I said no. ”

“Brooke!” Stella stands. “Are you mad? Why would you say no? You and I both know there's no way you're going to come up with all that money in the time they're giving you no matter how many extra jobs you do. These guys Steve's mixed up with could hurt you or do some criminal shit like that. They could hurt your family. Your friends.” Something occurs to her. “Oh my God, Brooke, I could be sex-trafficked!”

“You won’t get trafficked, Stella, let’s not get dramatic.” Stella has such a vivid imagination.

“You don’t know how sick this Fulvio creature is and I’m not about to bet on him.” She grabs both my hands. “Let Xavier pay him off, please.”

“He only offered to pay on the condition that I go to a wedding with him.” She digests this.

“So let me get this straight, you said no to one date with a really hot billionaire in exchange for him making all your troubles go away? How are we best friends?”

“You don’t get it, Stella. Xavier is insufferable. He’s arrogant and bossy and mercurial... I can’t be around him. You said it yourself, it’s better to avoid him.”

“That was before he made you an offer of a lifetime. Did he say why he wanted you to go on this date? I’m sure he has no problem whatsoever finding dates.”

“My thoughts exactly. He’s got something up his sleeve; he’s always playing at some game.”

Stella sits next to me. “Sweetie. It’s one date in exchange for getting your life back. You can do it. Just ghost him or whatever after the date is over.”

Stella makes a great point. The thought of not having that debt hanging over my head is pure bliss. “You’re right. Maybe I should call him back. ”

My phone vibrates, and I look at it. My heart plummets.

“Is it him?” Stella asks.

“No. It’s Fulvio.” I look at her. “What should I do? Zoey’s check isn’t even due until tomorrow.”

“Well, you need to answer,” Stella says, and I pick it up.

“Hello,” I say in a slightly shaky voice.

“This Brooke?” His voice is still as raspy as I remember. “Yes. This is her.”

“You’ve been a busy little whore, haven’t you?”

“Excuse me?”

“Not that I’m complaining,” he says. “We got the money you got your rich boyfriend to pay us off with is all.”

“What?” I’m not sure I heard him correctly.

“Yep, every last dime. Nice doing business with you, and anytime like, you and your limp dick brother wanna owe us some more money, we’re here for you. We’ll treat you nice like.”

I hear the dial tone.

“What did he say?” Stella asks.

I’m reeling with shock when I say, “It appears Xavier has paid off the debt. Everything.”

“I thought you turned him down.”

“Yeah. I tore up the check.”

“And yet here you sit. Debt free.” Stella shakes her head in disbelief, smiling.

“I can’t believe it. I’m free.” I get up and pace the room.

“Yes, you are, girlfriend.”

“But why would he still do that after everything I said to him? And I refused him for the date.”

“Maybe he’s not as bad as he seems,” Stella says. “And now you owe him a thank you. Perhaps you might even consider being his date for this wedding.”

“But I don’t want to,” I whine. “Stella, it’s a wedding. A formal, public event. What do I know about being some billionaire’s wedding date?”

“Somehow Xavier doesn’t strike me as someone who plays by anyone’s rules. You won’t have to be anything except yourself, otherwise he can fuck off. Right?”

“I’m sure he’s already speed-dialed some other girl more suited to his needs.”

Stella shakes her head. “Chicken,” she says affectionately. “You’re scared. Well, it’s just a ‘thank you’ it’s going to be then,” she says.

I nod, not quite believing the turn of events. I suppose I could call to say thank you. It’s the courteous thing to do. Or maybe send a card. It shouldn’t be hard since I won’t have to see him face to face.

My phone vibrates again. This time it’s Steve. Stella leaves me to finish the phone call, mouthing something about meeting someone. I blow her a kiss.

Steve is incredulous and apologetic and ecstatic and guilty about my boyfriend paying off the debt. I correct him the first time, but I lose the strength to keep explaining the relationship, or lack of one, between Xavier and me when he continues calling him my boyfriend. By the end of the call, I'm drained and I just want to go to bed. There is just one worry gnawing at me.

Steve is free now but for how long? Gambling is an addiction that is almost impossible to kick. I told him my concerns.

"I know, and I'm so very ashamed for dragging everyone into this. I've already checked myself into Gamblers Anonymous and my sponsor is very supportive. I think he can help me."

"I hope so, Steve. Well done for taking those steps, I'm proud of you," I say.

And for all our sakes, I hope he's right.

On my lunch break the next day, I call Xavier. His number was one of those Zoey listed out for me. His assistant Gail picks up and informs me he's in a meeting but will return the call as soon as he's out.

In another twenty minutes, my phone rings. "Hello," I answer, trying not to sound as nervous as I feel.

"Brooke." The rough timbre of his voice washes pleasantly over me.

"Sorry to disturb you at work."

"It's alright, what can I do?"

"I... um. Xavier, I know you paid the money. Steve's debt, I mean. Why did you?"

“Why not?” he says, “I really meant to help you whatever else you may think of me. It didn’t seem fair that you were being made to pay back a debt you knew nothing about.”

He sounds warm and so very kind. I find myself relaxing.

“But I said I wouldn’t go on your date.”

“I know.” Xavier chuckles. “Did you call to remind me of that?”

“No,” I say. “Of course not. I called to say thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

I hesitate. “So...did you still need a date?”

“Are you asking me out now?” Xavier’s tone is playful.

“Never mind, I’m hanging up now.”

“Okay, wait! Yes, I’d very much like you to come with me but only if you want to. Do you really want to, Brooke?”

“What I want is not the point. Take it or leave it,” I snap .

“I see. Well, don’t get too excited on my account,” he grumbles.

“I know. I’ll try not to break a leg jumping for joy,” I reply.

“Smartass,” he murmurs. I can hear the smile in his voice. “By the way, the wedding is in Cancun, Mexico.”

“Are you kidding me? You expect me to follow you to Mexico?”

“Well, seeing as that’s where the wedding is happening, I don’t see how you won’t follow me there.”

“And you tell me that just now?”

“If you’d given me a chance to breathe before leaping on the offer, I might have mentioned it.”

“You—” I stuttered. But I’m not really annoyed. I’m just surprised because I’d assumed it would be in New York.

“Too late to back out now.”

“I thought the date was for a couple of hours, not a whole day. I’ve got plans, Xavier.”

“The wedding is for a couple of hours. Although there’s the rehearsal dinner on Friday, the reception, and the four-hour flight each way to think of as well. I can have you back on Saturday evening.”

I’m speechless now. What did I just agree to? A whole day and night away in Cancun?

“What plans have you got?” he asks.

Actually, I don’t have any plans except to stay home, do laundry, and clean. Maybe some artwork. “I can’t just leave.” I search my head for a plausible excuse.

“Sure, you can. We could even return on Sunday if you wanted to stay after the

reception to enjoy Cancun.”

“Xavier! ”

“Alright! I promise, though, you’ll be fine. I’ll look after you.”

I don’t dwell on how good that statement makes me feel.

“How long has it been since you went on a holiday?” Xavier coaxes.

I can’t remember. I admit I’m tempted. Still, I balk.

“But why do you want to take me?”

He growled in frustration. “Enough with the excuses, Brooke. You’re coming with me.” His tone has an authoritative bite that raises goosebumps on my flesh.

I’m silent for a bit. Then I take a breath and say, “Okay.”

“Good girl,” he says. “And Brooke?”

“Yes?” I’m breathless.

“Thank you,” he whispers and hangs up.

It’s ridiculous that I feel that whisper echo all the way down to my toes.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:10 pm

Brooke

I don't see Xavier for the following three weeks, but we speak a few times on the phone to discuss the wedding. I'm surprised by how easy he is to talk to when he's not being a jerk. Or super bossy. I learn Zoey and Dan are coming for the wedding too and so are his friends, most of whom are in New York. We'll be taking his jet with Zoey and Dan, but his friends will meet us there.

He asks about Steve, and I tell him about him being in gambling rehab. He also asks about the rest of my family, and I, too, inquire shyly about his.

He and Zoey are the only children of Richard and Sunita Bennett, who are soon due back from a three-month-long transatlantic cruise. The Bennetts come from generations of real estate wealth. His parents are retired and live in Seattle, and Xavier has taken over the company.

Stella is surprised to hear about the wedding being in Mexico but also green with envy, whining about how she hasn't had a holiday in forever. Although she's busy trying to clear her schedule for Cherise's tour, which happens to be on the same weekend as the wedding, she has taken it as her personal mission to style me for the upcoming wedding, stating that as she was the one who bagged me a billionaire, it was her duty to ensure that I keep him. So, I spend a few evenings under Stella's watchful eye, perfecting my makeup skills since she's not going to be there with me.

On one of our calls, Xavier casually said that if I wanted to go shopping for outfits he could take me. I firmly turned him down and he immediately dropped the issue. I figured he'd asked just to be polite, not because he was concerned about how I would

look. After the phone call, I'd run back to Stella in desperation because I really had no idea what to wear. We decided on renting an Elie Saab dress for the wedding and she loaned me one for the rehearsal dinner.

Xavier had his driver pick me up on Friday while he finished up with meetings and I'm now waiting for him in the Bentley outside the high-rise building where his office is. The moment he steps out of the revolving doors and strides toward the car, all the composure I'd gained in the past three weeks evaporates into thin air. He's devastatingly handsome in a suit.

Deep in conversation, he gets into the car, gives me a smile, and continues talking on the phone. I take the opportunity to watch him. His size makes the space suddenly too small. He loosens his tie and undoes the first couple of buttons on his snow-white crisp shirt, and reclines against the back of the seat. I'm surrounded by his voice and masculine scent. His nearness is like a magnetic force field pulling my body into his.

Why do I have to be so affected by this man ?

"Look, I'm out of New York for the next few days, but I expect Mark to get the bug fixed tomorrow and the whole report should be on my desk by Monday at the latest."

He reaches into the center console and offers me a bottle of water, then fetches one for himself. When I start ogling him as he drinks deeply, I mentally kick myself, tear my eyes away from him to look outside the window, and retreat into my protective shell.

"Gail will get you anything you need and she's available this weekend, so I expect you to make full use of her resourcefulness."

He hangs up the phone and turns to me.

“Brooke,” he says, “I’m sorry, I’ve been caught up in work, trying to clear my schedule for this trip.”

“Don’t apologize,” I say to him.

“I should have come to pick you up,” he insists.

“No, it’s fine. It’s not as though it’s a real date. You proposed the idea and I agreed.”

Xavier looks taken aback for a moment. “Are you alright, Brooke?”

No, this was a stupid idea. “Yeah, I’m good. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Nothing,” he says. “Well, it’s good to see you again. You look nice.” I’m dressed for comfort in regular black tights, a T-shirt, and a denim jacket. My hair is in a ponytail. I don’t know that it’s nice but I’ll take it.

“Thanks,” I say.

The silence stretches and I feel Xavier’s eyes on me. Still, I remain aloof. It’s either that or crawl over to drape myself over him, and I do have some self-respect after all .

We reach Teterboro Airport and after brief checks, we’re aboard a luxury private jet. Zoey, Dan, and Lisa are waiting already. Lisa squeals happily when she sees me, running to give me a hug.

“Mommy, look it’s Brooke!” She wraps her chubby arms around me. “I missed you.”

“I missed you too,” I say, ruffling her dark curls. “Hi Zoey, hey Dan,” I say when I reach them, still holding Lisa in my arms.

Dan smiles back but Zoey gets out of her seat and embraces me on the side that's not holding her daughter. "Gosh, Brooke, what a lovely surprise! I can't tell you how happy I am to have you with us on this trip." Her smile gets even wider when she looks over my shoulder at Xavier and she's doing something with her eyes—I'm not sure what it means but when I steal a quick look back at Xavier, I catch him sternly shaking his head at her.

O-okay. What's a set of twins if they don't talk in code?

Lisa asks to sit at our table and I am grateful to have her as a distraction. Xavier hasn't stopped looking at me since the drive here. The last thing I want is for Zoey and Dan to witness my attraction to Xavier. He doesn't seem to share my concerns because he's openly staring. On second thoughts, I should have given him what he wanted from the get-go. Smiles, reasonable eye contact, and conversation. Normal behavior for people going on a date.

When I finally allow myself to look at him, his gaze holds a hint of concern but also heat, and there's a smile playing around his lips. He mouths, "Relax, it'll be fine." I nod and look away.

"Mommy," Lisa says suddenly, "Is Uncle Xavi allowed to kiss Brooke?" I freeze in shock at the unexpected question, then feel my face heat up furiously. Xavier bursts out laughing, and I give him a death stare.

Zoey coughs delicately, trying to get rid of the wine she might have swallowed down the wrong pipe. "Lisa!" Zoey sounds mortified, and Dan seems to be hiding a smile behind his hand while also trying to look shocked.

"He wants to, Mommy, don't you, Uncle Xavi?" she asks. "Mommy, can he?"

"I think that very much depends on Brooke," Xavier drawls. His eyes are scorching

now. Why did I think having Lisa in our cubicle would shield me from him? He doesn't care.

"Okay, Lisa, why don't we go and have a chat and then a little nap so when we get to Cancun you can be all fresh and ready to play again." Zoey drags-slash-carries Lisa from my lap, whispering, "I'm so sorry." Lisa goes reluctantly with Zoey who takes her toward the back into what I assume is a bedroom.

As soon as they leave, Xavier takes the seat beside me. He leans in close. "Lisa is right. I should have led with that. No wonder you're so tense."

"Are you kidding me?" His arrogance knows no bounds. Dan is within earshot!

"No. I've wanted to kiss you since I saw you in the car. Come here." He cups his hand over my nape and takes my mouth.

It starts out as a peck, but then he dips his head again, sucking on my lower lip, and I can't resist parting my lips. His tongue sweeps into my mouth, rubbing along mine, then he slants his head over mine as he takes my mouth deeper and harder. I'm lost in his delicious taste, unsure of how I'd gone a whole three weeks without it. My hand creeps over his shoulder and into his hair, loving the feel of the silky strands against my fingers so much that I start to pull. Xavier moans in response. He loves it. He lifts me onto his lap, then turns the kiss decadent, sliding his hands in my hair and moving his open mouth against mine, licking and tasting leisurely, making a carnal feast of my lips and tongue. He kisses me until I'm trembling and my toes are curling in my sneakers. Until the tension leaves my shoulders and I'm sagging against him. Then he releases my mouth and kisses a path across my neck toward my ear.

"Hello," he whispers huskily.

I slowly raise my eyelids and look at him. His smile is lazy, the dimple on his right

cheek flashing. He looks satisfied, and I know that I'll be tempted to do anything to keep putting that look on his face. I think of Kryptonite as I watch the gold flecks in his heavy-lidded green irises. Please, I beg the universe, don't let me fall for this man.

"Liked that a lot, didn't you?" Xavier teases.

Mortified, I glance around quickly to check if we'd been seen. The club seats opposite are empty. I wonder at what point Dan left.

"Cocky much?" I roll my eyes. "You weren't exactly immune." I grind pointedly against his erection.

"Oh, I was pretty much in heaven. Your kisses can drive a man insane," he says matter-of-factly. "And she's blushing again." He laughs.

The man has no filter. I'm surprised he said that, but even more surprised at how giddy the compliment makes me feel, considering one of Phil's issues was that I was boring in bed. I slide off his lap and sit before he melts me into a puddle. Fucking Kryptonite.

Xavier gives me a moment but doesn't let me retreat into my shell for the rest of the evening. Dan, Zoey, and Lisa stay behind those doors for a couple of hours, then come back to the main cabin to join us, and the rest of the flight passes without a hitch.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:10 pm

Xavier

We touch down in Cancun around eight p.m., an hour after the rehearsal dinner was supposed to start. We make our way through the busy traffic to the five-star resort where the wedding party is staying. My phone hasn't stopped ringing from the moment we landed.

"Calm down," I say to Ryan. "We'll be about half an hour. We could come straight there, but I doubt Zoey or Brooke would be happy about that."

Zoey gives me a glare that confirms that. I give Brooke's hand a reassuring squeeze.

"Brooke?" Ryan asks. "Who's Brooke?"

"She's with me," I simply say.

"I didn't know you were bringing someone."

"And that's a problem because?"

Ryan is silent for a beat. Which irritates me because I know he's about to say something I won't like .

"Because Vanessa is here." Ryan continues. "She begged to come with me so she could see you."

"And little cherub that you are, you couldn't refuse. Well, that sounds like your

problem, man.” I chuckle. If Ryan and Zoey would quit playing matchmaker for a second, they’d see Vanessa and I aren’t the least bit suited. “Anyway, tell Alex and the boys I’ll be there soon.”

Brooke is still looking out of the window, raptly taking in the busy, colorful streets and the sounds of Cancun at night. Lisa is rested from her long nap on the flight and is happily chatting to Dan and Zoey.

We reach the hotel and the awe on Brooke’s face driving through Cancun is nothing compared to her reaction when she sees the suite. It’s one with wall-to-ceiling panoramic sky and ocean views and a terrace with an infinity pool.

“Do you like it?”

“Oh my God, Xavier, this is breathtaking.” She looks around in wonder, shaking her head. “It’s—too much, too big for one person.”

“Are you trying to get me to share your room?”

She gets a bit flustered. “I mean, come on, it’s big enough for four people, Xavier. We could both stay here and we’d have plenty of space.”

“I wanted you to be comfortable and not feel like you have to stay in the same room with me, especially if you didn’t want to.”

I know she’d thought I brought her here to get into her pants. While there’s nothing I’d like to do more, I just really didn’t want to be alone this weekend.

Her eyes take on a soft glow and she throws her hands around my neck. “Thank you.”

The hug takes me by surprise. This is the first time Brooke has shown me affection without me having to push or provoke her. It feels bloody good. I return the embrace, liking the way she fits in my arms, the way my palms span her small waist and the swell of her hips. Her smell. I put my nose in her hair and inhale deeply.

“Xavier”—she releases me—“what are you doing?”

“You smell good, can you blame me?” I laugh, and she shakes her head.

I leave her to get changed for the rehearsal dinner.

The rehearsal dinner is halfway done when we get there. It is on the rooftop terrace of the hotel overlooking the beach, which is the venue of the wedding tomorrow. Classical music plays in the background, mixed with the laughter and conversations of the guests. Zoey and Lisa had gone ahead to sit with Holly, the other flower girl, and her mom Emma.

I see Alex and his bride-to-be, Nora, standing with the officiant. A group of women are beside Nora, and the guys are on Alex’s side. I gather they’ve already done the processional. I tense as we draw nearer.

It’s a semi-casual rehearsal dinner, nothing more , I tell myself, gently rolling my head from side to side to relieve the tension already setting in.

“I’ll go sit over there,” Brooke says, motioning to the small group where other guests who aren’t part of the wedding party are sitting. Before she goes, I pull her into my arms and kiss her cheek. “Have I told you how beautiful you look?”

“Only about a dozen times, Xavier,” she replies, squeezing my arm. If she thought my behavior was unusual, she didn’t show it. I watch her go for a moment, then follow Dan and head to the other boys standing to the side of the makeshift aisle.

“About time, Xaviboy.” Lee hugs me. “What took you so long?”

“Last minute meetings. Unavoidable, unfortunately.”

Wyatt claps me on the back in welcome.

I shake Max’s hand, who is also a friend of Alex’s. Max recently launched his IT startup company in Manhattan and we’ve met a few times to discuss investments. I see the group standing together a few feet away. Jordan has his arm around his new wife, Sabrina. Jordan’s business partner, the bespectacled Ethan, and another petite woman I’ve never met are deep in conversation.

“Guys, it’s been ages!” I say when I reach the group. We regularly caught up in Manhattan at Sabrina’s exhibitions but over the past couple of months we’ve not had the chance to meet.

“Xavier, you made it!” Sabrina gushes. We all share hugs, then Sabrina introduces her friend Bonnie, the petite woman with short purple hair. Bonnie, unlike Sabrina, isn’t part of the bridal party.

I then go over to James, Alex’s half-brother I’d heard so much about but never actually met, and finally Giovanni, the best man, a big bearded guy with a man-bun. Ryan approaches, handing me a drink—a scotch on the rocks—and stands beside me.

“You dog.” Ryan sips his drink. “So you are seeing that woman you ditched me for the other night. You might have said. I needn’t have bothered with Vanessa. ”

“What, and rob you of the chance to play Mary Poppins and Fairy Godmother?”

“Fuck you.” Ryan smiles.

“Ry, keep Nessa away from Brooke, you know how she can be. I don’t want Brooke upset. She’s... important.”

Ryan whirls to face me, shock registering on his face.

“What,” I bark.

“Nothing. Not a thing.” He takes another sip and hides a stupid smile. “Although I figured I’d leave Vanessa in your lap and find myself a Mexican beauty.”

“You figured wrong, my friend. Try figuring she meets someone else. Better still, set her up with one of these guys.”

He shakes his head in exasperation. Alex and Nora have finished with the officiant and are coming toward us.

“Xavier, my man!” Alex crushes me in a hug, and I thump his back.

“Congratulations, man.” I turn to Nora and kiss her on both cheeks then pull her in for a hug. “You’ve made him the happiest man alive.” Nora beams. “Seriously, until you, we’ve always known him to be as grumpy as a bear with a sore head, so thank you.”

Alex cuts in, “Okay, we get it, sunshine.” We laugh as they move to do their rounds with other guests. Just before they leave, Alex squeezes my shoulder and says in a low voice, “Really appreciate you being here, Xavier.”

I nod in reply. Alex is hands down the most selfless man I know. I’d bend over backward for him. “You’re welcome, man, anytime.”

After a while, I look around for Brooke, already missing her. She’s talking

animatedly and laughing with Sabrina's friend, Bonnie. I wonder how Bonnie got over there so fast. They seem to be getting on like a house on fire. I smile. There's a reason Stella is Brooke's best friend, and Bonnie looks like a clone of Stella. Brooke catches me watching and smiles shyly. I grin, feeling like I've just won the lottery. Vanessa stands with Andrea, Nora's maid of honor but approaches when she sees me.

Vanessa kisses my dimpled right cheek. I would usually also let her kiss my chin or neck as she's wont to do, but this time I hold her upper arms. She's not deterred; she grabs my forearms, stroking back and forth like she craves any sort of contact from me.

"You look good, Bennett," she breathes.

"So do you, Nessa," I return politely.

"I can't believe you really brought a date, knowing I would be here? Does she know about us?"

Before I can say anything, Brooke sidles over to me and presses against me. My arm automatically lifts and cradles her nearer and Vanessa takes a step back. Brooke strokes one hand up and down my back and tingles race between my shoulder blades, spreading across my shoulders. Her other hand is low on my abdomen, fingers tracing the muscles. Her breasts are nestled close and she's subtly rubbing against me like a cat. My brain short circuits. "Introduce us, babe," she purrs.

I wonder who this brazen woman is and what she's done with shy Brooke. Her touch is such a fucking turn-on. "Brooke, this is Vanessa, a friend of mine. Vanessa, Brooke is the woman I'm seeing," I say tightly.

"Since when?" Vanessa asks rudely.

“Since whenever I need seeing to,” Brooke tells Vanessa, then stands on her tiptoes and whispers in my ear, sucking on my earlobe. “Like right now. ”

Heat spreads up my neck because I’m suddenly, painfully aroused. In the middle of a wedding rehearsal dinner.

“Excuse us,” I say to a shocked Vanessa, “we were just leaving.”

I catch Brooke’s hand and drag her away from the terrace through the nearest elevator.

“Xavier—” she begins.

“Not a word, babe .”

The elevator door closes, and I’m on her, pinning her against the wall. I catch both of her hands in mine, hold them above her head, and devour her mouth in a hard kiss, pouring my anger and arousal into it, roughly grinding my erection into her. She lets out a lusty moan and curls her leg around my waist so I’m hitting her clit repeatedly. After a few moments she suddenly jerks, making a strangled sound and I realize with shock that she’s coming. Fuck me, the lift hasn’t even descended four floors. I jerk away as if she’s on fire and move to the opposite wall of the elevator.

She looks like a wet dream with her flushed cheeks, glazed eyes, and hard nipples poking through her emerald silk cocktail dress. My balls ache with the need to sink into her. We reach our floor and I pull her into my room.

“What the fuck was that?” I say when the door closes.

“I’m sorry, I couldn’t help it, I was—you were—”

“I don’t mean the orgasm, babe . Before that, upstairs with Vanessa.”

“Are you sleeping with her?” she asks.

“What was that about? Were you jealous? Did you want to punish me? Prove a point?”

“Answer my question, Xavier. ”

“Not a chance. Not until you explain why you were suddenly all over me.”

“Are you angry?”

“I’m fucking hard, Brooke! You put your hands on me in public, at my friend’s rehearsal dinner, and I couldn’t fucking think anymore.”

“I’m sorry.” Her gaze goes to my crotch. And stays there. I grow impossibly harder and my dick starts to throb.

She slowly moves closer, as if in a trance, until she reaches me. I’m spellbound with need. Her hands go to my fly. “Xavier,” she breathes, unbuttoning my slacks and looking deep into my eyes as she pulls the zipper down.

Who the hell is this seductress?

She curls her hand around my arousal and my head falls back, eyes closing against the intense sensation. She pulls my cock out, stroking her thumb back and forth over the moist, engorged crown. My mouth opens in a tortured groan as I leak more precum.

“Do you want me to—?” she whispers.

“Yes! Fuck, yes, baby, please.” I feel like I’ll die if she doesn’t put her mouth on me right now.

She’s on her knees in front of me in a flash and takes me in her mouth. The wet heat of her mouth feels so good I have to lock my knees to keep them from buckling. My hands find their way into her hair, gathering the mass of waves away from her face so I can watch her plump lips sliding over my heated flesh.

Her eyes are closed and she’s moaning as if she’s enjoying this. Her hands don’t quite encircle the thick base of my cock but I feel her every squeeze and stroke. She takes me deeper and gags. I moan loudly at the feeling, drawing on every ounce of control I have not to ram into her throat. A few more licks and pulls and I feel my balls draw up. I’m right there. Already. Fuck this is good.

“Brooke,” I pant, “baby, I’m going to come.”

Her hands find mine, linking our fingers and she takes me deeper, her moan vibrating down into my balls. She lifts her eyes to meet mine and the lust I see in them tells me she wants to taste me. I lose my mind. The orgasm hits me like a freight train and my hands shake in hers as I flood her mouth, my hips jerking. She sucks until I’m completely spent, places a soft, open-mouthed kiss on my thigh, then rises to her feet and plants another kiss on my neck, sucking softly. I’m still panting.

Hands down the hottest blowjob I’ve ever received.

“Holy fucking shit, woman.” I gasp, wiping her smeared pink lipstick with a thumb.

“I was jealous, Xavier, and I’m sorry I did that to you,” she says.

I cup her face and look deep into her eyes. “No, I’m not sleeping with her. We were friends for a while, then slept together for a few weeks. Our physical relationship

ended over a year ago. And I haven't slept with anyone since I laid eyes on you." I haven't wanted anyone except you.

"Look at us." Brooke chuckles. "Who knew all we needed was a couple of orgasms and we'd be right as rain."

"Smart mouth." I take her mouth in a kiss. "We should go back upstairs."

She groans. "Everyone's going to know what happened. The way you dragged me off..."

"That was entirely your fault, beautiful girl; besides, who doesn't love a little wedding scandal?"

"Xavier! "

"And just in time to meet the boys," I continue. "Your timing is impeccable, Brooke. To think I won't even need to warn them to back off of you."

"Oh, God." Her cheeks turn pink, and I laugh out loud, shaking my head. Brooke Lewis. The woman who ten minutes ago literally decimated my composure and reduced me to a smoking pile of want, is now blushing prettily.

Taking pity on her, I say, "I'm joking, okay. Apart from Vanessa, I doubt anyone noticed. It's not like we made a scene. You'll be fine, don't worry."

"Can I at least fix my makeup?"

"I kind of like you all mussed up, but yeah, take your time."

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:10 pm

Brooke

It's the morning of the wedding, and Bonnie and I are on the terrace of my room, dipping in the infinity pool and enjoying the breakfast feast Xavier ordered for us.

"This view is sick," Bonnie says, taking a photo of me in the pool against the backdrop of the Caribbean Sea. "You'll love this set." She takes a few more shots, then puts my phone down and wanders to the breakfast table to grab another bunch of grapes.

I met Bonnie yesterday at the rehearsal dinner. I'd been feeling self-conscious and underdressed in Stella's simple emerald silk dress, another one she'd bought on a whim despite it being a size too big for her. The dress was simple, with a halterneck bodice and figure-skimming skirt.

Seeing Vanessa, who'd been dressed to the nines and sending sneers in my general direction, had made me question my choice of outfit until Bonnie strutted toward us with the grace of a queen, dressed in leather and lace-up boots. Her black curly hair was in an asymmetric pixie cut and streaked with purple .

Her style did nothing to detract from her exquisite features though. She made a beeline for me and we'd hit it off immediately as she reminded me so much of Stella.

She's a freelancer in IT security, mainly working from her home in Long Island, and we were pleased to discover we don't live very far from each other. We'd already made plans to catch up once we returned to New York.

When I suddenly disappeared with Xavier and then returned half an hour later, she'd calmly taken my arm and whispered, "Holy hell, girl, your effect on that man needs to be studied in university, and until you give me the source of that elixir, I'm latching on to you like a baby octopus."

I'd laughed, thinking surely she'd meant his effect on me.

I'd later met the bride and groom, Jordan, his wife Sabrina, Ethan, and Xavier's best buddies Ryan, Wyatt, and Lee. Despite dark looks from Vanessa, I thoroughly enjoyed myself and even texted Stella to tell her I was having fun.

Bonnie had booked herself into another hotel when they arrived in Cancun. She'd been happy to hop on Jordan's jet but said she would never allow him to pay for her hotel room. I admitted I didn't quite understand her logic but could respect it. Then I'd invited Bonnie to stay overnight in my own room.

I was confused about what was developing very quickly between Xavier and me. I knew unless I did something drastic to put brakes on it, there was only one way last night would end. In Xavier's bed. A prospect that scared me shitless because somehow I knew it would be impossible to spend the night in his bed and remain unaffected afterward.

Stella had said to ghost him after the wedding. I desperately hope that ship hasn't sailed. As it stands, I may already be in too deep if I'm being honest. The man makes me feel and give up way too much. He told me he needed a date. For all I know, he might only have brought me along to deter Vanessa from chasing him. Not to mention he's still a cocky jerk and a playboy who I'd be wise to stay away from once this "date" is over.

I decided I had better keep my head for a bit longer. Since I couldn't very well keep Lisa with me, nor could I run to Zoey and Dan's room, I begged Bonnie to stay.

Bonnie knew exactly why. She'd smiled. "Babes, I don't see why you're cockblocking yourself from that prime piece of man cake, but I'll respect it." And then she sighed. "And here I am, in need of a proper fuck... but hey, who said there was any justice in the world?"

It turns out Bonnie understood the assignment. When we went over to speak to Zoey, Dan, and Xavier, she made a production of gushing over how nice this hotel was compared to hers and how she'd kill for a nice view of the sea. Xavier had asked if she'd like a room in our hotel, and I, of course, then offered to share my too-large room. I'd expected Xavier to be disappointed, but he was gracious and seemed happy even. His reaction stung, making me question what exactly I wanted.

"What time do we need to be there?" Bonnie asks, munching on the dark juicy grapes.

"Around ten thirty, the wedding starts at eleven." Xavier had sent me a naughty text first thing this morning about what time we needed to be at the venue.

"Right then, we've got a couple of hours. Having completed my task, I'm going to run to my hotel and get dressed—and give you some Xavier time. I'm sure the man is gagging to see you." Bonnie wags her eyebrows suggestively.

I laugh, watching her leave in the thick dressing gown. "Bonnie, surely you don't mean to go across town dressed that way?"

"I'm not about to wear last night's clothes, someone might see me and think I'm doing a walk of shame."

"Okay, and that's better than if they think you're crazy?"

"Absolutely! Meet you downstairs then," she says as she leaves.

I'm still chuckling when I get out of the pool and pick up my phone. Bonnie was right. The pictures are stunning. I see a recent missed call from Xavier. My phone is still on silent since last evening's rehearsal, which is why I missed the call.

I'm about to return the call, but then decide I'll go and see him. I take a quick shower, wash and dry my hair, then throw on a casual T-shirt and shorts to head to his room.

He opens the door on the second knock and I take him in dressed only in thin gray sweatpants, his hair sexily mussed and standing on end, his green eyes warm and inviting, jaw covered with stubble, shirtless chest rippling with tight cords of muscle, leading south to— holy cow...

"Good morning, Brooke." Xavier smiles, his right cheek dimpling attractively.

"Come in." He opens the door wider.

As soon as I enter, he grabs my waist, pulling me in for a kiss.

"I missed you," he says when we come up for air.

I missed you too . I keep my mouth shut.

"Seems like you really hit it off with Bonnie."

I nod yes.

"I'm glad," he says.

"You don't mind I wasn't with you last night?" I had to ask.

"No, of course not," he says. "I would have liked nothing better than to spend the

night buried inside you, but I meant what I said. I want you to be comfortable and have a good time. I really didn't want to come to Cancun alone, and you being here with me is enough satisfaction."

"But I don't get it, Xavier. You wouldn't have been alone; there's so many of your friends and family here. Zoey, Dan, Ryan, Jordan... all of them are here." I pause before asking, "Did you want me here so you could avoid Vanessa?"

"I didn't even know she was coming."

"So why then?" Was it too much to hope that Xavier didn't have an ulterior motive and he just wanted to spend time with me? My silly heart thuds hopefully.

"Does there need to be a reason? You're enjoying being here—"

"But—" I begin.

Fists pound on the door. "Xaviboy! Open up, Sleeping Beauty!"

Xavier sighs. "It's the boys, give me a sec, babe."

Babe ? Okay. I opened that door last night and he's seriously barging in.

He throws the door open and six hot guys pour into the room. Lee, Wyatt, Ryan, Max, Ethan, and James. "What the hell, assholes?" Xavier addresses them.

"Poker, right now. Giovanni's room. Move your ass," Ryan says.

Lee sees me first. "Brooke... hello. Again."

The rest notice me and the group goes silent. Then everyone tries to say hello at once.

“Get the picture?” Xavier snaps at them.

“Sorry, we didn’t realize you had company—” Max begins. Lee and Wyatt are still looking shocked.

“That’s his girl, dumbass,” James says to Max.

Lee recovers and says to Xavier, “We’ll let you off this time. You’ll lose anyway, so—”

“No, it’s fine, guys,” I say. “Really. Xavier and I were just talking, we’ll catch up later, right?”

I peck him on the lips.

“Are you sure?” Xavier asks.

“Of course.” I kiss his neck.

As I leave, I hear the boys teasing him.

“Oh look, he’s blushing,” someone says. “Like a fucking bride.”

I’m dressed in the rented Elie Saab dress. It’s icy blue and figure-hugging, with intricate sequin detail, a mermaid hem, and a narrow mesh insert on the front bodice, displaying more than a hint of cleavage. I brush and clip my hair away from my face but let the rest cascade down my back in a mass of waves. I finish off my makeup with a pale blue eyeshadow and a nude glossy lip color and I’m ready to leave. I stop by Zoey’s room on my way down. Dan’s already left with the other men.

“He said something about going to watch a game,” Zoey explains. I know it’s the

same game they dragged Xavier to play. I watch her try to get a squirming Lisa into her white flower girl dress and offer to help with Lisa so Zoey can finish up.

We are finally ready to go join the others at the beach.

The wedding venue is set against the backdrop of the rich blue Caribbean sea, with rows of white chairs wrapped in gauzy bows, split by a red-carpeted aisle leading to a beautiful gazebo decorated with flowers .

There are about a dozen dangerous-looking men in black suits and dark glasses around the perimeter of the venue. Zoey notices me looking and explains.

“Just a little security detail. They’re the best man’s men.”

The boisterous Italian guy? I look back. It doesn’t look like a “little” detail. I’ll bet my ass those men are armed. “Is he into security or something?”

“Or something,” Zoey says mysteriously.

I spot Xavier and the rest of the groomsmen. They’d finished taking pictures and were standing around for the ceremony to start. He looks gorgeous in tan slacks and suspenders over a crisp white shirt and bow tie with the sleeves rolled up over his forearms. He’s standing a few feet away from the rest, smoking.

I watch him take a couple of deep drags, then crush the stub under his tan loafers. Ryan approaches him, puts an arm around his neck, and says something to which Xavier nods. Ryan then pats his back and leaves. I’m puzzled by the exchange.

“I didn’t know Xavier smoked,” I blurt.

A frown appears between Zoey’s eyebrows as she catches my line of vision. “No, he

doesn't anymore, he used to. He had to kick the habit before Lisa was born. I'm just going to find Emma, the other flower girl's mom so we can get the girls together," Zoey says.

"Are you alright, Brooke?" She notices the worry on my face. "Xavi's fine, he's just a bit stressed, is all."

Stressed? Why would he be stressed and all of a sudden smoking?

Xavier catches my eye and strides toward me, his gaze heating. "You look incredible, babe." He kisses me, and I taste mint and cigarette on his breath.

"Thank you," I say. "You don't look so bad yourself."

He's rubbing my upper arms, but I feel the slightest tremor in his fingers.

"Xavier, is everything okay?"

"Of course, why wouldn't it be?" he asks, his eyes still raking over me.

"Well, you seem a bit... on edge."

He laughs. "You should see Alex. He's shitting himself. No, I'm good."

I'm not convinced though. He was fine this morning, wasn't he? Before the boys came to get him...

"So, what was that about earlier with the boys?" I keep my tone casual.

"Oh, they were just being silly. It was a game of poker. The loser has to take off a lucky girl's garter later on," he explains.

I see . “Did you play?”

“I didn’t lose if that’s what you’re asking.” He chuckles, and I release the breath I hadn’t realized I was holding. He traces the shell of my ear with his index finger, then curls his hand over my nape. “Ethan’s doing the honors.” Ethan is the tall, dark-haired guy in spectacles.

“I don’t see Bonnie yet?” Xavier asks.

“She’ll be here soon, she just texted me.” He nods, playing with the hair on my nape.

“What about Stella? Checked in on her?” I love that he’s interested in me enough to ask about my friends. Although I’d much rather talk about him and whatever is stressing him out.

“Yeah, I sent her photos of my room and the wedding venue.” I smile. “She’s insanely jealous but she’ll live. She’s got Cherise this weekend, so her hands are kind of full anyway.”

“Cherise the singer?” he asks.

“You bet your money it is.” My smile brightens .

“Wow.” He marvels. “Good for her.”

“I know. She’ll be out celebrating tonight. She’ll probably insist she take me out on another celebration night out since I’m missing out on this one.”

“It’ll be nice to take you on a date when we get back,” Xavier says.

“You don’t consider this a date?” I ask.

“I’ve hardly spent any time alone with you.”

My heart starts to pound. “Why do you want to spend time with me?”

Xavier laughs. “Why indeed?” He shakes his head, amused.

“No, really, I’m not your type. You said so yourself.”

“Not this again.” He throws his head back, taking a handful of his thick hair. Then he pins me with a searing look.

“Okay, here goes. No, you’re not my usual type, you’re Brooklyn. You’re funny and smart and sweet and sassy. You’re gentle yet fiery. You’re shy but also decadent and wanton. You’re sexy.” His voice lowers an octave. “Christ, you’re so fucking sexy you drive me insane. I want you, okay? That’s why I want to spend time with you. And I know you want me. So stop fighting this.” His other hand slips into my hair. “And stop running.”

I’m panting now. His words have ignited a fire in me. “I’m not running.”

“Yeah?” He looks deep into my eyes, his hands framing my face. “Come to me tonight then.”

My core clenches tightly at the dominance of his tone, and I want nothing more than to do his bidding. I’m scared by the intensity of what I feel for this man.

I bite my lip, and his gaze follows the movement. His thumb frees my lip, then rubs back and forth over it.

“Your mouth is sinfully sweet, you know.”

I know he's thinking of when I had my mouth around him. I feel emboldened by the desire I see in his eyes. "I like the way you taste," I say in a husky voice.

"Good." He takes my lips, kissing me deeply, his tongue delving into my mouth to couple with mine. I moan, grabbing his wrists.

"Guys, behave." I hear Zoey singsong as she approaches us. "Can't be stealing the show. Don't want to give that uptight wedding planner a fit."

Xavier releases me, and I face Zoey, red-faced. Zoey shoos Xavier away to join the other groomsmen waiting for the cue to begin the procession. She grabs my hand as we head to our seats. "He is absolutely bonkers for you, Brooke. I couldn't be happier he's with someone like you." She squeezes my hand tight. "Thank you," she says as we take our seats.

Brooke

The wedding reception is in full swing, and I've never danced so much in my life. Bonnie arrived just as the wedding ceremony started and sat beside me. And now she's swapped tables at the reception rather than staying at her original table with Jordan, Sabrina and Ethan.

We enjoy bubbly drinks, dance, and people-watch. She comments on the guests, particularly the eye candies—the groomsmen, most of whom have now lost their bow ties and are sporting a few of their shirt buttons undone, giving tantalizing peeks of muscled chests and tattoos.

Xavier is still fully dressed and noticeably tense, having gone out to smoke a couple more times but apart from that, he is as attentive as ever. We've shared a few dances and each time it was a full-body experience to be so close to him. By the end of the fourth dance, I was panting with the need for more.

Giovanni gives a rousing best man's speech, to which Alex responds, saying it must have been the most difficult speech he's ever done because it was in English and because he wasn't allowed to swear. Everyone laughs.

He doesn't even have an accent. Why do people keep calling him 'Italian guy' as if he speaks no English? Perhaps there's something else to his being Italian that defines him. Something to do with those scary men Zoey might as well have called his pets. Okay. I calm my overactive imagination. I may have read one too many of Mario Puzo's books.

Xavier and Zoey are on the dance floor now, and Dan is spinning a giggling Lisa.

Bonnie's just gone off dancing with Max. She's more appropriately dressed today but no less sexy. She is in a silk plum-colored mini dress with a collar and long sleeves. But that's where the decency stops. It has a deep, narrow plunging neckline extending all the way to her winking purple belly button piercing, and the skirt is ruched to emphasize her curves.

I'm enjoying my third flute of bubbly champagne when Vanessa approaches and sits on Xavier's empty chair beside me.

She looks stunning with her shoulder-length black hair and hot pink strapless jumpsuit with a sash tied into a large bow.

"Hello, Brooke, we've not had a chance to catch up since"—she clears her throat—"yesterday. Any friend of Bennett's is a friend of mine."

I hate that she calls him Bennett. "Why do you call him that?" I ask, feigning indifference.

"Because he loves it," she retorts. "We go way back, you see. Bennett, Wyatt, Ryan..." She pauses. "Even Taylor. We've been friends for years."

"Who's Taylor?" I'm certain she was baiting me with that pause, but I can't resist biting .

"Oh, Bennett hasn't told you about her? Shit. I shouldn't have said anything. Maybe you should ask him. But then again, if it's as you say and he's only 'seeing' to you, he's not obliged to tell you anything deep and meaningful, is he?"

I look back at Xavier, who is now dancing with Lisa while Zoey is in Dan's arms, as

the barb sinks in.

As if on cue, Xavier looks over at us, a worried frown on his face. “Are you alright?” he mouths. I nod and smile woodenly.

“This little thing you two have going on,” she says, “he can’t possibly be that into you.”

“I think you’re wrong,” I say, hoping my voice doesn’t sound as shaky as I feel.

“You seem like a nice girl, Brooke. That is why I’m going to tell you this. Xavier cannot give you what you’re looking for.”

“Which is?”

“Himself,” she says matter-of-factly. “A relationship. Love. I see the way you look at him. Not that I blame you; it’s impossible not to love Bennett.”

“He’s not capable of all that.” Vanessa continues, scenting blood in the water. “At least not with anyone who’s not Taylor. I see a lot of girls get their hopes up only to get crushed.”

“Like you did?” I reply. Maybe your “Bennett” can’t but the Xavier I know can give himself to me. I’ve felt it. My stupid, hopeful heart stubbornly insists.

Vanessa lets out a loud sigh. “Brooke, Xavier will never love again and it has nothing to do with you. You’ll be lucky if you last more than a few weeks. Better to leave now while you still have some dignity, before you become completely broken over a man that cannot return your feelings.” She pats my hand and leaves .

Ryan comes to get me to dance and then it’s Lee, then Wyatt, then Max, or was it

James? The rest of the reception has become a blur because every single beat is an echo in my head.

Taylor.

Taylor.

Taylor.

When the dancing stops in time for Nora to throw the bouquet, I'm nauseous and lightheaded and just about had enough. I tell Zoey I need the ladies' and leave the venue.

By the time I reach the luxurious bathroom, which is thankfully empty, the wave of nausea has passed. I look at my reflection. I could use some lip gloss. Taking the fruity lip gloss from my purse, I hold it to my mouth but my hand is trembling too badly to complete the task.

I'm in love with Xavier. I now know that for certain. I just didn't want to face it. And the moment I'm ready to stop denying what I know in my heart to be true, I hear he's in love with someone else. Could my luck get any worse?

I drop my hand and take big gulps of air. I splash some water on my face and pat it dry. I'll be just fine, I tell myself. I just need to go back out there and act as if the bottom hasn't fallen out of my world.

I finally leave the bathroom, but instead of heading to the reception, I turn toward my room. I'm feeling too raw. I need more time to get myself together before I can face Xavier. I'm on the bed staring up at the ceiling when someone knocks on my door.

I go to open it, thinking it's Bonnie.

Xavier fills the doorway. Okay, calm down, you've got this . "You left all of a sudden," he says, worry knitting his brow .

"I just needed to lie down for a bit." I leave the door open for him and turn back toward the bed.

"Baby, are you alright?" He stops me, takes me in his arms, and kisses the top of my head. My frayed heart can't take his tenderness.

"Um, I'll be fine, but maybe don't call me that."

"What? 'Baby'? Brooke, talk to me, what's going on? Did Vanessa say something to you?"

"Who is Taylor?" I blurt.

Xavier rears back in shock. He turns and slowly walks toward the window, hands in his pockets. My God, it's true. Taylor does exist . There's an awful twisting in my belly.

"Are you in love with her?" My voice breaks.

"Is that what Vanessa told you?" His back is still turned. And I have my answer in his hesitation and his avoidance of the question. All the hope I had shrivels.

I say weakly, "What am I doing here if there's another woman—"

"Taylor is dead, Brooke. Vanessa knows this. She died almost six years ago." His voice is deathly still. "And yes, I loved her. She was my fiancée. But I'm not in love with her. Not anymore."

“Not for a long time.” Xavier mutters the last part under his breath.

I’m beyond shocked to hear this. Xavier lost his fiancée? My heart bleeds for how horrible it must have been for him. There is another part of me, though, the darker part apparently, that is relieved that this Taylor woman is no longer involved with the man I love.

I go to him and slip my arms around his waist. “I’m so very sorry, Xavier, I had no idea.” I feel the tension in his muscles and his posture, which remains rigid.

“It’s alright, Brooke, it’s in the past.” He turns and pins me with an intense look. “What I do want to know is why the idea of another woman upset you so much.”

I take a calming breath. “I don’t know. I guess I just don’t want to be someone you’re playing with.”

He looks at me as if I’ve sprouted horns, so I explain. “Like this whole weekend, you’ve been so wonderful, and I don’t know how much of this is real.” There, I’ve said it.

“I could say the same thing about you, Brooke.” Xavier reaches out a hand and tucks my hair behind my ear. “I’ve seen sides to you I’ve never seen before.” His hand lingers on my face.

“Exactly, so it’s confusing—this thing between us.” I look away from his eyes because it feels like they’re boring into my soul.

“Let me simplify it then. Do you want it to be real?”

My heart starts to pound. “What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean.” His thumb is under my chin, lifting my face so he can look deeply into my eyes. The rest of his fingers are wrapped around my neck in a gentle, possessive hold. “Do you want to be with me, Brooke?”

Oh God. I want to run, to say no, to deny what my heart desperately wants, but I manage a shy nod.

“Say it,” he commands, “out loud.”

“Yes,” I whisper.

“Good girl. Done.” He takes his hands off me and yanks off his bow tie. “Anything else you want?”

“Wait, just like that?”

“Yes, baby, it’s that simple. I’m all yours, Brooke. What else do you want?” He begins unbuttoning his shirt. I feel a sensual fog weaving around me and sucking me into its depths. I wanted a few things but right now all I want is Xavier, all over me, in me. Still, I make a last-ditch effort to avoid the inevitable.

“Don’t we have to get back to the party?” I ask breathlessly.

He slowly shakes his head, shrugging off his suspenders.

“What do you want, Brooke?” He takes off his shirt, and my mouth goes dry.

“You,” I say finally, unable to fight what I feel anymore.

“I should hope so.” He chuckles. “What do you want me to do?”

I'm hyperventilating now. "T-touch me."

"As you wish. Take off all your clothes. Leave the shoes on."

I obey.

Like a predator, Xavier watches my every move as I shimmy off my dress, bra, and panties. I stand in front of him naked, shaking with want, waiting for his next order. I could never have guessed being ordered around in the bedroom would turn me on this much.

"Get on the bed and spread your legs." His voice is gravelly.

"Jesus, Xavier." I moan, so aroused I'm dripping. My back feels so sensitive on the silk sheets that my spine arches on contact. I bend my knees but he grabs both my ankles and pulls me to the edge, then holds my knees apart and stares at my wet pussy, licking his lips.

"You're gorgeous," he says and starts to trail open-mouthed kisses from my knees right up to the juncture of my thighs. I've never had anyone go down on me before but it doesn't even occur to me to protest. I'm beyond shame now; I only know I want Xavier's mouth where I ache most. I feel his hot breath on my core right before he tongues me in one slow lick from the base, ending at my throbbing clit. I grab the sheets and moan. He repeats the motion until I'm arching off the bed, seeking his mouth.

"Xavier please." I sob, mindless with pleasure.

"Shh, I've got you, baby." He puts a hand on my quivering belly to hold me down, slides two fingers inside my slick pussy then sucks on my clit. I get loud, moaning and gasping his name, my head thrashing on the bed. How have I never done this

before? When he takes my hard nipple and pinches while curving up his fingers inside me, I come so hard I see stars. I'm still coming when he shoves down his slacks and briefs and thrusts into me. I gasp with the pleasure of convulsing around his hard thick cock. He starts a brutally fast rhythm that seems to keep my orgasm going and I lose sense of when one ends and when the other begins. The only thing I know by the time he finally shudders, groaning my name and spilling into me, is that my throat is hoarse and I'm trembling all over.

"You're mine, Brooke," Xavier pants, or I think that's what he says. I'm so sated and boneless, I drift off to sleep immediately.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:10 pm

Brooke

After yesterday, something shifts between Xavier and me. While I'm not sure if he feels as deeply for me as I do for him, I know I no longer have to constantly wonder if he's playing a game or not and that is a massive load off my heart. It's as if someone has finally taken pity on me and let me off a crazy roller-coaster.

We spend Sunday morning enjoying the beach resort that had been made exclusive to the wedding guests. The plan, as a thank-you gift from Alex and Nora, was for everyone to remain in Cancun to fully enjoy the holiday before returning to their busy lives.

I make a mental note to thank Stella for packing beachwear, which otherwise would have been the last thing I'd have paid attention to. I'm still wearing the sexy dark blue bikini Xavier had taken one look at this morning and fucked me against the bathroom counter. I'm finding the man has such a hair trigger for getting turned on. Earlier, as I got dressed again, finally tying the matching sash around my hip, I heard his relieved sigh and smiled inwardly. Possessive man .

Xavier is all cool sophistication and a perfect gentleman outwardly but under all that lies the heart of a savage. He says and does the rudest and filthiest things in bed, and God help me, I love it. I love it so much.

At the moment, we're sunbathing on lounge chairs and enjoying the view. I needed a breather after all the swimming and frolicking in the waves.

"So, what if I wanted to go back yesterday evening?" I ask Xavier who's putting

sunscreen on my back.

“I would have taken you back,” he says.

“And you would have missed out on all of this?” I throw an arm out, indicating the incredible view and all the people—his friends and family—surfing, jet skiing, snorkeling, or like us, just lazing around. Even Giovanni’s “security detail” men are playing beach volleyball.

He shrugs. “There will always be holidays. You, on the other hand, were skittish.”

“Skittish. Wow.” I don’t even know if I should be insulted. “The size of your ego is just staggering, Xavier. And I note how very confident you are using past tense.”

Xavier chuckles behind me.

“What?” I rear back, facing him now, wanting to see his stupid gorgeous face when I punch his mouth.

“Well, if you prefer me to use present tense, Brooke, there’s a much better way I could describe you.” His smile disappears and his eyes smolder.

“And what’s that?”

“You’re mine.” My mind serves me the scorching memory of the way he said that last night as he spilled into me. Holy hell .

Okay, I walked into that one , I think, as heat creeps up my neck.

“Which means if you run now,” he continues, “I’ll hunt you.” The mood switches from playful to heated in two seconds flat.

I concentrate on keeping my breathing even. He's so irritating. And freaking hot. The jerk.

"What, no sassy comeback?" he teases.

"You're an animal, you know that?" He belly-laughs, collapsing on top of me. The rich sound vibrates pleasantly over me. "You certainly think like one." He laughs harder and before I know it, I'm laughing too.

I see Ryan coming toward us just as we settle down again.

"Hey, Brooke," he greets.

"Hi, Ryan."

"Lazybones, haul ass, race is starting now, we're dropping toys. Winner takes all," Ryan says to Xavier.

"Great. One sec, yeah?"

"Sure. Bye, Brooke." Ryan jogs back.

"Toys?" I ask.

"Mostly cars, yachts, bikes, maybe." He uncurls from the lounge and I immediately miss his warmth.

I see. Toys indeed. Somehow, I didn't think they'd be betting on their Xboxes.

"Baby—"

“Of course, I’m good, go have fun, okay.”

He kisses me until I’m breathless, then saunters off. “See you later, gorgeous.”

As if on cue, Zoey scurries onto the chair beside me as soon as her twin leaves. Giddy with excitement, she asks, “What gives?”

“Oh my God, he’s told you!” I look back to where Xavier is joining the other guys on the shore.

“He’s told me nothing. Xavi is like a clam with information. But I have eyes.” She rubs her palms together. “So?”

“We’re seeing each other, I think,” I say. It feels good saying it out loud.

Zoey claps excitedly just as Bonnie drops next to her on the lounge chair, sipping on a cocktail. She caught the end of our conversation.

“Well, that’s certainly a relief!” she begins without preamble. “The sexual energy zapping between them two could power a small city. To think that I’ve been in the middle of that all weekend and still haven’t managed to get laid. Speaking of”—she looks in the direction of Xavier’s retreating back—“I can tell you, as a good, observant friend, that compared to yesterday, Xavier looks extremely relaxed and loose-limbed.” She takes a sip, turns to me, and says solemnly, “Which makes me wonder... can you even walk? Without a bowleg, that is?”

“Bonnie!” I laugh. “You do remember Zoey is Xavier’s twin sister, right?”

“Oopsie, I’m sorry. See, I have no filter between my brain and mouth.”

“It’s alright, Bonnie,” Zoey says, “I just need to find some bleach later to scrub off

the mental image.” She shrugs. “Other than that...”

We laugh.

“You know, I came to see if you girls wanted to play,” she asks, motioning to the makeshift volleyball court.

“Well, there’s a game going on,” I say.

“Not for long. The boys are longing for a mixed-side game. James has asked me twice now, so I’m going round the girls to see who wants to play.” It’s mostly James and Giovanni’s men playing. Xavier and the others have gone jet skiing.

“I’ve got Andrea, Sabrina, and Vanessa so far. And there are sports bras and shorts we can change into so we don’t give the boys too exciting a game.” She winks.

I look over at where Vanessa is flirting with one of Giovanni’s men. She’s not even looked at or spoken a word to me since yesterday, something I’m immensely grateful for. I wonder if I have Xavier to thank for that.

I can tell Zoey wants to play. I, on the other hand, can’t abide the thought of running around. I’m so tired after barely getting any sleep with Xavier.

“Oh, you go ahead, girls. Zoey, I’m happy to watch Lisa. And Holly, if Emma wants to play too.”

Bonnie gives a triumphant whoop, then whispers to me, “Lucky bitch, I knew you couldn’t walk.” I laugh as they leave to join the others.

We eventually arrive in New York late Sunday evening. The flight back to New York was exciting, with everyone chatting about the events of the wedding.

Two chauffeured cars meet us at the airport; one takes Dan and Zoey home, and Xavier drives me to my apartment in the other.

“Xavier?”

“Yes, baby.”

Gosh, I love it when he calls me that.

“I had such a wonderful time. Thank you for taking me.”

“My pleasure.” He raises our linked hands to his mouth .

“So, how does this work?” I ask, motioning to us.

“I’ll let you set the pace. Whatever you’re comfortable with. Within reason, of course.”

“What does that mean?”

“I mean, it’s my relationship as much as yours, and I do have needs and preferences.”

“Why does that sound like you’re negotiating a deal with me?”

“Don’t worry, Brooke, I’m just saying I’ll need to see you often.”

“How often?”

“Ideally? Every day.”

“Xavier!”

“Which is why I’ll let you set the pace.”

“Okay, you know before when you said relationship... is that what we’re in?”

“I’m obviously not doing a good job of making things clear. I’m your boyfriend, Brooklyn Lewis. How is that for clarity?”

“Crystal.”

We go through the front door and I have to press the bell because Stella has the keys.

She opens the door. And screams.

“Brooke!” She jumps on me. “I missed you so much.”

Stella finally notices Xavier behind me. Her mouth opens like a fish.

“Hi,” he says, “you must be Stella. I’ve heard so much about you.”

“Stella, this is Xavier,” I say as we enter the living room.

“Hi”—she shakes his hand—“nice to meet you, Xavier.”

Xavier asks where to put my suitcases, and I lead him to my room. Stella’s jaw is still hanging open when I offer Xavier a drink.

“I’m good, baby. You okay?” I know he’s asking if he’s alright to leave.

I nod, and he kisses me briefly, stroking his tongue against mine. He kisses my neck, whispering, “I’ll call you.” Then he gives Stella a light squeeze on her shoulder and bids her goodnight.

She's still standing in the middle of the living room, gaping at me.

"Close your mouth, Stella."

"What in the holy hell was that?"

"That," I say, "was my boyfriend dropping me off."

"No way!" Stella starts to scream again, hopping around like a deranged puppet.

"Weren't we going to ghost him after this trip? It's been two days! How did you get from there to here?"

"A lot happened," I say.

"You have to tell me everything! You cannot leave anything out."

She follows me around.

"Well, the first thing I should tell you is I found your long-lost twin."

"Come again?"

"Her name is Bonnie, and, Stella, you're a match made in heaven. I've told her all about you and I think she's got a small crush on you already. We're meeting her next week."

"O-okay. Did you by any chance bring me a hot man too? I know Cancun must have been crawling with them. "

"It was, to be fair. But what about Luke?"

Stella rolls her eyes. “History! Come on, Brooke, a girl has got to have standards.”

“You know, Stella, I have no idea what your standards are.”

“Not to bore me to death would be a good start.”

“Anyway, so yeah, you brought me a chick. Awesome. Now give me the goods before I die of curiosity.”

“Well, how much time have you got? Not going out tonight?”

“I have no plans whatsoever. Besides sitting at your feet and soaking in every single juicy detail.”

So I tell her about the incident on the plane, about Vanessa, about Taylor, which is how we got here.

“So you’re telling me while you were waiting for him to get his shit sorted, he was waiting for you to get your act together. Interesting,” Stella says, and I shrug.

Then we look at pictures from the trip.

“Who are those sex on sticks?” Stella points to the two guys flanking Xavier in the picture I’d taken of them coming ashore after jet skiing.

“Oh, it’s Xavier’s friends. The blond guy is Ryan, and Ethan is the other. Ryan is quite close with Xavier.” Stella nods.

“So, how does it work?”

“What?” I ask

“You know, being a billionaire’s girlfriend.”

“Don’t be silly. Xavier is just like anyone. He just has nice things.”

“He’s going to want to give you things; there’s a certain status—”

“I distinctly remember you saying Xavier won’t make me change anything.”

Stella laughs. “That was before he became your boyfriend! If you think your life is not going to change, you’ve got another thing coming. Babe, he’s stupendously wealthy. I don’t even think it’s safe for him to be in our neighborhood.”

“Oh, come on, Stella. It won’t be like that.”

“Alright, maybe you’re right. I think he’s smitten, though.” She sighs and suddenly throws her arms around me. “Oh, I’m so excited for you! You so deserve to be happy. And spoiled. And thoroughly fucked by a man who—?”

“Eww, shut up, Stella.” I wrench free of her tight embrace as she collapses on the bed, giggling.

“Oh, come now, sinner, you know I’m right,” Stella manages to say as we both dissolve into fits of laughter.

Brooke

The next four weeks are bliss. After Cancun, Xavier and I settle into a routine, where he refuses to go two days without seeing me. He either meets me for lunch or dinner or takes me on a date.

He tries to have me stay over as much as possible, but I don't want to be one of those girls who gets a new man and then abandons her friends. He is the same way, too, because we also hang out with the boys at his home or the clubs.

I notice that Xavier, among other things, is freakishly attentive; it amazes me how interested he is in what I say or do, and in a very short time, there's almost nothing he doesn't know about me.

Bonnie, Stella, and I met on a girls' night out at Empire, where she gave us all the gossip I missed from the wedding. Apparently, so much more happened in those couple of days but because I was so wrapped up in Xavier, I didn't realize.

Things are going extremely well, I think, getting out of bed and stretching cramped muscles. I feel a delicious ache deep in my loins. Xavier had been insatiable last night, ferocious in his need to have me repeatedly, and I was right there with him. He finally, and with difficulty, peeled himself from my bed at dawn to attend a video conference with a team from Canada.

I take a deep breath as I head into the bathroom and catch a whiff of spoiled bacon. Stella is going to give herself food poisoning if she carries on with this recent habit of hers.

When I emerge from my room I see Stella having bacon and eggs.

“Stella, that meat is off. I could smell it from all the way in there.”

“Sweetie, I keep telling you, you need your nose checked, it’s perfectly good. Does that mean you’re not having any—”

“Absolutely not, thank you.”

I move to the fridge, wrinkling my nose at the pan and fighting off a wave of nausea. I grab the quinoa salad I made last night. That seems to be the only thing I can abide in the mornings.

“You’re up early, though, for someone who spent the night out.” I peel off the Saran wrap and dig in.

“You wish,” Stella says, hiding a snicker in her coffee.

“What?” I stop chewing.

“You wish I didn’t witness the apocalypse that happened in your room last night.”

“Oh my God! You were in? You said you were spending the night with Luke.” Luke is a Calvin Klein model Stella met at a recent photo shoot.

“Nah, I changed my mind. We went out for drinks but I just wanted my own space, so I called it a night. And came home expecting some peace and quiet. But no, Quiet, you were not. Brooke was being bodaciously bad with her billionaire boo... Notice those alliterations? I’ve been practicing it to the beat of the banging headboard.”

“You’re disturbed is what you are.” My cheeks are flushed.

“Hell was I ever disturbed! If I didn’t know better, girlfriend, I’d think you were being murdered in there.”

I’m so embarrassed. “I’m sorry we kept you up.”

“Me? I slept like a baby. There’s no better lullaby than listening to your slutty best friend finally get off. Repeatedly. It’s been a long time coming, Brooke. I’m so proud of you.”

“Oh, God!” I groan. “That is so not happening here again.”

Stella chortled happily. “Don’t stop on my account. The neighbors might complain though...”

“Actually, it was my fault. He shouldn’t have been here at all yesterday.”

“How so?”

“Well, I sort of slipped up and said I love you.”

“Hold up. You love him?”

“I do Stella. God help me, I so love that man. I didn’t even know I said it. I thought I was saying goodnight or something, and by the time I realized what I said, it was too late. He, um, he overreacted.”

“Overreacted?”

“He got all blistering and macho, and next thing I know he’s at the door in the middle of the night demanding I tell him in person over and over again...”

“And then proceeds to fuck your brains out. Oh, Brooke, how freaking hot is that?”

“Well, yeah, in a nutshell. But Stella, you don’t think it’s too soon, do you? Am I being an idiot about this?”

“Uh-uh, you don’t get to second guess or sabotage this, Brooke. You blurted it out because it felt natural. I know you, however long it takes, you’d never say something like that unless it felt right.”

“But he didn’t say it back,” I say in a small voice.

“Oh, you mean he was too busy savoring it to say it back?”

“I mean, how hard can it be? It’s three words. If he feels the same way, surely…”

“I’ve seen that man around you and I can tell you he’s crazy about you. A man would not get that excited over you telling him something like that unless he’d been desperate to hear it.”

Hope blooms in my chest, along with a wave of nausea so strong I have to rush to the bathroom. I barely make it in time to lose my breakfast and then some more down the toilet. I’m still retching when Stella gathers my hair up and gently rubs my back.

When I stop heaving, Stella helps me up and takes me back to the kitchen, fixing me some sweet ginger tea. I’m sipping the tea with some dry crackers when I notice she’s hovering. And looking at me in a strange way.

“I must be coming down with a virus or something,” I explain, touching my forehead.

“The same thing happened a couple of days ago.”

Stella shakes her head slowly. “I don’t think it’s a virus.”

I give her a questioning look.

“Brooke, for the love of God, tell me you and Xavier have been careful.”

Her meaning dawns on me. “No, come on, that can’t be. I’m on the pill.”

“Which means you’re not using protection.” Stella throws her hands up in exasperation .

“It’s impossible, I can’t be pregnant.”

“I think you better tell that to the half dozen test sticks I’m getting right fucking now.”

Thirty minutes and five tests later, I know without a shadow of a doubt I’m carrying Xavier’s baby.

“Well, there goes your date tonight for one thing.” Xavier is taking me on a doors-off helicopter ride tonight.

“But I still don’t see how. I’ve been regular.”

“Did you miss any pills?”

“I don’t think so.”

“What about Cancun?”

“Yeah, I ran two packs together to avoid having a period, so no miss.”

“What about when you went to Prudence? Oh, you hadn’t met Xavier then...”

And suddenly I know. I was meant to start a new pack on the day I went home, but I forgot the pack here. I had gone straight from Prudence to Boston to see Steve, so the new pack was delayed for... I count my fingers... three days. I met Xavier on that third night. I'd been so worried about the debt I must have had the days confused.

I look at Stella. "It was that first night I came back from Boston. I left in such a hurry I forgot my pills here...I didn't start when I should have, and I had been off for a week before then. Stella, what am I going to do?"

"Tell your boyfriend, for starters."

"I have no clue how to begin to tell him. I don't even know if he wants kids. The issue has never come up."

"Now's the time to bring it up then. And he might take it better than you think. He adores his little niece, doesn't he?"

I nod.

"He won't freak out, okay; just tell him."

God, I hope so .

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:10 pm

Xavier

For such a hectic day, I'm unusually energetic. It started with a seven a.m. troubleshooting meeting with the Canadian team and things went downhill from there. But every time I remember the softly whispered "I love you," I want to howl in pleasure. The feeling it gives me in the pit of my belly is indescribable. Possession. Need. Bone-deep joy.

When was the last time I allowed myself to just be happy? Since before Taylor. I'd been in such a dark place after Taylor died; Zoey had constantly begged me to get grief counseling. She still thinks I have a lot of unresolved issues, but Brooke... Brooke is my happy place. Proof that I can love another woman even more deeply and fiercely.

These past few weeks, Brooke has settled really well into my life. My friends adore her and I got to meet her family. I've known deep down for a while that Brooke loves me. I feel it in her touch, the way she responds to me. She looks at me as if she wants to give me the world, despite everything I already have, everything I could give her. But to hear her say it was another feeling entirely.

My phone vibrates and I see her text.

Brooke:

Xavier, I'm so sorry, can I take a rain check on our date tonight? I don't feel very good .

I call her immediately. She picks up on the second ring.

“Baby, what’s wrong?”

“I’m—just feeling a bit off.”

“Maybe you’re coming down with the flu or something?”

“Yeah, maybe,” she says in a low voice. “I’m sorry about tonight.”

“Oh, don’t be silly, babe, we’ll do it another day. I’ll drop by yours in an hour. Do you need me to get you anything?”

“No, I’m good, and really, you don’t need to come tonight. I just need to sleep it off. I’m sure I’ll be alright tomorrow.”

“I want to see you, Brooke.”

There’s a pause, then, “Okay.”

“Great, I’ll see you in a bit.”

I hang up and call to cancel the standby helicopter as Gail’s maternal voice comes on the intercom. “Your four o’clock just arrived, Mr. Bennett.”

“Thank you, Gail, send them in,” I say, throwing on my suit jacket.

When Stella lets me into their apartment, she has an unnaturally bright smile.

“Xavier!”

“Good evening, Stella, you look well. ”

“Thanks, Brooke is just having a rest.” She takes the grocery bag out of my hands and shoos me into her room. “Give me a shout if either of you needs anything.” She scurries off quickly.

Strange. Stella usually lingers to chat unless she’s on her way out. Which she isn’t.

I find Brooke curled up in bed crocheting. Which means she’s stressed about something.

I take off my jacket and get on the other side of the bed, gathering her in my arms. She puts her face in the crook of my neck, inhaling my skin.

“God, I love it when you do that.”

“You smell amazing. These days there are not many things that do,” Brooke murmurs.

Unusual. “Are you okay?” I ask.

“I am now.”

“What do you want for dinner?” I take my phone out.

“I’m not really hungry.”

“Some soup then. Tomato soup and bread from Libby’s, okay?” She doesn’t look too keen but also doesn’t say no, so I make the order.

“So how did it go with the school board today?”

“Oh, same old, you’d think we were haggling at a flea market. It’s just about hiring a teaching assistant to help with the art and music club, even just on a temporary basis because we’re heading into summer now. There’s a lot of activity before the summer break.” She sighs. “We got there in the end; they’ll get us someone.”

“That’s great,” I say, proud of her for getting it done.

“What about you? Was your meeting alright? You hardly got any sleep last night.” She blushes .

We were ravenous in our need yesterday, indulging in each other for hours.

“It was good, thanks. We should do last night more often.”

“Xavier, I don’t think I’ll survive having several nights like that.”

“Sure you will, we’ll work on your stamina.”

“It’s... too much pleasure.” Her breath hitches.

Desire unfurls low in my belly and I go from semi-hard to rock-hard.

“There’s no such thing,” I say, then deliberately steer the conversation to safer ground before I attack her while she’s sick.

“Lisa’s been asking for you. She’s doing some art from school and wanted to do it together with you. She’s been collecting all sorts of leaves and sticks and sweet wrappers and wouldn’t let Dan help because ‘nobody does it like Brooke’.”

“I miss her too. It’s been over a week, I think.”

I've been keeping Brooke to myself in the past week. My tight network of friends and family have been all over Brooke because she's such a delightfully warm person but I want to have some alone time with my girlfriend for a few weeks before I let them have her again.

"Lisa adores you, and so does Zoey. And Dan. And all the boys. You'd think you walked on water or something."

She smiles. "You have a wonderful family, Xavier, and Lisa is super fond of you. She made it so hard for me to avoid you in the beginning."

"Yeah, Lisa's on my team alright." I laugh. "She knows she can get away with murder with me."

Brooke giggles. "I know right? You're such an amazing uncle. "

"Thanks, babe." I kiss her forehead, and we settle into a comfortable silence.

"Were you there when Lisa was born?" she asks suddenly.

"You mean in the delivery room? No, thank you. Dan would have my head!"

She laughs nervously. "Of course not. I meant since she was a baby."

"Pretty much."

"So, were you alright with, you know, with feeding and changing and burping, potty training and the like?"

I pause and look at her. Strange question. She has this terrified look on her face.

"Well, it's all a blur, really. I don't remember the specifics. I might have changed a

nappy or two—”

“Have you ever, you know, thought about having a baby yourself?”

A shrill ringing starts in my ears. I go very still, waiting for it to pass. “No. Why do you ask?”

She shrugs, avoiding my gaze, and I know something is very wrong.

“Brooke?”

“Xavier, I’m pregnant.”

I feel the blood drain out of my face.

“Excuse me?”

“I said I’m pregnant.”

I stand, suddenly needing to put as much space as possible between us.

“You said you were on the pill.” My voice rises, and I ball my trembling hand in a fist.

“I did. I was, but I think I missed a couple—”

“You missed a couple! Jesus, Brooke, how could you have been so careless?” I roar.

“Xavier, please stop shouting at me. You could take some responsibility too. You’ve never ever used protection, not even the first time.”

“Because you said you were on the pill!”

“But you didn’t know me then,” she shoots back. “How many girls could be walking around pregnant by you?”

It’s impossible because I’ve never ever gone without protection. Not even with Taylor. Still, the mental image her words paint crushes my chest in a tight fist, and I hyperventilate. I don’t know what comes over me when I say, “And so how do I know it’s mine if you’d let a man you don’t know fuck you without protection?”

She recoils as if she’d been hit and visibly pales. Her eyes fill with tears.

“Xavier, please don’t be ugly about this.”

“I’m a fucking idiot for believing you.”

“I swear I didn’t lie, I didn’t. I—I had a lot on my mind and just forgot.” She’s sobbing now. Seeing her cry is torture; my skin feels on fire with the need to take her in my arms and tell her it’ll be okay. But I can’t make myself touch her. It’s not going to be okay. She’s pregnant, for Christ’s sake!

My throat closes, and I yank off the first few buttons of my shirt. Still, the air feels cloying and heavy. I need some air. I can’t do this... I don’t realize I’ve said that out loud until she says, “What do you mean?”

“I mean, I need to leave. Right now.” I grab my jacket.

“Xavier, please let’s talk about—”

I yank open her bedroom door and come face to face with Stella, who leaps a foot away from the door as if she’s been standing next to it. She’s livid. “That woman

loves you and trusts you, and I truly believed you were a decent human being. Guess what? You hurt her more in the last ten minutes than her ex did in a whole year.” She points to the front door. “Get the hell out and don’t ever come near my friend again.”

I’m numb, which is why Stella’s words don’t sink in. Or maybe it’s the damned ringing in my ears. As soon as I get outside, I take huge gulps of calming breaths. My heart rate slows and my knees weaken. I need to lie down before I collapse.

I don’t remember the thirty-minute drive home, but as soon as I get in, my bed calls to me like a siren and I gratefully collapse into it. Brooke’s smell envelopes me and I take a deep breath, filling my nostrils. I need her. Badly. But she’s pregnant. I got her pregnant. I’m a fucking selfish asshole.

I pick up my phone and scroll down to a number I never thought I’d call again. It rings off. He’s busy. Obviously. My phone starts to ring almost immediately.

“Hello, Dr. Carlson,” I say.

“Xavier. What a pleasure. How can I help?”

“I was hoping I could come and see you.”

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:10 pm

Brooke

I'm sitting at the small kitchen dining table, nibbling on the lunch Stella made me.

It's been twelve days since Xavier stormed out of the house and I still haven't heard from him. I've given myself a migraine trying to wrap his reaction around my head. He switched right before my eyes, turning into a different person entirely with an ashen face and crazed eyes. I get that he detests the idea of having a baby that much, but surely by now he would have calmed down enough that we can at least discuss it like normal adults. But as he's not picking up calls or returning any of my messages, he obviously doesn't want anything to do with me.

I tell myself the reason I keep trying to reach him is that I'm worried about him and not that, in spite of everything, I'm so lovesick I'm craving the sound of his voice.

I can't not have this baby. Still, I wait for him. To tell me to go jump off a bridge, or that he'll play his part... anything, just talk to me. Stella and I have worked out I'm around seven or eight weeks. I started to take pregnancy vitamins and booked myself into antenatal already because I want this baby with a fierceness that shocks me. And part of the reason is that it's Xavier's.

How pathetic is that?

I pick up my phone and start scrolling down my recent calls.

"Brooke, don't do that." Stella has been hovering, making sure I eat my dinner. "Don't obsess. You've sent him enough messages. Any more and you'd be begging.

And I will not let you do that.”

She’s been so angry I worry she’ll give herself a heart attack. I guess she feels responsible for pushing me toward the guy in the first place. Although she didn’t make me have unprotected sex. No, that part is all on me.

“It’s been almost two weeks, Stella. I’m worried about him.” I nibble on dry toast. As if in tune with my roiling emotions, the morning sickness has worsened in the past couple of weeks.

“Brooke, he’s fine. If he’d died it would have made the news.” Stella sees the stricken look on my face and softens. “I mean, of course nothing’s happened to him. He’s probably just—working... okay, I don’t know what the hell he’s doing but he better have a fucking terrific excuse for pulling this shit.” Stella grabs a large mug from the cupboard. “Here, I’ll get your ginger tea.” She stomps around the kitchen.

Everyone is so angry these days, I think. I’m just hollowed out. I wish I could be angry, but all I do is cry and worry. Stella says it’s the hormones. I can’t even speak to Mom and Nan, I wouldn’t know where to begin. I feel like I can’t tell anyone else until I’ve spoken with Xavier.

I look at my phone again. “Maybe if I speak to Zoey?”

Stella gives me a look .

“I just need to know, Stella. Yes, he might tell me to go to hell and he might be cold and uncaring, but I can’t live in this limbo. The silence is killing me. Maybe if I know for sure, then I can move on.”

Stella is still shaking her head when I wipe the stupid tear hanging onto my lower lash and dial Zoey’s number, putting the phone on speaker.

“Hey, Brooke!” she answers. “It’s so nice to hear from you. I’ve been meaning to call.”

Stella and I look at each other.

“Hi, Zoey,” I say.

“We’ve missed you, so much. Lisa most of all. I think she’s been saving her art project for when you come by, but Xavier is just besotted with you. It appears Lisa isn’t the only one who needs to learn how to share...”

“Um, Zoey,” I begin, “have you... seen Xavier?”

“Xavi? Is he not with you?”

“No, I’ve not seen him in almost two weeks.” My voice breaks. “I just want to know, Zoey, is he alright?”

“He called me from work today and he seemed alright.”

“I see.”

“Did you say he’s not contacted you in two weeks?” Zoey sounds incredulous.

“Yes, well, we had an argument and he walked out. He’s not responding to my messages. I don’t even think he’s reading them.”

“That’s very unusual behavior for Xavi. He’s not one to let quarrels fester.”

Zoey continues, “To be honest, I haven’t seen much of him either. Dan and I have been out of town and his parents have had Lisa for the past week; we only just got

back this morning. Brooke, if you don't mind me asking, what was the fight about?"

"Um." I lose the courage to speak. I look at Stella and she nods. "I'd appreciate it if you kept this between us."

"Of course," Zoey says.

I let out a sigh. "I found out I'm pregnant." I hear Zoey's gasp. "I told him..."

"And he didn't take it well. Figures."

"What do you mean?"

"Brooke, you can't imagine how grateful I am that you've told me this. I'll check in on him and let you know. But would you do me a favor and meet me for coffee or lunch tomorrow? I don't mind if it's closer to yours, just in case you want to get back to work. It'll just be us two."

"Um, okay." I think of Libby's. "There's a place not far from Regal Elementary that I sometimes have lunch at."

"Right, and your school is on Howard Avenue, isn't it?"

"Yes, I'll text you the address, although I'm not sure I'll be able to take a lunch break tomorrow." The new arts and music club assistant starts tomorrow. "Perhaps around four o'clock?"

"Definitely. And, Brooke? Thank you. See you tomorrow."

I hang up.

“What do you make of that?” I ask Stella.

“I don’t know but it sounds like a lot of baggage.”

In the past couple of weeks, Libby’s Kitchen’s homemade cookies have been the perfect solution since I discovered that skipping breakfast altogether in favor of sweetened ginger tea helps me avert the dreaded morning sickness. I’ve taken to having my lunches at Libby’s, which is just a few minutes walk from work.

I’m munching on the third cookie when Zoey walks in, looking elegant in a chocolate-brown pencil skirt, a tan silk shirt, and matching pumps. She’s come straight from work. She spots me and saunters over, her heels clacking on the tile floor. She’s gorgeous. So beautiful, I think, tears stinging my eyes because she looks like Xavier who I haven’t seen in two weeks. She beams at me and I have to look away from the dimple that flashes in her cheek. I take a calming breath as she hugs me tightly.

“Sorry I’m late. Traffic was a bitch.”

“It’s alright, I finished later than I thought, so I haven’t been here long. What would you like?”

“Oh, I had lunch earlier. I ate much more than I should have. Perhaps some water. And those cookies look divine.”

“Yeah, actually, although don’t take my word for it, my tastebuds and sense of smell have gone rogue.”

“Sweetheart,” Zoey says gently, “that bad? Do you know how far along you are?”

“Around eight weeks. Actually, it’s manageable as long as I don’t eat too early in the

mornings and I have no meat.”

“Well, you look great. And it’ll pass soon, I promise.”

I say nothing. I don’t feel great. And I’m impatient to hear about Xavier. She notices my silence.

“Are you going to keep the pregnancy?” There’s a desperate plea in her eyes. She needn’t bother. I’d lay down my life to keep it. To Zoey, I say softly, “Xavier…?”

“Yes, Xavi is fine, physically at least. He’s been staying at one of his hotels, the Crowne.”

Wow, okay, I didn’t know he owned the Crowne on Fifth Avenue. One of the hundred million and one things I don’t know about my boyfriend. Who apparently has moved out of his house to avoid me. I’m suddenly glad for Stella, who lent me some backbone these past couple of weeks, otherwise, I could have seriously embarrassed myself.

“Do you know why he moved out?” I ask.

“He didn’t move out. He just needed to clear his head. My guess is that his apartment reminds him of you.” Pain lances in my chest. I nod repeatedly as if I understand. I don’t.

“Brooke, it’s not you he’s running away from. It’s himself.”

Funny that phrase, running away. That’s exactly what he told me not to do. Hypocritical jackass.

“It seems like he’s doing everything he can to avoid me.”

“To avoid hurting you!”

I don’t get it. “What are you talking about?”

“Did he tell you about Taylor?”

“His ex-fiancée?” Oh my God, not Taylor again. “I understand she died a few years ago.”

“Yes, but how?”

“No, he didn’t tell me.” My heart starts to pound.

“Exactly six years ago this month, Taylor died in a car accident in which Xavi was the one driving. It was two weeks before their wedding. She was pregnant.”

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:10 pm

Brooke

I stare out of the window of Libby's, watching the busy traffic on Atlantic Avenue as people push their way through the Zebra crossing, their faces tight with purpose. And here I sit across from Zoey, my heart breaking again with what she's telling me.

"She was almost six months pregnant. A deer came out of nowhere and Xavi swerved to avoid it but lost control and the car spun and turned over. They were trapped under the car for almost an hour and Xavi could do nothing but watch Taylor bleed until she became unconscious. By the time the emergency response got them out, it was too late." Zoey's eyes are shiny with unshed tears.

I realize I'm crying too.

"The autopsy showed the baby's placenta had separated due to the trauma from the seatbelt. Like Xavi, she was otherwise unhurt. "

"You're telling me that the only reason she didn't survive is because she was pregnant?"

"Precisely."

And Xavier has had to live with that . The unspoken words hang between us.

Zoey takes a few breaths and continues. "We knew he was suffering, but he withdrew to this place where it was impossible for anyone to reach him. He threw himself into his business with a singular focus and became tremendously wealthier."

“He didn’t drink, but he smoked like a chimney, worked too hard and slept too little. But he refused to break. He remained the perfect brother, perfect brother-in-law, and perfect son.” She takes another swallow of her water. “And with Lisa, eventually, the perfect uncle.”

“Eventually?”

“I was also pregnant at the time, you see.” Oh God. I didn’t know it was possible for my heart to break even more.

“He couldn’t bear to be around me. He avoided me like the plague. But on the day Lisa was born, he came to see us. He’d stopped smoking because of Lisa, and heaven only knows what he did instead to cope. From there on he was perfect. Until now. Well, until two weeks ago.”

Zoey grabs my hand. “He’s got such an enormous heart, Brooke. He gives and gives so much love, so much of himself, he just struggles to really let people in. Which is why we’ve been so over the moon about you.”

“We?”

“Everyone. Our parents, Me, Dan, Ryan, Wyatt, Alex... everyone who knew about Taylor. ”

Vanessa wasn’t over the moon. She’d warned me. She had tried to love him herself and failed. Xavier is wrapped in Taylor’s ghost.

“I don’t see how I’m different seeing as he pushed me away.” Only, I was the one who was stupid enough to get pregnant.

“Brooke. I love you to bits, but Xavi is my twin brother. So, it may sound like I’m

selfishly looking out for his happiness at the expense of yours, but I've never seen my brother with anyone the way he was with you. Not even Taylor." She passes me a piece of paper. "He's being a jerk and sabotaging his first chance of happiness in a long time, but I also know he's hurting. He must be. Go to him. Please."

I look at the paper. It's the address of the Crowne. Room 901.

I want nothing more than to go, and I debate it for a long time. Then I push the paper back. "I love him and my heart breaks for him, but, Zoey, I'm sorry, I can't deal with this for him. No one can. He has to decide if he needs us—the baby and me—more than the guilt of the past and fear for the future."

"Thank you for telling me all this."

I stand from my seat and hug her. She holds me for a long time. "I love you, Brooke."

I leave quickly before I can change my mind and snatch the paper out of Zoey's hands.

I return to find a damp kitchen floor, and when I enter the living room, I see a big, blond, half-naked man bent over his phone. He looks up as I enter and I recognize him with a shock that roots me to the spot.

Ryan? In my house, half-naked. His hair is wet.

"Great, you're back." He approaches, not seeing anything amiss.

Stella comes out of her room in a dressing gown, toweling her hair. I can't believe Stella would do this—sleep with Xavier's best friend, with everything that's going on.

“Oh, thank God—”

“Stella!” I whirl on her. “How could you? Ryan, of all people, for goodness’ sake!” I point to him.

“Hey, it’s not—” Ryan begins.

“I swear, Brooke, I did not touch him,” Stella says.

Ryan scoffs. “Yeah, only because you were too busy wiping the drool off your face.”

“As if.” She rolls her eyes, throwing the towel at his head. He catches it deftly.

I look from one person to the other. “Whenever any of you would like to explain what is going on?”

“He came in looking for you and offered to help with the leaky faucet I was trying to sort out. Turns out he doesn’t know his head from his ass and ends up flooding the kitchen. But it’s sorted now.”

Ryan hasn’t stopped looking at Stella.

“What are you doing here, Ryan?” I ask.

He tears his gaze from Stella. “Is there somewhere we can talk—”

“There’s nothing Brooke doesn’t tell me. And if it’s regarding her ex-boyfriend, then that’s even more of a reason I need to be there.”

Er... I don’t remember breaking up with my boyfriend but apparently Stella has gone ahead and done it for me in her head.

Ryan narrows his gaze at Stella. “It is about Xavier and Brooke, and it’s got nothing to do with you.” Stella glares back .

I can’t tell what’s going on between these two, but I’m suddenly too tired to figure it out. “Look, Ryan, if it’s about Xavier and Taylor, Zoey beat you to it. I know all about Taylor.”

I walk toward my room, suddenly wanting nothing more than to lie down. I’ve been too strung up all week, and on getting to know that Xavier is alive and well, I’m suddenly exhausted.

“He loves you,” Ryan calls.

That halts me in my steps. For the first time in the past couple of weeks, anger boils inside me. I’ve just about had enough. “You go back to that jackass and tell him to man up if he has something to say to me. Otherwise, he should keep the hell out so I can get on with my life!”

“Xavier doesn’t know I’m here. There’s a chance he’ll kill me if he knows I came by,” Ryan says.

“He wants you, Brooke, desperately. Six years and we were never able to get him to have therapy, and we tried everything. He refused completely. Until now. He started seeing the therapist the day after he left here.”

Ryan comes closer. “He’s only staying away because he thinks that’s the best thing to do.”

“How did you find him?” I ask.

“Gail, his secretary, called and told me. He’s been working like a maniac. Just like he

did six years ago.”

Falling into old habits. But he’s getting therapy now, so maybe he stands a better chance?

“He’s not picking up his calls,” I say.

“Because he left his phone at home. I suspect he knew he wouldn’t be able to resist if you reached out to him. Brooke, please. I know he must have acted like a complete nut job, but I’ve known him since we were boys. Xavier is a wonderful person. He’s your boyfriend, and he needs you.”

Everyone keeps banging on about what Xavier needs. What about what I need? Does it even matter if what I need most is what they’re asking me to go get?

I look at Stella to see what she thinks. She wrinkles her nose at Ryan as if she smells something bad, then looks back at me. “I’m not buying that shit.”

“You’re a piece of work, you know.” Ryan glares at her.

Stella rolls her eyes. “Yes, well, you’re an—”

Whatever she meant to say was interrupted by the pounding on the front door.

Stella goes to the door. She looks through the peephole then promptly turns, putting her back to the door as if trying to keep whatever or whoever is on the other side from coming in.

“It’s him!” she whispers.

“Him, who?” Ryan asks.

“Who else, your friend,” she retorts. My heart starts to pound.

“Well, are you going to open it?” Ryan asks.

“No way in hell.” Stella digs in her heels.

Ryan marches to the door.

“Don’t you dare—” Ryan picks up a shocked Stella and throws her over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes, then pulls the door open.

Xavier fills the doorway. He looks glorious in gray slacks and a soft white cashmere sweater that molds to his torso like a lover’s embrace. The sleeves are pushed over his forearms, exposing tanned skin and thick coursing veins. My eyes eagerly drink in the lines of his broad shoulders, his tanned neck, his square jaw covered with dark stubble, and finally creep up to meet his hot green gaze.

He looks straight at me. My heart lurches to a stop, then picks up its rhythm.

“Baby,” he whispers to me alone. I’m not sure what Ryan has done with Stella, but right now I couldn’t care less.

“Xavier,” I say through my parched throat. I can’t say anymore because he’s coming toward me.

He approaches slowly as if he expects me to bolt. He stops a few feet from me. He’s too far and yet too close. I can smell him. My skin prickles with awareness.

“Can you ever forgive me? I behaved like an absolute monster. I don’t know what came over me. Actually, that’s not true, I know. And I can explain. Not that it excuses my actions, but perhaps it might make you understand.”

“Ryan beat you to it.” I motion to the general area where I think he might be, but he and Stella have disappeared. “And I had lunch with Zoey today. She told me everything.”

He nods. “I was hoping to tell you myself.”

“Oh, so now you want to talk. Why didn’t you pick up your calls or respond to my messages? Why did you say those things? About the baby not being yours?”

“I said a lot of things that were not only horrible but untrue. I’ve never had any doubts about you. I know I’m the only man you’ve been with in a while. I just wasn’t ready to face why I never used protection with you, and I turned it around on you.”

“Xavier, look—”

“Brooke, I’m in love with you. I’m so utterly consumed with it. I think I loved you from the moment I first saw you. I wanted you with a ferocity I didn’t understand. I want you to know that I have never ever been with anyone without using protection. Never tried it. That’s a level of intimacy I haven’t been able to share with anyone. Except you.”

“How—what about Taylor?”

“The condom broke. That’s why she got pregnant.”

My stupid heart leaps and a languid warmth bubbles inside my chest. Xavier loves me. Right from the start he gave himself to me in a way he’d never shared with anyone before.

I put my arms around myself, not sure if I’m protecting myself or doing what I need his arms to do.

“Let me hold you, baby.” He moves closer.

You’re killing me, Xavier, and I need to keep my head sane to deal with you.

I take a step back. He doesn’t follow, but his eyes are pulling me in. Dominant Xavier is back, exerting the force of his desire. I look away, then turn toward the window, presenting my back to him.

“So what happens now? I’m still pregnant and you still have the trauma you’re dealing with. Are you going to repress your emotions the way you did with Zoey and Lisa?”

“I can’t, even if I tried. Haven’t you listened to what I’ve been saying? It’s impossible for me to suppress what I feel for you. You have all of me, body and soul. I want to fight for this, for us.”

My heart might as well be butter on a hot skillet for how it withstands the impact of his words.

Still, I fight the urge to go to him and stay with my back turned. “Are you going to be having random times when you’ll be weird?”

“What happened two weeks ago was a panic attack. It happened because I was blindsided by information that triggered my unresolved trauma about what happened to Taylor. I went straight to therapy. It’s only been a few sessions, but I can see that it’s helping already.”

“So you’re telling me the idea of having a baby doesn’t put you off?”

“Not in the slightest, babe. I know I lashed out and walked out on you when you needed me. I can’t tell you how awful I feel about that. And I made myself stay away

because I never want to hurt you the way I did again.”

I take a few breaths. “I think I was more hurt that you shut me out.”

“I’m so sorry. That will never happen again. I promise.”

“Brooke, please,” he says when I remain silent.

“I forgive you, Xavier,” I say finally in a small voice, “and I love you too. I can’t stop.”

Xavier exhales a sigh of relief. “Brooke. I want you in my life. Always. Forever.”

“What are you saying?” I whirl to face him, and he’s on one knee.

My heart does cartwheels behind my ribcage. I can’t breathe. My leaden feet move toward him. Is this really happening?

“Marry me, Brooklyn Sofia Lewis.”

Oh God, I don’t know his middle name. What if it’s ridiculous?

“What’s your middle name?” That seems like the most important deciding factor.

“Dominic.”

I release the breath I was holding in a rush. “Not bad,” I say. “Sexy actually.” I try it out. “Dominic.” It rolls off my tongue nicely.

I try it again. “Dominic. Now that’s a strong name. It suits you,” I say. “I like Dominic, maybe even more than Xavier and—”

“Brooke?” A worried frown appears between his brows.

“Hmm?”

He makes a sweeping motion to indicate he’s still on his knee and waiting for an answer.

“Ah, yes.”

“Yes, as in—?”

“Yes, Xavier, I’ll marry you.”

He catches me in his arms and twirls me around. I allow the joy inside me to bubble over and laugh out loud. He sets me on my feet and brings out something from his back pocket. My breath stops when I see it. It’s a beautiful pink solitaire diamond with a platinum band.

“Oh, wow.” I gasp.

“Do you like it? I had to guess what you might like.”

“It’s so beautiful, Xavier. I love it.”

“Good, because it’s yours. Permanently.” He holds out his hand for mine and then slips it on my finger.

“So, therapy, work, ring shopping. You’ve been a busy boy, Xavier,” I tease.

He laughs. “Mostly I’ve just missed you madly.” He takes my lips in a hard kiss. Whoa. Talk about sensory overload after having been deprived of his taste and smell

for two weeks. And he's not easing into it at all. It's a devouring kiss, his tongue spearing into my mouth to mate with mine. He's ravenous. My hands slide into his hair and I pull, just the way he loves it.

"Hello, wife."

"Slow down, we just got engaged." I smile .

"Not for long, babe. What do you think about a few weeks from now?"

"Xavier! We need a few months to plan."

"We can plan fast." He takes my mouth again and kisses me until I'm breathless and straining toward him, then lifts me up, and I wind my legs around his waist.

He walks us backward as my mouth feasts on his jaw and neck. "Hurry," I whisper, sucking on his earlobe.

"Er... guys? Before you get it on, perhaps you'll allow us to congratulate you." Ryan's voice comes from the direction of Stella's room. I twist my head to see them. Ryan is still shirtless. Stella is now in a tank top and shorts and frowning at Ryan.

" 'Get it on!' What are you? Ninety?" She scoffs. "Anyway, baby girl, congratulations." She comes toward us while Ryan makes a strangling motion with his hands behind her back.

"I always said you'd come round, Xavier."

"Er, Stella, you didn't." I disentangle myself from Xavier and show her the ring.

"Well, I suppose we could rewrite history with the size of that diamond," Stella

replies when she sees the ring. We laugh. “It’s beautiful.”

“Congrats, brother.” Ryan grabs the back of Xavier’s neck and hugs him hard.

“Thank you.” Xavier embraces him back.

“Right, Stella, off we go,” Ryan says, “let them bask in the glow of their new engagement.”

“Now you’re really pissing me off. Can’t you talk normally?”

“I could, but I really like how I can make steam come out of your ears.” He pulls her toward the laundry.

Xavier and I look at each other. “She’s too nice for him. Ryan’s a certified ass,” Xavier says .

“I was going to say he’s too nice for her. She’ll chew him up and spit him out.”

“Well then, they’re perfectly suited.” Xavier chuckles. “Where were we?”

“You were about to spend the rest of the day apologizing to me.”

“Fantastic idea.” His smile is wicked.

He knows exactly what I want. He bends and throws me over his shoulder; his hands start to knead my ass as he heads to my room.

His voice drops an octave. “You think you can make it filthier than that, though?”

My heart skips a beat. “Make love to me.”

He smacks my butt. Hard. “Specifics, baby.” I’m shocked by how much I love it. How much I want him to do it again.

“I want your mouth on me, Xavier.”

“Good girl.”

It’s several hours before we leave the room again.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 5:10 pm

Brooke

Seven months later

The musical sound of the doorbell pulls me out of bed. Only Lisa would want to come up this early. We've had the elevator modified such that rather than ascending directly, it sounds as a doorbell, which is then activated from inside each apartment. Which is good considering how little clothing we tend to wear indoors.

I shuffle to the edge of the bed, then throw one leg over the other before pushing myself off. It's a routine that takes almost a whole minute, but with the size of my belly, I find it's the only way I can get out of bed. Unless my husband gets impatient and hauls me out.

Yes. We managed to get married two months after our engagement in a beautiful, private ceremony.

I think about how much has changed in my life: moving in with Xavier, visiting his family home in Seattle, where I met his parents and grandmother, the wedding, and him getting to see more of my mom and nan, who may even now be more in love with him than I am.

Stella and Bonnie have taken to each other like ducks to water. We still have days and nights out, but I have been missing in action in recent months as I got heavier with the baby. Those two are more than able to stir up trouble all by themselves, so they're doing fantastic.

Steve is still in therapy and so far, has stayed out of trouble.

For Xavier, therapy was a game changer. I was honored when he asked me to go with him. He's completed therapy now. I thought he would freak out with the long commute from our Upper West Side apartment to my school in East New York, but he handled it well, although he insisted I be chauffeur-driven. I didn't like the idea one bit, but I had to make some concessions for him. And it wasn't so bad in the end, as Marco, my chauffeur-slash-bodyguard, and I became fast friends.

I'm now on maternity leave and getting increasingly bigger. The baby is due any time now, and everyone is excited. Xavier's parents have been at Zoey's, "visiting" for the past week. Xavier isn't fooled; he knows they're not leaving until after the baby is born.

I'm so easily exhausted that I'm tempted to stay indoors but I make sure to swim every day and take walks on the terrace as many times as possible to get my daily dose of exercise and sun. Lisa makes it her duty to get Auntie Brooke to exercise. Which is no doubt why the bell is ringing this early.

I slip my feet into soft mules and head to the bathroom for a quick splash of water on my face. I hear the faint sound of Xavier singing in the shower as I approach. Shaking my head in amusement, I wonder for the thousandth time how a man who looks as good and plays the piano as well as Xavier, can sing this terribly.

I enter the bathroom as he emerges from the shower, naked and dripping, his hair slicked back, eyelashes spiked, his torso all corded, rolling muscles, and his thick cock... God... I love his cock... which is starting to harden under my hungry stare. I feel myself get embarrassingly wet. He's magnificent. I want him again, which is crazy since he'd just screwed me into two orgasms before getting into the shower. I turn to the sink and splash water on my heated face.

"See something you want, wife?" He presses his wet front to my back and nibbles on

my neck. His hand comes up to cup my heavy breasts and pulls gently on my overly sensitive nipples. His erection presses into my back. My head falls back on a moan, my pussy clenches hard and I feel a gush of warm fluid, the volume of which shocks me. Surely...?

My stomach tightens in a short, painful contraction, followed by another big gush of fluid. This time Xavier feels it. We look up at the same time, our eyes meeting in the mirror. The doorbell peals insistently.

“Brooke, is that—”

“—Lisa,” I nod as another wave of pain hits.

“—what I think it is? I meant your water!” Xavier says.

“Yes, it’s broken, I think.”

Xavier grabs a towel, swings me up in his arms, and gets me back into bed, putting the towel under me. He hurriedly throws on clothes and calls Zoey to let her know we’re going to the hospital. My hospital bag is already packed and has been sitting in the trunk for the past four weeks.

Xavier picks me up and we head straight down into the basement where Marco is waiting.

Four hours later, after a surprisingly easy delivery, we welcome red-faced and screaming Lily Rose Bennett, all seven pounds of perfection. Xavier sits next to me by the bed, a dazed look of pride and awe still lingers on his face. He stayed for the delivery, and even though his eyes got as wide as saucers and he went a bit green as Lily Rose’s head was crowning, I thought he recovered remarkably well.

My hospital room is filled with flowers and peach, gold, and pink vinyl balloons, and

there's now a small village oohing and aahing around the now-sleeping baby's crib.

Zoey arrived first, followed by Bonnie, then Dan, who brought Xavier's parents and his still agile ninety-year-old grandmother. Wyatt and Lee followed shortly after and started acting like they were seeing the eighth wonder of the world and not their friend's baby.

Steve called to say he was on his way and bringing Mom and Nan.

Stella comes in last, followed closely by Ryan, and I notice she's giving him a wide berth, occasionally shooting daggers across while Ryan smirks at her. It's obvious Stella can't stand him. I sigh. I need to talk to Xavier again about Ryan backing off and not winding her up.

I look at Xavier, who caught the awkward exchanges between Stella and Ryan. He knew what I was thinking without me saying anything. He nods, telling me he will. For the fourth time. Christ, the man is like a kitten with a ball of yarn around Stella .

Xavier takes my hand and kisses my fingertips. "You were amazing, baby." My heart lurches in response.

What is it with my reaction to this man praising me? I might have a praise kink .

"I love you," I say, looking into his vivid green eyes.

He leans over and kisses my forehead again, then my nose, before taking my lips.

"Forever and always," he whispers when we come up for air.

"Forever and always," I return.

THE END

Thanks for reading!