



The Rancher's Rejected Bride (Billionaires of Evergreen, Texas #2)

Author: *Marian Tee*

Category: Romance

Description: For the first time ever, *The Ranchers Unwanted Wife* and *The Ranchers One-Night Mistake* are available in one book.

She became his mistake. Then his obsession.

In *The Ranchers Unwanted Wife*, Tabitha loves Nicholas Sutherland from the moment she meets him. He's everything: handsome, kind, perfect. And for a while, it seems he might feel the same. But everything falls apart when Tabitha discovers that Nicholas has been lying all along. He never wanted a wife, and he certainly never wanted someone like her.

In *The Ranchers One-Night Mistake*, Sarahs loved Damian for years, chasing after him even when everyone told her not to. She wouldve kept chasing him, too if not for Damian making it humiliatingly clear that he doesnt want her. And he never will.

Total Pages (Source): 37

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:57 am

A RAY OF SUNSHINE , that was what the others liked to think of Tabitha "Bee" Sandler.

The girl always had a smile to brighten their days, kind words to comfort those who had lost sight of hope, and in times of great tension, the girl even did her best to crack a joke or two, never mind if she was woefully bad at it.

Indeed, that flaw of hers was what usually succeeded in cooling everyone's tempers down.

How could one stay mad, after all, when someone managed to hilariously mess up something as simple as a knock-knock joke?

A ray of sunshine, that she was, but some also thought of her as their town's little Job, the Old Testament prophet whom Satan cursed and plagued in his quest to prove that Man could and would always turn away from God in the face of adversity.

But Job did not. He had stayed faithful, and so had their own little Job.

Once the carefree and lovingly pampered daughter of a young, hardworking couple, the first of many tragedies had befallen Bee when she was eleven, and an unsolved hit-and-run claimed the lives of her parents.

And although Bee's beloved Great Aunt Lily readily took her in, misfortune made the girl's second chance at happiness rather short-lived.

What was supposed to be a routine checkup at the office revealed the very worst: Lily

had cancer, and whatever savings the older woman had were instantly wiped away by costly medications and treatments.

At sixteen, Bee - in spite of her bedridden aunt's pleas to the contrary - had quit high school and started working at the largest factory in town. But three years had only passed when her great aunt passed away, and Bee was all alone.

But still she remained a ray of sunshine, doing what she could to care and help, and treating the folks at the factory as her extended family.

She insisted on babysitting for free, saying that having fun with kids was enough compensation, and when Old George fell and broke his ankle, Bee had cheerfully cooked meals and kept house for him until he was back on his feet.

Their beloved ray of sunshine, that what what she was to all of them, and it was also why everyone at the factory were struggling with tears and impotent rage as they watched her run out of the manager's office, clutching her torn blouse to her chest.

For their little ray of sunshine, they would've fought and to hell with the consequences. To hell with losing their jobs. To hell with everything. But because their little Bee was what she was, she had shaken her head, her eyes pleading with them in tearful silence.

I wouldn't be able to bear it if anyone of you lost your jobs because of me.

And so they let her go, their little ray of sunshine fading before their eyes, and their hearts breaking piece by piece as she disappeared from view.

WAKE UP AT SIX, SHOWER , and breakfast. Be at work by seven and clock out at six. Work on a variety of errands until seven or eight, and then it was home until it was time to leave again and start another cycle of her daily routine.

With the exception of attending mass every Sunday, that had been Bee's life for over seven years now, and not once had it occurred to her to complain to God.

Having inherited her parents' good-natured disposition and cheerful tolerance, Bee didn't find it hard at all to shrug off every problem that came her way.

She cried over some of it, of course, but after that, she simply took it day by day, believing that moving on was both a choice and an inevitable outcome.

The only guilty pleasure she allowed herself all these years were her mail-order bride romances, used paperbacks that a co-worker at the factory bought for her every time she went to visit her daughter in the city.

There was just something wildly inspiring and romantic about a woman gambling everything for love, and every time life started getting to her, Bee would simply close her eyes and deliberately lose herself in a fantasy based on her favorite books.

It worked every time, or at least it did...until now.

Bee was a trembling, weeping mess as she sat on her bed, skin still crawling at the memory of Horace Garris' large, sweaty hands pawing at her and his slobbering mouth leaving a disgustingly wet trail on the side of her neck.

She had only managed to tear herself out of his arms by kneeling him but not before he had ripped her blouse open and leave her exposed.

He had screamed invectives in between his groans of pain, threatening to have her fired and arrested if she didn't show him respect.

A choked sob escaped Bee as she remembered this. Self-respect was all she had, and she just couldn't let someone like Horace take that away from her.

THE LIBRARIAN SMILED in welcome when Bee came in and asked if she could use of the computers.

"Of course, dear." Emily made no mention of Bee's noticeably swollen eyes and too-bright smile.

News traveled fast, and while the rich folks believed in Horace's version of the story - she's a slut, wanted me to pay before I tried out the goods, then cried rape when I said I'm no idiot like the boys she fooled around with - Emily and her kind knew better.

They had all noticed Horace's interest in Bee from the very start.

Bee might be a little plain, but even at sixteen she had already possessed a full figure, and while years of too much work and too little food had left her painfully thin, this had only served to emphasize the girl's voluptuous abundance.

Sympathy squeezed the librarian's heart as she turned to where Bee sat, with the girl's frowning gaze focused on the monitor before her.

Poor girl , Emily thought. While no one would have wished for Horace to attack Bee that way, maybe it was the final push the girl needed to leave their town for good.

Unknown to Emily, similar thoughts were already going through Bee's head. She had come to the library to access her email, and more importantly, answer the latest mail from Danny.

Their correspondence had begun when a marketing email arrived at her inbox three months ago.

It was from a matchmaking agency that specialized, of all things, in mail order marriages.

It had seemed too much of a coincidence, but then after a bit of research, she found out that Google, Facebook, and the likes had a way of utilizing user data to come up with targeted advertising.

So maybe, her interest in mail order bride romances was the reason she had gotten such an email?

After a bit more online snooping, she had signed up for an account, seeing that the website had promised complete anonymity and wouldn't even require her to send a photo. All it wanted was a description of her profile and a short explanation of what she was looking for in a marriage.

A month after registration, she had gotten an email from an eighteen-year-old university student named Daniel. They had exchanged almost daily emails since then, with the younger boy, whom she liked to call Danny, constantly entertaining her with funny little anecdotes about ranch life.

You'll love it here, Bee. Just say the word, and Dad will have the papers ready. You'll be my new mom, you'll be married to Dad, and we'll all live happily ever after.

It had all sounded too good to be true, and even as poor, lonely, and desperate as she were, Bee had been unable to let go of all her fears and worries.

Common sense had warned her about the whole thing being a scam, and every day, she had struggled against the urge to write back to Danny and say, Yes.

But everything had changed now.

Everything.

She had seen how the wealthier folks in town had started looking at her, the looks of

disgust and contempt that they threw her way.

It was clear as the light of day that Horace hadn't wasted any time spreading lies about her, and they had all chosen to believe him without even asking for her side of the story.

Bee knew she could lodge a complaint against the factory manager, and that to do so was the right thing to do.

But if she did that, it would mean having to stay and fight, see things through until the end. And she didn't think she could bear staying another day in this town.

It was time to move on, Bee told herself as she began to type her reply.

Dear Danny,

I know this will likely come a surprise, a pleasant one I hope...

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:57 am

ONE WEEK LATER

The city bus only came twice a day to Evergreen, Texas, with the first in the early hours of the day, and the other arriving before sundown.

It was not that Evergreen had a particularly small population, but rather, Evergreen's residents had no need of public transportation, with locals primarily consisting of families that owned multimillion-dollar ranches for several generations.

Bee could hardly believe her eyes when she saw the man standing by the bus stop. Danny had warned her that his dad possessed movie-star looks, but she had honestly thought he was only joking.

Obviously , Bee thought dazedly, he was not.

If Danny hadn't taken great pains to explain exactly why his dad had a need for a mail-order bride, she would be calling 911 right this moment to report a scam and have Nicholas arrested as a con artist.

Even the words 'tall, dark, and handsome' didn't do him justice.

With his honey-blond hair streaked with gold and his long, lean build clad in a plaid shirt and tight-fitting jeans, He looked more like a ruggedly sexy cowboy angel, Bee decided, and instead of halo and wings, he had a roughed-up Stetson and leather boots to complete his look.

It was altogether too much, really, and Bee's throat went dry as she watched him

stride towards her, his every movement graceful and strong.

A burst of wind as the city bus sped off diverted Bee from her gawking, and she hurriedly pushed her skirt down before it could reveal the color of her underwear.

When she looked up, he was already in front of her, and up close he appeared even larger than life, and so breathtakingly handsome it had her gulping.

"Tabitha Sandler?"

His voice was deep and velvety - the sexiest sound in the world to her ears - but it was the way he said her name that had Bee choking back a giggle.

Traveling from her home in Georgia all the way to Evergreen had involved a two-hour flight and a two-hour bus ride, and she had spent most of the journey trying to picture how their first meeting would play.

Never, however, had she imagined that it would come down to this, with her brand-new husband checking her identity like a police detective.

Others might've found this insulting or disconcerting, but humor came to her rescue like it always did, and Bee was unable to keep her lips from twitching as she lifted her gaze to his. "Hello, and, umm, that was my name, yes."

Was? Nicholas couldn't even fathom what that was supposed to mean.

This girl was a kooky little thing, and maybe that was why Daniel had acted out of character.

His son had never been the type to ask a favor.

That he would do so now, and it had to be the kind of favor any one of the ranch hands could've easily done in Nicholas' stead. ..

Daniel had probably thought there was a chance his friend's eccentric way of talking would have her end up in the nearest hospital with a psych ward.

And he was right to be worried , Nicholas thought.

His son had mentioned that she would be staying with them for the month, and yet the girl only had a single duffel bag with her.

Bee noticed Nicholas' gaze falling on her bag, and she said hesitantly, "I didn't have much else to bring."

"I see." But he didn't, not really. "We should get going," he said finally.

Seeing him reach for her bag, Bee shook her head, stammering, "It's fine——"

Nicholas only gave her a look, and Bee found herself meekly letting go of the bag's worn handles.

Nicholas' truck was a dusty silver beast with cream leather interior.

It was easily the most luxurious vehicle Bee had ever experienced riding, and it showed in the way her wide-eyed gaze took in the massive touchscreen display on the dashboard and the way she reverently ran her fingers over the wood finish of the door's handles.

Her reaction had Nicholas wondering how Tabitha and his son had even met in the first place, and as he started the engine, he deliberately adopted a casual tone as he asked her about this.

"After the emails, you mean?" Bee was too busy admiring the way Nicholas drove to dwell over the oddness of his question.

"It was just once, during the ceremony." A thought occurred to her then, and she quickly turned to look at him, saying in a rush, "I'm not saying that to make you feel guilty."

Danny explained how busy you were, so I totally understand why you couldn't make it. "

Emails? Ceremony? Guilty? What the hell was she talking about?

He had half a mind to demand that she make even just a tiny bit of sense but managed to clamp his mouth shut at the last minute.

It didn't matter either way , Nicholas reminded himself broodingly.

She was Daniel's friend, not his. It was only right to let his son handle her.

Turning back to her, he noticed Tabitha rummaging through her purse and felt obliged to ask, "Is anything wrong?"

"I have something for you..."

Nicholas' eyebrow arched. For him?

"Aha!" She flashed him an adorable smile of victory, like a five-year-old who had gotten her first star from school. "Here you go."

Nicholas cast a wary look at the document envelope she was holding out to him. "What's that?"

"Danny says it's his wedding gift," Bee answered rather self-consciously.

Wedding gift?

"And you can see it's still sealed. I promised him I wouldn't take.

.." Her voice trailed off as she found herself distracted by the sight outside her window.

They were entering what seemed to be a privately owned ranch, with a pair of hands quickly swinging metal gates open to let Nicholas' truck through. And beyond those gates was...

Paradise.

Myrtle and lilac chastetrees were alternately planted on each side of the road, and their canopying branches showered the ground below with a rainbow storm of petals.

Up ahead, the ranch's main house rose into view, a sprawling, two-story structure with dark red gabled roofs, expansive windows, and sliding glass doors.

Bee turned to Nicholas, asking rather breathlessly, "Is this where you work?"

"That's one way of putting it, I suppose." Nicholas' tone was dry.

"I've tried my best to research about ranch management," Bee shared tentatively, "but if you're willing to show me the ropes, I promise I'll do my best to help out."

"I see." Nicholas was becoming increasingly convinced that Tabitha was either certifiably insane - or presently high on drugs, and when he saw her suddenly blush, he made a mental note to have the family doctor drop by first thing tomorrow.

Blissfully unaware of the direction of Nicholas' thoughts, Bee was busy trying to calm her racing heartbeat as she watched Nicholas step out and go around the truck to open the door for her.

The chivalrous gesture reminded her of the dashing heroes from her favorite mail-order romances, and it was all she could do not to squeal.

Just a week ago, she had hit rock bottom, and now...

And now...

Nicholas offered her his hand to help her out, and Bee gingerly placed her hand in his. The feel of his touch was thrilling, and shamelessly wicked thoughts came out of nowhere to assail her mind.

Nicholas, running his large, strong hands over her body...

The sound of the door slamming shut behind her had Bee crashing back to reality. She belatedly realized that Nicholas had long let go of her hand and was now frowning as he took in her flushed cheeks.

"Are you alright?"

"I...uh...yes." Bee had never been a good liar, but she just couldn't make herself admit that he had turned her on so much she had ended up sexually fantasizing about him. He might be her husband, but...it was just too embarrassing.

Nicholas mentally threw his hands up in surrender. There was just no making sense of her, and whatever the real reason was that had Tabitha turning red as a tomato, he was damn certain it would be just as irrational as the rest of her replies.

In any case, he had done his job, and he could now wash his hands off her.

Gesturing towards the silver-haired man standing by the doorway, he murmured, "Thomas will be taking you to your room——"

Bee was confused. "My room?" Did he mean they wouldn't be sharing a room?

"Yes. I've had the lilac room on the second floor prepared for you——"

Another startling realization struck her, and she blurted out, "You mean...we're staying at the main house?"

"Where else are we going to stay?" he asked rather exasperatedly.

Wherever ranch managers were supposed to stay, Bee wanted to say but managed not to. Maybe, she had it all wrong, or she hadn't researched enough. Maybe, ranch managers living under the same roof as his boss were more common than she thought.

"If we're done now——" The tinge of impatience in Nicholas' voice made Bee bite her lip. "I still have work to finish..."

Bee managed to summon a smile. "Of course. I totally understand."

The words seemed truthful enough, and yet in her eyes he seemed to catch a flicker of hurt.

Which would even make less sense, Nicholas thought irritably, than everything she had said so far. What the hell did she have to be upset about? She was Daniel's friend, dammit, not his, and all he owed her he had already done.

Nicholas purposely turned away as the family butler escorted Tabitha inside his house, and as he made his way to the stable, he remembered the envelope she had given him.

Danny says it's his wedding gift, the girl had said.

He pulled the envelope out of his pocket, and tearing it open, a piece of paper fell out. A single QR code was printed on it, and Nicholas frowned. What the hell? He scanned the code with his phone, and it took him to a password-protected page.

Since this was his son, Nicholas typed the name Petula, and the page started to load. A couple of photos showed up first, and Nicholas' gaze narrowed when he saw his son and Tabitha standing in what suspiciously seemed like a judge's private chambers.

He clicked on the Next Page link, and what seemed like a scanned document started loading.

A document that appeared to be...

Nicholas swore under his breath when his worst fears were confirmed.

His lawyer answered at the second ring, and Nicholas didn't waste time with small talk. "I need you to check something for me," he said tightly.

Sensing the urgency in his client's tone, Joe silently waved for his secretary to leave and waited for the doors to close before reaching for his pen, saying, "Give me the basics, and I'll get to it right away."

"I think I'm married."

"Congratula—"

"Without my knowledge," Nicholas interrupted.

"Shit."

"My son might be involved."

And it just kept getting shittier, Joe thought as he started scribbling. "I'll get back to you as soon as I can."

An email arrived at Nicholas' inbox exactly seventeen minutes later, with several documents attached. The first one was a marriage contract...between him and one Tabitha Sandler, and with his own eighteen-year-old son standing for him in proxy.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

It became instantly clear to him that Daniel had forged his signature on the documents as well as committing dozens of other crimes along the way.

Joe's email showed that Daniel had put up a dating firm called Hearts' Match, and it didn't appear to be a coincidence at all that his son's company could be easily mistaken for Heart 's Match, the matchmaking agency that Nicholas' childhood friend Charlotte owned.

Joe's third set of documents was a contract brokered by Daniel's company, and specified in it was a list of conditions that both Nicholas and Tabitha had to meet.

One party failing to do so would be sufficient grounds for divorce, with Nicholas apparently agreeing to transfer half of his fortune. ..to Tabitha's name.

When Nicholas called his lawyer for the second time, Joe appeared to be expecting it, having picked up the call before the first ring had even ended.

The older man also beat him to speaking, saying heavily, "If you don't want to risk Ms. Sandler suing your son for fraud and God knows what else, your best bet is to play it safe and keep your new wife happy while I try finding you a loophole."

"Goddammit, Joe."

"You're not paying me a fortune to lie to you."

Nicholas' fist clenched against the urge to punch a hole into the nearest wall. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Why the hell would Daniel do something asinine as this?

"How long do you think it will take you to get me out of this mess?"

"It will help if you can track your son for me——"

"He's vacationing in Tahoe——"

"I know that's where he's supposed to be," Joe said almost apologetically, "but I've already checked, and your housekeeper told me she hasn't heard a peep from him."

Fuck.

"I'll personally work on this, Nick, but I'm no miracle worker, so in the meantime..." Joe cleared his throat. "You saw that first condition, didn't you? It shouldn't be hard——" Nicholas started cursing up a storm, and the lawyer's words came into a halt.

What in the world was wrong with Nick? Joe had seen photos of the girl, and while she was no headturner, she wasn't all that bad either. She had a nice smile, and an

even nicer figure. How bad could it be ?

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:57 am

FAINT FOOTSTEPS HAD Bee turning away from the corral, and she unconsciously straightened when she saw Nicholas striding towards her. She tested a smile at him, and while he didn't smile back, he at least didn't snap her head off and look at her like she was insane.

Which was how he had been looking at her , she thought ruefully, ever since meeting her at the bus stop.

Nicholas didn't know what to make of himself as he came to stand next to the girl—

Tabitha, he reminded himself.

He might still have a hard time thinking of her as his wife, but he could at least stop thinking of her as just his son's friend.

His son , Nicholas thought, whose age was likely to be closer to Tabitha's than his.

"I hope you don't mind me coming here." Tabitha's words drew him out of his thoughts, and he saw her gesture to the heifer peacefully sleeping in the corner, a padded bed cushioning her hefty frame. "I thought it would be nice to finally see Petula in person."

Nicholas didn't bother hiding his surprise. "You know her?"

"Danny told me she's the best birthday gift you've ever given him."

"As it should be," he said evenly. "A sportscar would've cost me less money than his

sudden decision to turn one of my finest stocks into a damn house pet."

Nicholas' disgruntled tone made him seem a lot more human, and it had her relaxing enough to speak more freely in his presence. "I think it's cute that you spoil him so," she confessed. "I'd do, too, if I had a son like him."

"But you can't. Can you?"

"Oh no." A concerned look crossed Tabitha's heart-shaped face. "Danny told me this was inevitable."

Nicholas' lips tightened. He was beginning to hate the way she kept mentioning his son's name, and damn if he knew why that was.

Bee's concern grew at the way Nicholas' features had hardened in the past ten seconds.

"I truly don't mind about the age gap," she told him earnestly.

"Danny said you'd eventually bring it up because you were that kind of man.

But honestly, it's not an issue, and I don't care if others think I'm too young for you——"

"Aren't you?" he asked flatly. At twenty-three, Tabitha was one whole decade younger than him...but just five years older than Daniel. "You seem more suitable to be my son's girlfriend——" The expression of genuine revolt that crossed her face immediately put a stop to his words.

"Don't ever make a joke of that kind again, please?" Bee pleaded with a shudder. "I've never thought of him as anything else but my stepson," she said feelingly, "and vice

versa."

"I see." He saw Tabitha bite her lip and wondered if there was something else she wanted to say but couldn't. "Tabitha?"

"Everyone calls me 'Bee'—-" She saw his lip curl and had to quickly swallow back a giggle.

"Tabitha is a lovely name," Nicholas said firmly. "So I'd rather use that if you don't mind."

"I definitely don't," she assured him.

Thinking it was a good time as any to bite the bullet, he said slowly, "I can be rather.

..high-handed at times, but it doesn't mean you would ever need to watch your words with me.

I'll always endeavor to listen to what you have to say.

I'm...your husband, after all." He saw her eyes widen in surprise, and color stained Nicholas' bronzed cheeks.

"You don't think of me that way?" he challenged.

Of course I do , Bee wanted to say. But the thing was, hearing Nicholas actually say those words out loud had shocked her so much it completely robbed her of the ability to speak.

Tabitha's continued silence was making Nicholas feel strange, and the prospect of her possibly having second thoughts about their so-called marriage was irritating the hell

out of him.

Nicholas appeared to be brooding over her words, and Bee couldn't stop herself from staring. It was like seeing a golden-haired Heathcliff brood before her every eyes, and she could barely contain her giddiness, could barely resist the urge to swoon just so he'd be made to sweep her up in his arms.

If this is a dream, God, please don't wake me up?

The thought had Bee reaching for her cheeks again, but just as she was about to pinch herself for a reality check, he suddenly turned to face her, and her fingers froze mid-squeeze.

Nicholas' brows shot up at catching Tabitha with her hands on her face. "What are you doing?"

Bee quickly dropped her arms to her sides. "Nothing."

Green eyes narrowed at her. "You're incredibly... odd. "

The words made her feel anxious, and she joked nervously, "That's not grounds for an annulment, is it?"

Nicholas only stared at her.

"That was a joke," she said weakly.

"I see."

Bee's unease disappeared as her cheeks heated up and her lips formed a helpless smile.

Nicholas was starting to get a headache. "Why are you blushing?"

"Because Danny told me about that ."

Her blush had deepened as she spoke, and his confusion grew. "Told you about what?"

"He says when you say that..."

"What the hell is that?"

"I see——"

"You see what?"

A choked laugh escaped Bee. "No, I meant, it's the words 'you see.' Danny said that whenever you say those two words, it's probably your way..."

Tabitha's face was now beet red, while Nicholas didn't think he could get any more confused than he already was. "Just spit the words out, Tabitha."

Squirming on her feet, she took a deep breath before letting the words spill out in lightning-quick fashion. "He says it's your way of trying to control yourself from kissing me ."

Nicholas nearly choked. What the hell? Tabitha had to be an idiot to fall for such words——

And then it hit him.

The reason why she had been blushing in the car, the first time he had said 'I see', and

disbelief swamped Nicholas at the realization that she could be so naïve enough to believe Daniel's words. His gaze snapped back to her direction—

And she was still blushing.

Ah, dammit.

He remembered the words from the contract his son had forged his signature on.

The marriage must be consummated within twenty-four hours of their first meeting .

And failure to meet even just one of the conditions would mean losing half of his fortune - or risk having Tabitha sue his son for fraud .

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:57 am

BEE WAS NOT A TOTAL novice when it came to sexual chemistry. Most of her knowledge, however, came from the romance novels she read, and so she still found herself rather stunned when it finally happened.

Nicholas' eyes glittered at the way Tabitha's quickened breathing had her bountiful breasts jiggling behind the thin fabric of her blouse. The sight called Joe's last words to mind, with the older man assuming that consummating his unexpected marriage shouldn't pose any problems.

In which case, Nicholas thought grimly, the old man was grossly mistaken.

The problem wasn't about him finding the girl unattractive, and the way his cock was presently trying to poke a hole out of his jeans was proof of that.

And of course, it wasn't about her finding him unattractive either.

No fucking way that could be true, with how her nipples were now making a rather pointed impression on her blouse.

Rather than either of those things, the problem lied in his inability to see where things would go the moment he took her to bed. He had never been attracted to her type - cute rather than beautiful, awkward rather than sophisticated, innocent rather than experienced.

His instincts warned him against getting involved, but for the first time since the accident Nicholas found himself unable to heed them. Even knowing that one night was all it would take for this girl to turn his world upside down—

To hell with it.

He told himself that he was only doing this because he didn't want to risk losing his half of his fortune.

And that was it , Nicholas told himself. He was going to fuck her because the contract said so and for no other reason than that.

And now that his mind was made up...

His gaze returned to her, and Nicholas saw the way her body involuntarily trembled in reaction to his scrutiny.

We're just getting started, baby.

Nicholas continued to watch her under hooded lids, silent and still as he let lust play out and work its magic.

He hadn't always been a patient man, but because his misspent youth had made him pay a heavy price for his once reckless ways, Nicholas had learned to appreciate the value of discipline and control.

Every aspect of his life had also come to reflect this, his every risk the result of careful deliberation, and most importantly of all, he always bid his time.

Always.

And especially when it came to fucking.

He watched and waited, her arousal softly stirring into life like the most deliciously edible flower blossoming under the demanding heat of his need. One by one, the most

wanton desires of her body revealed itself like tenderly unfurling petals.

The clouded look in her eyes as her tongue darted out to lick her dry lips.

The gradual swell of her breasts as her shapely legs pressed together.

And then the sound of her voice—

"Nicholas."

The look in Nicholas' eyes turned possessive, the last petal of her surrender having unfolded at the way she tremulously whispered his name with unconscious yearning.

Even though she didn't know it yet, she had, at that moment, given herself to him.

Fire had completely taken over her senses, and Tabitha was his to do as he pleased.

"Tabitha."

Her name had become both a silken invitation and a rough command, and Bee nearly whimpered at its potently seductive impact on her dazed senses. She hungered like she never did, and the sensation thrilled and terrified her at the same time.

It was like living a dream, and in it, Nicholas Sutherland had become her master, and she was dying for him to hold her. Play with her. Claim her.

And when she heard him ask in a voice harsh with need, "Do you want me to kiss you?"

She almost ended up sobbing out her answer. "Yes." Because she wanted and needed him so. Hungered for him the way she had never thought she would hunger for

anything in her entire life—

His fingers drove into her hair, and a whimper escaped her.

His head slowly bent down.

Nicholas' lips pried hers open, and his tongue drove deep into her mouth.

Oh God. Oh God. Oh God.

And she could no longer think, desire seizing control of her body as her arms wound around his neck and she found herself kissing him back, hesistantly at first, but upon hearing his growl of satisfaction, Bee gained enough confidence to let her tongue mate with his.

Nicholas let out another growl at the touch of her tongue, and a whimper spilled past her lips as he suddenly hauled her up. Her legs instantly locked around his waist, and his tongue drove deeper into her mouth.

Something long, thick, and hard began to throb against her belly, and she choked back a cry. Nicholas had started to walk, but she was barely aware of this, her every thought consumed by the way his cock kept pulsing against her.

The only time she finally became aware of her surroundings was when Nicholas started to lay her down, and she opened her eyes.

They were no longer at the corral , Bee realized dizzily. Instead, they were inside a vast and intensely masculine bedroom, albeit tastefully decorated in leather and torch-finished cedar.

His bed was big and luxurious, with crisp, cotton sheets, and the thought of resisting

didn't even cross her mind as Nicholas started undressing her.

She even raised her arms to help him get rid of her blouse and lifted her hips up as he pulled her skirt down her legs.

It was only when he reached for the front clasp of her bra that she couldn't help stiffening and feeling self-conscious, and Nicholas seemed to sense this.

"There's nothing to be afraid of," he said softly. "I'm your husband. Remember?"

A moment passed before he saw Tabitha willing her body to relax, and guilt and satisfaction warred inside of him.

It didn't feel right, to have her trust his words so, but at the same time, he was unable to stop himself from deriving a primal sense of pleasure in the way she yielded complete control of her body to his.

With a flick of his fingers, the cups of her bra fell loosely to the sides of her body, and her sweet, rounded flesh was finally bared to his gaze. She had the most amazing pair of breasts, and he wasn't surprised to find his hands slightly shaking as he reached to cup them.

Her body buckled at the very first touch, and it buckled yet again when Nicholas started kneading the pink-tipped globes.

With every little thing he did - cupping and squeezing her breasts, tweaking and pinching her nipples - she would react, her lips parting in a moan, her back arching and her legs snaking restlessly against the sheets.

Her uninhibited response threatened to erode his control as he found herself starving for more.

Bending down, he took one nipple into his mouth, and she cried his name out.

"Nicholas."

It was the sweetest, hottest little sound, and he found himself sucking harder on her nipple.

She began to whimper and buckle, and as her hands moved up to rake through his hair, his own hands began to move.

He cupped one ass cheek with his left hand while his other hand reached for one of the lacy straps that kept her panties in place.

A gasp escaped Tabitha as he ripped her underwear off with one yank, and then she was clutching her head to him, her nipple pushing deeper into his mouth as she sobbed his name out.

"Nicholas. Oh God. Nicholas."

He moved to her other breast and took his time feasting on it while his fingers renewed its exploration, gently sliding over her already moist folds.

For a little while, his strokes remained lazy and constant, moving back and forth until he felt her legs relax.

Only then did he slowly slide one finger in, and her folds, now heavy and swollen with arousal, parted without resistance to give him entry.

Bee's eyes flew wide open the moment she felt his finger slowly but steadily penetrating her womanhood.

The sensation was unlike anything she could ever imagine, and oh dear God, but she wanted more.

By the time, his finger was knuckle-deep inside of her, Bee already felt incredibly full, and she didn't dare let herself think just how much fuller she would feel, once it was his cock filling her—

Nicholas' finger had suddenly started moving, and desire once again took over, the rest of her thoughts disappearing as her own pussy started to ache and throb.

And when he started moving his finger in and out at a faster and harder pace, she could no longer help herself, her body arching to meet each thrust. In.

Out. In. Out. In. Out. And then a second finger shoved inside of her without warning, and Bee let out a scream.

In. Out. In. Out. In. Out. And he was doing it so much faster now. So much harder. So much deeper.

This was how it felt, to be fucked by her husband's fingers.

And the moment the thought formed, it began - her orgasm consuming every cell of her body, the pleasure so acute that for one moment she seemed in danger of losing consciousness.

She started to cry as shudders of pleasure wracked her body.

It was just so, so good. Just too, too good that a tiny part of her couldn't believe it was real.

She felt him pulling away, and Bee's desire-clouded gaze hazily focused on him. He

was stripping his clothes off with quick efficiency, and in moments, Nicholas stood completely naked, big and bronze and all over, and her pussy instantly reacted, one last stream of cum spilling out of her folds.

Nicholas sucked his breath. While he had long lost count of the number of women he had taken to bed, he was damn sure that not a single one of them had managed to cum at the mere sight of his naked body.

And that it would be Tabitha, of all women...

His virgin wife...

"Tabitha..." Jaw clenching, he forced himself to ask the question that his conscience demanded from him. "Are you sure of this?"

Bee's heart skipped a beat.

That he would care to ask, when even she knew how painfully obvious she was in her need for him...

With her vocal chords still refusing to work, she could only answer him in silence, her legs slowly parting open as she gazed up at him, her eyes saying the rest.

Take me.

Expelling his breath in a hiss, Nicholas moved swiftly, his weight pressing down on her as his powerful body settled between her legs. He saw her swallow as the head of his cock nudged against the still-moist entrance of her womanhood, and he said roughly, "I'll do my best to minimize the hurt."

"It's fine——"

Having her speak was enough of a distraction, and Nicholas' hips slammed down, his cock impaling her in one deep stroke. She cried out, a flash of pain crossing her face, and remorse flayed him even as his cock found itself balls-deep in a wet, tight corner of heaven.

"I'm sorry," he rasped.

Bee slowly shook her head. "It d-doesn't hurt as much now..." And she wasn't even lying. The pain had only lasted the first few seconds, but the stinging sensation had soon faded until all that was left was a strange, restless urge to feel... more.

She wanted more, but how did one have more, when she didn't even know what it was she wanted more of?

Bee raised her gaze to his in helpless frustration. "Nicholas..."

It was as if he understood exactly what she wanted to convey with just his name on her lips, and as his gaze locked with hers, Nicholas slowly lifted his hips.

Bee cried out in instinctive protest as she felt his cock withdrew out of her. "No——"

His hips pushed back down, his cock sliding inside of her with similar ease, and she moaned.

He started to move, and her legs slowly snaked up to lock around his waist.

He started thrusting faster, and her hands curved over his shoulders, nails digging into his muscular back.

Faster and faster, until she had every need to clutch him, her trembling body now completely enslaved by the forceful thrusts of his cock.

In. Out. In. Out. In. Out. She began to sob as her body began to tighten.

In. Out. In. Out. In. Out. But still his relentless pace went on, and the way his cock kept shoving in and out of her was slowly driving Bee out of her mind.

In. Out. In. Out. In. Out. Her back began to arch.

In. Out. In. Out. In. Out. She heard Nicholas rasp her name out just as his heat exploded inside her tight passage.

Oh God.

A second round of pleasure swept her body away, and she cried out as her own cum flowed out and mixed with the hot, sticky release of his semen.

As her eyes drifted close in the aftermath, tiny shudders still racking her slender frame, Bee found herself thinking of the most improbable thing.

Improbable, Bee thought drowsily, but not impossible.

Because it could happen.

Her dream of living her own mail-order fairytale romance actually coming true, and Bee ending up married to the man she was fated to fall in love with.

It could happen.

Right?

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:57 am

BEE WOKE HOURS LATER to the tantalizing trail of her husband's fingers drifting over her naked back. Pleasure lazily fanned out through every inch of her body, gently stirring her humming senses into life.

A helpless smile touched her lips as she felt his hand grip one side of her waist. She let him turn her over, her cheeks turning a pale shade of pink as she felt the covers slip down her naked body, enough to expose her already pouting breasts.

But then she saw him, and embarrassment was quickly forgotten as a wanton rush of uncontrollable desire surged inside of her.

He was seated on the edge of the bed, naked save for a pair of sweat pants that hung low on his hips.

She tried not to stare but once again found it impossible.

He was so breathtakingly gorgeous, with every inch of him bronzed and hard, and she wasn't at all surprised to feel her stomach cramping as she watched his lips seductively curve into a devastatingly sexy smile.

Mine .

Butterfly wings fluttered in her stomach at the thought.

This man was mine .

But just as she started to shyly return his smile, a growling sound incongruously

shattered the silence between them, and it came all the way from her empty stomach.

Bee's eyes widened in horror.

A second later, and a tiny, high-pitched moan of mortification escaped her lips, and hearing it, Nicholas threw his head back with a laugh.

She let out another moan, but the sound was immediately muffled as he swept her up, making Tabitha straddle his lap just as his mouth covered hers in a ravenous kiss.

The kiss went on far longer than Nicholas intended, her taste intoxicating him like no other woman's did, her hold on him incomprehensible but undeniable.

When he finally lifted his head, the sight of her kiss-swollen lips pleased him, but before he could even think of taking Tabitha back to bed, it made another sound, and his lips twitched in wry amusement even as her cheeks instantly reddened.

Bee wished the earth could just swallow her up. "I'm so sorry."

Nicholas grimaced. "Don't be." Self-mocking humor glinted in his gaze. "I should've fed you dinner first before satisfying my own appetite."

"I'm not complaining——"

"It's my responsibility to look after you," he said gruffly.

"But——" Tabitha gasped when he suddenly rose to his feet, with her still in his arms. "No, please, I might be too heavy——" Bee awkwardly cut herself off as piercing green eyes bored through hers.

"You're too thin," Nicholas said gently. "And since I don't think it's because you're

the type to get carried away with crazy fad diets...you'll tell me about it over dinner, mm?"

Bee looked at him uneasily. "But what if there's nothing good to speak of?"

" Maybe others were fine with sharing their own sob stories, but a part of her had always found the prospect distressing.

She knew without being told that the story of her life was no fairytale, and she just didn't see any point in making others feel sad over it as well.

Having noticed the way Tabitha had become stiff in his arms, Nicholas glanced down at her and heard himself say, "Keeping secrets from each other will not bode well for our marriage."

He felt her tremble at his words, and his arms around her instinctively tightened. A moment later, he felt Tabitha place her hand over his heart, and his chest clenched.

"I'm sorry," Bee whispered. "It's just...ever since my parents...I've gotten used to thinking it would be better for everyone around me if I kept things to myself."

"Things are going to change now," he heard himself assure her, and Tabitha's answering smile hit him like a ton of bricks, the accompanying trust shining in her eyes making Nicholas feel strangely guilty and unworthy.

"Thank you," Bee said shakily. "It's just crazy how happy you've made me..." Her eyes teared. "I don't know whatever made Danny pick me over all the others—"

You and me both, Nicholas couldn't help thinking.

"But I'll never stop thanking God that He's let me become a part of your lives..."

It was the most poignantly sweet thing anyone had ever told him, but before he could even figure out what to say, her stomach rumbled out another warning, and color burst in her cheeks once again.

"I am so sorry!"

I'm not, Nicholas thought, unable to help feeling that he had somehow been granted a reprieve just before things could get too complicated.

"I swear it's not always like this. It's just that I hadn't any time to eat after the flight..."

The miserable look on her face was too adorable to ignore, and he found himself pushing her against the wall, his mouth swooping down in a kiss that effectively turned her gasp of surprise into a moan.

He indulged himself with one last kiss as his fingers squeezed the now-familiar fullness of her breast.

"Nicholas."

He managed to find the strength to pull away before things completely got out of control. As he let Tabitha slide to her feet, he saw the way her dark eyes begged for more, and a strained chuckle escaped him. "Stop looking at me like that."

He gave her bare ass a light slap, and she half-gasped, half-giggled, unable to believe how much her life had changed in so short a time.

One week ago, she had been quietly crying her heart out, feeling dirty and violated.

And now...she was in this beautiful room, married to an equally beautiful man, and said beautiful man had just landed a playful slap on her bottom.

It was just too impossibly wonderful!

Nicholas was bemused when he saw Tabitha's hands suddenly lift to her cheeks. "Tabitha?"

Hands still on her cheeks, she confessed, "I feel like I need to pinch myself. Life's just been too incredibly amazing—"

Nicholas put one and one together, and he drawled, "Did you come up with that just because—" A smirk unfolded over his lips. "I slapped your butt?"

Bee froze. It was one thing to feel that way, but it was another thing to admit it out loud, and she found herself verbally grasping for straws. "I...um...err..."

The deep, sexy timbre of his laugh had her making a face, but even so the thought of refusing didn't even enter her mind as Nicholas took her hand and tugged her close towards him.

"I'll slap your ass as many times as you want later," he promised huskily.

"Nicholas!"

"But first, we need to get you fed."

Taking her to the en-suite bathroom, he pulled out a shirt from one of the drawers and turned to her, saying simply, "Up."

Even as Bee made a face at being made to feel like a child, she nevertheless did as ordered and raised her arms so he could slid his shirt over her.

Nicholas stepped back to observe his handiwork and immediately regretted his

choice. While her slender body was easily lost under his shirt, her breasts were large enough to have the fabric stretch tautly over her breasts.

So damn sexy.

He saw her nipples pebble against the thin layer of cotton, and the sight proved impossible to resist. Hauling her to him, he bent down and drew one cotton-covered nipple in and suckled hungrily.

She let out a whimper, and the sound had him giving her nipple a final, playful bite before he forced himself to let go once more.

Bee could feel herself reddening anew the wet, telltale mark his kiss had left on her shirt. "W-What if people see—"

"No one will see," he soothed. "This whole wing's mine."

Bee wondered if she had heard him right, but in the end, all she said was, "If you're really sure..."

"The first thing you should know about me," he murmured, "is how possessive I can get.

" As he spoke, his hand palmed her breast as if to emphasize his point, and his eyes glinted at the way her body automatically pressed closer to him.

"There's no fucking way in hell I'd let any other man see you like this. "

"I s-see." With his hand still holding her breast, her voice came out a little breathless, and the sound had him smirking.

How arrogant he was , she couldn't help musing, but for some reason, Bee also knew she wouldn't want him in any other way.

By the time they finally made it to the kitchen, even Nicholas was feeling a little hungry and after explicitly ordering Tabitha to stay put on one of the counter stools and let him serve her, he went to work, frying up some bacon and making each of them a Spanish omelette.

And throughout it, he felt her fascinated gaze following him wherever he went, and when he finally set the plated dishes on the counter, he watched her entire face light up with a radiant smile.

Beautiful.

The thought came out of the fucking blue, and the raw force of attraction that followed right after had him sucking his breath.

She was too goddamn beautiful, and if he wasn't careful, he might end up forgetting that their marriage was nothing but a sham.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:57 am

CONTRARY TO NICHOLAS' initial plans, it was well after dinner, and they were back in his bed, her tiny body curled in his arms, when he finally got her to speak of his past, and she somehow managed to make him do the same.

She told him everything, starting from the very beginning, when her world was small enough to be perfect, and all the way to the end, when she learned how life could so drastically change in a blink of an eye.

Hearing her voice shake as she told him of how her former boss had almost raped her had Nicholas yanking her close and tucking her head under his chin to keep her from accidentally glimpsing the cold rage in his eyes.

"I'll never let anyone hurt you again. I promise you that.

" And he meant to keep his word, regardless of how things would turn out in the future.

He also meant to teach the asshole a lesson, but this one he kept to himself.

He had a feeling that if Tabitha knew of his plans, she would only ask him to stop and let things be.

He felt her stir in his arms, and when he glanced down, she asked him hesitantly, "What about you?

In all the months Danny and I had been exchanging emails, he's only spoken of his life since he started living with you.

He never—" Tabitha paused to cast him an uncertain look.

"If you don't want to talk about it, I totally understand—"

Nicholas' lips twisted in an ironic smile. "Would you still wish to hear it, even if there's nothing good to speak of?"

"I want to know everything about you," she said simply.

The smile remained on his lips, but this time it no longer reached his eyes. "So be it then." A stoic mask settled on his face as Nicholas' mind reluctantly drifted back to the past.

He had been fifteen then, and like all boys in that age, he had been foolish, brash, and reckless. And with parents that saw no wrong in giving in to his every wish, Nicholas had believed the whole world was his to conquer.

When a girl two years older than him told Nicholas he had gotten her pregnant, he had told her carelessly he would pay her whatever was needed as long as she didn't make the mistake of cramping his style.

When Carly had readily agreed, he had taken her acquiescence at face value, and because she had not pressured him at all to get involved, Nicholas had found himself actually enjoying all the perks of being a dad without having to suffer the lows.

He was able to spoil little Daniel when he wanted, have his baby boy visit him during weekends and then get Carly to take him back when he had other plans.

It was an ideal setup, and it had never occurred to him to question the status quo until he had impulsively decided to drive up to Carly's house.

He had intended to surprise Daniel with a visit, but he had been the one who ended up stunned.

Carly's three-story mansion, which she was only able to afford because of his monthly paychecks, appeared to have served as a lavish playground for the rich and famous.

It was where the junkies went whenever they needed a private haven to indulge their vices, and for those with highly particular sexual appetites, the mansion also functioned as a bordello, with Carly willingly procuring the necessary participants for the right price.

And on the night he had visited, he had caught Carly just about to hand over their own son - their baby boy - to an aging old sheikh in exchange of a hundred million dollars.

"She swore to me that Danny had never been involved before that night," Nicholas said harshly. "But even though the FBI and the investigators I had hired corroborated her story, a part of me couldn't stop thinking that she had to be lying. That everyone was lying, and I was too late—"

Tears falling down her cheeks, Bee threw her arms around him, whispering, "I'm so sorry."

"I had nightmares about it for years," Nicholas said tonelessly. "And I don't think I'll ever forgive myself for what happened."

She tightened her hold around his neck. "I'm so sorry, Nicholas." And now, the words that Danny occasionally and fleetingly mentioned, words that used to puzzle her - they all made sense to her now.

I'm not saying my dad's uncool or anything, but he takes most things seriously.

Sometimes, I get the feeling he's still punishing himself.

He doesn't find it easy to trust people, so you need to be patient with him.

Bee bit her lip hard, but it was no use, her tears only falling faster as she found herself unable to stop imagining the way he must've felt, seeing his seven-year-old son almost lose his innocence in the hands of a pedophile.

She ached to help him, but she didn't even know where or how to start, and never had she felt more painfully insecure than she did at that very moment.

She was nothing but a high school dropout, with not even looks or a nice job to speak of.

She didn't even have any experience to speak of, something that would at least allow her to connect to Nicholas as another parent.

Bee felt Nicholas brush his lips against the top of her head. "No more tears, sweetheart. It's all in the past now."

"I just wish..." Her voice caught. "I just wish I knew how to help you." Because the more she thought about it, the more terrified she was...

Could it be possible Danny had made a mistake in choosing her?

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:57 am

"GOOD MORNING, H-HUSBAND ."

Nicholas opened his eyes at the giddy, breathless sound of Tabitha's voice.

She was on her knees on the bed, wearing his shirt, and her dark hair cascading down one slim shoulder.

He saw right away that she was obviously tickled pink to call him the H-word.

..and equally made obvious by her pink cheeks was how she had mustered all her courage to actually say the word out loud.

Bee let out a gasp when Nicholas, in one sudden move, had reversed their positions, and she found herself lying on her back while her husband - oh my gosh, this man was her husband - loomed over her with a rakish smirk.

"Good morning, wife." He half-expected himself to choke on the word, but instead it rolled smoothly down his tongue like he had always been destined to say it. To her.

He watched her lips part in surprise at the words, and then her face blossomed with a smile that threatened to make his heart do something stupid like skip a fucking beat.

This was getting out of hand, dammit.

But somehow he couldn't make himself regret it.

Bee let out another gasp when Nicholas (her husband , her mind kept chanting)

swept her up in his arms and off the bed.

"Where are we going— oh. "

He had carried her to the en-suite bathroom, and instead of lowering Bee to the floor, Nicholas had deposited her right in the middle of his enormous wooden barrel bathtub.

Did that mean they were about to share a bath together?

The thought had a series of racy scenarios immediately popping up in her mind, and Bee's cheeks heated up. Some of her favorite mail order romances included this exact scene, too, and oh, if even just one of those things were to take place...

When Nicholas turned to face Tabitha, he caught her with her hands on her flushed cheeks mid-pinch, and he laughed. "I wonder what has you excited now," he murmured wickedly.

Bee pinched her cheeks harder (oh dear God, how could this unbelievably beautiful and incredibly exciting man be her husband?), and when she saw him start untying the drawstrings of his sweatpants, she had a feeling she might end up pinching herself to death.

And three...two...one...

A fully naked and visibly aroused Nicholas now stood in front of her, and Bee bit back a whimper.

While last night had mostly been a sensual blur, with Bee too nervous and excited to fully take in the finer details of Nicholas' nude form, today was a whole new ballgame, with sunlight streaming from the window illuminating every bare inch of

his masculinity in golden clarity.

Rugged cowboy angel indeed , she thought dizzily.

Sleek and muscular all over, he seemed too sexy to be real, and when her gaze finally fell to his engorged manhood, Bee could only gulp, unable to believe something that long and thick could've fit inside of—

A tiny involuntary squeak slipped past her lips when Nicholas stepped inside the tub to join her.

"Take your shirt off."

The huskily spoken command sent Bee's senses reeling, and her fingers seemed to move on its own volition as she reached for the hem.

In seconds, the shirt laid discarded next to his sweatpants, and she barely had time to register the hungry look in his green eyes before he was kneeling down in the water, and his mouth had landed right between her legs.

"Aaaaaaaaah."

She made a clumsy grab for his shoulders, needing something to hold on to as her knees threatened to give out at the shattering feel of his lips nuzzling her folds.

Oh God.

His lips trailed up.

Oh.

Tongue lavng her clit—

God.

Teeth nipping the tiny, quivering nub—

Ooooooooooh Gooooooooood.

And then he was sucking on it hard, and it was just too much. It took only five seconds, maybe even three; all she knew was that Nicholas eating her clit was like a bullet train ride to heaven.

"Nicholas." She sobbed his name out as her orgasm sent her spiraling, and it just went on and on and on that she was barely aware of Nicholas using the handheld spray to clean her up before getting the tub filled.

A leisurely bath followed, with Nicholas settling her between his thighs before shampooing her hair and leaving her body wet for an altogether different reason with his soapy caresses.

And later, much, much later, with Nicholas lying against the back of the tub, while she rested against his chest, she heard him say casually, "I'll have your things transferred to my room today."

Water splashed as Tabitha turned in his arms, dark eyes curiously peering up at him as she asked, "Why did you have them sent elsewhere in the first place?"

Because I didn't think I'd let my cock overrule my brain, and I'd end up taking you to bed and fulfilling the first condition of our marriage.

But out loud, all Nicholas said was, "I didn't want you to think I was taking anything

for granted."

A dismayed expression crossed her face. "I should be the one worried about that," she said glumly. "And I am, actually. Because no matter how I look at it, you're the one who seem to be getting the shorter end of the stick with this marriage——"

"You really think so?" Nicholas asked gravely.

She nodded.

"Because you think I'm the world's sexiest husband?"

With the words still uttered in the same grave tone, it took her another moment before she realized he was teasing, and she was unable to suppress her smile. "I'm serious——"

"So am I," he countered. "I see the way you look at me."

Bree turned red.

"Just one look," he said huskily, "and your body immediately reacts."

"W-What——"

"Like this..." His gaze fell to her already aroused nipples, and she gasped as he tweaked one between his fingers.

"And this..." His other hand delved under the water to rub her clit, and she moaned.

A moment later, and almost half of the water splashed out as he suddenly had her half hanging over the side of the tub.

"Nicholas——"

His thick cock pumped into her from behind.

Oh my God.

She hurriedly grabbed the sides of the tub as he started fucking her, hard enough to have her gasping as her breasts swayed in the air.

His breath suddenly tickled her ear, and she whimpered.

"Does this feel like I'm unsatisfied with our marriage?" Nicholas whispered.

His hips started pumping faster against her.

"Does it?"

She started seeing stars, and when his cock slammed back into her, deep enough that she felt he had reached all the way to her womb, she could only cry out, her pleasure reaching its zenith.

Behind her, she dimly heard him growl, his orgasm following right after hers, and the feel of his seed filling her had Bee letting out another cry.

It was almost half past ten by the time they finally came out of his room, and Nicholas couldn't stop smirking when he saw the way she was walking.

"It's not funny," she half-wailed. The soreness between her legs had her waddling like a duck, and anyone who saw her now was sure to guess why.

"I'm sorry——"

Appalled that her words had him thinking she was blaming him, she said quickly, "It's fine——"

"I'm so big."

Oh.

Her glower had him laughing again.

"God, you are so conceited——ah!" He had her up in his arms again, and she quickly protested, "There's no need——"

He cut her off by sucking on her lower lip, and her toes curled at the sensation.

I really do have the world's sexiest husband .

As they descended the stairs, Nicholas felt her head rest against his chest while her fingers played with the top button of his shirt.

"I guess Hearts' Match had it right," he heard her mumble almost as if speaking to herself.

"Right about what?" They reached the foot of the stairs as he spoke, and Nicholas reluctantly let her go when she started wriggling insistently in his arms.

"The consummation clause," she told him. "It didn't seem right at first. It felt like we'd be moving too fast too soon, but..."

Tabitha smiled up at him, and Nicholas thought, God, she was beautiful.

"Last night wasn't just perfect," Bee whispered shyly.

Too damn beautiful.

"It also felt completely right."

The words struck his heart like a bolt of lightning.

Too damn beautiful, Nicholas thought again. Inside and out. Just too damn beautiful for him.

He took a deep breath, knowing that he couldn't let the words go without saying something in return.

"Tabitha——"

She looked up at him hopefully...just as someone coughed behind her, asking in an amused drawl, "Are we interrupting something?"

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:57 am

BILLIONAIRE STUD FARM owner Sean Northwood gave the redhead next to him an incredulous glance. Do you see what I'm seeing?

Isla stepped on her husband's foot under the table and smiled sweetly at his wince. Don't. Jinx. It.

Seated across them, another couple was having almost the exact same silent conversation, with billionaire rancher Devon Montgomery similarly struggling to contain his disbelief.

Although he and the others had been friends since childhood, not once had any of them seen Nicholas Sutherland acting so blatantly protective towards any woman.

Not even Carly , Devon thought, and that girl had been Nick's baby mama.

Harry's eyes widened in alarm when she saw her husband start smirking, and she quickly forestalled him with a pleading shake of her head. Don't ruin it. Please?

Devon grimaced. Damn. He had just been about to make fun of Nicholas, but having Harriet look at him that way left him no choice but to play nice.

Lucky son of a bitch. With their wives' presence ensuring they were on their best behavior, there was only one person left on the table who still had a chance of giving Nicholas hell.

"What was that again about the secret Daniel shared with you?" Logan Hardwall smiled charmingly at Nicholas' wife. "Two words, right? Every time he's trying to

avoid PDA, he'd say—"

"I see." Bee could barely suppress her smile at the way Nicholas rolled his eyes.

There was a moment of silence, with Nicholas' friends exchanging a seemingly significant look. Another second passed, and then the three other men said simultaneously, "I see."

Even though it didn't make a whit of sense, Bee couldn't help bursting into the laughter and so did the two other women.

Nicholas gazed darkly at his friends. "Fuck all of you."

And now, the other men were chuckling, too.

Ah, fuck it. Nicholas gave up trying to keep a straight face, and a slight smile eventually tugged at the corner of his lips.

He could live with everyone having fun at his expense.

Better him than her, he thought, and his gaze flicked towards Tabitha.

She was smiling and talking animatedly to his friends' wives, the loose set of her shoulders telling him that she was relaxed and having fun.

Thank God for his friends, Nicholas thought.

The moment he had introduced her to his friends as his wife, everyone had simply taken it by stride, with the men teasing Tabitha for choosing a ruthless bastard like him while Isla and Harriet readily offered their felicitations and chatted with her nonstop until Tabitha's tension had visibly eased.

Having forgotten today's brunch turned out to be a good thing, after all , Nicholas thought idly.

He would've canceled it if he had remembered, but with this, he was at least able to fulfill another condition in their marriage contract.

Since it had specifically requested Nicholas to introduce Tabitha as his wife to any long-term resident of Evergreen, he couldn't think of anyone better than the people in this room, each of whom he would trust his life with.

When his friends finally left, Nicholas turned to Tabitha, thinking to ask how she was but she beat him to speaking. An uncertain look on her face, she asked haltingly, "Do they know about...how we met?"

Nicholas took hold of her hand and brought it to his lips. "You have nothing to worry about," he said softly. "Sean and Devon are just like us."

Her eyes widened. "Do you mean..."

He nodded.

"You're not kidding?" she asked faintly.

"God's honest truth, ma'am."

Bee had never heard him speak with such a distinctly Texan drawl, and it startled a laugh out of her.

"There it is." He gently traced her lips. "Smiles suit you more than frowns, sweetheart."

She just about turned into jelly at the words, and it seemed as if Nicholas also sensed her inner melting, with the way he was suddenly smirking.

"Too much?" His tone was the very definition of devilish.

Bee tried to play it cool for once. "I have no idea— Nicholas, no! "

But the deed was already done. She was now seated on his lap, and with the kitchen having only an open doorway, there was every chance Nicholas' boss could walk in on any them, and oh my God , but what if this would have her husband suspended or, even worse, fired?

Nicholas frowned at the sudden look of distress on Tabitha's face. "What's wrong?"

"I just don't think this is appropriate," she said uneasily. "I mean what if your employer—" She stopped speaking when she saw Nicholas' gaze narrow.

"You know..." His voice was thoughtful. "I have a feeling we've got our wires crossed somehow."

Fearing that he might think her too interfering or presumptuous, she said tentatively, "I really, um, like..." She tried to say the words 'sitting on your lap' but couldn't. "I really, um, enjoy this ," Bee said instead. "I'm just worried that your employer might think you've been skiving off—"

"Can I ask you a question?" Nicholas interrupted. "What exactly has Daniel told you about my job?"

"You manage a ranch." She paused. "Don't you?"

"And that's it?"

Bee was starting to feel confused. "Was there anything else he should've added?"

"Nothing much..." It was his turn to pause. "Except the fact that I own the ranch as well?"

Bee burst into laughter. "Yeah, right——"

Nicholas smiled but said nothing.

She stopped laughing. "You're joking."

Nicholas only looked at her.

"You have to be joking."

He said very gently, "I'm not."

"But..." Her heart had started racing, and she was suddenly having difficulties breathing.

"It can't..." Her eyes flew to him in horror.

"I can't do this." She was just ordinary Tabitha Sandler, a nobody who was fine being nobody.

And he was now telling her she had married a man whose ranch was the same size as Rhode Island?

"I can't, I'm sorry, I——"

"Tabitha."

"I don't want to disappoint you. I don't want to ever make a mistake——"

"Tabitha." Nicholas' firm voice cut her protestations short. "Look at me."

Panicky brown eyes lifted to his.

"Do I look like a man who doesn't know what he's doing?"

She slowly shook her head.

"Do you think I would have married you," Nicholas lied without hesitation, "if I thought you wouldn't be able to handle being my wife and everything the position entails?"

After one long moment, she shook her head again.

"Then trust me when I say you have nothing to worry about." Because it was true.

"You're the woman Daniel and I chose." She had nothing to worry about.

Bee hastily blinked back tears. "You have such a way with words."

Since it wasn't her who had been tricked into a marriage by his own son.

"Thank you for believing in me. Thank you for choosing me. Just... thank you ."

It wasn't her who had then ended up uttering a thousand lies just to keep the deception.

Nicholas' lips brushed over hers, and he whispered, "No, sweetheart. Thank you ."

And it wasn't her , Nicholas thought moodily, who now had no fucking idea about what he really wanted to happen.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:57 am

"GOOD MORNING, HUSBAND ."

Sleepy green eyes gradually focused on her, taking note of her still-pink cheeks and the telltale quiver in her voice. A moment later, and the sound of his wicked laughter had Bee turning even redder.

"It's just not that easy calling you 'husband'," his wife said defensively.

"It's only a word," he said lazily.

"It is not just a word," she said huffily. "But never mind about that..."

Nicholas arched a brow when she reached for the covers and slowly drew them from his naked body.

Her eyes met his shyly.

"Happy monthsary."

And then she was going down on him, and his already aroused cock slid into the tight, moist warmth of her mouth like it was fucking home.

She held and pleased him like the novice she was, teeth occasionally scraping painfully against the swollen head of his dick, but because it was her - because it was his wife - none of it made a difference.

She had him tightly gripping her hair in mere fucking moments, had him shoving his

cock down her throat with uncool haste, had him goddamn exploding in her mouth with more load than he could ever remember releasing.

And when he felt her throat working to swallow all of his cum, ah, fuck , it just gave his orgasm a second lease of life, and a hoarse groan escaped him as he felt his balls tighten once more.

By the time he finally managed to pull out, her lips were a deep, swollen shade of red, and it was the loveliest, most erotic sight Nicholas had ever fucking seen.

She crawled up between his legs, palms landing on each side of his body, breasts dangling tantalizingly near his mouth as silky waves of her hair fell down one bare shoulder.

He watched her lips form a smile of hopeful expectation. "Did I please you?"

God, she was the fucking sweetest ...

Dragging her head down for a kiss, he whispered against her lips, "Beyond my wildest expectations."

That she almost made him forget none of this could last.

The kiss ended all too shortly, with Tabitha laughingly pulling away with a shake of her head, saying, "We need to shower and change."

"I don't see why we should. We could just stay here and make love the whole day—"

She shook her head again, a mysterious smile now playing on her lips. "You'll see."

He let her pull him up from the bed, playing along but only until they made it to the

glass-enclosed shower.

He waited only until they were both naked and hot water had blasted from the ceiling-mounted shower head before making his move.

She was off his feet in a second, and her stunned gasp had him chuckling.

"Nicholas!" Her legs automatically locked around his waist even as Bee made a grab of Nicholas' broad shoulders for balance. Pulling back, she stammered, "What do you— ah!" He had lifted her up then pulled her back down, impaling her with one swift stroke.

"Oh my God."

And then he was bouncing her on his thick, throbbing manhood, and all thoughts of protest disappeared under an overwhelming surge of sensations.

"Oh God."

Her head lolled back, and she could only hang on to him for life.

Their lovemaking was fast, furious, and wondrously loud and lurid. It was everything she hadn't even known to fantasize about, and she loved every moment of it.

Or at least she did until they had finally stepped out of their bedroom, and she saw how every member of the cleaning staff was giving her knowing looks.

It was so obvious that they had heard all those noises she made, and her hands flew to cover her face as she let out a muffled moan of embarrassment.

Nicholas, on the other hand, simply took it by stride, and if she hadn't been so busy

drowning in mortification, she might have even gone as far as thinking her husband was practically strutting like a man who had just the best sex of his life - and wanted the whole world to know it.

Just as they were about to enter the dining room, Tabitha shook her head and tugged him towards another direction. "We're not eating there."

Nicholas was bemused . They weren't?

Instead, his wife brought him all the way...to the kitchen, and Nicholas' puzzlement only grew when he saw almost all of his ranch hands gathered inside it, along with his kitchen staff and even Thomas.

At the older man's nod, Nicholas' employees took their party poppers out.

What the—

Pop! Pop! Pop!

And as confetti started to rain, his staff's boisterous cheer rang out.

"Happy monthsary, Mr. and Mrs. Sutherland!"

Nicholas' brows shot up, and then a grinning Tabitha literally jumped into view in front of him. "Surprised?"

"Stunned speechless." And he wasn't lying. Not once had he this kind of celebration with his staff, and most of them had been working for him over a decade.

Rising on her toes, Tabitha placed a kiss on his nose and pulled back with a beam, saying, "And this, Mr. Sutherland, is just the beginning."

His men filed out, and for some reason, she had the two of them following behind the twenty or so men as they went out through the back door. They walked all the way to the other side of the house, and the first thing he saw were festive party streamers hanging over the landscaped garden.

"Happy monthsary!"

Nicholas shook his head in good-natured surprise when he saw that Tabitha had actually invited just about every person working at his ranch, alongside their friends and families.

"Nicholas?"

He pulled her close as he gazed down at her. "What is it, baby?"

"I thought it would be nice if we could celebrate our first week together with your staff." She looked up at him uncertainly. "It's okay, right?"

"It's the perfect idea, Mrs. Sutherland." He smiled down at her. "Thank you for preparing for this."

And indeed, Nicholas couldn't imagine the last time he had this much fun on his own, and without him having to live vicariously through his son.

As he laughed and clapped when Thomas and Tabitha started hosting a series of games, which his men gamely joined and competed in, thoughts began to form in the back of his mind.

Thoughts that would never have occurred if she hadn't come to his life. ..

For so long, he had been punishing himself, and he hadn't even known it.

While he had continued to meet with his childhood friends, Nicholas realized that those meetings in itself were far and between.

He had only shown up if either work or a major milestone was involved, such as when Devon and Sean had gotten married.

And he had been the same with his staff , Nicholas brooded, without realizing it as well .

He watched his wife circulate among his employees, laughing and chatting with them, and it was if as she was the one who had known them her entire life.

He heard her congratulate the head gardener for finally finding the courage to ask his dream girl out, someone who apparently worked as one of the cleaners over at Devon's ranch.

He watched her move on to another table, and this time she was speaking with his head cook, who was in turn thanking Tabitha for the herbal remedy she had personally brewed for her son's cough.

Just watching her, seeing her dole out smiles like she had never tasted hardship, was more than enough to take his breath away.

Compared to how she had looked the first time he saw her, Tabitha had filled up quite nicely, no doubt due to Thomas and Nicholas alternately doing their best to get her to eat.

While neither of them had spoken about it out loud, he had a feeling the older man was paranoid about his wife's seeming frailty and what could happen if she ever fell sick.

He looked at her, and he could only think of one damn thing.

Beautiful.

She was so damn beautiful, he had long stopped counting the number of times he only had to look at his wife, and she would have his heart banging against his chest.

Standing at the opposite of the garden, he saw her suddenly stiffen and begin looking around searchingly. A moment later, her gaze locked with his, and he saw the way she patently relaxed, in a way that made it seem like she didn't feel right until she saw him.

He raised a brow. Missed me?

She made a face. You're so full of yourself. But then her lips curved. Although you're right as always. Shaking her head, Tabitha mouthed, I miss you, husband.

Inclining his head, Nicholas mouthed with mock gravity, I miss you, too, wife.

The first few notes of live music suddenly struck, and his surprised gaze whipped towards its direction.

So that was why there had been a makeshift stage set up, Nicholas realized.

Tabitha had actually invited his favorite band, and in moments, she was standing right in front of him, her cheeks once again a becoming shade of rose.

"Did I manage to surprise you again?" she asked with an excited grin.

"You did," he acknowledged. "And as a reward—" He took hold of her hand. "May I have this dance, wife?"

The word seemed to have caught her in surprise, causing Tabitha to literally squeal out loud, and Nicholas laughed.

Bee realized then what she had inadvertently let slip and was instantly mortified. "I'm sorry! I was just— oh! "

She found herself being literally whirled into the grassy dance floor, and in the next moment, he had her bent backwards in a graceful dip. A breathless, choked laugh escaped Bee, and Nicholas smirked at the sound.

Oh, dear God, how can this exquisite man be her husband again?

Nicholas' lips twitched at the now familiar dazed look on Tabitha's face. "That pedestal you have me on seems to be getting alarmingly higher," he murmured with sardonic humor. "I have a feeling it's going to be hell when I inevitably fall from it."

Being the loyal creature she was, his wife simply laughed. "That's never going to happen."

' Because you're perfect' were the silently implied words to end the argument, and a wry expression crossed Nicholas' handsome face as he swirled and whirled her around.

So damn sweet , he thought.

But at the same time, she was also so damn naïve, he just knew it was going to be the death of him one day.

"Are you happy?"

Her sudden question quickly drew his attention back to her, and Nicholas frowned at

the wistful note in her voice. "Of course I'm happy. Why would you even ask?"

"I just think it would be better if Danny were here with us," Bee confessed.

Nicholas managed to keep his face expressionless at the mention of his son's name. "When was the last time you spoke to him?"

"Yesterday. He knew about today's surprise, and I've tried my best to convince him that we really want him home with us, but—" She gave him an apologetic look. "He's so annoyingly pigheaded. He really thinks he's going to be a third wheel between us."

"Has he mentioned when he plans on coming back?" Nicholas asked with deceptive casualness.

She shook her head. "Have you tried asking him? He says he was able to speak to you yesterday, too."

"Yes, we did get to talk," Nicholas lied without missing a beat. "But it was only for a short while, and I wasn't able to bring it up." The music changed into something slower, and Nicholas pulled his wife close, her head fitting perfectly under his chin.

His wife was damn right about his son being pigheaded, Nicholas thought. He had been sending the boy messages every damn day, but not once had Daniel answered him back. And until his son returned, it was left to Nicholas and Joe to figure a way out of the mess Daniel had created.

The thought of this had Nicholas' lips tightening as it dredged up memories he didn't want to revisit. His last conversation with his lawyer had been frustrating to say the least, and it had left an unsavory taste on his tongue that lingered to this day.

"I've been hearing good things about your new wife," Joe commented over the phone.

"There's no need for you to call her that." Nicholas' tone was brusque. "You know the real score between us."

"I guess I do. But do you?"

"Just get to the fucking point," Nicholas said curtly, "if you have something to say."

"Hey, now——" The lawyer's tone turned conciliatory. "I'm not your enemy here. And all I'm saying is that from what I hear and from what I know...she's a nice girl." Joe paused. "So would it be really that bad if we let the marriage——"

"Carly was someone I had known since I was a kid," Nicholas cut in harshly. "She was supposed to be a good girl. And you know how that went down."

Joe cursed in his mind. He had forgotten about that bitch.

"You need to stop letting the past control your life, Nick. Daniel's found the perfect woman for you, and because he knew you would never have given her the time of the day, he went as far as pulling off this unbelievably elaborate scheme just to give you a chance at happiness."

"He's an idiot," Nicholas said shortly, "to risk our entire fortune——"

"Just give it a damn chance, Nick."

"It was nice talking to you, Joe. Call me when you've found a loophole."

"Nick?" Bee's brows furrowed in concern when her husband gazed down at her unseeingly for a moment. "You've been miles away. Is something wrong?"

His expression instantly cleared, and even as his lips curved as he told her it was nothing, Bee couldn't shake the feeling that he was lying.

"I know this party was over the top," she began anxiously. "But——"

"Stop worrying." Nicholas cupped her face. "This party was perfect ." He bent his head. " You're perfect." And in full view of his entire staff, he covered her mouth with his in a long, deep kiss.

By the time he lifted his head, she was on her toes, her hands gripping his shoulders tightly, body melting against his lean, hard form. She looked up at him, and her heart just couldn't take it anymore.

"You make me so happy," she whispered tremulously. "Just so happy I'm scared I'd wake up and this is all a dream——"

"It's not, baby."

Tears suddenly stung her eyes. "Nicholas." She had planned to keep it a secret for a little bit longer, but him saying that...

The sudden distress darkening her eyes had him asking sharply, "What is it?"

"I have something to tell you." A smile wobbled over her lips. "Just three words, really——"

Not those three goddamn words, Nicholas thought. Because that would be fucking awkward.

And it wasn't.

It was worse.

" Congratulations - I'm pregnant. "

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:57 am

AS TEENAGE CHILDREN from local and nearby orphanages quickly filled up the auditorium of Evergreen's community hall, Bee hastily let go of the stage curtains and felt like kicking herself in the head as she turned away to rejoin her friends.

Her stage fright had been bad enough earlier, she thought glumly, but after seeing the size of the crowd that awaited her, it wouldn't be long now before she either ended up having hysterics or just fainting dead away.

Both Isla and Harry glanced up when Bee came back to their shared dressing room. Her pale face spoke volumes, and the two women simultaneously groaned.

"Oh, Bee, please tell me you didn't," Harry said with a sigh.

"But you did," Isla guessed darkly. "Didn't you?"

Bee collapsed on one of the vacant chairs. "I'm sorry," she said in a small voice. "I just couldn't help it. I felt like I had to take a look—"

"And now you're thinking you can't possibly do it," Harry finished. "Isn't that right?"

Bee bit her lip. "Well..."

"We were in your shoes before," Isla told her, "so we have more than a good idea of what's going through your mind. I know the prospect of talking to those kids is terrifying, but you need to focus on what's important."

"And that's your ability to give them hope," Harry said softly, "just by being you."

Bee swallowed hard as the truth of their words sank in. After taking several deep breaths, she lifted her chin and gave her friends a determined smile. "Alright. Let's do this."

Minutes later, and all three of them were up on stage as the program's host completed the introductions. "For one whole day, these three women will be available to mentor you, listen to your stories and share theirs - today is all about you because you matter."

The event lasted until the wee hours of the night, with the three women and their fifty-plus protégés shedding both tears and laughter as they shared and learned from each other's experiences in life.

It was an infinitely rewarding experience, and Bee couldn't thank her friends enough for encouraging her to participate.

"Does that mean you're up for next month's function as well?" Isla teased.

"Even if I have to sing and dance," she joked, "I'll do it."

"We'll hold you to that," Harry warned her with an impish grin.

Devon and Sean arrived soon after to drive their wives home, and when they asked where Nicholas was, Bee fought hard to keep her smile as she answered, "He's, um, out of town for work."

"Of course." Devon's smooth voice revealed nothing of his unease. Bee's smile was just too bright. It was damnably obvious she was hiding something, and it most likely had to do with her missing husband.

Bee waited until all of Nicholas' friends had driven off before quickly walking to

where Nicholas' driver was waiting.

Keep it together, Bee. Just a few more steps.

Just a few more. But by the time Jerry opened the passenger door for her, it was already too late, and the tears were running down her cheeks.

The silence inside the car was painfully awkward, with Jerry frequently darting worried glances at his employer's wife through the rearview mirror.

She looked woefully alone, her tiny frame swallowed by the vastness of the Bentley's backseat, and her quiet sobs made painfully palpable by the sight of her shaking shoulders.

They had seemed so fine a few days ago , Jerry thought morosely. What in the world could've happened that would make Mr. Sutherland drive off in the middle of the night like the Devil himself was after him?

Unknown to Jerry, the exact same question had been running through Bee's mind. For five days now, if one had to be specific, or ever since she had woken up alone in Nicholas' bed.

At first, she hadn't been concerned at all, thinking that it was work that had him leaving so early. But when night had fallen once more, and there were still no signs of him, that was when she had tried calling him on his cellphone...and had her call transferred to voicemail.

Five days, Bee thought, and she could only cry harder, unable to believe how little time it took for her new life to fall into pieces.

For five days now, she had done her best to keep busy, with Nicholas' foreman

patiently showing her the ropes as she tried to find her place in the ranch and figure out how she could be of help.

And when that wasn't enough, she had tagged along with Isla and Harry, doing what she could to help with their non-profit projects.

Anything to keep herself busy, anything to keep her from thinking that for those same five days, she hadn't gotten a single message or call from Nicholas.

Her phone suddenly rang, the jarring sound making Bee jump in her seat.

But then a thought occurred - that it might finally be Nicholas, and this whole nightmare could be over - and she quickly answered the call. "Hello?"

"Hello, pretty mitria ." The word was Greek for 'stepmother', and at the realization that it was Danny who was calling...

Danny, not Nicholas.

Danny.

From the other end of the line, Daniel frowned at Bee's continued silence. "Hello?"

And then he heard it.

"Danny." Bee's voice caught. "I think I messed up."

The sound of his stepmother's heart breaking...and his own heart broke alongside hers.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:57 am

THIS IS IT , Nicholas thought as he slowly walked up the driveway.

It had recently occurred to him that he had been doing it all wrong by asking strangers to find Daniel's whereabouts.

Those guys might have been experts at finding missing people, but Nicholas' need to keep things under the radar meant doing their jobs with one hand tied behind their back.

If he wanted to find his son, he would be his own best shot since he knew his son better than anyone.

And so for the past five days, he had been flying all over the world, visiting their old haunts one by one, until he finally ended up here: a tiny seaside cottage in Isla de Flores, which he and Daniel stayed in when the boy had asked for "quality time" for his sixteenth birthday.

A tall, good-looking guy came to answer the door at Nicholas' knock. He could've passed as Nicholas' twin if not for the dark locks of his hair, and as their eyes met, the somberness in his son's gaze had Nicholas' chest tightening to the point that he could hardly breathe.

"You know." His voice was flat. "Don't you?"

"That I'm about to be a big brother?"

Shit. It was all Nicholas could think of as words completely failed him. If Daniel

knew about Tabitha's pregnancy, then it meant his son had also recently spoken to her. "How is she?" he forced himself to ask.

"We should go inside——"

"Daniel." Nicholas' voice was steely. "Tell me how she is."

The glare his son shot at him had Nicholas stiffening. He had never seen Daniel lose his temper, but could he really blame his son for doing so now?

The front door slammed shut behind Daniel, and his son advanced towards him, saying in angry accusation, "You left her. She told you about the baby, and you left her, Dad. How could you?"

"Don't fucking make this all on me," Nicholas growled. "You were the one who made this mess to begin with——"

"For your own good," the boy yelled. "I did it for you——"

"You had no fucking right——"

"You were lonely!"

All the words Nicholas had to say burned into ashes at the unmistakable look of anguish on his son's face.

"You were lonely." Daniel's voice became thick with tears. "Even if you never told me, even if you did your best to hide it, even if you had the whole world fooled - I knew it. I saw it. Something in you changed since you got me back, and I'm just tired of seeing you so lonely."

I just want you to be happy, Dad——"

"I am happy, dammit."

"But not enough," Daniel said with a shake of his head.

"I know things in our family weren't ideal at the start, and I know you still blame yourself for the past - but come on, Dad.

Can't you see you've more than made up for it?

You practically turned yourself into a monk just to set a good example for me.

And when I told you I was gay, you didn't just stand by me.

The way you looked at me that day - I'll never forget it.

You were looking at me like you didn't understand why I thought I even had to say it, why I would think that it would matter to you or make you love me less——" Daniel's voice broke.

"Do you know how lucky that makes me, Dad? "

"You're my boy," Nicholas said gruffly. "Or girl. Whatever you want me to call you——"

Despite everything, Daniel couldn't help rolling his eyes even as the urge to bawl his eyes out became harder to resist.

But then Nicholas suddenly hauled him close.

"You're my flesh and blood, dammit. Of course I'd fucking love you no matter what."

Daniel squeezed his eyes shut, but it was just too darn much, and his tears started to fall. "You're the best dad any son could ever have," he said with a sniff, "and I just wanted it to be my turn to make you happy—"

Nicholas swung away at the words. "It's not that easy," he muttered. "And dear God, the risks you took with that fucking contract—"

"There are no risks," Daniel said wearily, "and deep inside, you know it. You know it, Dad. Just like I knew the moment I read her letter...she's meant for us."

Nicholas didn't answer.

Daniel refused to give up in the face of his father's continued silence.

"Do you know why I thought she was right for you?"

" he asked fiercely. "Her whole life was just one tragedy after another.

Everyone she loved was taken away from her.

But somehow...she never lost her ability to smile, and it just made me think.

..if she could go through all that and still find a reason to smile.

..maybe she's the only person who can help you understand.

..you've done enough. You've paid enough. And you're free to be happy again."

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:57 am

THE NEXT MORNING DAWNED bright and clear, but in one particular law office, the mood was dreary and irksome.

Joe hated calling in sick, and he hated it even more now, with his secretary on vacation, and he was left to make do with a scatterbrained temp.

Trying to keep the impatience out of his voice so he wouldn't rattle Beth into making another goddamn awful error like yesterday's mixup, he asked carefully, "Did you get all that? "

"I think, no, um, I'm sure I did, sir."

"Then dictate it back to me, will you?"

"Mr. Paulson needs to be informed about tonight's dinner being rescheduled."

"Go on."

"There's a document on your desk, regarding Alice Winfrey's divorce settlement, and I need to fax it to the Tel Aviv branch before I leave."

"And the last one?" His nose started to itch as he spoke.

"I need to mail out the packet—"

Joe let out a sneeze just as Beth finished, "—to Mrs. Sutherland."

"Yeah, that's right," Joe muttered, having caught the last word the temp said.

In the process of asking if she had indeed gotten that one right, Beth changed her mind instead, saying simply, "I'll work on these then, sir." After putting the receiver down, she cast a final look at the notes she had scribbled for today's to-do list.

Damn, Beth thought with a wince. She really had the most horrible handwriting. She couldn't even tell if she had written Mr. or Mrs., but since Mr. Gilmore had said she got it right...

Mrs. it is , Beth thought as she called for the law firm's in-house courier.

A guy about her age came up to her desk minutes later, and she handed the packet towards him, saying, "Please make sure Mrs. Sutherland personally gets this. Mr. Gilmore has classified this as urgent."

"Gotcha."

And so exactly thirty-four minutes later, a frowning Thomas accompanied the courier to the living room, and Bee ended up with an unexpected packet in her hands.

"Mr. Gilmore says it's urgent," the messenger thought to emphasize.

"Um, thank you. I'll make sure to read it right away." And so she did, waiting only for her visitor to leave before tearing the brown envelope open. The first thing that fell out was a handwritten letter, and it was addressed to her husband.

I still don't think this is a good idea, but I'm a man of my word and I take my oath seriously. That's the only reason why I'm giving you this.

I know Danny might have tricked you into marrying her so, yeah, I can see that's not

the best foundation for a marriage. But it could be worse, you know?

And about the pregnancy...yes, you didn't get the contract clause wrong. Tabitha Sandler had agreed to be on the pill for at least one month prior to meeting you, and you - or rather Danny - was supposed to be the one to provide those pills.

I managed to track the deliveries, and as it turns out, your boy's exceptionally good at this whole con thing. The packaging used for the pills was for a well-known contraceptive, but what Tabitha actually ended up taking was just vitamins.

Which means neither of you had protected sex, and that's how babies are made.

Anyway...I found the loophole you've asked for. It's highlighted in the contract, and you can use it to get out of the marriage without having to worry that Danny might get sued for forgery or fraud.

But if you want my advice - both as your lawyer and as someone who's known you your whole life - give yourself more time to think things through.

I know she's nothing like the women you're known to date, but she isn't all that bad either, is she?

Let me know if you need anything else.

~ Joe ~

Bee's fingers shook as she took the rest of the documents out. She flipped through them, reading the lawyer's comments page after page after page, and it was like having her face slapped, with every issue Mr. Gilmore believed would help Nicholas' case as he sought out of their marriage.

And the more she read, the number she became until she felt dead inside.

Oh, dear God.

She should have known things were too good to be true, should have known there was no possible way for a man like Nicholas Sutherland to actually want to be her husband.

Everything just made more painful sense now.

The way Nicholas had looked at her the first time they met, and it was as if he had a strange creature suddenly dropped on his lap.

The way he had chosen to go along with the deception, just to ensure that his son wouldn't be sued for forgery or fraud.

It all sounded more plausible , she thought dully, than insisting that this was all a mistake, and Nicholas really did want her as his wife.

Her phone rang, and a hysterical laugh escaped her when she saw it was Nicholas calling.

How ironic was this , she thought helplessly. She hadn't heard from him when she wanted to, and now he was calling her, when even the mere thought of hearing his voice was no longer bearable.

NICHOLAS EXHALED HIS breath in relief when he finally heard his wife pick up the phone. "Tabitha?"

Silence.

Tension seeped into him, and he involuntarily tightened his grip on his phone. "I know you have every reason to be mad," he said quietly. "But I promise you, I can and will explain everything as soon as I get back. I have Daniel with me now and——"

"Nicholas."

He stiffened.

"I...know."

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

"Tabitha——"

"There was some kind of miscommunication. Your lawyer had documents for you, and they ended up addressing it to me. So that's how I know——"

"Whatever it made you think," he said fiercely, "it's wrong. Everything's changed——"

Bee closed her eyes. Liar. She wanted to scream and sob the word out. Liar, liar, liar. But more than anything, she wished she could be stupid enough to still believe in him.

"Just wait for me to come home, and we'll fix this." He could feel her hurting, and his inability to do anything about it was driving him batshit. "I promise you, we'll——"

"I really loved you, you know," she whispered.

Nicholas whitened.

"I'm just so ashamed that I was so stupid and foolish——"

"Tabitha——"

"That I left you no choice but to pretend you cared——" Bee's voice broke. "I'm just so sorry."

The line went dead.

Daniel could feel his own face paling when he saw the way his father's hand went limp, his phone slipping from his fingers and falling to the carpet with a heavy thud.

"Dad?"

Nicholas' gaze was bleak as he turned to face his son. "She knows everything."

Daniel's blood went cold. "What do you mean——"

"Just fucking that," Nicholas said tonelessly. "She knows everything—— " Memories of Tabitha's last words lashed his mind, and he bit back an agonized groan.

I really loved you, you know.

I'm just so ashamed.

I'm just so sorry.

"Dad." Daniel's voice broke through the torment of Nicholas' thoughts. "I'm going to call Thomas. I'll make sure he doesn't let mitria leave until we talk things out and make things right..."

But when they finally made it back to the ranch, it was to find out that they were too late.

"I'm sorry, sir," the older man said heavily. "But she was already long gone when you called."

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:57 am

A PAIR OF BOUNCERS dragged a drunk and wildly struggling Horace out of the bar, and his back landed on the pavement with a heavy thud as the men let go unceremoniously.

Horace opened his eyes and saw the people waiting in line to get in taking photos of him as they whispered among themselves in between snickers of derision.

"What the fuck are you looking at?" Horace yelled as he clumsily pushed himself off the ground just to sway alarmingly on his feet. "You fucking—"

Someone threw a used, greasy wrapper from a fastfood chain at him. "Go home, loser!"

Bitter humiliation turned Horace's face beet red as the crowd's jeering laughter made him feel like shrinking and wilting inside.

Stumbling away, Horace began the long, tiring walk of shame to get home, and with every step, his rage just kept burning and burning until he felt like he had literally turned himself into a walking time bomb.

It's all that bitch's fault, Horace thought viciously. Goddamn that bitch . His life was hell because of Tabitha Sandler, who no doubt fancied herself now as some rich hoity-toity gal just because she had the devil's own luck getting married to a billionaire asshole from Texas.

Stupid bitch had probably spouted out all kinds of lies about him just to get revenge.

And the bitch certainly knew how to send a man on his knees.

Cowboy What's-His-Face had bought the factory just to have Horace fired in a snap, and all the perks and luxuries he had been used to went away with it.

The company car. The paid clubhouse membership. His very fucking name and reputation.

He was a pariah now, and because that bitch also had some lawyers digging out skeletons from everyone's closets, sexual harassment complaints from decades ago had suddenly resurfaced and allowed the factory to terminate Horace without reference and pension.

Fucking bitch.

He would make her pay one day. Make her pay real bad. Just had to sober up and he would drive all the way to Texas and fucking kidnap and rape her. Cut her legs off so she'd be permanently on her knees and suck his dick all day long.

Just had to sober up——

A taxi cab drove past Horace before slowing down to park in front of the town's only motel.

Well, would you look at that?

If he was lucky, a stripper could be getting out, and maybe he could get her to service him for an IOU.

The passenger door finally opened, and Horace licked his lips in anticipation.

Come on, come on——

Slim, denim-clad legs swung out, but Horace didn't let it get him down. Hookers could still wear jeans, too, he told himself. And that was a damn progressive thought, so those fucking feminist old witches from management really had it all wrong about him.

The cab driver gave his passenger a hand with her overnight bag before speeding off. The woman turned, and the sight of her was like getting a bucket of ice-cold water thrown right at his face.

God fucking damn.

Was that really Tabitha Sandler he was seeing?

He watched her head to the front desk, and his own feet lurched into movement. Closer and closer. Until he was near enough to hear her speak——

"Just for one person, yes," he heard her say to the receptionist, and the voice was unmistakable.

Goddamn bitch was back.

And Horace was in the right place and time to give her a nice, proper welcome.

A RENTAL PICK-UP TRUCK similar to what Nicholas drove back home was already waiting on standby by the time his private jet arrived at a small county-owned airport located just a few miles away from Tabitha's hometown.

After instructing his head of security to continue monitoring Tabitha's cellphone activity, Nicholas drove straight to his wife's old address, and throughout the twenty-

minute ride, a rare mix of terror and desperation continuously threatened his self-control.

Ever since landing in Georgia, he had been unable to shake off a pervasive sense of danger, like a sixth sense warning him that his wife was in danger.

When he finally arrived at his destination, the sight that awaited him did nothing to help alleviate his concerns.

All he could do was feel sick to his stomach at the place Tabitha had called home for so many years.

It didn't feel fucking right, that she had to live in a dump like this, while he had just been a two-hour's flight away, with more money than he could spend in several lifetimes.

If only he had known her sooner.

If only he had listened to Joe and didn't let the past cast a shadow on every decision he made.

If only.

Then she might not have left him - might not be all alone now, pregnant, hurt, and vulnerable to all the despicable horrors that plagued the world.

Even knowing that she couldn't possibly be home, he still found himself moving, a part of him needing to know more about her and see for himself the house that served as the setting of her earlier years.

The front door was unlocked, and it swung open with a loud creaking sound.

Unknown to Tabitha, he had also instructed one of his finance managers to purchase the property from the bank, and while he had yet to make up his mind about what to do with it, he had his manager settle all its outstanding bills in the meantime.

And since that should include electricity—

A flick of the light switch eradicated the darkness that had swathed the entire home, and Nicholas sucked his breath as memories instantly flooded him. In the short amount of time they had been together, Tabitha would occasionally share with him stories from her childhood.

His gaze fell on the framed photo on the center table.

It's my favorite picture of my parents. They were out grocery shopping, and they had three-year-old me in the cart.

A charming story...but what she had kept to herself was that the frame housing it was nothing but cheap plastic now, and the antique silver frame she spoke of had probably been sold off to pay for her Great-Aunt's treatments.

As Nicholas looked around, he found evidence everywhere.

The shelves that she once told him had been filled with books were now empty.

The mahogany table that had been in her family for generation was gone now, and in its stead was another cheap, plastic replacement.

It was cheap fucking plastic every goddamn place he looked, when Tabitha deserved silk and velvet.

And she had been too damn proud to tell him any of this , Nicholas thought grimly.

Stepping back out, he found himself breathing hard as a sudden, strangling feeling of desperation ravaged him.

Where are you, baby?

Come back to me.

Please .

His hand shook as he pulled his phone out from his pocket. He had promised to call Daniel regularly and keep him abreast, the only way to convince his son to stay behind and let Nicholas do his groveling on his own.

But before he could hit Daniel's number on speed dial, his phone suddenly rang, and he sucked his breath when he saw his head of security's name flash on the screen.

Answering the call, he asked right away, "Have you found her?"

"She's down at the local hospital——"

Nicholas paled. "Has something happened?" But he was already walking back to his car as he spoke, his body seemingly switching to autopilot mode as he got behind the wheel and got the GPS navigator started.

"We've been informed she's fine, but from what we could gather, a case of break-in was reported and——" The other man's tone turned remorseful. "I'm sorry, sir, but there's been mention of physical battery and rape..."

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:57 am

NICHOLAS COULDN'T BELIEVE how bad she looked when he entered the hospital room and saw her lying alone in the bed, small, pale, thin, and all bruised up. She had one blackened eye, a cut on her lip, a bite mark on her neck, and bruises all over her arms.

And those were just the things he could see , Nicholas thought grimly.

The only consolation was that Horace Garris was worse off, with Bee having eventually succeeded in fending him off by literally poking her fingers into his eyes, kneeling him on the groin, and - for the final blow - striking him unconscious by hitting his head with the sharp edge of the table lamp.

He stayed in the chair next to her bed, keeping a silent vigil as he tried to figure the best way to apologize and convince her—

Tabitha started to stir, and he straightened in his seat. Her eyes slowly fluttered open, and he tensed.

Bee hurt everywhere, and it took a while for her eyes to focus, and her mind to accept that she was not dreaming.

It really was Nicholas, and he was looking at her...

Like he cared.

Stop that, Bee!

This man had never been really her husband, had never really wanted someone like her, and it was time she stopped acting and thinking like it wasn't so.

"Tabitha." His deep, gravelly voice had Bee reluctantly lifting her head. "I'm sorry this happened. It's my fault——"

The vehement shake of her head cut his words short. "Please don't think that." Bee was dismayed. "It's not your fault——"

"But it is." Forcing himself to continue meeting her gaze, he told her in no uncertain terms what he had done to Horace and why the man's subsequent downfall could've made him feel he had nothing to lose in attacking her.

Afterwards, he waited for Tabitha to condemn him for being careless and withholding things from him, but instead, she simply shook her head, her gaze filled with dismay... for him.

"I still don't think it's your fault."

And that was that. She had almost died because of him, and she was worried about how he felt.

She was just that kind of girl , Nicholas thought painfully, and a part of him had always known that.

The part that subconsciously, from the beginning, Joe, Daniel, and just about everyone else was right about her.

Tabitha was a good person, the kind that would always find it easy to forgive and forget.

But would she also be the kind , Nicholas wondered tensely, to give him a second chance?

Bee knew the exact moment when everything about Horace was forgotten, and it was time to speak about their other...issues. It was in the way he was looking at her now, the way he slowly reached for her hand, and when his fingers curled over hers, it just suddenly happened, and she couldn't stop it.

The tears fell, and she hurt. So badly.

Because it had just occurred to her that this might be the last time she'd ever feel his touch again.

"I want to stay married to you, Tabitha."

Bee could only shake her head, the tears falling faster. Dutiful and honorable as always , she thought painfully. But she couldn't have him living a lie for the rest of his life just because of her and the baby.

"Please." Nicholas had never begged in his entire life, but it turned out to be a lot easier than he imagined, when everything that mattered was at stake. "Just give me a second chance——"

"Please just stop," Bee whispered brokenly. "You never wanted to marry me, Nicholas——"

"But I do now," he gritted out.

"You're just saying that because you feel guilty about what happened," she cried out.

"No!" His grip on her hand tightened. "I'm saying it because it's true. And you're

right, I didn't want to marry you at the start, but I wanted you. From the very start, I wanted you, dammit. And the longer you were with me, it became something more. Something else entirely——"

"And yet you left," she choked out, "when I told you I'm pregnant."

He whitened.

"And you were gone for so long——"

"I'm sorry," he said rawly. "The moment you told me you were pregnant, it just hit me then that I couldn't lie to myself any longer. That I had to make a choice, and I needed to get away and think. I spent the days looking for Daniel——"

Bee didn't understand what he was saying. "Look for him?"

"He might have been calling you every day, but he was lying about his phone calls to me. He was hiding from me, Tabitha, and not even my best investigators could find him. The whole time I was gone, I was just trying to track him down. I wanted to talk to him——"

Because he wanted to know, Bee couldn't help thinking, why his son could be so stupid.

Nicholas, seeing the look on Tabitha's face, said sharply, "It's not what you're thinking.

" And when she only looked at him, he said savagely, "I'm not lying, dammit.

And if you want the whole fucking truth - I didn't really know at the start why I needed to see him.

I just felt I had to, and it was only when I found him, and we started talking - when I heard his reason for choosing you——" He brought her hand to his lips.

"I realized Daniel was right. You were what I needed.

And I still need you. I will always need you. Because I——"

"Please!" The word came out in a sob, Bee tearing her hand out of his hold when she realized what he had been about to say. "Please just don't say that. Please d-don't lie——"

"I'm not lying——"

"But you are. I know you are."

And she couldn't afford to let herself believe anything else.

Because self-respect was all she had left.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:57 am

"MORNING, mitria. Breakfast is served."

Rubbing still-groggy eyes as she sat up, Bee saw Danny coming in with a fully loaded tray in his hands. "Oh, Danny. You don't have—" The tray was now on her lap. "Err, thank you, I guess."

"You're welcome," the eighteen-year-old said cheerfully as he settled himself in the floral stuffed armchair next to the window. Raising the veggie shake in his hand in a toast, he said with a smile, " Bon appétit, mitria ."

It had been almost a month since the attack happened, which meant she only had three days of recuperation left. Three days, and then she would be out of his control, and she could move on and figure out the next chapter in her life.

"You're stressing yourself unnecessarily again," Daniel guessed with a sigh, having seen the familiar faraway look in his stepmother's eyes.

Bee immediately felt defensive. "No, I'm not." And then she started shoving slices of pancake into her mouth, one after another, just to have an excuse not to get into another conversation with Danny about his father.

The boy thought the world of Nicholas, and that was understandable. Many cowboy fathers might've tried to lasso the homosexuality out of their sons or something, but Nicholas had done the opposite.

So yes, she got why Danny was so keen on convincing her to feel the same about his dad, but what her soon-to-be former stepson didn't understand that had never been the

issue. She thought the world of Nicholas Sutherland, too. Had since so from the start and still did.

It was the memories of all the things she had done as the so-called Mrs. Sutherland that she couldn't bear to think about - and it was those same tortuous memories that made her unable to stay in his presence for long.

"Mitria ..." The mattress dipped under Daniel's weight as he sat on the edge of the bed, his heart heavy at the way tears had started rolled down silently his stepmother's cheeks. "Is being here with us really that bad?"

"I just can't stand it," she whispered. "Being with him and..." Remembering how foolishly forward she had once been, flirting with him, seducing him, even giving him a blowjob as a monthsary gift—

A choked sob escaped her, and the sound made Daniel swallow hard. He had been hoping his dad would find a way to patch things up with Bee, and that they could still be a family, but seeing her so miserable all this time made him realize just how selfish he was being.

"Are you really not in love with him anymore?"

That's not the issue here. It was what she wanted to say, but because she was just too tired and emotional, her pregnancy making her hormones crazy moody, she could only shake her head, not knowing that Nicholas himself stood outside her bedroom.

The door, which Daniel had left half open, allowed him to see and hear everything.

Daniel saw his father's face whiten at seeing his wife shake her head in response to his question. He started to speak, but his father had already walked away.

Wiping her tears from her cheeks, Bee took several deep breaths and used the time to calm herself. Just three days, she reminded herself. Three days, and then she could leave the ranch for good, and just love him from afar.

SHE WAS NO LONGER IN love with him . The realization echoed over and over in his mind, and he found himself doing something completely out of character as he drove to the nearest bar and started drinking in broad daylight.

Anything to get rid of the memory of seeing Tabitha shake her head when his son asked her if she still had any feelings left for him.

But it didn't work, the pain seemingly too much that the memories just kept hurting.

He had fucking tried. God, how he had fucking tried, ever since he had practically blackmailed her into convalescing at the ranch, to make her see that marriage to him wouldn't be so bad.

He had bought her gifts every day. Flowers. Jewelries. Whatever food her pregnancy hormones had her craving. But while she always smiled and thanked him politely, none of it had worked in breaking down the walls that she seemed to put up every time he was around.

He had tried asking her out on dates, but she always had one excuse or another to say no.

And yet she always said yes whenever Harry, Isla, or his own damn son invited her out, was always ready to pitch in or lend a helping hand every time a non-profit org, small or big, came knocking on their door.

And what he hated most of all was how she was getting a little too damn close to the bodyguard he had hired to look after her until Horace's trial reached its destined end,

and the man was locked up for good.

If only Drake Morrison hadn't come so highly recommended, Nicholas would have long fired him and replaced with someone else, preferably someone without a dick.

Nicholas asked for the bartender to refill his glass, and as he watched the other man pour another shot of bourbon into his glass, he wondered broodingly if he had accidentally hit on the real reason behind his wife's change of heart.

Had she stopped loving him because she had found someone more deserving of her?

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:57 am

"HEADING SOMEWHERE? " Nicholas asked the next morning when he saw his wife coming down the stairs and looking exceptionally lovely in a cream-colored pantsuit.

"San Antonio," she answered hesitantly, "for a board meeting."

"One of your non-profits?"

She nodded.

"Let me drive you then, since I need to head up to the office as well."

Her eyes widened. "Oh, but you don't have to——"

"I know," he said pleasantly. "But I want to."

Outside, Nicholas bit back a curse when he saw Drake already waiting by the Bentley.

"Good morning, Mr. Sutherland, Mrs. Sutherland."

Too damn fucking handsome to be a bodyguard , Nicholas thought darkly. When Drake started to open the door, Nicholas derived a lot of pleasure in saying, "That won't be necessary." He slid a possessive arm around his wife's waist. "I'll be the one driving her to the city——"

"Mr. Sutherland?" Thomas came out of the main house, the wireless receiver in his

hand. "It's a phone call from one of your partners in Munich."

Fuck.

Seeing her chance to avoid getting trapped in a confined space with Nicholas, Bee said quickly, "You should take that. I can just go with Drake and Jerry as planned." She moved away, and her heart squeezed as she felt his arm loosen its hold.

Nicholas' face hardened as he watched her smile up at the bodyguard before stepping inside the Bentley.

After closing the door, Drake glanced at him, murmuring, "Mr. Sutherland."

He had the strongest urge to drive a fist into the bodyguard's face, but managed to control the impulse. "Make sure nothing happens to her," he said curtly.

"I'll take good care of her, sir."

Nicholas' jaw clenched. Asshole. That wasn't what he had asked, dammit.

As the Bentley cruised down the highway, Bee couldn't help wondering about the seeming tension she noticed between Nicholas and her bodyguard.

"Drake?"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Has my...has Nicholas spoken to you recently about anything?"

"I was to make sure nothing happened to you."

"And that's it?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Oh well.

Maybe she had just been imagining things.

The weather was pleasantly cool and cloudy when Bee arrived at a clubhouse in San Antonio, with her bodyguard tailing behind her.

As always, the sight of Drake Morrison's dark good looks had most of the women around them sighing and literally batting their eyelashes at him, but Bee's bodyguard didn't even spare them a glance.

It was probably why , Bee thought ruefully, a few women also took the time to shoot envious glares at her back.

If looks could kill, she would have long been dead.

Several times over even, since people's interest in Drake had been quite intense, from the very first time his photo had gone viral and joined the select ranks of The World's Sexiest Bodyguards.

There was only one other person around when Bee entered the boardroom, and Drake came to stand behind her as she took her usual seat.

Today would be her last time to attend meetings like this , Bee couldn't help thinking. In two days, she would be moving out of the ranch and into an apartment near the city headquarters of Nicholas' company. It wasn't complete freedom, but at least she no longer had to see him every day.

So just hang in there for two days more , Bee told herself. Two days and all this would be over.

Drake bent down, a curious look on his strikingly attractive face as he asked, "What about two days?"

"Oh, um, it's nothing," Bee said quickly with a shake of her head even as she was privately aghast that she had unintentionally blurted her thought out loud.

She placed a hand over her growing belly, the gesture unconsciously protective. This whole business of leaving Nicholas and starting over was stressing her more than what was safe for the baby. Maybe...maybe she should simply jump right in and leave?

It was just two days, anyway. Surely, in the larger scheme of things, it wouldn't really matter that she hadn't been able to fully comply with the month-long rest that the doctor had ordered?

"You're quite the character, Mrs. Sutherland." The words, spoken out of the blue in a soft, malicious drawl, startled Bee into lifting her head and meeting the rather catty gaze of the elegant-looking redhead seated across her.

Chloe , Bee belatedly recalled. The woman was a four-time divorcée, and if rumors were to be believed, the redhead would soon be on her fifth wedding, this time to a Bolivian tycoon whose source of income was dubious to say the least.

"When I learned what kind of woman our dear Nicholas had married—"

Bee couldn't help gritting her teeth at the way the woman spoke his name in a caress.

"I was quite surprised. And your involvement in that ghastly trial in Georgia—"

Chloe gave an affected shudder. "Did you really have to poke that man's eyes out?"

Bee couldn't even find it in herself to feel offended, astonished as she was that there really were women like Chloe in real life. "I was about to get raped," she said finally, "so I had to do what I could."

"But that was just so disgusting..."

"Yes, it was. Wasn't it?" Bee had a hard time keeping her face straight as she realized just how genuinely revolved the other woman was.

"My friends and I were talking about it over lunch," Chloe was sharing, "and after considering all the very visible factors—" The other woman glanced tellingly at Drake for some reason. "That was when we realized why Nicholas would choose someone like you. Because that's your appeal, isn't it?"

Bee was utterly confused. "Sorry?" And what did her bodyguard have to do with her marriage to Nicholas?

Chloe tittered. "Oh, come on, darling. Don't start playing coy now.

We both know you understand me perfectly fine.

Nicholas' just so conservative and decent on the outside, it was only natural he'd need someone like you to balance things out.

" Chloe wrinkled her nose. "Honestly, if I had realized this sooner, I wouldn't have hesitated to play the freak for Nicholas.

I've always thought he was the most exciting one among the SAFEs. "

The media-coined acronym stood for San Antonio's Finest Eligibles, of which Nicholas, along with Devon, Sean, and Logan, was a member of.

Bee had only learned about the name weeks ago, and realizing what it meant had only served to further convince her that she really wasn't meant to be a wife to someone like Nicholas.

And apparently, Chloe and no doubt most of Nicholas' peers, too, thought the same.

"I'm just curious..."

Bee suppressed a sigh, realizing the other woman still wasn't done.

"Is he meant to make your husband jealous?"

She saw Chloe direct another oddly telling glance at her bodyguard and couldn't help frowning. "Excuse me?"

"Oh, please. It's not like the whole world don't know about you two."

Bee stiffened. "If you're saying what I think you're saying——"

"I absolutely am," Chloe cooed just as the doors swung open and the rest of the board members started filing in.

The meeting started soon after, leaving no chance for Bee to ask what Chloe meant. Even so, the other woman's innuendos continued to bother her, and as soon as she and Drake were in the privacy of Nicholas' car, she took her phone out and Googled her name.

A gasp escaped her a moment later.

Tons of gossip reports had been written about her in the past two weeks, and all of them were suggesting that her "closeness" to the bodyguard meant the two of them were having an affair right under Nicholas' nose.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:57 am

"MRS. SUTHERLAND WOULD like you to know she's waiting for you at the study, sir." Thomas' face was somber as he relayed the message, and Nicholas' face hardened.

So this was it, he thought grimly. Just two damn days until she was properly free to leave his home, and she couldn't even wait that long.

Was she really that in love with Drake? The mere thought of another man touching her was enough to put him in a violent mood, and he remained on edge even as he entered the study and found a nervous-looking Tabitha seated on the couch.

She looked beautiful in her rose-printed dress, the fabric fit enough to blatantly advertise the pregnant curve of her belly. As always, the sight of it made him hard, hence the loose trousers Nicholas had recently taken to wearing.

"Hey." The smile that formed on her lips was as tentative as the tone of her voice.

Nicholas knew she was hoping he would smile back, and he almost laughed at how damnably optimistic she was. Did she really think he could smile, knowing that she had come here to let him know she was leaving him for another man?

Not on your life, baby.

He might not be able to force her to stay with him, but he was damn well going to make it as hard and awkward for her to go.

Bee's heart banged nervously against her chest as Nicholas sat next to her on the

couch. It was the closest he had been since she had temporarily moved back to the ranch, and oh dear God, it was making the butterflies in her stomach do the craziest things.

He was just so, so beautiful. Still the most beautiful man in her eyes, really, and oh, how she ached to once again have her fingers running through the silky golden locks—

Stop that, Bee!

Their marriage had never been real, and so she had never any right to touch him.

"Well then, wife..." Nicholas saw her visibly start at how he had addressed her, and he asked mockingly, "Is something wrong?"

Bee could only shake her head silently.

"It seemed so long ago," Nicholas murmured, "when you would've replied differently every time I called you that. You'd be blushing and smiling at me, and you'd address me with that one word you're so inordinately fond of. Husband, wasn't it?"

A stricken look crossed her face. "Why are you doing this?" Her voice shook, pain chipping away at her heart with every memory his words were forcing her to remember. "I know I've made a fool of myself—"

"Is that why you decided to turn the tables," he asked flatly, "and make a fool of me this time?"

Bee paled, her hurt all but forgotten at the realization that Nicholas, unlike her, knew what everyone had been saying about her and Drake. "I'm s-sorry," she stammered. "I didn't know people were talking about us that way."

Nicholas' jaw clenched. She was sorry that people had talked...but she wasn't sorry about falling in love with another man?

"I would never want to shame you."

No. She wouldn't. She wasn't that type of girl, and maybe...maybe it was also time to accept that he wasn't the type of guy who deserved her.

Nicholas suddenly felt weary. "Why did you want to talk to me, Tabitha?"

She swallowed hard. "I just thought...it was time to go."

"There are only two more days left."

Her throat tight with sobs that were suddenly struggling to come out, she could only speak in a stilted voice. "I know."

"Just two more days," he repeated, and the bleakness in his voice made Bee bite her lip hard. But even so, she could only stay behind the protective walls of her heart.

"Is my company truly that unbearable to you?" Nicholas asked dully.

Her heart hurt. God. If only he knew. But all she could do was say the same thing over and over again. "I'm sorry."

He gazed at her, and he couldn't remember feeling this sick, this fucking weak. The moment she left him, the moment she became someone else's, his life would never be the same again—

And before he knew it, he was on his knees, and she was crying. He took her hands in his, and she cried harder.

"I love you, Tabitha."

But his wife only cried, her dark eyes telling him she didn't believe a word he was saying, and terror and desperation grew inside of him. "Tell me." His voice was raw with emotion. "Tell me what to do so you'll believe me—"

"I just can't—"

"At least give me a fucking clue—"

"I'm so sorry—"

"I don't need your apologies," he said hoarsely. "I need you to tell me how to fix this. Didn't you tell me I'm the world's sexiest husband? Am I not that to you anymore? Does Morrison have more abs than I do? Is that fucking it—"

"Nicholas, please!" It hurt to hear him say such things. "It's not like that—"

"But it looks exactly like that," he said bitterly, "as far as the rest of the world's concerned."

"Nicholas, no." Pain was eating her alive at seeing him so broken, and it wasn't right. It just wasn't right, and it hurt. "It's not like that at all—"

"Then stay. Please fucking stay. I'm begging you. Please stay."

"Nicholas—"

"I love you, Tabitha—"

It was too, too much. She could feel herself weakening, and it terrified her.

"I'm sorry."

And then she was running out of the room. Away from him. Maybe even for good.

Leaving him on his knees. His heart in pieces.

He really had lost her.

Bee ran and ran, but the pain didn't leave her, and she fell to her knees with a sob.

God. Oh God. She had thought she was doing the right thing, setting him free.

But now she was no longer sure. All she could see was the ravaged expression on Nicholas' face.

All she could hear were words that he had spoken, words that he should never have said—

Tell me what to do so you'll believe me.

At least give me a fucking clue.

I need you to tell me how to fix this.

She was leaving him because she believed he was only making the best out of the situation — Didn't you tell me I'm the world's sexiest husband?

Am I not that to you anymore?

Does Morrison have more abs than I do?

Is that fucking it?

And her pride hadn't been able to stand that. Her pride. Not self-respect. But pride.

The only time I see you happy is when you're talking to him.

Oh God, all this time she had been protecting her pride while unknowingly forcing him to lose his—

Then stay.

Please fucking stay.

I'm begging you.

Please stay.

Her heart threatened to shatter.

I love you, Tabitha.

Nicholas heard the footsteps first, but he couldn't make himself look up, couldn't risk looking up only to find out it was not her. Because if that happened—

"Nicholas."

And then she was there, kneeling in front of him, her hands cupping his face.

"Husband."

His green eyes were wet when they met hers, and more tears rushed down her cheeks.

"I love you." A smile wobbled over her lips. "I love you so, so much——"

His arms closed about her, his mouth taking her in a sweet, hard kiss that said the rest, and she kissed him back even as she cried and wrapped her arms around his neck.

And the kiss went on forever, as it should be, for it was the happy-ever-after Bee had often read about, and it had now come true.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:58 am

ON ONE FINE SATURDAY morning, Nicholas surprised his wife by driving her to the city and taking her to a beautiful black and gold steamed locomotive. "Happy fourth monthsary, Mrs. Sutherland."

Inside the train, about a hundred guests waited to surprise her, and Bee's eyes teared when she saw numerous familiar faces from the factory she used to work for.

Nicholas watched in quiet satisfaction as people from Tabitha's hometown gathered around his wife, giving her tearful hugs as they congratulated her on her marriage.

It was only when the train's liveried conductor announced that lunch would soon be served that Tabitha's former co-workers temporarily relinquished his wife's attention, and he waited until her searching gaze found his before crooking a finger at her. Come.

A helpless smile formed over her lips. So arrogant.

But her feet moved all the same, and her heart skipped a beat as his arms closed around her.

Green eyes glittered sensually down at Bee, and her heart skipped another beat.

My cowboy angel , she couldn't help thinking.

And he was married to her.

Nicholas chuckled at the adoring look on his wife's face. "I'm still The World's

Sexiest Husband, I take it?"

"Not only that," she said loyally, "but your pedestal's about twenty-five feet high now, too."

He had to bend his head down to kiss her for that, and as with how their kisses always went, it lasted a good amount of time and required an equally good amount of strength for him to end it.

"The rest is for later," he promised her, "and if you're a good girl, I might be persuaded to spanking your ass harder than usual."

"Nicholas!" But as he curled an arm around her waist, he also heard her ask hesitantly, "How hard are we talking about?"

And so it was how the world had their first photo of Nicholas Sutherland laughing while his young wife blushed prettily next to him.

The End

P.S. In case anyone needs to hear this—

Psalm 27:1 The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:58 am

MY MOM LIKED TO SAY my stepdad and I were kindred spirits: hearts full of eternal sunshine, balls of steel, skin as thick as a rhino's carcass, and an impulsive streak that was more than a few miles wide.

Those things, Naomi told me, were what made Josiah propose marriage within three days of meeting her, and those same things, my mom shared with a sigh, were why she had asked him to wait and keep their relationship a secret for three months... times ten.

Naomi had rolled her eyes but soon burst into tears when I threw my arms around my stepdad-to-be and told him I was the luckiest girl in the world.

The rest of the evening happily continued in the same vein, and it was only when coffee and desserts were being served that Josiah got a little serious and told me his story.

I had a privileged childhood, but it was gloomy as hell.

It was then I found out that while Josiah was a fourth-generation Wyomite, he also happened to be the Earl of Daringford, owing to his great-grandfather's noble blood, and with this lofty title came the tradition of the boys in their family being sent off to boarding school on their seventh year.

While British by blood, Josiah had the heart of a cowboy, and his biggest mistake was flippantly saying yes to an arranged marriage and thinking it would all work out. But of course it did not.

Josiah and his haughty aristocrat of a wife had nothing in common, and both of them had only waited until Martha had done her "duty" by giving birth to a son before seeking divorce.

Emotions did not exist in Martha's vocabulary, and this was made appallingly evident when his wife also offered to waive all her rights to custody.

..in exchange for a lifetime of receiving alimony, regardless of whether she married someone else or not.

He had agreed, of course, but Martha's cold-blooded streak had also made him paranoid about the possibility of his son taking after his ex-wife.

To prevent this, Josiah had decided to enroll his son at a local public school instead of Eton, and he had his own ranch hands teach his boy how to ride a horse rather than having him attend a fancy riding school.

He had done everything he could , Josiah had told us wryly, but somehow, his little boy still ended up the frightfully decent sort.

He was a stickler for rules and routines, like the best, uncorrupted version of his mother.

He's a good boy, but I don't think he's all that happy.

I'm hoping, though, now that you two are joining our family, things will start to change. ..

And this time, it was Josiah who had tears in his eyes, and the poignant sight had my mom and I instinctively leaving our seats to give the new man in our lives a big, loving hug.

It just felt the right thing to do at that moment, and when Josiah had hugged us back, it was like serendepity blowing me another kiss.

That was how I liked to think of it, you see.

Sometimes, I'd have this feeling, and it would often turn out to be heaven blowing kisses to point me to the right direction.

I called this feeling serendipity, and I felt it the first time I met Josiah.

..and I felt it again the first time my stepbrother's lips touched mine.

Page 20

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:58 am

IT WAS HALF PAST THREE in the morning, and The Sherrington's library was the only on-site facility that was still open.

.. and happened to welcome minors like me.

The wall-lined shelves were fully stocked, and their fiction selection wasn't bad at all.

Even better, they also offered round-the-clock drink service, and I ordered myself a cup of coffee to make sure I was up until seven.

I was already a few chapters in with the latest Pendergast novel when I heard the room attendant murmur a greeting. I glanced up, curious to see what kind of person would also prefer hitting the library rather than going clubbing or drinking at this time of the night (day?)—

Oh. My. God.

I quickly raised my book up to hide my face while peeking over it.

Tall. Dark. Handsome.

I watched the stranger unfold his length into one of the leather recliners after picking a book from the bestseller selection, and another three-word-phrase flashed in my mind.

Hot. Dude. Reading.

It was the name of one of my favorite Instagram accounts, and as their handle suggested, its feed was populated by photos of beautiful men reading in public.

Just like Mr. Recliner .

I quickly abandoned my seat and transferred to the closest vacant table across him, shameless in my need to gawk more at my new favorite "view".

His good looks were emphatically rugged: dark, prominent brows, deep-set eyes, and a chiseled jaw.

He was very much a man, the way all the guys I had swiped-left on were not, and I especially loved how deeply bronzed his skin was, which made a line from the Ghostbusters theme song suddenly pop up in my head.

I'm afraid of no ghost...

But instead, I found myself silently singing, I'm afraid of no sun, and the rephrased line had me giggling out loud.

Eep!

I quickly hid my face behind my book while composing myself, hoping that the sound didn't draw his attention and make him think I was this childish idiot he was better off avoiding. What was wrong with me?

Unlike most girls my age, I could usually handle myself around the opposite sex, but it wasn't because I was frigid or batted for a different team.

The guys I knew just didn't meet my ideal, which until this day, ran more along the lines of beautiful, preppy-looking boys who went for slacks rather than jeans and

preferred cars over bikes.

City-sleek and wholesome, that had always been my type, and Mr. Recliner with his cowboy hat, denim jacket, and boots was anything but.

And yet...

I just couldn't stop staring at him, and before I knew it, I already had my phone out.

Just one photo, I promised myself.

But before I could hit Click , the room attendant had suddenly blocked my view and flashed me a kind smile as he gestured towards a sign on the wall.

NO PHOTOS ALLOWED

Oops!

I returned his smile sheepishly. "Sorry." I obediently dropped my phone back into my jacket's pocket, but as soon as the waiter moved away, I quickly peeked at Mr. Recliner's direction in hopes that he hadn't noticed my stupid little misstep—

What?

I rubbed my eyes, but the leather recliner he had been occupying earlier remained empty.

Where did he go?

It had only been mere seconds - less than a minute, tops - since I last saw him.

How could he have disappeared so fast?

I turned around without thinking, feeling a strangely frantic urge to look for him, and the moment I looked behind me, I nearly fell out of my chair.

Mr. Recliner...had turned into Mr. Chair!

Or rather, he was suddenly seated on the table behind me, muscular arms crossed over his chest, and his gaze narrowed sharply at my direction.

"Looking for me?"

His voice was as perfectly rugged as the rest of him and too impossibly sensual to resist. I found myself playing Musical Chairs all by my lonesome as I moved to my third seat for the night, and I noticed Mr. Recliner's dark brows pleating with a surprised frown when I took a seat across him.

"Hi." I flashed him a dimpled smile and barely managed to resist the urge to bat my lashes at him. "I'm Sarah." This close, I couldn't help but notice how he was even more gorgeous than I thought possible, with extraordinarily long lashes framing eyes that were the dreamiest shade of blue.

"Damian." His voice was curt, but his blue eyes had turned strangely watchful, almost if he was waiting for me to react, and I tried not to squirm in my seat as a worrying thought occurred to me. Oh no. What if he was a celebrity, and I had just offended him by not recognizing who he was?

Think, Sarah, think!

I started mentally running through the list of famous people I knew, which unfortunately wasn't much since I preferred to spend most of my time with fictional

2D ones.

Let's start with A to Z for country singers, Sarah.

Could he be the one who sang Old Town Road with Billy Ray Cyrus.

What was his name again? Lil...Wayne? Or could he be.

..a bandmate of Nicole Kidman's husband?

That guy sang country, didn't he? And his name was.

..Kevin...Nash? Garnett? No, wait. That guy was blond, and his name wasn't Kevin, but Keith something—

"Shouldn't you be in bed by now?"

Still in the midst of trying to remember Nicole Kidman's baby daddy's surname, the question completely caught me off guard, and I blurted out the first thing in my mind.

"Only if you're in it—"

Oh my God, if looks could kill, I would be so, so dead by now!

"I'm kidding," I said quickly. "Just kidding!"

He was still scowling at me, but....

Was that...was he...

My eyes widened, and I rubbed my eyes again, but it was still there, and there was no mistaking the dark flush that had stained the aristocratic panes of his cheeks.

Oh my God.

And almost as if he could read my mind, Damian started glaring at me as well.

"Did I just—"

"Don't even think about it," he warned.

"Make you blush?"

"The hell you did."

"But—" I pointed gingerly to his cheeks.

"I've been drinking," he said shortly.

"Um." I couldn't help casting a dubious look at the tea set on his table, which was as classic as it went, with his porcelain cup filled with Earl Grey tea.

"Believe what you want," he snapped.

"Then I believe you like me," I teased.

His lip curled. "You'd like that, don't you?"

"Very much."

"Unfortunately...you're wrong."

Leaning forward, I whispered, "I think you're lying."

Damian leaned forward as well, but instead of whispering, he replied in a perfectly succinct voice, "I think you're crazy."

I barely managed to hold my laughter back. " Oh no ." I clutched at my chest as I leaned back against my seat. "I think you just made me fall in love with you."

And this time, I saw it.

"Aha!"

It disappeared as soon as I spoke, of course, but by then it was too late.

"I know what I saw," I told him smugly, "and I totally made you smile."

"You're imagining things."

"No, I'm not." My singsong tone had his lips twitching, but this time I knew better than to point it out.

"Do you live around here?" Although I genuinely wanted to know more about him, I was also hoping that little twitch would eventually turn into a smile, which I was willing to bet would be heartbreakingly sexy. "You do, right?"

He grunted.

"I'll take that as a yes, and since you live around here, you probably work around here, too, so..." I studied the way he was dressed as I tried to guess what his occupation was. "I'm guessing you do some kind of ranch work?"

Another grunt, but he also reached for his book at the same time and started making a show of reading it. Too bad for him, though, I was too thick-skinned (and crushing on

him too hard) to care. "I don't know much about ranching," I told him, "so if I'm wrong about this, don't laugh——"

"No."

"I haven't——"

"Being a cowboy isn't a job title."

Oh my gosh.

Did he just read my mind?

The lengthening silence seemed to prompt Damian into looking up, and he let out an exasperated sound when he saw the way I was staring at him.

"That's it, you know," I told him seriously. "That's the sign we're meant to be. It's serendipity——"

"Oh, for fuck's sake."

"It is——"

"Past your bedtime," he cut me off with a pointed look at my wristwatch. "That's what it is."

"Stop treating me like a kid," I protested with a pout. "I'm eighteen, not eight."

"There doesn't appear to be any difference," he retorted, "with the way you're——" He broke off when I shot out of my seat. "Where——" He stopped speaking again as I slid into the seat next to him and pressed close, enough to have my already straining

breasts brush against his arm.

"There ." The breathless note of my voice didn't surprise me at all, considering how hard and fast my heart was beating. "Is there a difference—"

"Are you like this with every guy?" Damian gritted out.

I quickly shook my head, wide-eyed and breathless at the heat suddenly blazing from his eyes.

"Don't lie," he growled.

I shook my head again, saying vehemently, "I'm not!" And it was the truth. "I promise—"

"So why me?" he demanded roughly.

"I d-don't know—"

Damian cursed under his breath, and I jerked in surprise.

"I can feel your nipples, dammit." The heat in his eyes smoldered into a sensual blaze as he spoke, and oh God...

A whimper escaped me as I felt my nipples tighten and poke harder against his arm.

Ooooooh.

The look in his glittering blue eyes was feral now, and he looked like he wanted to eat me alive.

"This is fucking crazy, damn you."

I just kept shaking my head. It was the only thing I felt capable of doing, my mind no longer functioning properly. No guy...just no guy had ever made me feel this way before, and I could barely keep myself still on my seat.

"Goddammit."

But even as he kept cursing the situation we found ourselves in, he didn't move away, and I didn't fail to notice the way his nostrils flared the moment he saw me nervously licking my lips.

Whether he admitted it or not, he wanted this, too, and the realization made me feel heady and ache in places that had never ached before.

"Serendipity," I whispered. Heaven had blown me another kiss, and it was pointing to Damian's direction.

"Fuck serendipity."

And Damian shot out of his seat, leaving me to gape in surprise as he strode away without even looking back.

"Wait!"

But he was already out of the lounge room, and I found myself running after him.

"Will you please wait?"

He was angry. That was obvious enough, and while I had a feeling I was the one who made him angry, I had no idea how that happened.

"Damian, please!"

He was only several steps away from the hotel elevators now while I still had a few meters to catch up to. I started to run...but ended up gasping out as I crashed into another hotel guest. The guy had just entered the lobby, and if not for his quick reflexes, I'd have completely fallen on my butt.

"Whoa." The stranger helped me regain my balance and I rubbed my temple, which seriously hurt. "Are you alright?"

I opened my mouth to answer, but it was Damian's icy voice that responded to him first.

"She's fine."

My head jerked up as long strong fingers curled around my wrist, and I only caught a glance of the other guy's bemused expression...just before Damian started dragging me towards the elevators.

"Where are we going?" I asked breathlessly as we stepped inside the first elevator that opened its doors.

Instead of answering, he asked sharply, "Are you alright?"

I beamed up at him. "Did I make you worry?"

"Just answer the question," he snarled.

"You are worried!"

"Oh, for fuck's sake."

"And jeal— oww! " I ended up yelping in pain when he suddenly pinched my cheeks. "That hurt!"

"Good."

"Good?" I was once again staring up at him, wide-eyed. " I'm hurt, and it's good? " I shook my head in wonderment. "Does that mean you're a sadist? Or does that make you a Dom?"

"What the hell?"

"I'm cool with either," I told him helpfully. "Whether you need me to be an M or a sub—"

His hand covered my mouth, and as I blinked at him, he hissed, "Will you shut up? You're going to get me arrested if you keep talking like that."

"But there's no one around," I protested as soon as his hand left my mouth.

"You shouldn't get used to talking like that either way," he muttered.

"But I'm right, aren't I?"

He rolled his eyes.

"You like me."

"No, I—"

Impatient at his stubborn refusal to acknowledge the burning truth between us, I decided to just do it ala Michael Jordan and take The Shot.

So I stood on my toes and kissed him.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:58 am

AT FIRST HE WAS STIFF and unresponsive, his lips cold, hard, and unmoving under my mouth.

After that, he was furious, the force of his emotions burning through the fierce manner in which he gripped my shoulders as he tried to push me away with a hiss. "Stop it."

But of course I didn't stop. I couldn't, not with that feeling making me breathless and weak in the knees, not with serendipity whispering in my ear and making my heart race like it never had before.

I'm sorry, Damian. I'll happily be a masochistic Sub for you, but not now. Not over this. Not when I think God gave you to me.

So instead of stopping, I tried harder, and this time I dared to lick his lower lip with my tongue.

He probably wouldn't believe me at this point, but the truth was, I had never kissed a guy in my entire life.

I liked my novels racy, though, and all those pages read totally paid off when I felt Damian's lean, hard body jerk against mine.

"Fuck."

My handsome Dom do so loved to curse, but I didn't mind at all. I found it absolutely sexy, and a hundred times sexier was the way he suddenly had me backed against the

wall, which felt like a scene straight out of my favorite steamy romance.

"Damn you."

The words made me want to giggle even as my toes curled hard at the rough rasp of his voice. All this cussing was a turn on, but if I told him that, Damian would probably turn himself into a monk just to be perverse.

"Remember," he grated out. "You wanted this."

I do. I will.

But there was no time to answer, with Damian already fisting my hair as he bent his head down and sucked on my tongue hard.

Ooooooooooooooh .

It was like being struck by a lightning bolt of pleasure, and the hands that I kept clenched behind my back moved on their own, first to clutch at his shirt, but when he angled my head to deepen the kiss, it suddenly didn't feel enough, and my hands moved up to press against his chest. Which was pure muscle, and so darn sexy it had me whimpering against his lips.

When I heard the elevator chime out as its doors slid open, I half-expected, half-dreaded the kiss ending, and it did.

..but only for Damian to sweep me up in his arms. So it wasn't over then?

I pulled back a little, cautiously hopeful, and as soon as our gazes met, he said grimly, "It's too late for you to back out. "

Oh!

I quickly hid my face against his neck so he wouldn't catch me smiling. Silly, handsome Damian. The thought of backing out hadn't even crossed my mind, and there was only excitement and a rather sensual thrill of fear when I felt him take his card key out to unlock his door.

His room was a suite, and since Josiah had booked the same type of room for my mom and me, I had a fair idea of how much it cost. Did that mean he was well off then?

It would be nice if it were so, but honestly, it didn't matter.

As much as I loved to tease Naomi by pretending to be an airhead, she had raised me too well to be one, and I totally didn't need a guy to make a living for me or— oh my God!

My mental ramblings came to an abrupt halt when I felt Damian laying me down on his massive bed, and I found myself staring up at his gorgeous face.

The bedside lamp's incandescent lighting cast shadows along his jaw, emphasizing its contours.

Our gazes locked when I raised my fingers to trace one edge, and after a moment he reached for my hand, and I caught my breath when he nibbled on the tip of my fingers.

After releasing my hand, he asked softly, "Nervous?"

"Just a little," I admitted.

"Shall I let you go then?"

I shook my head right away, not even having to think of this, and I saw his jaw clench at the speed of my response.

"So be it."

My entire body started tingling as I watched Damian lower his head, and my breasts swelled and ached under the tight bodice of my dress the moment I felt the heat of his breath caress my skin.

"Fuck."

And the weight of his powerful body was finally pressing down against me.

Oh God.

For one long moment, it was just his lips and tongue, and he was such a masterful kisser that it was more than enough. He kissed me long and hard, kissed me to the point that my thoughts disintegrated, kissed until I moaned against his lips and gasped for breath as soon as he lifted his head.

"Damian."

He growled at hearing his name on my lips.

"Fuck."

And then his hands were moving swiftly to undress me: first, my jacket, then my dress, and in seconds, I was down in my undies.

For a fleeting second, I felt self-conscious and panicky - what if he didn't like how I looked?

What if he thought my body too curvy? I started to cover myself, anxiety making me tremble, but the moment I raised my hands, Damian's voice whipped over me in a command.

"Don't."

My gaze raised to his, and I found myself sucking my breath at the hard glitter of desire in his icy blue eyes.

"Let me look at you."

My arms fell back to my sides as his desire-laced gaze roamed over me, and I felt every inch that his eyes touched tingling.

..melting...aching...until I was trembling for another reason.

Damian wanted me, and unlike earlier, he wasn't even making the slightest attempt to hide it.

I could feel it in the way his body had turned rigid and tense above me, could hear it as his breathing grew harsh, and he started to pant.

He wanted me , and oh God, the knowledge drove me crazy, and before I knew it, I was writhing and unconsciously begging him with my eyes.

"Fuck."

And without warning, his head dipped just as his hands yanked the cups of my bra

down. I gasped in shock, my body arching involuntarily, and the sudden movement caused one nipple to pucker straight against his lips.

Oh!

My face flamed. Yes, I was bold...but not that bold, and I found myself stammering out an apology. "S-Sorry, I d-didn't mean..." My voice faltered when I saw the mocking light in his gaze, and it was almost as if I could hear his voice drawling out in my mind.

Didn't you?

And I found my whole body blushing at the point. Argh! I finally remembered to try pulling away, but the moment he sensed me moving, Damian immediately reached for the breast closest to his mouth, and a gasp broke out of me just as his gaze captured mine.

Blue eyes still holding mine captive, Damian slowly closed his lips over my nipple.

Aaaaaaaaaah.

It was heaven and hell, and all thoughts of resistance and inhibitions fled the moment his tongue laved around my nipple.

I wanted it to end because it felt too good, but I also never wanted it to stop for the same reason.

A fleeting thought crossed my mind as I trembled in his hold: Was this how any man's mouth on my breast would feel, or was it just him?

But then Damian started sucking on my nipple, and the thought disappeared in a

flash.

Didn't matter, I thought dazedly. Nothing mattered as long as he kept on sucking my nipple, and as he moved to the other breast to attend to it the same way, I found myself blindly reaching up to clasp his head to my straining chest.

Don't stop. Please. Please don't stop.

I truly thought I was only crying the words out silently in my mind, but the way Damian's big, hard body shuddered over mine told me I had actually ended up moaning them out loud.

"Fuck."

And now, it was my turn to shudder and moan, the sound of Damian cursing never failing to whip my body up in a sexual frenzy. His head moved down, and I didn't even think twice of parting my legs open—

"Good girl."

Even as the words he rasped out made me blush all over, it was also impossible to deny how lovely they made me feel.

Maybe...I was an M, after all. Maybe. It was my last hazy thought, my brain shutting down completely the moment I felt Damian slowly trace the cleft of my vagina with his middle finger.

Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah.

Words utterly failed me, my mind simply incapable of describing the sheer wanton pleasure of feeling Damian touch the most secret and intimate part of my body.

It was like...it was like being owned and petted at the same time, and I wanted more.

Needed more. So much that I found myself begging for it.

" Please ," I whimpered. It wasn't enough that he simply kept stroking with just one finger, and at such a leisurely pace it was as if he was doing it only to torture me.

"Please what?"

"More."

"Then..." A gasp escaped me as his finger briefly left my folds, and I bit my lip when I felt him reach for my panties. "Can I get this out of the way?"

I barely finished nodding when he was already inching it down my legs, and by the time the scrap of cotton was tossed to the floor, I could already feel my folds turning silky wet as they throbbed and quivered for his attention.

" God, you're hot." I could only blush and squirm under his possessive scrutiny of my flesh, and when his fingers parted my folds open, I couldn't even remember to feel shy or afraid. I simply arched up—

"I need to know how you taste..."

My body buckled.

Oh God. Taste. He was going to taaaaaaaaste——

His tongue pushed inside my folds.

Meeeeeeeeeeeeee.

I dropped back against the bed while my legs fell completely wide open under the voraciously lovely assault of his mouth.

It was heaven and hell all over again, but a hundred times better and worse, and I could only writhe and moan while my fingers once again reached out in their blind quest to hold on to him. ..and hold him to me.

Every forceful, devouring thrust of his tongue destroyed me, and I could feel my whole body start to tighten as the pressure inside of me grew...and simmered...and burned...

Oh Goooooooooooood.

And because he was the man whose presence bore the kiss of serendipity, Damian seemed to sense the moment the pressure inside of me climbed to its peak.

Even while his tongue was still driving in and out of my pussy, he reached for that tiny, stiff nub of pleasure and placed it between his fingers. And then he was rubbing it... hard and fast, and the pressure inside of me burst——

Pleasure rocked my world, stars exploding behind my lids as my lips parted in a silent cry.

I came hard, harder than my eighteen-year-old mind was capable of imagining, and while my body was still shuddering under the force of my seemingly endless orgasm, it was then I heard a knock on the door, followed by a voice that had only just become recently familiar.

"Damian?"

And Damian's eyes locked with mine as he answered, "Yeah?"

"You alone?"

"No."

A pause, and then the voice said quite casually, "Just don't be late for the wedding later."

"Of course."

"Night, son."

"Goodnight."

Shock ripped through me even as my body continued to shudder and twitch its way through the last fading waves of my release.

That was Josiah's voice.

Josiah, my mother's husband-to-be.

Which would then make Damian...

" Stepbrother ," I choked out.

"Yes." Damian's lips twisted in a smile that didn't reach his eyes. "Welcome to the family, love."

He stared down at me for one long moment, and I stared up at him, unable to make sense of anything.

Another moment passed, and then he was pulling away, and I quickly righted my bra

before scrambling out of his bed.

I could feel him watching me as I picked my clothes off the floor and dressed in a hurry, and his hard blue eyes following my every move made something abundantly clear: even with the truth already out, Damian Fox still wanted me, his stepsister.

When I finally turned to him, I still had no idea what to say...while Damian clearly didn't have the same problem.

"Do you hate me now?" His voice was harsh, his words underscored by an emotion I couldn't put a handle on.

Should I?

"You should, you know." His voice became even harsher. "I took advantage of you."

Had he?

"I knew who you were from the start, and I still..."

"Kissed me," I whispered.

His lips tightened.

"Taken me to your room and made me cum..."

"Fuck." His lips tightened. "Fuck." He whipped around, turning his back to me, but by then it was too late. I had already caught a glimpse of what he was trying to hide, and it was so, so much larger than I thought was normal.

"Damian——"

"It's obvious then, isn't it?" And without looking at me, he said curtly, "You have an asshole for a stepbrother."

And then he was walking out, leaving me all alone in his room, my lips parted in shock.

I wanted to cry. I almost did. Until I felt a gentle, cool wind coming in from the open doors of the suite's balcony, tickling my ear...like a heaven-sent breeze.

Oh.

That was when I had my answer, and I realized I knew what to do.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:58 am

SPRING brEAK HAD FINALLY arrived at Laramie, and hormone levels and booze consumption rates were steadily rising by the second.

The streets occupied by the university's fraternity houses and residence buildings were particularly busy: most students were hurriedly loading their vehicles as they prepared for an out-of-town trip while others, with a flight to catch, were just as hastily sliding into the backseats of their booked Ubers.

Either way, all of them, at one point or another, found themselves staring the moment they caught a glimpse of the extraordinarily handsome, elegantly dressed stranger walking past them.

In truth, however, the man was actually either none or everything of the above, depending on who was being asked.

Damian sternly repressed the urge to smile the moment his gaze fell on the dark-haired girl seated atop her metallic pink luggage, gaze downcast while she idly kicked pebbles out of her way with the tip of her sneaker-clad foot.

He slid his hands into his pockets as he halted a few feet away from her. A pebble rolled towards him at the exact moment, and he heard Sarah's audible intake of breath when he struck it with the tip of his leather-clad shoe, and the pebble rolled back to her.

"Damian."

The breathy sound of his name on her lips still shook him to the core, and he had to

clench his jaw against the urge to yank her towards him so she could say it again but closer, with her lips caressing his ear.

He saw her take a peek behind him, and he was bemused and concerned when her brows automatically furrowed. "What's wrong?" His long-legged stride had him reaching her in moments, but she irritably shook her head at his offer to help her up.

"You shouldn't have come here," Sarah muttered.

"Why not?" The silkiness of Damian's voice effectively hid the fact that her words had him bristling. "Do you have something to hide?"

"What do you think?"

She pointed to something behind him, and when Damian turned around, a part of him expected that he'd be greeted with the sight of a college boyfriend whose face he'd immediately want to punch.

But instead...there were girls? A crowd of them, literally, and whose numbers still seemed to be growing by the second. What the fuck?

"That's why I didn't want you to come here," Sarah was grumbling as he turned back to face her.

"This place used to be one of the few safe havens I had, you know.

No one knew about you, so I never had to listen to another girl talking about liking you, falling in love with you, wanting to have sex—" Sarah saw Damian frown and made a face.

"I'm old enough to drink beer now. Can't I be old enough to say—"

Damian's blue eyes had turned icy in disapproval now.

"Never mind," she said quickly. "Forget I said anything.

" She saw him instantly relax and had to hide her smile.

Their secret little roleplay of Dom/sub had been going on for three years now, and the only reason she was eager to continue with it was because she had realized early on that he was only ever autocratic where she was concerned.

To the rest of the world, his own father included, Damian had cultivated a mild-mannered veneer that had people endlessly praising him for his even temper.

A rather perverse way to make her feel special , Sarah knew, but she would take what she'd get.

They started walking, Damian taking charge of wheeling her luggage next to him while she kept pace on his other side.

"You never offered to pick me up before," she remarked.

"You never refused to take our jet back home before."

"Oh."

"Why did you?"

"I was thinking I should try being a little more independent——"

"Perish the thought."

A smile broke out of her face. Sarah found these rare instances where Damian sounded British terribly sexy, but she knew better than to tell him. Querulous man that he was, he was likely to start acting and talking like a redneck just to piss her off.

When they reached the parking lot, Sarah couldn't help but gaze admiringly as Damian loaded her luggage into the trunk like it didn't weigh heavier than a basket.

"I spy muscles," she teased in her usual singsong tone.

He turned to her, saying gravely, "I spy drool."

What? She panicked right away and had only started checking the corners of her mouth when she saw the smirk that had unfolded over Damian's lips.

Argh! She rushed forward to sock him on the shoulder, but he caught her hand mid-air, and Sarah immediately forgot all about revenge as her breath caught at his touch.

Damian, who was old-fashioned in the sense that he didn't like having a woman strike him for no reason, was about to gently reprimand Sarah for her actions when he belatedly noticed the way she was staring at him.

Her lips were also parted slightly open in seeming invitation for a kiss, and the sight had him swiftly letting go of her hand.

"For fuck's sake, Sarah."

All thoughts of admonishment were immediately forgotten, and taking top priority was bundling Sarah into the passenger seat before anyone could catch a glimpse of the expression on her face, which was anything but sisterly.

Sarah could hardly contain herself as she watched Damian swiftly walked around the

car to get behind the wheel.

She waited until he had shut his own door closed before blurting out, "You still want me!

" Her tone was joyous, almost bragging, but her dark eyes, full of ill-concealed relief, showed the true state of emotions.

Damian didn't even answer her, but she didn't care. She knew what she saw, and after all these years in which he had shown her nothing beyond brotherly affection, well...

"I know I promised you that night I'd forget what happened," she confessed, "but I lied."

Silence.

"I'm in love with you, Damian. I never stopped."

Still more silence, and just when she thought it would end there, she heard him say, "I know."

Page 23

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:58 am

DAMIAN'S DEEPLY TANNED skin was glistening with sweat by the time he hit the treadmill's Stop button, and his heavy-hitting run cooled down into a more leisurely walk.

He reached for his phone before stepping off the machine, and a quick scroll showed twenty-plus messages waiting to be read.

..with over half of it coming from the girl he had dumped on the front steps of the family ranch.

Sarah: Please come back.

Sarah: I've only three days of spring break left.

Sarah: I promise we won't talk about the awkward stuff.

Sarah: Just come back home. Please?

He reached for his hydro flask just as another member of the gym approached him, a rich divorcée in her thirties who was on the prowl for Husband #4. "If you happen to be free tonight—"

Sarah: If you come back today I'll give you a blow job. No questions asked before or after.

After reading Sarah's message, Damian ended up spewing water all over the divorcée's face.

Shit.

He gave the woman a curt apology before walking out on her, hell-bent on getting to the locker room before anyone noticed the sudden bulge behind his shorts.

And there'd even be more trouble , Damian thought irritably, if people thought it was because of the woman he had accidentally spat out water on.

Damian stripped out of his clothes as soon as he got into one of the frosted-glass cubicles and switched the shower to full blast. Icy cold water jetted down in the next moment, but the billionaire remained absolutely still underneath it.

This would probably end up giving him pneumonia, but anything was fucking better than having to resort to jerking himself off to a measly fucking text message—

Fuck.

As soon as he allowed himself to think about Sarah's text, an erotic and decidedly forbidden vision followed: his beautiful, outrageous Sarah, her nubile body completely bare to his sight, an impish smile curving over her lips as she met his dark gaze.

..just before slowly kneeling down to take his already engorged phallus into her small, lovely mouth.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck!

His eyes squeezed shut as blood rushed to his head, and his hard body turned rigid for the worst possible reason.

He tried to get the vision out of his mind, but his imaginary Sarah was just as

stubborn as the real one.

Refusing to go away, she remained on her knees while her head energetically bobbed up and down as she sucked harder and harder—

A low growl tore out of his throat.

Fuck.

But this time, he had completely lost. He no longer gave a fuck about who would hear or know.

His fingers were tightening around the swollen girth of his penis, and then he was stroking himself furiously, the jerking movements of his fist at pace with the sucking sounds his imaginary Sarah was making.

Suck. Suck. Suck. Suck. Suck.

And then he was cumming, his powerful body shuddering, as her name rolled silently down his tongue.

Sarah.

DAMIAN'S PHONE STARTED ringing as soon as he was out of the locker room, and he swore under his breath when he saw Josiah's name flash on its screen. He reluctantly answered the call, and as expected, he didn't even get a single word in with his father immediately going off on a rant.

"What the hell are you doing there? You should be here with us, your family!"

"Someone has to remain an adult," Damian mocked, "since you've opted to play

hookie—"

"Bullshit," Josiah growled.

"Careful, Father. Remember you've already been diagnosed of being hypertensive—"

Josiah rudely cut his son off, demanding, "Do you know that she's going out for a ride with Colton today?"

Damian's grip on his phone involuntarily tightened, but his voice remained coldly indifferent when he spoke again. "I see nothing wrong with that—"

"Keep talking like that," Josiah warned, "and you'll soon hurt her past what she can endure."

And did Josiah really think he didn't know that?

Damian threw himself at work for the rest of the morning, but by the time his PA came in to ask him about lunch, he had already risen to his feet and heard himself say, "I'm heading back to the ranch. If it isn't life and death, don't call or it's someone's job on the line."

The drive back to the family ranch from Jackson Hole usually took an hour and a half, but Damian had shaved off a good number of minutes from this by swapping the SUV he normally drove for a sports car he had revamped for off-road use.

A ranch hand saw him coming and immediately pointed towards one of the trails leading to the river bank. "I saw Ms. Clarke head that way."

Damian got out of the car with a frown. He hadn't asked a single thing yet, dammit.

So why the hell was Greg assuming he was looking for Sarah?

"Shall I drive your car back to the garage, Mr. Fox?"

"Greg's tone was hopeful. It had just occurred to him that now was his only chance to drive the billionaire's sports car, whose rigged performance and looks had it featured in numerous automobile magazines.

And to further improve his chances, he then quickly added, "If you set off now, sir, you could still probably catch up with Ms. Clarke and Mr. Moore."

AFTER GIVING RAINBOW a quick, affectionate pat on its head, Sarah left her horse to graze at its leisure while walking back to where Colton was seated by the riverbank.

Tall, blond, and boyishly good-looking, he also had the fortune of possessing incredibly wealthy parents and an assured future as a NFL quarterback.

While most women would've killed to be in a relationship with him, his current companion unfortunately wasn't one of them.

"You're looking prettier every time I see you, Sarah Bear." Any compliment from him was usually enough to have girls swooning on his feet, but this time it only had the girl seated a good three feet away from him rolling her eyes.

"Drop the act, Moore," Sarah retorted, "and for the nth time, will you please stop calling me that? You know how Damian hates it—"

"He isn't even here to hear it," Colton protested.

"It doesn't matter," Sarah said stubbornly.

"I really gotta hand it to you, Ms. Clarke. Your loyalty knows no bounds."

"Stop pretending to be jealous," Sarah said with a snort. "We both know you only think you want me because I'm the only girl in town you haven't gotten to bed."

"One of these days," Colton threatened, "I'm going to make you fall for me——"

"When pigs fly—— Colton! " She sputtered in a mixture of indignation and laughter when Colton, who was typically known as the gentlemanly type, actually threw his empty can of soda at her. "Jerk!"

Almost one hour later, and Colton was half-bored, half-annoyed as he was forced to listen to Sarah worry over her stepbrother's actions.

"I know Damian's read my messages, Colt," Sarah was sharing unhappily, "but he hasn't replied to any of them."

And so it continued, with Colton making sure to grunt, nod, or shake his head whenever Sarah required a response. It had been this way between them for over three years now...and counting.

Colton could still remember the night they had first met, and Sarah had come crashing into his life, literally . He had taken one look and had fallen for her like a ton of bricks while Sarah, on the other hand, even at that time, had only eyes for Damian.

The next time they met, it had been at Josiah and Naomi's reception, and Colton had been overjoyed when he found out she was going to live next door.

He had asked her to dance the first chance he got and invited her to go clubbing, thinking it would be smooth sailing from there on.

But instead she had shaken her head at him with a sheepish smile.

'I'm sorry. I'm already in love with someone else.

' Her gaze had swung away from him as she spoke, and following her line of sight, it was then he had come to realize his rival was none other than Sarah's own stepbrother.

A sudden squeal from Sarah yanked Colton back to the present, and his lips twisted when he saw the painfully familiar look of excitement on Sarah's face.

"He finally texted you?" he asked dryly.

"He's looking for me as we speak," Sarah reported happily while quickly rising to her feet. She dusted her jeans off, wanting to look more presentable, and it was then that her gaze absently drifted to the ground, where a gartersnake happened to be slithering straight towards her.

Even though Sarah knew it wasn't poisonous, snakes were one of her biggest fears, and just the thought of having its cold, slimy scales graze against her skin had her in a panic, and she quickly turned around to run—

And ended up once again crashing into Colton's embrace, her body fully pressed against his lean, hard form.

Colton stiffened.

Sarah paled.

"I'm not gonna lie, Sarah Bear," he whispered. "Your breasts feel too damn good against my chest." The words were meant to make light of the fact that the briefest

contact between their bodies had him sporting a hard-on, but to his shock, he saw Sarah's eyes filling up with tears.

"W-What's wrong?" he stammered.

But she had already wrenched herself out of his hold and was running away.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:58 am

SARAH HAD NEVER FELT so dirty. Before college, she had attended an all-girls Catholic school her entire life, and she had never gone out on a date because none of the boys she met had felt "right". Only Damian had been different, and she hadn't felt any shame at all whenever he touched her.

From time to time, however, she would often find herself wondering if another man could make her feel the way Damian did, and now she had her answer. More than making her feel soiled, it also felt completely wrong, to have her breasts against Colton's chest and hear him actually say he enjoyed it.

Fingers suddenly cupped her elbow from behind, and thinking it was Colton, Sarah immediately cried out, "Let go!" She struggled to free herself, but he was too strong, and before she knew it, he was already forcibly spinning her around.

"Damian?" She stopped moving right away as a sense of relief washed over him. Damian...Damian would make her feel better. Damian always made things right just by being there—

Oh!

Too late she noticed the grim set of his jaw, and somehow she knew. She just knew, and the realization made her recoil from him with a choked sob.

"You saw it—"

His lips tightened, and that was answer enough for her. She tried to run away for the second time, but Damian was a lot more forceful than Colton, and soon enough, his

strong, hard arms were tightening and locking her in place.

"Let me go——"

" Quiet ." To other people's ears, the command, despite the gently firm tone he used to deliver it, would most likely have sounded cruel and harshly insensitive.

And while it might be so, Damian didn't really give a damn.

He knew what his Sarah needed, and in times like this, Sarah always preferred to be handled with a firm hand.

"Breathe."

He saw her lips tremble even as her chest slowly rose and fell.

"That's it, love."

Her tears continued to fall, but already he could feel the tautness gradually easing from her body, and he began stroking her back to help her relax.

Looking up, she asked with a sniff, "How did you find me?"

"Doesn't matter. All you need to know is that I'm letting you cry for another minute if you wish...but after that, you're to cease wasting your tears on another man."

"Jerk." Her fist struck his chest. "You really think saying that would make me feel better?"

"Yes."

Instead of answering, Sarah laid her head against his chest, and moments later, he felt his shirt growing wet under her cheek.

Time dragged ever so slowly, and every second was an infinite struggle to remain in control and not give in to the rage still churning inside of him.

He had seen every fucking thing unfold, and the only reason Damian had kept his distance was the knowledge that Sarah being Sarah, having him confront her while she was in a compromising position would only cause her greater distress.

She might be brash and coquettish at first glance, but he knew his Sarah well.

She was a closet prude, and so he had waited until she had left before walking up to Colton and driving his fist into the boy's face.

When the minute he had given her finally came to pass, Damian slowly released her and cupped her chin to force her to meet his gaze. "Feeling better?"

She nodded. She could actually breathe a lot more easily now, and her chest didn't feel as tight as it had been earlier.

"Still have the urge to cry?"

She shook her head.

"Sure?"

She was about to nod when she realized where this was all leading to. Shit. This was Damian, after all, and he had this nasty habit of playing big brother at the most horrible times. "Wait——" But of course it was too late, and he had already flicked her forehead... hard.

"Ouch!"

Another flick.

"That hurts!"

"Good," he snapped. "Maybe next time, it will get you to think twice about being alone with Moore."

"What happened was an accident——"

"That wouldn't have happened in the first place," he said between clenched teeth, "if you didn't let yourself be alone with him."

"He's my friend——"

"A male friend," Damian snarled, "who's been slaving over you for years."

Her eyes widened, and before she could stop herself, the words were already out of her mouth. "Are you jealous?" Damian's blue eyes immediately blazed at her in anger, and she winced. Right. Totally wishful thinking that she could make him admit——

"You know I am."

Sarah's stunned gaze flew back up to his...and the first thing she saw was his head dipping...just before his mouth crashed over hers.

Oh God.

Her eyes squeezed shut even as her heart slammed against her chest, and her entire

body burst into flames.

God. Oh God.

"You're mine, dammit," Damian growled against her lips, "so will you take better care not to let any other man touch my property?"

She tried to answer. She wanted to answer, would've loved to assure him that she was all his and always would be.

But she couldn't, with Damian kissing her so hard she started seeing stars.

When he finally lifted his head, Sarah could only gasp for breath as she stared up at him, body still trembling but this time it was purely out of excitement and desire.

"Where did he feel you?" Damian demanded.

"B-Breasts—" The word was barely out when he had her back pressed against a tree trunk, and his large, strong hands were palming her heaving tits.

She started to moan, but the sound was lost in his kiss.

His tongue thrust in just as his hands started mashing her tits, and she could only buckle against him.

God, it had been so long.

He started pinching her nipples, and she moaned and buckled harder against him while her hands swept wildly over his back. Up. Down. Up. Down . She was just so insanely restless, and when his dark head bent down to take one covered nipple into his mouth—

Sarah bit her lip hard. Oh God. She mustn't make a sound.

Couldn't make a sound. Shouldn't make a sound.

But it was as if the more she was controlling herself, the more Damian wanted to have her wild in his arms, and while he switched his attention to her other breast, she felt his fingers sliding inside her jeans—

She looked up, stunned, and blue eyes that glittered with lust immediately took hold of her gaze. And then slowly...so, so damn slowly, Sarah felt his fingers stroke her already folds, just before his middle finger thrust inside of her.

Her lips parted in a silent scream, and the agonizing pleasure intensified as he continued holding her gaze, letting her know that he could see her every reaction as he started fucking her with his finger.

Just one finger , but it already had her hips moving jerkily to meet its steady, deep thrusts.

God. Oh God.

He was still staring at her, not letting her look away, not letting her hide anything, and instead of feeling embarrassed or ashamed, it just made her want to show him even more. She wanted there to be no doubts about how all of her was his—

God oh God.

And just as his finger drove so deep she could've sworn he had reached her hymen, his thumb pressed hard against her clit—

Aaaaaaaaaaaaaah.

Damian's mouth slammed over hers as she came with a gasp, and it was the most exquisite torment to feel Sarah's nubile body shudder repeatedly as she rode out the waves of her pleasure.

He kept his finger moving inside of her throughout her orgasm, while his thumb continued grinding her clit.

Only when he felt her slump weakly against him did he finally pull his hand out of her jeans, and when their gazes collided—

"I love you."

Fuck.

Sarah tried not to let fear get the better of her when she saw the way Damian's gorgeous face turned expressionless. She had obviously miscalculated, and if she didn't do something now, she had this really bad feeling things would drastically turn for the worse between them.

"Forget what I said," she blurted out. "Let's talk...let's talk about my text."

"Sarah—"

"Don't I owe you—"

"Sarah, stop."

She froze.

"I'm sorry," Damian said tonelessly, "but you're leaving me with no choice—"

She tried to cover her ears, but Damian forced her arms back down.

"I'm never going to love you back." Damian saw her face pale, but he hardened himself against it. "I'm sorry——"

"I just don't understand," she said jerkily, "what else do I have to do...why can't you love me——"

"Why can't you just stop?" he asked harshly.

"Do you really want me to?" she cried out.

Silence.

So much silence that it almost had her hoping, almost had her believing that maybe, maybe this was all a big, ugly joke, or that maybe he'd change his mind, but instead...she heard him ask quietly, "Why else would I ask?"

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:58 am

LOOKING BACK, SARAH could only shake her head at how melodramatic she had been that night.

Damian's rejection had devastated her so much that leaving and getting as far away as possible from him was all she had been able to think of.

After throwing herself on Rainbow's back, she had the mare galloping to the ranch at full speed.

Once there, she had bumped into Naomi and Josiah, and still in tears, had told both of them that she had a big fight with Damian and that she needed some space.

While her mother had tried to keep her from leaving, Josiah had gently overruled his wife, and it was all thanks to her stepfather that she had gotten back to Laramie on that very same day.

Once in her dorm room, she had locked the door, flung herself at her bed, and cried all night.

In the past, she had always been the one to reach out to Damian first, but that night, she had promised herself to stay away from him for good.

She had made up excuses to avoid having to fly home for the holidays, and she had grabbed the first chance she could to work out of state and place as much distance between them.

It hadn't been easy at first, and despite the exciting but challenging nature of her job

as a digital marketing analyst, countless nights had been spent crying over Damian.

Thank God Hardy had come to her life at the right moment, she thought fondly. In loving Hardy, she had found motivation to move forward, and enough clarity and inner peace that when an elegant invitation had arrived at her mailbox...

I think I'm ready, Sarah thought as she read Naomi's handwritten message. It was brief but emotional, with her mother asking if Sarah could let bygones be bygones and allow their family to be complete when she celebrated her fortieth birthday in a week's time.

Sarah reached for her phone and started texting.

Sarah: Just booked a ticket to Jackson Hole for Friday. Please ask Damian if he could pick me up at the airport? ETA is eleven-ish.

When her phone buzzed with a new incoming message, Sarah tapped it right away, thinking it would be from Naomi.

But it wasn't.

Damian: I'll be there.

Her heart skipped a beat, but she ignored it and instead made a mental note to schedule a check up with a cardiologist.

SARAH HAD TAKEN GREAT care in choosing her outfit for the flight.

A gray, madras-patterned trench coat and matching wide-legged, ankle-length trousers, black wool turtleneck, nude pumps, and a sleek but sensible Chanel shoulder bag.

None of her usual sneakers and totes, and no ripped jeans or frilly dresses.

She was all grown up now at twenty-four, and she wanted Damian to know this.

Before stepping out of the plane, she made sure to plop a pair of huge, dark glasses down her nose for added sophistication, and it proved to be quite the lifesaver the moment her stunned gaze fell on the tall, powerful figure whose wealth and clout had allowed him to park his sports car right next to the runway.

Just one look at him, and she wanted to cry at the sheer unfairness of it all.

Weren't men supposed to get uglier with every year that passed?

So why was Damian Fox the opposite? Like her, the billionaire had a trench coat on to ward off the cold, and this added piece of clothing only served to accentuate the massive breadth of his shoulders and the sleek muscular lines of his form.

His presence was commanding and strikingly earthy at the same time, and it was more than enough to have the other female passengers in her flight taking strategically positioned selfies to include him in the background.

It was such a familiar ploy that she had a hard time keeping a smile off her lips. There really was just something about Damian Fox that made a girl want to take endless photos of him, but she was not going to be one of them again.

Damian took his own shades off the moment she reached him, and good manners forced Sara to do the same as her gaze reluctantly lifted to his.

Shit.

His blue eyes were the same dreamy shade she hadn't really been able to forget, but

what had her throat tightening and her nerves stretching taut was the sensual glitter in it—

Shit, shit, shit!

She slammed her glasses back on her face, etiquette be damned, and when she saw Damian raise a brow, she said shortly, "The sunlight hurts my eyes."

"I see."

His gaze drifted to her hair, and she tried not to feel self-conscious. Her long locks were gone, and in its place was a sleek manageable bob that she no longer had to worry about styling.

"You had it cut," he commented.

"Florida weather." In contrast to Damian's tone of polite friendliness, hers bordered on rudeness. It wasn't something she planned, but somehow it just ended that way, and she told herself that was fine. The plan was to exorcise old ghosts, anyway, and show him once for all—

"I missed you."

And just like that, the plan to give him the cold shoulder fizzed out, with Damian's gruffly spoken words completely catching her off guard. For one long moment, all Sarah could do was gape at him. Had he really said those words or had she—

"No." The faintest smile curved over his lips. "You weren't imagining it."

Her heart nearly stopped beating. "You're r-reading my mind again."

A beat of heartbreaking silence, and then Damian said quietly, "Some things never change, I guess."

Her eyes started stinging.

Don't do it, Sarah! Don't forget the plan! Don't forget how much he's hurt you!

Damian slowly reached down to take her glasses off.

The tears rushed down.

"This one," he said, "I'm hoping will change. I don't want to make you cry anymore."

The tears fell faster.

And then she could no longer help it, and she was throwing herself in his arms. "I miss you, too...big brother."

Page 26

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:58 am

DAMIAN HAD A LIMOUSINE waiting for them, and she forced herself to act casual as the billionaire joined her in the backseat.

In the past, she usually had to badger him to sit next to her, so having him do so right away was more than a little disconcerting.

It also put Sarah on her guard, and her unease only grew when Damian told her they'd have lunch first before joining Naomi and Josiah.

"You must be hungry after the flight."

"Actually—"

"I've already booked a table at Le Petit Prince, and I'll be meeting with my assistant there."

Sarah breathed a sigh of relief. This was just his usual efficiency at work, apparently, and she settled back against her seat, no longer as bothered.

"I hope you don't mind?"

"It's fine," she assured him. "Le Petit Prince's my favorite, after all."

Damian blinked. "Is it?"

She threw her shoulder bag at him, but he caught this handedly, and the billionaire was smirking when he handed it back to her.

"So did you remember or not?" she asked in a mock growl.

"I remember everything about you," Damian said silkily. "Happy now?"

"It's nothing to be happy about," she retorted, "since I remember everything about you, too.

" She flashed him a smile. "We're siblings, after all.

" She saw the billionaire's lips tighten but told herself it was just his dog-in-the-manger personality asserting itself.

Over the years, she had done her best to analyze his attitude with painstaking objectivity, and her eventual conclusion was that Damian was just like all other big boys with their toys.

He only remembered to want her either because of nostalgia.

..or when another big boy (Colton being a good example) appeared to want what was his.

The rest of the ride elapsed in silence, with Sarah doing her best to ignore the way Damian kept staring at her. Had she gained weight? Did she look different? Less attractive?

Her thoughts ran to all sorts of directions, but all of them completely missed the mark since what the billionaire was busy grimly evaluating was her words and actions.

In the past, Sarah's face would've glowed like sunshine if he told her they'd be eating out, and she'd act as if she had won the lottery if she subsequently learned it would be only the two of them.

This time, however, the thought of being alone with him appeared to make her skin crawl, and he had been forced to throw his pride away and offer up a stupid excuse just to keep her from leaving.

More unwanted changes became evident when they arrived at the restaurant, with Damian doing his best not to feel antagonistic at the way Sarah was giving everyone hugs while saying 'I missed you guys' over and over. She certainly hadn't been as warm and enthusiastic with him earlier.

"Welcome back, Mr. Fox, Ms. Clarke."

In response to the dignified greeting from the restaurant's silver-haired manager, Sarah, being her usual impish self, overrode all rules of formality by blowing the older man a kiss. "Thanks, Brucie!"

"It's been so long since we've last seen you together," April, the restaurant's assistant manager, remarked.

"I'm glad to see you two have finally worked things out.

" And since the sexual tension between the two was pretty much palpable, April flashed them a mischievous smile, asking, "Are wedding bells imminent? "

Sarah didn't even miss a beat, saying with a laugh, "Unfortunately, no.

We're not back that way." She tossed a wry look at the billionaire over her shoulder, adding, "My dear big brother was very patient with me.

" Turning back to April, she explained, "He rightfully waited for me to grow out of my infatuation, which I eventually did. "

How very juicy, April thought, and how very inaccurate, too, considering the way Sarah's dear big brother had started sporting a granite-hard expression at the younger woman's words. "Does that mean you've started dating other guys——"

"We should head to our table now," Damian interrupted before Sarah could answer.

"Of course, sir." April hid her smile as she had one of their waiters escort the "siblings" to their usual spot.

The tables had obviously turned now, and as Damian and Sarah were both considered as local celebrities of sorts, exciting gossip about the two was likely forthcoming in the next few days.

Sarah's face glowed with pleasure when Damian pulled her chair out and she saw the bouquet of roses lying in wait. "Is that mine?"

"A belated gift for your college graduation," he answered gruffly.

"You also missed several birthdays and Christmases," she reminded him while reaching for the bouquet. "Is this bouquet for all those occasions..." Her voice drifted off. With the bouquet in her hand, it was only now that she saw the small velvet box hidden underneath it.

She glanced at him questioningly, and Damian nodded.

Wow.

He had never given her jewelry before, and she had always thought the reason for that was because he hadn't wanted her to attach any special meaning to it. So what did this mean then, she couldn't help wondering. Did he want her to see this as symbolic of something——

Here we go again, Sarah Jeanne!

Damian Fox was only giving her this because he obviously believed the years they had spent apart had made Sarah get over him. Just that , she told herself firmly. Just that and nothing else!

But even as she tried hard to convince herself of this, she still couldn't help trembling as he reached for the box and opened it to reveal a pair of diamond earrings.

"May I?" Damian asked.

All Sarah could do was nod and found herself biting her lip hard as his fingers frequently brushed against her ears. Just the slightest touch had her fighting off the shivers, and she closed her eyes and prayed for control. You can do this!

Damian stepped back, ostensibly to see how the earrings looked on her, but what he actually wanted to see was her reaction...which turned out to be nothing but a look of childish pleasure. The kind , he thought grimly, that one would get from little sisters.

"I love it, Damian. Thank you." And as soon as they took their seats, she gave her head a little shake to make the earrings dangle. "How does it look? Do I look prettier now?"

"It looks too elegant on you."

Sarah made a face. "Will it kill you to give me a compliment?"

"Don't be greedy," he chided. "I don't buy just any woman earrings. That should be enough."

"True." She looked around, asking, "Is Tommy still your assistant?"

"He is, and he just texted. There's an issue at Foxtown. I'll be meeting him there instead."

"Oh." Did that mean it would really just be the two of them then? "I see."

"Don't tell me you're nervous to be alone with me," he mocked.

Abso-freaking-lutely, Sarah thought, but because she was a changed woman now, she knew how to play the game and hid her feelings in plain sight, saying with a rueful shake of her head, "I just feel bad for you."

Being alone like this...I can't help remembering the times I shamelessly went after you.

"She sent him a look of apology, saying sheepishly, "Sorry for that."

"It's nothing."

Damian's brusque voice threw her off, and she asked with genuine confusion, "Are you mad?"

What else could he fucking be, with the way her every word was unintentionally confirming his worst fears? She was truly over him, he thought bitterly, and he only had himself to blame for it.

"Damian?"

"Apologies." This time, he made an effort to keep the edge off his voice. "I just have a lot on my plate these days."

"Because of Foxtown?" she asked worriedly.

"It's nothing bad," he swiftly assured her. "We're only months away from opening, so having to iron out a few little hiccups along the way is normal."

"So it's really happening then, the launch?" Sarah asked excitedly. Foxtown was Damian's most ambitious project to date, and one that had been five years in the making.

"We can tour it this afternoon if you like," he offered.

"I'd love that, thank you," she said with a beaming smile. "How does it feel, now that Foxtown's about to be unveiled to the world? Are you excited? Nervous?"

"I'm looking forward to its launch."

She couldn't help laughing at his matter-of-fact tone. "You so don't sound like it."

"Not everyone has to squeal and giggle like you used to do," the billionaire retorted, "to show excitement." A pause. "Or are you still like that now?"

"Mm." She gave him a mysterious look. "That's a secret."

"Careful, little Sarah," he murmured. "You know how I am with secrets."

Her heartbeat spiked up. Was it just her imagination or did he sound like he was flirting with her back there?

The billionaire arched a brow. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

And there it was again: a rich, velvety tone that was slowly and sinuously working to make her years-dormant body ache and swell back into life.

"Don't worry," she managed to say. "Everything's different now. I'm not going to jump on you the first chance I get—"

"I won't stop you if you would."

"Ha. Ha. Ha." Oh God, why was he saying these things?

"It wasn't a joke."

She really did laugh this time, but it sounded so awkward to her ears that she quickly cut it off and reached for her water instead.

Her discomfort was more than obvious, and his lips tightened at the sight of it.

Sarah used to die for the chance to speak about the two of them, but obviously that, too, had changed.

Damian made no further attempt to engage her in conversation, and although she tried to convince herself it was what she wanted, she still found herself close to tears by the time the billionaire asked for the check.

She took her phone out and sent an SOS. A moment later, her phone rang just as Damian returned to their table, and when she was done with the call, she gave him a smile of apology, saying, "Connor's coming over to pick me up."

"Can I take a rain check on the Foxtown tour?"

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:58 am

"DAMIAN LOOKED LIKE he wanted to kill me."

"Dog in the manger," Sarah dismissed as she took a sip of her hot chocolate.

The cafe they were in was a renovated barn, and their table in particular offered spectacular views of the nearby elk refuge.

In the past ten minutes, she had already spotted a huge herd of elk, along with a couple of moose and bighorn sheep.

Such sightings usually excited her, but now she couldn't even make herself smile.

"I don't think it was just that," Colton said skeptically. Maybe Sarah had missed the look the billionaire had given him, but Colton hadn't. He had already had a taste of Damian Fox's fist, and suffice to say, once was definitely more than enough.

"Stop looking so worried," Sarah reproved. "I was throwing myself at him every opportunity I got," she reminded him, "and I did it for years. But he never took the bait. What does that tell you?"

"I get your point, but there's just something——"

"There never was anything between us. That hasn't changed, and it never will," Sarah forced herself to say with a shrug. "Anyway, what's this about you finally having a girlfriend?"

A crooked grin flashed over Colton's lips at Sarah's words. "She's amazing..."

Sarah couldn't help reflecting over the change in their friendship while listening to Colton talk about his girlfriend Beth.

Unlike her and Damian, she and Colton had patched things up pretty quickly.

He had apologized just a few days following the incident, and she had accepted his apology and gave him an explanation as well for her reaction.

They had become firm friends after that, real friends, in the sense that neither of them had any unrequited feelings for the other.

And because they were real friends, Sarah only waited until Colton paused for breath before blurting out her request. "What do you think about pretending to be my fake boyfriend for the weekend? "

"Most dangerous idea ever," he answered promptly, "and not something I'd risk my neck on."

Darkness had long fallen by the time Colton drove her to Josiah's fancy digs in Jackson Hole, and she still hadn't stopped nagging him about a fake relationship.

"Come on, Colt," she wheedled as she got out of his car. "Be a good sport——"

"Shit! Do you see that?"

Sarah followed his line of gaze and started in surprise when she saw Damian standing on the porch while deep in discussion with Tommy.

"You told me he wouldn't be here," Colton hissed under his breath.

"Obviously, I'm wrong," Sarah hissed back. "Last time I checked, being wrong isn't a

crime——"

"Easy for you to say," Colton snarled.

"You're a professional football player, for heaven's sake! Start acting like it!"

And as the two of them continued bickering sotto voce, neither was aware of how deceptive their posture appeared, with their heads bent close to each other and their bodies nearly touching. The whole thing smacked of romance, and the sight had the billionaire fit to kill.

Damian strode forward to deliberately place himself between the two, and as Sarah and Colton jumped away from each other, he didn't miss the way the pair exchanged nervous looks with each other.

Oh God. Sarah couldn't help but sneak an anxious look towards Damian. Could he have heard what they were talking about?

I'm fucking dead . Colton could feel himself losing color as the billionaire's chilling gaze settled on him. Could Damian have misunderstood Sarah's whispers about (faking) passionate kisses?

Damian, mistaking their worry for looks of guilt, had to clench and unclench his fists several times before he was properly rid of the urge to beat the shit out of the younger man.

Turning to Colton, he said in a treacherously soft voice, "We're about to have dinner inside. Would you like to join us?"

Colton, who was no idiot, shook his head.

"Thanks for the offer, but I, ah..." He tried to think of an excuse, found himself too nervous to come up with any, and decided to simply let it end at that.

"I should go now." And without meeting Sarah's gaze, he turned away, got back into his car, and sped off.

"You deliberately scared him," Sarah accused him.

Damian's shrug was dismissive. "I can't control how other people react to me."

Sarah couldn't help rolling her eyes. "Do you even care how arrogant that sounds?"

Damian didn't even bother answering her and instead placed his hand on the small of her back, saying, "Let's go in. Father and Naomi are already waiting."

It was Sarah's turn not to speak, mostly because she didn't trust herself to. It had been ages since she last felt his hand on her back like this, and just like before, his every touch was heaven and hell all rolled into one.

Naomi burst into tears the moment she saw Damian and Sarah walk in together. "I'm so happy."

"Oh, Mom." Sarah rushed forward to give her mother a hug. "I'm so sorry for making you feel bad."

"It's fine." Naomi hugged her back tightly. "Everything's fine, now that we're all together again."

And for a time, it was really just like before, and Sarah couldn't remember being this happy in years.

Josiah and Damian were arguing over everything under the sun, Naomi was doing her best to play peacemaker, while Sarah.

..well, just this once, Sarah was back to her old ways as she earnestly sided with Damian on every matter.

"You can't be serious, Sarah," Josiah blustered.

"But I am." Sarah smiled up at Damian. "He's always right because he's the smartest guy in the world."

Josiah groaned, Naomi laughed, and Damian.

..well, usually, the billionaire either snorted or grunted at this, but tonight he did neither.

Tonight, he gently ran his knuckles down her cheek, and as she trembled at his unexpected touch, he looked straight down into her eyes, saying quietly, "You're wrong. "

"Then you're admitting it," Josiah crowed triumphantly. "You're an idiot——"

"I suppose I am."

"Yes or no, son," Josiah insisted.

"If you insist on it, then yes . I am an idiot." Damian let go of Sarah as he turned to Josiah, saying sardonically, "I must be one, for letting her walk out of my life."

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:58 am

SARAH WAS DISTRAUGHT , and it had her lying on bed for hours, staring blankly at her ceiling.

She couldn't stop thinking about how disastrous last night's dinner was, thanks to Damian's bombshell of an admission.

His words had made her this close to booking a flight back to Miami and begging for her old job back, but after taking several deep breaths, she had somehow found the strength to paste a smile on her lips while playfully wagging a finger at his too-handsome face.

' I'm not so easily fooled like before, Mr. Fox.

You're just pulling all our legs here, aren't you? '

To which, the billionaire had simply leaned back against his seat and drawled, 'Is that what I'm doing?'

'Yup!' And she had ended the conversation there by lying about having promised to give Colton a call just so she could excuse herself from the table.

She closed her eyes, attempting for the nth time to fall asleep, but memories kept intruding, and oh God, even now, she could still remember, very, very vividly, the way his knuckles had felt against her cheek...

Aaaaaaargh!

Sarah covered her face with a pillow.

Argh! Argh! Argh!

What was that guy planning, anyway? This was obviously another manifestation of his dog-in-the-manger attitude, and she had to do something about it before she ended up...before she ended up doing something crazier, like falling in love—

A knocking sound against the door interrupted her thoughts, and Sarah shot up to a sitting position.

"I know you're awake."

Before she could react, she already heard the knob turning, and by the time Sarah turned towards the door, Damian had already stepped inside the room and was shutting the door closed behind him.

Oh God!

When Damian turned back to face her, Sarah had the covers up to her chin, and she was staring at him with a wary expression on her face.

Yet another example of how different she was now , the billionaire thought broodingly.

In the past, she had not only taken every chance to parade around him in skimpy nightgowns, but in those instances, the invitation in her dark gaze had also made it very clear she would more than welcome his advances.

This time, however...

"I already saw what you're wearing," the billionaire said dryly, "and the blanket you're wrapped in is a lot sexier." And almost as if he couldn't help himself, he then asked in a pained tone, "Green Hulk shirt and purple shorts? Don't you have any pride?"

Oh.

And because she could see in his eyes that he was telling the truth, she immediately threw the covers off her and saw him wince.

"You know how some clothes look better at second glance?" Damian asked.

"Yes—"

"Your choice of sleepwear isn't one of them."

Sarah burst into laughter.

"And unfortunately, I am not kidding."

The way his lip curled was just too much, and she ended up literally rolling on the bed while clutching her stomach.

"That's better, love."

She gasped, caught by surprise by how dangerously near he sounded, and when she opened her eyes, it was to realize that she had somehow ended up flat on her back on the bed while an impossibly sexy Damian loomed over her.

Shit!

She immediately tried rolling away, but his hands had suddenly landed on each side of her body, caging her in an instant.

Dark eyes full of disbelief flew up to him. "What do you think you're doing?"

"I want to talk," Damian said tautly, "and I need you to hear me out."

"I promise I'll listen, just let me——"

"Unfortunately, little Sarah, I don't trust you to keep your word."

"I'm going to shout for help," she threatened.

Damian laughed. "And what exactly do you think will happen when you do?"

"Josiah——"

"Will spread the word that I've compromised you," he finished dryly, "and you'll find yourself walking down the aisle in a shotgun wedding."

Her mouth opened and closed . Shit. He was right. "Naomi——"

"Will never dream to interfere."

"The staff——"

"Are a bunch of romantics."

Shit. Shit. Shit. Everything he said was true, which meant she was completely left to his mercies.

Damian's blue eyes narrowed. "You get it now, don't you?"

"Just say what you want," she muttered, "and then get the——"

"Stop that." Damian's voice was gentle but firm. "You're only hurting yourself more than you're hurting me."

"I'm not——"

"You've never been the type to find pleasure in being rude to people," he said evenly, "and you never will."

Sarah's chest started hurting. Why, God, why did this man have to know her so well——

"You give me too much credit, love. If I had known you as well as you think I did, then I'd have trusted you more..." His voice was light, but his gaze sober, and the pain in her chest grew at just how foolishly easy he found it to read her mind.

"I don't get why you're talking about trust," Sarah said jerkily. "It was never an issue between us——"

"It was. You just didn't know it."

And then he was pulling away, and as she quickly scrambled up to a sitting position, he retreated to sit at the edge of her bed, his form rigid stiff.

"I grew up missing and loving and hating my mother. Did you know that?"

Sarah shook her head. She knew precious little about his mother since neither Damian nor Josiah had ever seemed inclined to talk about the woman that had once been an

important part of their lives.

"She never asked about me, never gave a damn about me, and even though I knew I was being stupid, I even went to college in London just to be near her.

But I didn't even get a fucking single call, and for a long fucking time, I blamed myself for her inability to love me.

There must be something wrong with me, something that no woman could be capable of loving.

She was my mother, Sarah. She gave birth to me, and she couldn't even be bothered to remember my birthday.

And then you came...someone who hadn't any obligation to love me. .."

Damian turned to her then, and the emptiness in his gaze made Sarah's chest start hurting again.

"Do you understand now," he asked tonelessly, "why I still don't believe you could've been in love with me all those years?"

Sarah couldn't speak. She was lost in the past, memories of the times they were together streaming into her mind. Those memories used to hurt, and what she remembered the most was the last day she had seen each other, and she had asked, Why can't you love me?

Now, she knew.

But too much time had passed, and he had hurt her far too much to matter.

"All this time, I forced myself to stay away——"

"Stop."

"I tried to convince myself it was for the better."

"I don't want to hear another word," she said jerkily.

"But when I saw you again——"

She tried covering her ears, and God, it was just like before. He was suddenly close, too painfully close, and she fell back against the headboard of her bed as he pushed her arms down.

"I can't fucking pretend anymore," Damian said rawly. "I love you——"

A sob escaped her.

"I love you——"

"It's too late," she whispered brokenly.

Damian whitened.

"I c-can't——"

But she could no longer speak, with his mouth cutting her words off with a deep, hard kiss.

The kiss stunned Sarah to the core, rendering her frozen in his hold.

It had been so long. So, so long, and oh, the feel of his lips.

..it was even agonizingly sweeter than she had ever allowed herself to remember, and if she had still been the old Sarah, she would've let the kiss do its usual job and have it sweep her off her feet.

But things had changed. She knew better now, knew and remembered enough that she couldn't afford to let the past happen all over again.

But even so, it hurt to hear herself whisper, "No."

It broke her heart to deny him, and a part of her was already shaking in fear, dreading the moment he might force her to reject him again.

But that moment never came.

The billionaire pulled away, and when he rose to his feet, she couldn't help looking up—

Ah.

The look in his eyes said everything.

He had only let her go because he had known it would hurt her even more to say no to him again, and the knowledge killed her, her hands flying up to cover her mouth just as a heavy sob tore out of her throat.

She tried to end it there, willing herself to stop crying, but the tears only fell faster, and when another sob escaped her lips, she heard him curse under his breath—

And then he was leaning down.

"No——" She couldn't let him kiss her again. Didn't think she'd be able to handle it. "Damian ——"

But all he did was gently wipe the tears off her cheeks.

"I obviously need a lot more practice in not making you cry."

She choked back a teary laugh.

"Hush now, love. We'll talk more tomorrow."

"I don't want——"

"Tough." But his voice was casual, and he was also reaching for her as he spoke, and before she knew it, the billionaire had her tucked back under the covers. "Good night, Sarah."

She flipped to her side and pointedly refused to answer even as her stomach started churning at the rudeness of it all.

"Just say good night back." The billionaire's tone was faintly amused. "There are other and better ways to get back at me, but doing something that you hate isn't one of them."

Shit. Shit. Shit.

"You're already beating yourself up for it, aren't you?"

"Okay, fine," she snarled without looking back. "Good night. Happy now?"

A lazy chuckle was her answer, followed by three words delivered in a soft, wicked

tone. "That's my girl."

Aaaaaaaaaaargh!

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:58 am

NAOMI'S BIRTHDAY PARTY officially started the next day, and with it Fox Lodge temporarily closed its doors to guest bookings while transforming itself to a Great Gatsby-themed paradise.

The party also came with a structured itinerary, and the first item in the program had the whole family welcoming guests and escorting them to the three key areas for morning entertainment: women were directed to the patio for a winter spa brunch, the kids were taken to the play area at the basement, while the men were escorted to the library.

Or so she thought.

A guy had just come up to her, introducing himself as someone playing for the NFL, when an arm suddenly curved around her waist, and Sarah stiffened, knowing who it was without having to look.

"It's nice to see you again, Garth," Damian drawled.

"Yeah, you, too, Fox."

When the other guy's questioning gaze swung between Sarah and the billionaire, Damian said easily, "Sarah's my stepsister."

"Right." The younger man couldn't seem to stop staring at the way Damian's fingers were idly caressing Sarah's hip. "That's, ah, cool." And then he coughed and cleared his throat, saying, "Anyway, I gotta go."

"What the hell was that?" Sarah burst out as soon as the football player was out of earshot.

The billionaire lowered his head, his arm tightening around her waist as he whispered straight into her ear, "Marking my territory."

Aaaaargh!

Color burst in her cheeks, and she waited until she was sure no one was looking at them before stomping on his foot as hard as she could. It had Damian grunting in pain, but Sarah didn't care. "Stop messing around!"

"It's not as if you truly found him attractive," Damian dismissed with typical arrogance. "You saw the look on his face when he found out you're my stepsister. Men like him will never be able to defend you——"

"I don't need defending——"

"You don't," the billionaire agreed silkily, "but you wouldn't mind it either if I were the one doing the defending." His tone turned pensive. "What was it that you used to like saying about us? You'd happily be the sub to my——"

"Will you shut up?"

"Only if you call me what you used to call me."

"Damian! Be serious!"

"If you don't——"

"Dom."

"That's not quite it."

Oh God.

"Last chance," he warned.

She took a deep breath and whispered, "My handsome Dom."

A devastating smile curved over her lips, and oh God, it was like seeing the sun shine for the first time— aaah!

Damian had bent down to brush his lips over her mouth and had already pulled away before she could do a thing.

She looked around, horrified, embarrassed, and aroused all at once, and while none of the locals were acting any differently, there were various out-of-state guests who were now staring at them with scandalized expressions on their faces.

She turned to Damian, hissing, "Do you see what you've done? If Mom's guests start walking out—"

"Let them," the billionaire dismissed with a Gallic shrug. It was Damian Fox at his cockiest, and she hated it. Hated, hated, hated it so much because it was also times like this when he looked his sexiest in her eyes.

Aaaaargh! Control, Sarah! Control!

Yanking her hand out of his hold, she shot him a quelling look, saying, "Whatever it is you think that's going to happen between us—"

"It's already happening," he corrected her gently.

"No, it's not——"

"Sarah? Oh gosh, it is you!"

Sarah quickly whirled around at hearing her name called out, and then she found herself grinning with genuine pleasure at spotting a familiar face.

"It's been so long, Harry!" She rushed forward to give her friend a quick, warm hug while Damian went on to shake hands with Harriet's husband, who had their five-year-old son up in his arms.

"Does this mean you're back in Jackson Hole for good?" Harriet asked hopefully.

"I'm not sure," she admitted.

"And... him?" Harriet subtly nodded towards Damian's direction. "Are you two in good terms again?"

"We're civil," was all Sarah allowed herself to say. "My mom wrote to me——"

" Wrote? Not text?"

"Yes, wrote, " Sarah confirmed with a snicker, "and I bet you love that, don't you?"

" A little-known secret about Harriet's marriage was the fact that she had arrived at Texas as an honest-to-goodness mail-order bride, and even now, Sarah was still blown away by how much courage it took for Harriet to bet everything on love and marry a stranger.

Fortunately, things had worked out pretty well, with Harriet happily married to Devon Montgomery, a Texan billionaire who was a "first-generation" member of San

Antonio's Finest Eligibles, aka SAFE.

After escorting dropping five-year-old Jamie Montgomery at the play area, Sarah went back to the lobby to see Damian talking with Olivier Winterbourne. There was a pretty woman standing next to the mayor, and Sarah quickly moved forward with a smile.

"It's nice to see you again, Frankie," she told the mayor's secretary. "You, too, Mayor O."

"It's good to see you back in Wyoming," Olivier commented.

A sly smile curved over Frankie's lips. "You mean back together with Mr. Fox. Right, mayor?"

Sarah was about to protest when Damian answered, "I'm working on that."

Frankie flashed him a thumbs up sign. "Good for you."

And then the two were off before Sarah could even make her position clear.

Aaaaargh!

She tried stomping on Damian's foot again, but this time he was able to sidestep her efforts to make him limp. "Did I make you mad, love?"

"You know you did!" His arm slipped back around her waist as she spoke, and Sarah jerked in shock when she saw his head bending down.

Oh my God, what was he thinking?

But instead, his lips only brushed over the top of her head. "Try leaving my side again," Damian promised lightly, "and I'll do something worse next time."

Her eyes flew up to him in horror. "Are you——"

"Serious about winning you back?" the billionaire asked pleasantly. "Yes. Crazy over you? Yes. Any other questions?"

Sarah's mouth opened and closed. Shit, shit, shit. The sound of footsteps reached her, and she quickly turned her gaze away from Damian, relieved to have something else to focus on. "Hello. Welcome to Fox Lodge——" Her jaw dropped. "Pippa? Acheron?"

"I hope you're happy to see us," Pippa teased.

After exchanging quick hugs with her former employer, Sarah pulled back, demanding, "But seriously, what are you guys doing here?"

"You'll have to thank your stepbrother for that," Pippa's Greek billionaire husband drawled. "He insisted that we come as a surprise to you." A pause. "Or is he no longer just your stepbrother?"

Sarah's eyes widened.

"A little bit premature, my friend," Damian commented, "but I am actively working on it."

The level of comfort and familiarity between the two outrageously handsome men was just too obvious, and she asked suspiciously, "Do you two happen to know each other?"

"Yes," Acheron confirmed without a shade of discomfort.

"But as you made no mention of him, I thought it best not to make mention of Damian either.

" The explanation was a little too slick for her taste, but Pippa's huge all-women brood had popped up behind the couple by then, and since she was friends with all of them, Sarah soon found herself busy catching up.

Acheron watched his wife's family carry Sarah off, figuratively of course, and turned to his friend, saying bluntly, "The last time we spoke, you were determined to stay away from her."

"Things have changed," Damian said evenly.

"I see." Acheron's gaze turned contemplative. "And does she—" Warning glinted in Damian's eyes as he spoke, and without missing a beat, Acheron went on to ask, "—enjoy seeing the two of her children together again?"

Sarah, catching her former boss's last words, said with a smile, "Are you talking about Mom?"

"We are, although I must say, your mother is very much like my mother-in-law. The two of them could be easily mistaken as a big sister to their own children."

"I know, right?" Sarah was pleased as punch at the compliment since Pippa's mom was an incredible beauty. "Oh, and Frankie—"

"Olivier's secretary? I didn't realize they were here already." At her nod, Acheron said with a smile, "Then I'll have to beg to be excused. I try to sneak in as much work as possible while the wife's not looking."

While watching her former boss stride off, Sarah couldn't help commenting, "It's true,

you know. When I was working for them, the other employees told me about how Acheron used to be a workaholic, and he only started taking days off when he married Pippa."

"I promise to be the same," Damian murmured, "when we marry."

"Ha!"

"You don't want to?"

"Ha!"

The billionaire chuckled. "That's not exactly a no, love."

She knew that, but since to say yes would be sheer stupidity while to say no would be another pathetic lie—

"Ha!"

And then she hurried past him to welcome the next set of guests. Part of her expected the billionaire to follow her, but he didn't, and Sarah resolutely told herself she wasn't disappointed. She was actually happy and—

Several anxious-looking staff members suddenly ran past her, and Sarah called out to one of them in concern. "What's happening?"

Mr. Fox...Mr. Moore...

The other girl was barely coherent, but the little she understood was enough for Sarah to break into a run. A crowd of onlookers had gathered at the lodge's parking lot, and Sarah couldn't believe her eyes when she saw Damian about to take a swing at

Colton.

"Oh my God, stop!"

COLTON USUALLY HAD a carefree air about him, but this time the younger man looked grim and strung up at the same time, like someone running purely on adrenaline for the past few hours.

"I got your email," Colton said shortly. And boy, what a fucking thing to wake up to. Sarah's stepbrother had somehow dredged out what not even the media and Colton's most obsessed fans had a clue about, with the email containing nothing but a series of photos showing him and Beth together.

Colton took a deep breath, knowing he needed to play this just right.

Until Beth graduated from college, he needed to keep his girlfriend out of the limelight and free from all the toxic hate that came with dating someone like him.

And since the billionaire appeared to be waiting for him to speak first, he said warily, "This is about Sarah, isn't it? "

Damian surveyed the younger man's tension with dislike. "Does Sarah know about her?"

"Of course——" Fuck. Too late, Colton realized he shouldn't have said that, and as swift as his reflexes were, they just weren't as swift as Damian's, and the sudden punch to his stomach had him bending over with a groan of pain.

Grabbing Colton by the collar, Damian hauled him back up and snarled, "Don't fucking lie to me again. You really think I'd believe Sarah's fine with you having another girl on the side?"

That much was true, and that was why Colton had realized he had said the wrong thing.

And when he saw the fury mounting in the billionaire's gaze, he threw his hands up and burst out with the first excuse that came to his mind.

"You got it all wrong, dammit." I'm sorry, Sarah Bear.

But a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do to save his ass and his girlfriend's.

And he heard himself say, "I'm saying she knows because it's mutual—" Seeing Damian raise his fist again, Colton started to babble.

"Sarah knows the real score between us, and she doesn't mind that I have Beth because she, ah, has someone else, too—" Damian suddenly released his hold on Colton's shirt, and he crashed to the ground.

"Who is it then?" the billionaire bit out.

Picking himself up, Colton said lamely, "Someone she knew you won't approve." A stupid excuse, but hopefully the billionaire would be satisfied with it—

"Why would Sarah think we wouldn't approve of this man?" Damian demanded.

Shit. Colton hadn't thought that far ahead, and stuck for something to say, he once again rashly blurted out the first thing that came to his mind. " He's...married? "

Which turned out to be another mistake, with Damian pulling his fist back.

"Oh my God, stop!"

Relief washed over Colton at hearing Sarah's voice, the sound of which was apparently enough for Damian to check his violent impulses, and Colton started breathing more easily as the billionaire took a step back.

"Colton, are you alright?"

Damian, seeing Sarah about to reach for the younger man's bruised face, grabbed her hand and pushed it back down, saying brusquely, "He's still alive, isn't he?"

Colton, seeing the glint in Damian's eyes, quickly nodded. "Yeah, I'm fine. We just had things to...thrash out," he finished awkwardly.

"Are you really okay?" Sarah asked anxiously.

Furious at the way Sarah kept fussing over the boy, Damian didn't wait for Colton to give his answer. "Forget about him, dammit. We're leaving."

And with his fingers still tightly curled around her wrist, Sarah found herself being dragged off, her legs working overtime to match Damian's furious pace.

"Why did you hit him?" she demanded.

"Doesn't matter."

"Of course it matters!"

"Then I'll tell you," he said curtly, "once I'm certain he's telling me the truth."

Sarah froze. What truth? Could Colton have given the billionaire a hint about her feelings for Damian? Made him realize that she might not be as over him as she wished?

Damian could feel the violence inside of him simmering back into life when he saw a fleeting expression of guilt on Sarah's face. "Tell me the truth," he bit out. "Do you know about Beth Cohen?"

The way her face paled was answer enough, and Damian's lips tightened.

With Colton's words about Sarah being aware of Beth's existence proving to be true, did that fucking mean the rest of the boy's claims were true as well?

Was Sarah seriously having an affair with a married man?

And if she was, had Damian's constant rejections of her driven Sarah to doing it?

Was that why she had told him it was too late?

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:58 am

I THINK I'VE BEEN SPOILED , Sarah realized over at dinner that evening. Josiah and Naomi had just made their grand entrance, and while Sarah joined the rest of the guests in getting to their feet and clapping, part of her mind remained busy (over) analyzing Damian's present behavior.

He had never ignored me before, Sarah thought uneasily. He avoided being with her, yes, but the moment they were in the same room, he had always been attentive to her needs and never failed to make her feel special. That was how it had always been...until now.

The thought had Sarah searching the ballroom for the billionaire, and she eventually found him seated at a table with his peers, all of whom were unmarried like him.

She waited for him to look her way, like he usually did, but this time the billionaire's attention remained fixed on their parents, who were now descending the ballroom's sweeping staircase like American royalty.

Was this him being jealous over something Colton said or did?

Or was he truly mad at her for some other reason?

She couldn't stop obsessing over the reason behind his indifference, and she couldn't stop her gaze from continuously darting to his table, just to see if he'd finally look her way. But he never did, and even worse—

A woman had approached Damian, and as she bent down to talk to the billionaire, Sarah didn't miss the way the other woman's breasts had threatened to swallow

Damian's face whole. The bitch!

Sarah sharply turned away to glare down at her salad while a mass of emotions churned inside of her. She was furious and stupidly jealous, but she was also hurt and afraid. This weekend was supposed to be about proving herself she was over Damian, so why was she acting like this?

She took her phone out in an effort to distract herself, and Sarah did end up forgetting about the billionaire when she saw the number of calls she had missed from Colton.

As she typed a quick text, asking what was wrong, her phone rang again, and Sarah immediately excused herself when she saw the name that had popped up on her screen.

After stepping out of the ballroom, she walked several meters away before answering the call. "Hey, Hardy."

Unbeknownst to Sarah, Damian had gone after her the moment he saw her leave, and as he came closer, he heard her speaking in a voice that could only be described as affectionate.

"No, I haven't told them about you yet, sorry...I'm just waiting for the right time."

Damien could feel his face whitening as he listened to Sarah's words.

"Trust me, it will work out. Okay? So stop worrying and stressing yourself. Can you promise me that?"

Damian's fists clenched at the tender look on Sarah's face.

"I love you, too, Hardy. Good night." Sarah ended the call with a sigh of relief.

Thank God she been able to talk Hardy out of doing something crazy.

Turning around to head back to the ballroom, she had only taken a few steps back when she saw Damian standing in front of her, and she let out a startled squeak.

"Damian?"

"I never thought Moore was telling me the truth."

She stared at him in genuine bewilderment. "What are you talking about?"

"There's no need to pretend," Damian snapped. "Moore told me enough."

"I really have no idea——"

"Hardy," Damian nearly spat the name out in his rage. "The one you just finished speaking to and said I love you to, dammit. That's the man I'm talking about."

Sarah froze.

"And the reason why you haven't told any of us about him is because he's married," Damian condemned harshly. "Isn't it?"

"W-What?" But her mind was already working overtime, and when she saw Damian start towards her, she didn't even hesitate. She took her heels off and ran away without looking back.

"Goddammit, Sarah. Don't make me go after you."

But this only made Sarah run faster, and she picked her skirts up as she climbed the steps leading up to the suites. Think, Sarah! She needed to make the most out of her

headstart before the billionaire caught up with her, which she knew was only a matter of time.

Damian mentioned about Moore telling him something.

Was that why Colton had been trying to get a hold of her?

And then there was the way he had been spitting mad when talking about Hardy.

Understandable, considering his dog-in-the-manger attitude and hearing her say 'I love you' over the phone.

But what was that about the married bit?

Was he insinuating that she was having an affair with Hardy of all people?

If he was, and she said no, he might want to know more, and what if—

Fingers cupped her elbow.

Time's up, Sarah thought with a gulp.

And then she was being spun around, and her back fell against the balustrade as she stared up at Damian's icy expression.

"No more lies, Sarah," he snarled. "Are you having an affair with a married man or not?"

Sarah mentally crossed her fingers.

And then she heard herself say, "Yes."

"Goddammit, Sarah. Are you fucking serious?" Damian raked down at her. "Even Moore would be a better deal than that asshole, dammit." And when Sarah only continued looking up at him, he couldn't stop himself from gripping her shoulders to give her a good, hard shake. "Say something, dammit!"

Sarah swallowed hard. "I'm...sorry?"

"Enough to get rid of him?"

"I..."

Damian looked as if he was about to strangle her. "What the fuck is there for you to hesitate for? Do you really love him that much?"

Sarah didn't dare let herself speak. Damian knew her all too well, after all, and if she wasn't careful, he'd end up tripping her into telling the truth like he always did.

"Give me his name——"

"Damian? Sarah? What the hell are you two doing up there?"

The sound of Josiah's puzzled voice distracted Damian, and Sarah didn't waste time in seizing the chance to escape. Shoving him off, she quickly ran down the steps to join her stepfather in the landing.

"Sorry for going MIA," she apologized quickly. "Damian and I just had a bit of an argument, and we thought it would be better to keep it from the public eye."

Josiah glanced at his son, who was coming down the steps with a shuttered expression, and then back at his stepdaughter, who had just finished sliding her tiny feet back into her glittery heels. "Is it something I should meddle with?"

"Yes."

"No."

The two had answered at the same time, but what stunned Josiah was who had said what, and Damian, who normally asked him to mind his own business, was now suddenly singing a different tune and wanting him to get involved.

In times like this, it was best to side with the woman, and so Josiah simply said, "Let's head back before Naomi reports us missing."

"I agree," Sarah said quickly, and because she had yet to ask Damian not to say anything about Hardy to anyone, she held back to wait for Damian and curved her arm around the billionaire's as soon as he reached her side.

"It's best to present a united front tonight of all nights, don't you think, big brother ? "

The subtle warning wasn't lost on him, and Damian's lips curved in a smile that didn't reach his eyes. "Quite right, little sister. " But the moment Josiah turned and started walking ahead of them, he said under his breath, "Don't even fucking think this is over."

"Just please don't tell Josiah or Mom about this," she please. And as all eyes turned to them as they followed Josiah up the ballroom stage, she whispered, "Please, Damian. This is my problem to solve——"

"Just give me his name," Damian murmured as they took position, "and he'll cease to be a problem."

He means he wants Hardy to cease existing at all, Sarah thought, but this she could only keep to herself as the live orchestra had already started playing and it was time

for both Damian and her to join their parents in tonight's opening waltz.

Unlike Sarah, whose attention was focused intensely on not missing any steps, Damian hadn't any problems multitasking, and the billionaire continued to brood over Sarah's surprising show of stubbornness towards the other man.

That it was possible for Sarah to actually have fallen in love with another man, Damian refused to consider at all.

Sarah was his, dammit . Always had been, always would be, and no other fucking man, a married douchebag least of all, would change that.

When the music finally ended, a plan had already formed in the billionaire's mind, and no time was wasted in executing it.

As soon as they finished making their bows to the stage and the curtains fell behind them, Damian drew Sarah close, and ignoring their parents' curious looks, took her with him to one of the rooms backstage.

The hallway backstage was dimly lit, and Sarah's heart started beating harder and faster for no reason.

Damian opened the first door to their right and flipped the light switch open, saying, "We'll talk here."

Since it was to her advantage that neither of their parents accidentally hear anything about Hardy, Sarah forced herself to nod and followed the billionaire inside the empty dressing room.

She watched nervously as he closed the door shut, but as soon as he turned to her, anxiety simply got the better of her, and she blurted out, "I mean it about Hardy.

If you tell Josiah or Mom about him, I will never forgive you. "

The tremor in her voice told Damian how serious she was, and it was exactly what he didn't want...but needed to see.

"I can give you my word that I won't say a word to our parents under one condition."

For some reason, Sarah suddenly felt like she was about to enter into a bargain with the Devil, but a quick, wary glance at his features achieved nothing. His handsome face was a completely expressionless mask, and it left her no choice but to say slowly, "Alright. What do you want in return?"

"Something quite simple——"

"I doubt that——"

"Marry me."

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:58 am

MARRY HIM?

Had she really heard—

"Marry me, Sarah."

Oh God. She might as well have been thinking out loud with how uncannily accurate his responses were.

"Marry me."

Sarah had the urge to laugh and cry at how easy it was for Damian to say such words. It only went to show how little he understood of just how much he had meant... and still meant to her.

"This is insane."

The jerkily spoken words had a muscle ticking in his jaw, and it was only then that he realized how much her answer mattered.

..and how much it would fucking hurt, for her not to say yes.

He really had lost her , Damian realized with bitter regret.

The old Sarah would have thrown herself in his arms the moment he asked her to marry him, but this one before him. ..

His fists clenched against his sides. She was over him now, fine. But she had fallen for him before without him even doing a thing. He could and would damn well make her fall in love with him again, and this time, he would love her the way she deserved.

When Sarah started for the door, it was to have the billionaire reach for her arm and force her to turn back to him.

"We haven't finished talking."

"What else is there to talk about?" she asked unevenly.

"I asked you to marry me——"

Sarah shook her head. "Damian, please. Stop this. It's insane. It's just not——"

"I'm not asking you to love me again."

It hurt to hear him say such words, and oh God, how she wished she could believe that the regret and pain in his eyes were true.

But he had hurt her too much, had taught her too well.

She had lost count of the times he had looked at her, talked to her in the past like he loved her, only to tell her she had misread things.

"I'm sorry," Sarah whispered. "I don't think——"

"You want me anymore?" Damian's grip on her tightened. "That's easily resolved."

And then he was hauling her towards him.

"Let's just put it to the test."

Aghast and terrified at what those words were implying, she opened her mouth to say no.

..only to realize she had simply given the billionaire an opening, and the next thing she knew, his mouth was crushing down on hers, and the first thrust of his tongue inside her mouth instantly set her body ablaze.

Aaaaaaaaah.

For one moment, she simply stood there, unable to resist the temptation to savor the forceful thrusts of his tongue. Just one moment, she told herself feverishly. One moment...and then she forced herself to snap out of it. She started struggling, as hard as she could—

The billionaire's dark head lifted, and blue eyes glittered down at her. "Stay fucking still..." The command was delivered in a soft, mocking voice that had her body shaking for all the wrong reasons. "...if you don't want me ripping your gown off."

A helpless laugh escaped her even as her heart thundered against her chest, and it took everything in her not to let her body yield against his hardness.

"I know what you're doing," she accused him.

He was swearing because he knew how much it turned her on, and it was for the same reason he was putting on this overbearing Dom act.

"It's not going to work—"

"Won't it?" He saw her open her mouth to answer back, and he said swiftly, "Shut

up."

Her eyes widened.

"Or I'll fucking shut it for you."

A sound escaped her, something that was part-laugh and part gasp, but the truth was in her eyes, with the way they were turning misty and dark with emotions she couldn't quite control.

Yearning. Confusion. Excitement. Fear. And most of all, a shadow of the love that used to turn her eyes into stars, every time she had looked at him—

And that shadow was enough , Damian told himself fiercely. All he needed was a goddamn place to start, and if lust was all she had left for him, then he would take what he could get, and work with it.

He cupped her chin, so she wouldn't be able to look away. He wanted her eyes to see only him as he told her the truth.

"You want me."

She started shaking her head, but he wouldn't let her.

"And you're going to show how much you want me right now."

Her eyes widened in disbelief while his gleamed with danger.

"You made me a promise before, remember? I still have it in my phone."

While Sarah had no trouble understanding exactly what he was talking about, she

couldn't quite make herself believe that he still had in his phone the text she had sent him all those years ago. That was just too impossibly sentimental for someone like him to do, and—— oh my God!

The billionaire had held his phone up for her to see, and Sarah's own damning words from the past stared back at her.

Sarah: If you come back today I'll give you a blow job. No questions asked before or after.

When she felt Damian's fingers loosen its hold, Sarah immediately sprung away from him while wrapping her arms around her body. "You can't hold that against me——"

"Ah, but I can, love, and I will." Blue eyes smirked at her. "Because you want me to hold it against you," he purred. "You want me to force you into doing it. Command you to do what your body's dying to feel——"

Her arms tightened around her body in a futile attempt to control its shaking, and she shook her head in wild denial of what he was saying. "No——"

"Yes." Damian calmly pulled out one of the vanity chairs and unfolded his length on it. "And we're starting right now ." He crooked a finger at her. "Get on your knees, love."

Oh God. The most feminine parts of her began to throb and moisten at the sinful invitation in his voice. God, oh God. He was so, so, so...sexy. Just at his hottest and sexiest, every time he indulged her fantasies and turned himself into a cocky bastard like he was doing now.

"Come, Sarah."

No. Don't. Stop. Her mind was screaming the words over and over, but the desire that had enslaved her body easily overruled it, and Sarah found herself taking one shaky step forward. And then another and another.

"Good girl."

Until she was standing between his long, muscular legs, her mind a complete mess, and her body a mere, melting and shuddering mass of yearning.

He tugged her hand, just one soft but firm tug, and she found herself obeying his silent command as she slowly fell to her knees.

"Do you think you can handle taking my cock out of my pants?"

Sarah gulped. "I t-think so."

"Then do it." Damian watched Sarah lower her head, amused despite everything else when he saw her brows furrowed with concentration as she slowly and carefully reached for his pants. "It won't bite, love," he teased.

"I know." A tiny smile curved over her rosebud lips as she spoke, and it had Damian biting back a groan. Fuck. He had thought he had himself in control, but clearly not, with the way the mere sight of Sarah's smile had him breathing hard.

It took an agonizing eternity before she was finally able to pull his cock out of its confines, and by that time he was breathing hard and tightly gripping the chair's armrests to keep himself from grabbing her head and plow her lovely, little mouth with his already engorged dick.

"What now?" He saw Sarah lick her lips nervously after speaking, and fuck, but it was just too much temptation to handle, and he had to bend down and fist her hair so

he could have another taste of her mouth.

She gasped at the first contact, clearly taken by surprise, but a moment later, he felt her completely surrendering herself to his kiss, her lips parting wide open as her tongue gently stroked up to meet his.

The sweetness of it rocked him, and he found himself growling against her lips.

"Fuck."

And this of course had her whimpering. She was a cute, dirty little girl like that, with the way her body came alive with every swear word he threw out.

Damian forced himself to end the kiss and pull away before he completely lost control. Both of them were panting, and he found himself cursing anew when he saw her swollen lips and the way her chest was rapidly rising and falling under her gown.

"Do you know how fucking sexy you look right now?"

Sarah shook her head.

"It makes me want to fucking eat you, every fucking inch of you——"

A shudder rocked her body, so powerful it had her unconsciously grabbing his knees for balance.

"Fuck." The mere touch of her fingers clutching his knees was too fucking much.
"Take me into your mouth now, Sarah."

The edge of desperation in his voice made her feel heady. All these years, he had always seemed so in control when they were together, and so to see and hear him like

this...

She had the upper hand at this very moment, but instead of taking advantage of it, instead of using it to turn the tables around and make him feel how he used to make her feel, every time he walked away from her—

Sarah found herself reaching for his cock with trembling hands, with only one aching thought in mind.

I want to please him.

And so she bent her head to take his cock into her mouth.

His fingers drove through her hair as her mouth worked hard to accommodate the sheer girth of his cock. He wasn't even more than a few inches in, and she was already having trouble with just how juicy and fat his cock was. Was this truly a normal size for men or—

Ah!

Damian had used his hips to push another inch of his cock into her, taking Sarah by surprise, and she choked and almost gagged.

" Fuck . Was it too much?" Damian started to pull out immediately but stopped when her fingers squeezed hard around his cock in seeming protest. When he looked down, it was to see her slightly shake her head up at him. No, her eyes answered him with a stubborn glint of warning. Don't pull out.

And fuck if that didn't have him swelling even more inside her mouth, and his fingers shook as he stroked her head. "Alright, love." It was pure work to keep his voice calm and steady when his body was urging him to start fucking her mouth. "Let's take it

slow and easy..." Even if it killed him.

Since Sarah had a deliciously small mouth, it took a while before her lips managed to stretch wide enough and for her tongue to get used to working around the thick width of his cock.

After that came the remaining length of his erection, and Damian found himself exhibiting the patience of a saint as he penetrated her mouth at a controlled pace, waiting for Sarah to relax before pushing another inch in.

It was agony at its most exquisite, but every second also proved well worth his torment.

By the time all twelve inches of his cock were deep inside her throat, both of them were primed for pleasure, with Sarah fiercely gripping his thighs as her head enthusiastically bobbed up and down his length.

Damian did his best to prolong the moment, but then she started experimenting, her mouth squeezing tightly around his erection as she sucked hard—

"Fuck."

It was her only warning, and then he was shooting his cum down her throat, and Sarah worked furiously hard to swallow every creamy, salty drop.

A part of her wondered why she wasn't disgusted or in despair by the fact that she was swallowing the cum of a man she was supposedly over with.

But the much larger part of her just didn't care.

This...this was Damian Fox, the man she had been in love with for years, and it meant

everything, to hear his groans of pleasure and feel his powerful body shudder as his cum flowed down her throat.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:58 am

THE FIRST DAY OF NAOMI'S birthday weekend had been a huge success, and with photos of the party taking over social media, Sarah wasn't surprised when she saw the crowd of fans and paparazzi waiting outside Fox Lodge's parking lot the next day.

"Free PR is always good PR," a cheerful voice piped up from behind her. "Or so I like to tell the sheikh."

Sarah was already grinning even before turning around, having recognized the voice. "You made it!"

"We were supposed to make it here yesterday," Hyacinth admitted after their quick exchange of hugs, "but something came up at work, and Marwan and I ended up having to record another episode."

"What's important is that you're here," Sarah told her friend.

Hyacinth gestured to the crowd outside, which had just gone wild at the arrival of her brother-in-law, Sheikh Tarif Al-Atassi, and her sister Anisah. "Look how cute my sister is acting."

Prior to marrying the royal sheikh, Anisah had worked as a royal tutor for the kingdom's American queen and was rather infamous for her strict, schoolmarmish ways.

This side of her was glaringly evident now, with the way her lips pursed every time she saw girls clamoring for her husband's attention.

"Do you think she'll ever get used to it?" Sarah asked with a grin.

"Never," Hyacinth said brightly while curling an arm around her friend's. "But enough about her. I'm famished. Where do we eat?"

Ten minutes later, and Sarah and Hyacinth were sharing one of the cozy booths in J & N's, which was basically the hotel's upscale version of a diner. Since it was only seven in the morning, there still weren't that many people around, with most of the guests choosing to sleep in.

Sarah asked the other girl about Sheikh Rayyan, whose engagement to Hyacinth was yet to be disclosed to the public.

"Not coming," Hyacinth said with a sigh. "Busy with work, as always."

Sarah was about to murmur words of comfort when a commotion outside their window caught her attention. The crowd had gone wild again, girls jumping up and down - oh.

Hyacinth, seeing Sarah's grimace, turned her gaze to where the other girl was staring at. Oh. "And here I thought you were over him," she teased.

Sarah quickly snapped her gaze back to her friend. "Of course I am."

"Uh huh." Hyacinth was clearly unconvinced. "Just promise me I have dibs when you guys make it official. You two are perfect for my show."

Sarah glared at her friend. "Very funny." Since the title of Hyacinth's show was Fuck Being Politically Correct, it was easy to tell which aspect of her relationship with Damian the other girl was alluding to.

"I'm serious, and it will be fun——"

"What's going to be fun?"

Sarah jerked in surprise at hearing Damian's voice. Shit. She looked up, and there he was, looking his usual gorgeous self with a denim jacket thrown over his plaid shirt and jeans.

"I wanted you two to guest in my show——"

Sarah kicked Hyacinth under the table, but it was too late.

"It's a deal," she heard the billionaire say easily.

What?

"If you let me have breakfast alone with my stepsister ."

Sarah groaned at the amount of innuendo he had injected in the last word while the same thing had Hyacinth grinning. "It's a deal, Mr. Fox."

And Hyacinth was gone faster than one could say wait, leaving Damian to comfortably slide in her place on the opposite side of the booth.

"Morning, love."

Shit, shit, shit.

"Morning." Sarah's voice was stiff. Memories had flooded her brain the moment he appeared, and all of it was urging her to do a runner...

Damian knew exactly what Sarah was thinking when her cheeks suddenly flushed with color. "Thinking about last night?"

Eep . Sarah could feel herself turning even redder as his words forced her to face up to what she had done.

Last night, she had still been on her knees when Damian pulled out of her mouth, and it was hearing that strange but unmistakable popping sound that had snapped Sarah out of the haze of desire she had been trapped in.

She had looked up at him in horror, stricken at what she had allowed to transpire.

'This shouldn't have happened,' she had whispered.

And then she had hastened to her feet and run away, taking advantage of the fact that Damian still had to do his pants before he could come after her.

She had stuck to Naomi's side like glue for the rest of the night after that, and when the party came to a close, she had rushed to her room and triple-locked her door before falling into troubled sleep.

But even then, a part of her had known she was only delaying the inevitable——

Oh my God!

Sarah shot up in her seat when she felt his hand touch her knee.

"Relax," Damian purred. "No one can see us." He had her legs hidden between his, and with Sarah so much smaller and slimmer than him, other people at the diner would only be able to see one side of his denim-clad thigh and not much else.

His fingers started caressing her knee, just slow, gentle strokes that shouldn't have been erotic or thrilling in any way, but because this was Damian, it just was, and she had to bite her lip hard to keep herself from crying out.

"Have you thought about my proposal?" he asked softly.

"I already gave you my answer," she muttered.

"But it's not the answer I want," he drawled, "so change it."

Aaaargh. He was doing it again, going all cocky on her that she could only glower at him even as her toes curled hard inside her boots.

"Did I just turn you on, love?"

"No." But this was a lie, of course, and the gleam of amusement in his sexy, blue eyes told Sarah that he was on to her, too.

"Let me do something about it."

"There's nothing to—" She felt the billionaire squeeze her knee under the table, and oh God, it was more than enough to have her insides tightening with need, and she quickly sucked her breath to keep herself from making any noise.

"You were saying?"

She stared at him, torn between dismay and outrage. "For God's sake, Damian." They still had a hundred-plus guests staying in the same lodge as them, and they only had to be caught once—

His hand had moved, his fingers trailing up on the inner side of her thigh, and Sarah

reacted without thinking, her legs snapping close...and trapped his hand between them in the process.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

She might just have made things worse—

Oh my God!

Damian squeezed the tender skin of her thigh, and she found herself gripping one edge of the table.

"I can make you feel like this every day, love."

"Shut up."

"You just have to marry me."

"Never—" The hand between her legs was abruptly withdrawn, and a feeling of aching emptiness immediately struck her at the loss of his touch.

Damian leaned back against his seat and waited.

His Sarah was defiant at first, her voice sharp as she told him off. "Don't touch me again."

He didn't bother to answer, and soon enough, his patience was rewarded as Sarah seemed to shift restlessly in her seat.

"You can try all you want," he murmured, "but you won't be able to make it go away. You want me too much, love."

Sarah squeezed her eyes shut against the seductive note of inducement in the billionaire's tone.

"It's still early enough," he purred. "We won't get caught."

Inhale, exhale. Regulating her breathing was all she could do to distract herself from the devilish lure of the billionaire's voice, which was still doing a brilliant job in getting under her skin and stirring her senses.

"Tell you what, love. I won't even make you ask for it."

Oh God, oh God.

" You only have to open your eyes and look at me..."

Why was this man so good at tempting her?

"And I'll take you to my office and make you cum..."

Her pussy started to quiver.

"No questions asked," Damian promised gravely, "before or after."

The deliberate and deliciously wicked similarity in his words wasn't lost her at all, and before she knew it...

Her eyelids were already fluttering open, her gaze meeting his...

And then Damian was taking hold of her hand, and Sarah's heart started drumming loudly as he led her out of the diner. Their pace was swift, and all Sarah could do was focus on their clasped hands, not wanting to risk looking around and seeing

something that could ruin the moment.

And then suddenly, they were there, and her heart jumped to her throat as he stepped aside to let her inside his office. When she turned around, it was to hear the click of his door locking, and then he, too, was turning to face her...

No questions asked, before or after.

The memory of it freed her, and a whimper escaped her...just as she started running towards him.

They met halfway, Sarah throwing herself in his arms, and the billionaire immediately covering her mouth with his the moment her limbs locked around his body.

He carried her to his massive desk, and she heard things falling to the floor just before his hands shifted its hold and he was gently lowering her so she could lie flat on her back on his desk, her legs dangling over its edge.

She didn't even think of resisting when she felt him pry her legs wide open, and she could only whimper when she felt him slowly pull her panties down her legs. Cool air brushed against her pussy a second later, and she cried out.

"Exquisite," he rasped, "and so gloriously, fucking wet."

The words had her shuddering with a gasp, and at the first stroke of his fingers against her folds, she found herself becoming delirious with need.

Oh God, he was so good at this.

So, so wonderfully good.

So good.

Stroke after stroke after stroke, she felt herself gradually losing her mind, until she could no longer contain herself.

"Damian."

She heard him growl, and her body arched helplessly at the sound.

"Damian, please."

And that was when his finger finally ceased its tormenting, teasing strokes and slid inside of her.

A long, drawn out moan spilled past her lips, but it soon turned into quick, short whimpers when the thrust of his finger soon started to quicken. He was pushing deeper and harder, too, and she was finding it harder and harder to breathe as her body began to tighten.

"Damian. Oh God. Damian."

It was suddenly impossible to stop saying his name, and the more she said it, the hotter she burned, the fires inside of her pooling within the walls of her womanhood, and when she felt his thumb start grinding against her clit, something inside of her burst...

He watched her come, her body buckling with every thrust of his fingers, and when her dazed gaze drifted to his, he said softly, "I love you, Sarah."

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:58 am

"YOU ALRIGHT, LOVE? "

The words had Sarah turning to her with a gasp, and Hyacinth burst into laughter. "I knew that would get your attention... love ."

Aaaargh!

"I heard Damian call you that this morning," Hyacinth said innocently. "Or is he the only one allowed - hey! Where are you going... love?"

Sarah hit the slopes harder to pick up speed... and get away from Hyacinth's incessant ribbing. Note to self: Text Sheikh Rayyan about all the boys who had tried hitting on his fiancée. That should be enough to get the other girl in trouble, and the thought was enough to restore Sarah's good mood.

With weather forecasts ensuring continuous snow, plenty of Naomi's guests had come up and were taking it easy on the longer but more scenic route. Not in the mood for chit chat, Sarah changed courses and opted for the more complex one that would have her weaving through trees and boulders.

For the first few minutes, she skied down at full speed, breathless and exhilarated as her skis glided over fresh, powder-soft snow.

It was only when other skiers began to pop up at the second half of the trail that she was forced to slow down, and Sarah's mind began to drift aimlessly.

She found herself thinking about Hardy and reminded herself to give him a call—

Shit.

She knew right away she hadn't her phone with her and had left it charging in her room.

Dumb move, Sarah Jeanne. But not as dumb as...

She slammed on her mental brakes, but another thought had already fully formed itself in her mind, and this morning's shameful little interlude began playing back before her eyes.

Shit, shit, shit!

She could see it so clearly, like a translucent image superimposed over the wintry scenery. She was flat on her back, body still shaking, while Damian stared down at her, blue eyes turbulent and fierce as he said I love you those words.

Even the memory was too much, and Sarah had to fight back against the temptation to start hyperventilating.

He didn't mean those words, she tried convincing herself. That was just his dog-in-the-manger attitude rearing its ugly horns, and all because he thought she was having an affair with a married guy.

If only Colton hadn't said that stupid lie, she thought waspishly.

But since he had been doing it for Beth, she couldn't really blame him, and in a way, he had also been right when he told her that the lie was even better than being in a fake relationship, especially after Damian overhearing that damning call she had with Hardy.

After reaching the end of the trail, Sarah absently made her way to the chair lifts, mind still busy trying to figure out her next move. Damian loving her was just too good to be true. She had to tell him—

Sarah could feel herself paling when a breeze came out of nowhere to tickle her cheek. It felt strangely familiar, like a heavensent... no, no, no! She shot a glare towards the skies, which were now more grayish than blue. I'm so over the serendipity B.S.—whoa!

Damian suddenly appeared out of nowhere, arm around her shoulder and dragging her to the lift chair. The next thing she knew, they were seated together, safety bar locked into place, and then they were off, with no possibility of Sarah escaping for the next fifteen minutes.

Shit, shit, shit!

DAMIAN'S EDGES WERE still raw even though it had already been over a few hours since Sarah had gone running out of his office.

His first thought had been to go after her, but he kept seeing the look of devastation on her face, and the memory arrested his movements.

Every time he told her he loved her, she would look at him as if he was breaking her heart.

And so he decided to give her space, both of them really, even just for a few hours.

He had dragged Tommy out of the kitchen and forced his PA to work alongside him for an hour.

After that, he had joined Josiah in a luncheon meeting, and he had even indulged

Naomi's request to join her and her friends for a quick ride that would allow for several interesting wildlife sightings.

He had done all that and yet in the back of his mind thoughts of her refused to go.

He kept seeing her face, kept seeing the way the words refused to leave even as her lips moved, and the way her eyes.

.. God, they had been so dark and bright all at the same time, and every time he thought of those eyes, it was just all too fucking clear, how much he had hurt her all those years.

His gaze strayed back to his laptop, its screen showing the last page of the background report he had ordered from his security chief. Five pages in total, but it all amounted to a single thing: no fucking clue to prove or disprove the identity of any Hardy in Sarah's life.

He would've liked to believe this meant Sarah had simply made the man up, thinking it would keep him away, but his guts told him otherwise.

Even if Damian were to discount Colton's words, Sarah's fear had been genuine when he threatened to tell their parents about her involvement with a married man.

The man existed alright, and if Damian didn't figure out a way to win her back this weekend. ..he would never have her again.

Damian poured himself a shot of whiskey and downed it all with one gulp. The liquid burned down his throat, its fiery sensation parallel the hellish fear that had resided in the pit of his guts, ever since he had found out about Sarah being involved with another man.

Sarah was still an old-fashioned girl at heart, and there were some rules that he knew she would rather die than cross.

That meant she was unlikely to have any physical relationship with the man, not until that Hardy asshole was legally annulled at least, but what if the other man had been able to turn her head around with some sob story?

Sarah deserved more than having her virginity taken by some married loser, dammit.

But that was exactly what was going to happen if he didn't make a move soon. ..

The thought alone had Damian cursing, and he stalked out of his office in search for Sarah.

It took him a while, but he finally found her queuing for the lifts, and the timing was just perfect.

He got into the lift chair with her and smirked at the look of surprise on her face as he pulled the safety bar down.

"Y-you—"

"Missed me?"

"No!"

He leaned back against the seat, saying solemnly, "I did."

Furious at the way her heart skipped a beat at his words, she retorted, "You missed yourself?"

"As I aim to be the perfect husband," the billionaire drawled, "I would always like to have honesty between us, and with that said...do you truly think that's funny, love?"

No, she didn't, but the pained look on his beautiful face was, and she couldn't help laughing despite everything. "Oh, Damian." And the words were out before she even knew what she was thinking of saying. "Why couldn't you have been like this before?"

The words broke both of their hearts in an instant, and Sarah jerked her gaze away from Damian the moment she felt her eyes start to sting. "I'm s-sorry——"

"You have nothing to apologize for," the billionaire bit out. "We both know you only spoke the truth." Damian breathed hard. "I wish it wasn't, but I was an idiot, and it took losing you to realize how much I love you...and now, I'm realizing too late just how much I hurt you as well."

Her lips started trembling harder at his words, and she could only tighten her grip on her poles.

"You didn't deserve to be hurt, and while I know I don't deserve another chance, I am asking for it. I want a chance to love you again and make up for all the times I hurt you."

She didn't answer this time, and he didn't force her to.

Instead, he leaned close and when he slowly wiped the tears from her cheeks, she let out another sob, and her tears fell even faster.

"I r-really wish you were like this before," she said brokenly.

"I can't change the past, but I can promise you the future will be even better than this.

You just need to give me a chance."

There wasn't a time for Sarah to answer. The lift chair had arrived at the station, and as soon as the safety bar went up, she skied out, as fast as she could, but Damian caught up to her easily.

"We should head back," he suggested, not liking how the skies were looking. "It's getting late anyway—"

"You can go ahead," she offered right away.

He simply looked at her.

"Suit yourself." She opted for another route this time, thinking its greater number of twists and turns would allow for less talking. And so it did, since no sooner had they skied down a particular slope when something rumbled loudly behind them.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:58 am

"DAMIAN? DAMIAN?" She was terrified to shake or move him in any way, in case he was suffering from a concussion.

"Please wake up." Silence made her voice seem shriller in her ears, and although she knew it was only panic making her imagine things, the air around her seemed colder and thinner, making it hard to breathe. "Damian—"

He finally stirred, and she could've wept with relief when his dreamy blue eyes opened.

"Avalanche?" he asked right away as he pushed himself up.

"Wait—"

"It's fine," Damian cut in. "I don't feel any of the symptoms of a concussion." He turned to her, his gaze sweeping over her form as he asked, "You're alright?"

"I am." And her voice started to shake. "B-Because you pushed me away and..."

Seeing that her mind had forced to relive their ordeal, Damian immediately hauled her close and wrapped his arms around her. "It's alright," he murmured. "We're alright."

"Truly?" Her voice came out muffled, with her face hidden against his chest. "You're not worried we're going to die of hypothermia?"

"People still die of hypothermia around here," he acknowledged, "but most of them

were also usually intoxicated as well." He pulled back, wanting her to see his eyes so she would know he was telling the truth. "We're not going to die here, Sarah."

"I believe you."

She didn't sound like it, though , Damian thought.

"It shouldn't take too much time for someone to figure out Damian Fox is missing and rescue us." Sarah was thinking out loud in an attempt to keep her panic at bay.

"But in the meantime, we need to get moving..."

He saw her gaze drift to his skis, and that was when Damian belatedly noticed how badly damaged it was.

"You won't be able to ski on that," Sarah felt obliged to point out.

"No," Damian said slowly as the craziest idea occurred to him, and his heart began beating hard. "I won't. Are yours okay?"

She shook her head.

"I see."

"Is that a bad 'I see' or a good 'I see'?" she asked fearfully.

"I'm saying our current conditions aren't exactly the best, but they're still workable.

" After taking his skis off, Damian turned to her, asking, "Will you be alright if I leave you alone here for a moment?"

" When he saw her start to tense, he explained right away, "I still feel my phone in

my pocket.

I'll see if I can find a signal, get someone to pick us up by chopper. "

"Okay." Sarah tried not to show how scared she was at no longer being in the safe haven of his arms. "Just don't go anywhere I can't see you."

"I promise."

Damian pressed a quick kiss to her forehead, and Sarah didn't dare take her gaze off his back as he walked away.

The billionaire probably didn't know it, but she had an accident similar to this when she was seven.

It had just been her and her dad skiing, but because he had been drunk that time, he had somehow lost sight of her, and she had ended up crying and shivering in the cold for hours.

Although Naomi hadn't even blamed Sarah's father for the accident and only asked that he went to rehab, he had done a runner on them instead.

Sarah's anxiety eased when Damian trudged back to her, but the grim look on his face made her relief short-lived. "You didn't get any signal?"

Instead of answering her, he asked, "What about your phone?"

"I don't have it with me," Sarah admitted tremulously. "I left it charging in my room."

"I see."

I see? Frustration welled up inside of her. Why did he keep saying that? "Did you get to—" That was when the billionaire showed her his phone, and the words died in her throat. Its screen was completely smashed to pieces, and she gulped hard.

Damian crouched down. "Sarah?" Something felt wrong, and then he saw the way her face started losing color and almost swore. "Breathe, Sarah! Breathe, goddammit!"

She found herself clinging to the command in his voice, and miraculously enough, the tightness in her chest started loosening gradually.

"Good girl." Damian's voice was tight but controlled.

He had a feeling any trace of fear from him could set her off, and he needed her calm and relaxed.

"Slow and deep, love. That's right." And he started breathing easily as well when he saw her finally regain color in her cheeks.

"You're doing great, Sarah. That's it, love.

" He cupped her chin to lift her gaze to his.

"You're with me, and I'm going to take care of you. Nothing will happen to us. Got that? "

If she showed the slightest bit of fear , Damian brooded, he would call the whole fucking thing off. But if she didn't...

Sarah could actually feel the terror peeling off her skin as she lost herself in the blazing assurance in Damian's blue eyes.

"I got it." And as soon as the words were out, she realized that she had spoken the truth.

If Damian told her it would be alright, then it would be, and as she started to relax, logic also eventually reasserted itself and a chagrined expression fell over her face. "I was being silly, wasn't I?"

"Not at all."

She snorted. "Liar."

"Seeing that you're feeling good enough to argue with me..." Damian offered her his hand and helped Sarah to her feet, saying briefly, "We should look for somewhere to hole up. It's not good to be exposed too long out here."

Sarah tried not to think about how glaringly white everything was around them as they started moving.

She had no idea how Damian knew which direction to trek, but then, he had always been the outdoorsy type, the kind that knew the right end of a compass and was able to tell the time just by looking at the sun's position in the sky.

After almost twenty minutes of treading their way through woods that eerily reminded her of the Blair Witch, they finally made their way out, and the first thing Sarah saw had her rubbing her eyes several times, just to make sure she wasn't seeing some kind of mirage.

And yet...the log cabin remained unwavering in her sight, and she turned to Damian, eyes glowing with excitement. "You're seeing what I'm seeing, right?"

"No."

But the gleam in his eyes assured her he was only joking, and she let out a peal of laughter. "Oh, thank God!" She ran towards the log cabin and let out a squeal when she saw the fresh tire tracks on the snow. "Are you seeing this, Damian?"

"I'll go in first," was all the billionaire said. "Stay behind me."

It was still warm and cozy inside, with just the faintest hint of smoke from the fireplace, but it was only after Damian had checked the whole house out and declared it a safe place to hole up did she allow herself to breathe a sigh of relief.

Oh, thank God. Thank You, Thank You, God.

She sent a teasing look at the billionaire, asking, "Were you worried you'd find Leatherface hiding in some corner? "

"If I did, rest assured I'll offer you in exchange."

She laughed. "Jerk!"

But Damian didn't smile back, and upon reaching her, he asked seriously, "How are you holding up?"

"I'm good." And after a moment's hesitation, she said simply, "Thank you for bearing with me." She rose on her toes to kiss him on the cheek, but Damian deliberately turned his head, and her lips directly landed over his instead.

Her toes curled hard, her whole body freezing in shock at the unexpected kiss.

But when she felt him start to pull away, she reacted instinctively, her arms going around his neck as she whispered, "No.

" After all that they had been through, it suddenly felt right, and more than that, being with him like this felt necessary.

She didn't care about the fact that this wasn't their house or that their rescuers could already be on their way right that very moment.

All she wanted, all she needed was to be one with him, and she didn't hesitate to make this clear by pressing her already swollen breasts closer to his chest. "Please, Damian. "

A muscle started ticking on his jaw. "I don't want to take advantage——"

"Then I'll take advantage."

He half-laughed, half-groaned. "Goddammit, Sarah——"

"Make love to me." And before he could say anything else, a smile wobbled to her lips as she said, "And yes, I'll remember that I was the one who wanted this."

The significance of the words wasn't lost on him at all, and with a harsh groan, Damian grabbed a fistful of her hair and pulled her head back just as his mouth crushed hers in a deep, hard kiss.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:58 am

THE FIRST KISS WAS almost bruising in its wildness.

It was almost savage, as if both of them had an uncontrollable need to eat each other up.

Their pants soon filled the air, punctuated only by the crackling sounds coming from the fireplace, and it was only when they both had to gasp for air that Damian regained some sense of rationality.

He tried to slow things down, thinking she deserved something gentle and tender for their first time.

Unfortunately, his little Sarah had other plans.

She wanted it hard and fast, and she made her desire known just by meeting his gaze. ..as her nails raked over his chest.

Fear and excitement snaked through her blood when Damian's fingers suddenly curled around her wrist to keep her hand from moving. Her heart thundered against her chest as she slowly looked up, and she could only gulp at the savage blaze of lust in his eyes.

And then he was kissing her again, his tongue thrusting hard into her mouth, and she could only moan as she wound her arms back around his neck. Her handsome Dom was having his way of her, and it was exactly how she wanted their first time to be.

This time, their kiss was fierce and raw, and it had her writhing against him in

moments, her need quickly hitting a feverish peak.

She would've been happy if the kiss never ended, but when it did, it was only for the better, with the billionaire tearing his mouth off as he ordered Sarah to get rid of her clothes.

Her fingers shook as she did as he ordered, and they shook even more when she saw him stripping himself of his clothes at the same time.

He proved more efficient at it, too, and Sarah could only swallow hard when she saw Damian standing before her completely naked, his thick, hard cock already jutting up in arousal.

It looked so much bigger than she remembered, and she could feel herself getting wet at the thought of her pussy taking all of it in. It's going to fit, she told herself. It had to. Since her mouth was able to take all of it, her own cunt shouldn't have any problems doing the same. Right?

By the time she stepped out of her panties, all the thinking she had done about the size of his penis had left her underwear completely drenched, and she could feel herself turning pink when she saw where he was looking.

"Do you want me that much, love?"

She could only nod, finding it impossible to deny this.

After arranging their clothes on the rug to form a makeshift bed, Damian crooked a finger at her, and her heart started thudding hard again as she slowly made her way to him.

She was still a couple of steps away when his arms shot out, and she could only

whimper in stunned, dazed pleasure as he yanked her close, and every inch of her body was suddenly plastered against the hot, throbbing hardness of his figure.

His eyes locking with hers, he slowly adjusted his hold on her, and she caught her breath when the new position had his cock sliding up and down against her already wet and throbbing folds. "D-Damian..."

His arousal grew at the way her eyes closed and her head fell back.

"Oh God, Damian." If the mere sliding motions of his cock felt this good, how much more incredible would it feel, once he finally made her his?

When Damian felt her fingers dig deep into his back, he took it as his cue and bent his head to recapture her mouth. She moaned immediately, and the sound was more than gratifying, forcing him to strove for control as he guided her down until she was lying on her back on their pile of clothes.

He kissed her harder as his full weight rested down on hers, and she moaned against his lips while instinctively wrapping her legs around his waist. The new position caused the head of his cock to slip in, and both of them jerked against each other.

A moment later, another inch slipped in, and when he raised his head to gauge her reaction, it was to see her eyes looking up at him. ..

And goddammit, but he could almost believe that she was in love with him again.

"Sarah."

He had to say her name.

"I love you, Sarah."

And he could no longer control himself.

He penetrated her with a single, forceful thrust, his cock driving past her hymen, and he couldn't take his gaze off her face as he watched her gasp and catch her breath at the pain of her deflowering.

Maybe...just maybe, he really was the sadist and Dom she teased him to be.

Because instead of feel regret at the pain he caused her, he had found himself relishing it—

And the way she was looking at him now, it did seem she was also the masochistic sub she liked roleplaying as when they were together.

"It hurt," she whispered.

"I know."

"You're not going to say sorry?"

"I'd be lying if I did."

A choked laugh escaped her, but it quickly turned into a whimper when he started moving. "Damian!" Her eyes flew up to him. "It's too soon—"

"Is it?" And still he kept moving, his cock pulling almost all the way out before sliding back in. "You'll get used to it soon enough."

Her nails raked over his back. " Sadist ."

"I guess I am," he crooned. "And doesn't that make you happy?" He grasped one

rounded cheek of her ass as he spoke and punctuated his words by pushing her up as he plunged back down with another deep, forceful thrust.

"Damian!"

"Am I hurting you?"

"Yes!"

"And do you like it?"

Her body shuddered at the question, but with his cock still relentlessly plowing her cunt, Sarah could only sob her answer out.

"Yes." She stopped thinking after that, the pleasure of his possession completely dominating her senses.

And when at one point, he had reversed their positions, and he had pinched her ass before ordering her to ride him, she actually found herself crying out in pleasure as she submitted herself to his demand.

She rode him, milked him, and it was while she was arched over his body, her breasts bouncing with every thrust, it was then she felt him starting to swell, and her body starting to tighten—

Their gazes met.

And suddenly, it was all too clear.

"I love you, Damian."

To which he had the perfect answer a moment later.

"Fuck."

Classic Damian, and she found herself laughing and crying and moaning as both of them started cumming at the same time. She could feel him watching her, and she let him, not making the slightest attempt to hide anything from his hungry gaze.

"I love you," she whispered again.

After that, it was just one happy moment blurring into another, simply because everything Damian said and did, and everything that was by him, of him, and about him really - all of it made her happy.

She loved the strength he displayed when carrying her in his arms and the quiet reverence in his touch as he bathed her.

She loved the way he couldn't seem to get enough of her now, with the way he would frequently reach for her just to brush his lips over her hair or shower her face with kisses.

And most of all, she couldn't deny how happy she was when he invited her to step out to gaze at the stars, and after a few moments, it was to hear the whirring sound of a chopper's rotor blades as it flew above them—

The doors opened, and she saw a grinning Tommy crouching down just before a banner rolled out from the chopper, and Sarah started crying when she read what the gold-painted letters spelled out.

All at once, she understood several things: they could've been rescued a lot earlier, this cabin didn't just happen to be conveniently empty, and Damian had made all of it

happen.

..probably before he had smashed his own phone to pieces.

Turning to him, she said with a sniff, "You're insane."

Damian only smiled. "In my defense, my love, I only wanted us talk in a place where you wouldn't have anywhere to run away to. It was your idea, however, to fu—"

She cut him off, asking hastily, "Don't you have something to give me?"

"You mean this?"

The billionaire unzipped his ski jacket to retrieve a small, velvet box, and an incredulous laugh escaped her. "How..."

"I can't take credit for making the avalanche happen," he said dryly, "but I did have this with me for a while now." And as he spoke, Damian went down on one knee before opening the box to reveal a diamond ring.

"It's perfect, Damian," she said shakily.

"It will be..." He reached for her hand. "—when it's on your finger." Looking up, he asked simply, "Will you marry me, Sarah Jeanne Clarke?"

She could only nod, too emotional to speak as she watched him carefully slide the ring down her finger. It fit perfectly, and its weight on her finger felt so wonderfully right.

Later, Damian held her hand throughout the flight back to Fox Lodge, and she found herself momentarily closing her eyes to whisper to God, I'm sorry I doubted You.

And thank You.

It was, however, a prayer that would turn out to be painfully premature.

Although their parents and Naomi's guests hadn't a clue about their near brush with death and the marriage proposal that followed, key members of Damian's staff had been properly apprised, and they surged forward with a wide range of concerns as soon as the chopper landed and the billionaire carefully guided his stepsister, now also his fiancée, as she followed him out.

"Go on," Sarah urged, seeing the number of employees waiting to speak to Damian. "I'll wait for you at my room."

"I'll be with you in a moment," Damian promised, "and then we'll make the announcement together."

Sarah unplugged her phone as soon as she made it back to her room, and the first thing she saw was all the calls she had missed from Hardy.

Shit. He must be frantic by now, and that wasn't good.

She tried calling him, but when all she got was his voicemail, she finally decided to leave a voice message.

Hey, Hardy. I'm sorry I missed your call. I know you're worried about me, but there's no need to be. I give you my word. Everything's great, really great, even better than I imagined. Call me as soon as you get this, alright? Miss you, and love you always. I'll see you soon.

After ending the call, she quickly changed into something pretty and sparkly, one that would properly reflect her mood, and since it seemed Damian wouldn't be with her

anytime soon, she also spent a few minutes applying makeup, wanting to look her very best once the world knew she would soon be Mrs. Damian Fox.

But the moment never came.

Minutes passed, one after another, and it was as if she suddenly felt she had been shot, the pain so intense that it nearly had her crying out.

Something was wrong. And she found herself rushing out of her room and running down the stairs.

Something was wrong. And when she made it to the lobby, it was to see Damian stepping out of the doors, with a limousine waiting for him outside.

"Wait!"

And it was just like before, and she was running for him again.

"Wait!"

Something was wrong.

So, so very wrong.

She saw him getting inside the limousine, and in her panic, she lost her footing just as she reached the steps. When she started to fall, a sob escaped her, because she knew then. She was too late. She would never catch him again—

But this, too, was just like before.

Damian reached her in time, his arms catching her before her head could hit the

ground.

Everything was almost the same, everything was almost just like before...except for the look in his eyes.

And it was then she realized.

Even if she had stopped Damian from leaving—

She was already too late.

The look on his achingly beautiful face said it all.

"You changed your mind," she whispered numbly. "You don't...you d-don't want to be married anymore. You r-realized you n-never loved me—" Her voice caught. "Didn't you?"

And to it all, the only thing he said was, "I'm sorry," and oh God, it just made her want to laugh and cry, and in a moment, she found herself doing just that.

Laughing. Crying. And it just went on and on, louder and louder, that it had the people around them, people who had worked for them for years, people who knew how long she had loved and chased after Damian—

It was the first time she saw these people look away, the first time they found the sight of her love too uncomfortable to bear, and it just drove the point home.

"I told you before, didn't I?" she heard Damian say tightly. "You've got an asshole for a stepbrother."

And then he was walking away.

Again.

She tried not to cry. Tried so hard not to cry, but she just couldn't hold the tears back.

I'm so tired, God.

Is he really the one for me?

Can't I just give up?

Page 36

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:58 am

DAMN HER . Even now, she had her hooks in him so damn deep that he was this close to telling his driver to turn the car around and head back to the lodge.

Love you always. Those were the fucking words she had used for the other man in her life, and she had said them while wearing his ring on her finger.

He had heard him say them with his own ears, but even after this.

..even knowing that all she might want from him was revenge and that whole scene of her trying to stop him from leaving was just a fucking act, to have him pay for all the times he had hurt her——

God.

He still couldn't make himself hate her.

Couldn't even stomach the idea of hurting her back by fucking the first available woman and letting Sarah know about it.

He couldn't do any damn thing to hurt her because he loved her.

All he had been able to do was leave...because he loved her and probably always would.

When Damian's phone rang, a part of him was already wishing it would be her name he would see, and he did his best to convince himself it wasn't despair that crushed his heart when it was Tommy's name that flashed on the screen.

"What is it?"

"News about you and Ms. Clarke have exploded on the Internet," his PA reported anxiously. "There were guests at the balcony who saw what happened, sir, and the photos have already gone viral."

Damian swore under his breath. "Do Josiah and—" His phone started vibrating, with his father's name popping up on the screen. Fuck. "I'll call you again. I already have my father waiting on the other line."

And as was his usual, Josiah nearly roared Damian's ears off the moment he answered his father's call.

"What the hell is going on, Damian?"

And because he was too tired to lie, he simply gave the full, unvarnished truth. "I'm in love with Sarah, and she's in love with another man."

"What the fuck—"

"A married man named Hardy—" He stopped speaking when he heard Naomi cry out in the background. "Am I on fucking loudspeaker?"

Instead of Josiah answering, however, it was Naomi who came to the line. "Did you say Hardy, Damian?"

He stiffened. "Yes. I did." And remembering how adamant Sarah had been to keep the truth from their parents, he couldn't help asking sharply, "Do you know him?"

"Oh, yes." And this time, there was a distinct sob in Naomi's voice. "When Sarah was young, she had...she had a hard time saying Daddy for some reason. That's why she

ended up calling her own dad Hardy."

Damian whitened.

"She probably tracked him down. He's——"

He cut his stepmother off, saying with fierce urgency, "I need your help, Naomi. Can you find Sarah for me and keep her from leaving? I'm heading back right now."

And his driver was clearly eavesdropping because the guy was already taking a U-turn as he spoke, and when he saw his employer looking at him through the rearview mirror, his driver simply mouthed three words: I'm Team Sarah.

Damian could only give a nod of thanks, his nerves stretched taut while he waited for Naomi to get back on the line. And when she finally did——

"She's in your office," Naomi shared shakily. "Can you tell us what's happening——"

"I'll give you all the answers you want," he promised curtly, "but right now, I need to focus on Sarah——"

"Do you really love her, Damian?" Naomi asked painfully.

"I always did, Naomi. From the moment I saw her."

And after that, Damian found himself doing something he hadn't done for years.

He prayed.

TOMMY WAS WAITING FOR him by the steps, and his PA looked as if he had aged in years in the past few minutes.

"Sarah?" Damian asked right away.

"Still in your office, sir."

He gave the younger man a curt nod of thanks. "Keep everyone away. I don't want us disturbed."

"Understood, sir."

But when Damian entered his office, it was to find the room completely empty, and his gaze immediately strayed to the balcony's open doors.

He was too fucking late , Damian realized dully.

She had obviously outwitted everyone. He should've expected this, should've fucking seen it coming.

He had hurt her so fucking much, had hurt her for the last time, that she had obviously decided it was better to risk her neck, escaping through a second-floor balcony, than have to face him again.

A gentle breeze blew in as Damian sank to his knees.

He had lost her for good.

And it was all his fucking fault.

An unfamiliar stinging sensation struck his eyes, and the realization that a man of his age was about to cry had his lips twisting. It was just one of the many things, he thought numbly, that only his little Sarah could make him do.

Only his Sarah.

He felt himself start to shatter from within and he couldn't make himself care.

I love you.

The words felt like the only thing he had left of her, and already his lips were moving at the thought, the words tumbling out.

"I love you so fucking much——"

"I love you, too."

Damian's head jerked up.

And that was when she saw her standing by the fucking doorway of his en-suite. She was pale and shaking, her eyes swollen with tears, but ah God, when she spoke...

"I'm sorry. I had to pee."

The love she had for him since she was eighteen was in her voice.

Sarah's hands flew to her mouth.

And then she was running.

Falling to her knees.

Wrapping her arms around him.

"Don't cry, Damian."

His arms went around her.

"Then don't ever fucking leave me."

She pulled back to smile tearily up at him. "I couldn't even if I wanted to. There's this voice inside my head, and..." She swallowed back a sob. "It keeps saying you're the one for me——"

His mouth covered hers, and it was the sweetest, loveliest kiss, because this time, there were no more lies between them.

"Tell that voice for me," he said raggedly against her lips, "he's one smart dude."

"He has to be," she whispered with a tremulous laugh, "since He's God."

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:58 am

TWO MONTHS LATER, and Sarah, now Mrs. Damian Fox, was standing in one corner, thinking to herself, Who would've thought life would turn out this way?

Foxtown was finally on its soft opening, and so far the hundreds-plus guests invited for its first round of press was more than promising.

Everyone was raving about the theme park, and she had lost count of the number of times she had heard the phrase ' Westworld meets Jane Austen' being bandied about.

Then again, it really was the best description really.

Foxtown, simply put, was a theme park offering a fully immersive experience based in a fictional town that was half Wild Wild West and half Regency London. .. just like the man at its helm—

And almost on cue, a pair of strong arms wrapped around her waist from behind, and she leaned back to smile up at Damian. "Hello, stranger."

"Lord Fox," he corrected, making her roll her eyes, "while you're..." He fixed a quizzical look at her attire, which was outrageously frilly. "A clown?"

She burst into laughter. "Jerk."

"Just being truthful, love." The billionaire absently arranged her bonnet while speaking, and she caught sight of other guests sneakily taking photos of him doing so. Same old, same old, she thought fondly.

"Sorry I made you wait. I thought I'd check on Hardy on my way," he explained.

She brightened at the mention of Hardy, asking excitedly, "Is he enjoying himself?"

" Since Hardy used to enjoy spending time in the kitchen as a hobby, she had thought it would be a good idea to have her biological father try working part-time at Gunter's, which was patterned after the eponymous tea shop during the Regency period.

"He's doing great," Damian murmured, "but part-time should be as far as it goes."

She couldn't help smiling at the way her husband was obviously picking his words with care.

"I know you think I'm being overprotective about him, and I probably am, but it doesn't mean I'm blind to the realities of his condition.

" The first time she had tracked Hardy down, the latter's decades-long psychiatrist had been more than blunt with her.

Some people in this world simply aren't tough enough to deal with life, and your father's one of them.

It had been a heartbreaking assessment, but Sarah had long learned to accept it.

Since then, she had come to see Hardy as both her father and someone to look after like a child, and when the truth of his condition came to light, she had been beyond happy when Damian, Naomi, and even Josiah had welcomed Hardy into their lives as well.

"Sarah?" When she turned to him with a questioning look, he said softly, "I love you."

Her heart turned into mush, and she just had to raise herself on her toes to give him a quick, sweet kiss.

After that, they continued with their walk, still holding hands, and only occasionally breaking the silence between them when they thought of something to share with the other.

"Damian?"

"Mm?"

"I love you."

Unlike her, however, this only had her handsome Dom smirking. "I know."

It was times like this that she couldn't help marveling how everything was too perfect between them.

Then again, maybe that was how it was, when serendipity was at work.

They had taken one look at each other and had fallen in love at first sight.

They were step-siblings to each other, but their respective parents hadn't minded that they also became a couple.

They had been apart from each other, had hurt each other, but every single time, love would win and they would make up and forgive each other so very easily.

Life was beyond perfect, and when the sheer perfection of it terrified her—

A breeze tickled her cheek, and she burst into laughter because this wasn't the first time Damian had held a portable fan to her face.

After finding out what Sarah believed was God's way of letting her know she had made the right choice, he had used this tactic every time he saw her eyes darken with sadness.

"You really have to stop doing that," she told him. "People keep asking me about it—"

"Give them the same answer I do," he said with a shrug.

Her eyebrows shot up. "Don't tell me you told them the truth!"

He shot her a pained look. "Give me more credit than that, love."

"Then what did you tell them?"

And he answered simply, "I tell them I know when you're feeling hot."

" Oh. " That made sense... wait. It took her a second to realize how ' hot' could be interpreted in another way, and her gaze flew up to him in horror. "Damian!"

The End