



# The Wreckage Of Us (US #2)

**Author:** Cree Say

**Category:** Romance

**Description:** She was the girl they never wanted. He was the boy she could never forget.

Brittany broke herself trying to be perfect until there was nothing left.

Ace Rivera was her first kiss, her first heartbreak... and her brother's best friend.

Eight years later, she's back ,stronger, scarred, and no longer silent.

But so is Ace. And this time, he's looking at her like she's everything.

Then fate strikes again.

She watched him marry someone else

someone she calls family.

She ran.

Now he's back, asking for another chance.

She's already survived him twice.

The third time might destroy her.

**Total Pages (Source): 17**

## Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:53 am*

Her face crumpled, and I pulled her into a hug. For the first time in years, we cried together—not as lovers, but as two people who were once children themselves, thrown into a mess too big for their young hearts.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered into my shoulder.

“Me too,” I murmured into her hair.

We sat there in silence until the tears dried. When we pulled apart, something in both of us had shifted—something had let go.

The next morning, it didn’t take long for the storm to hit.

“You what?” My father’s voice boomed across the phone.

I pinched the bridge of my nose, pacing by the window. “I’m filing for divorce.”

“You ungrateful—do you realize what you’re doing to this family? To the company?”

I smiled thinly. “Funny you mention the company. Because as of last month, I own the controlling shares, remember? Which means you can yell all you want, but you can’t stop me.”

There was a stunned pause. Then, a low snarl, “You’ll regret this.”

“Maybe,” I said softly. “But at least I’ll regret it on my own terms.” And I hung up.

That night, I found Karla in her room, sitting cross-legged on the floor with her dolls spread out. Her tiny face lit up when she saw me.

“Daddy!”

“Hey, princess.” I scooped her into my arms, kissing the top of her curly head. I sat down on her bed, holding her on my lap, her little hands playing with my watch.

“Baby,” I began gently, “Daddy needs to tell you something important.”

She blinked up at me, wide-eyed. “Is it about Mommy?”

“Yeah.” I swallowed the lump in my throat. “Mommy and Daddy... we’re going to live in different houses soon.”

Her brow scrunched in confusion. “Why?”

“Because sometimes, even when people care about each other, they realize they’re better at being friends, not husband and wife.”

Her lip quivered. “But... you’ll still come for breakfast?”

I smiled softly, brushing her cheek. “Of course. And you’ll come visit Daddy at his new house too. We’ll still have our park days, our pancake Sundays, our movie nights. Nothing changes that, okay?”

“Okay,” she whispered, sniffing.

I kissed her forehead, hugging her tight as she clung to my neck. “Hey, remember what I always tell you?”

She mumbled into my chest, “You love me to the moon and back.”

I felt the crack in my heart widen, but I held it together. “That’s right, baby. And that’s never, ever going to change.”

I tucked her in, singing softly until her eyes fluttered shut. Then I sat by her bed for a long time, just watching her breathe, memorizing the rise and fall of her chest, the little fingers curled by her face.

When I finally left her room, the house was quiet again, but this time, it wasn’t suffocating. It was bittersweet.

I stood on the balcony, the cool night air brushing my face. For the first time in five years, I felt the weight lift—just enough to see the stars again. Brittany’s name echoed in my mind, a soft whisper at first, then a growing pulse under my skin.

I didn’t know if she’d take me back. I didn’t know if I even deserved the chance. But for the first time, I was free to try.

And God help me, I was going to try with everything I had.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:53 am*

Ace

The next few weeks passed in a blur. It was strange—how life could shift so much, how you could wake up in the same house, drink coffee from the same chipped mug, yet everything around you had changed.

Sierra and I hardly spoke unless it was about Karla.

We tiptoed around each other, both knowing the inevitable was drawing closer, neither brave enough to say it aloud.

But that Wednesday morning, fate no longer waited.

The courthouse was colder than I expected, with that sterile, hollow echo that only government buildings have.

Sierra sat across from me in a pale blue dress, her fingers nervously twisting the gold bracelet on her wrist. I remembered giving her that bracelet years ago, before everything fell apart—before our fathers pulled us back into a life neither of us wanted.

Our lawyers were speaking quietly, their pens tapping against the polished wood table. Sierra cleared her throat, her eyes flicking to me.

“Ace,” she whispered. “Are you sure?”

I met her eyes. God, we had been through so much. I saw the exhaustion in her face,

the tired acceptance. “Yeah,” I murmured, my throat tight. “I’m sure.”

For a moment, she smiled. A sad, trembling thing. “Okay.”

When the papers slid in front of us, I gripped the pen so hard my knuckles went white. My hand hovered, just a second longer. Sierra reached over and squeezed my wrist gently.

“It’s okay,” she said softly. “We’ll be okay.”

I swallowed hard, nodded, and signed.

The judge gave us a quiet, almost kind smile as she outlined the co-parenting plan. Sierra would have primary custody; I’d have weekends, holidays, and a flexible arrangement for vacations. We both agreed, because in the end, it wasn’t about us—it was about Karla.

Walking out of that courthouse, I felt... hollow. Like I’d just handed in the final chapter of a story I never wanted to write.

That afternoon, I packed my things. The house, once echoing with laughter and Karla’s tiny footsteps, was eerily silent.

My hands brushed over old memories—a framed picture of Karla’s third birthday, a card she’d made with stick figures that looked nothing like us but were precious all the same. I put it carefully in my bag.

When the car pulled up, Sierra came to the door holding Karla on her hip. Our daughter clung to her, her big brown eyes wide and confused.

“Daddy, why are you leaving?” Karla asked, her voice small, her little fingers

twisting in Sierra's hair.

I crouched down, forcing a smile I didn't feel.

"Hey, peanut," I whispered, smoothing her curls back.

"Daddy's not leaving you, okay? I'm just...

living in a different house now. But you'll come visit me all the time, and we'll still have our ice cream Fridays.

And I'll come see your ballet recitals, I promise. "

Her lip wobbled. "But why can't you stay?"

I felt a sharp pain in my chest, like someone was twisting a knife. I looked at Sierra helplessly. She knelt beside me, kissing Karla's cheek. "Daddy and I both love you so much, baby. We just... we're better as friends. But we'll always be here for you, okay?"

Karla sniffled, burying her face in Sierra's neck. I hugged them both, kissing the top of Karla's head. "You're my brave girl," I whispered. "I love you to the moon and back."

As I walked to the car, my hands trembled. I didn't look back until I heard Karla's tiny voice calling, "Daddy, wait!" She wriggled out of Sierra's arms and ran to me, her arms flung wide.

I knelt and caught her, holding her so tight I thought I might break. She kissed my cheek. "Don't forget ice cream Friday."

I laughed wetly, my throat tight. “Never.”

When I finally pulled away, Sierra mouthed, thank you. I nodded, climbing into the car, heart in shreds.

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The next morning, still unpacking in Montecito, I woke before sunrise. Boxes were everywhere, but I didn’t care. My mind was consumed with one thing.

Brittany.

I hadn’t heard her voice in years. Hadn’t seen her face. God, did she hate me? Had she moved on? Did she think of me at all?

I couldn’t take it anymore.

By eight a.m., I was outside Jasper and Corinne’s house. Jasper had already left for work. I rang the doorbell three times, heart hammering. Corinne opened the door, her blond hair a mess, a mug of coffee in one hand, her son Nathan peeking out from behind her legs.

“Ace?” she blinked in surprise. “It’s early. Everything okay?”

“I need to know where Brittany is,” I blurted. My voice cracked, my chest tight. “Please, Corinne. I—I can’t do this anymore. I need to find her.”

Corinne’s eyes softened, but her lips tightened. “Ace...”

I sank to my knees on her front step, scrubbing a hand over my face. “Corinne, please.” My voice broke on the last word. “I love her. I was a damn coward. I let



everything—my father, the company, the marriage—bury what we had. I let her walk away, and it was the biggest mistake of my life.”

Nathan toddled forward, his little brow furrowed. “Why you crying, uncle Ace?”

I let out a wet laugh, dragging a shaky hand through my hair. “Because I’m a fool, buddy.”

Corinne crouched down beside me, sighing. She rested a hand on my shoulder. “You really love her?”

“With everything I have.” My voice shook. “I’d give up the company, the money, all of it, just to get one more chance with her.”

Corinne studied me for a long moment. Finally, she stood, walked inside, and came back with a slip of paper.

“She’s in Arkansas,” she murmured. “She’s living with our friend Sylvia from NCPH. Don’t waste this, Ace.”

I grabbed her hand, pressing a kiss to her knuckles. “Thank you,” I whispered. “Thank you so much.”

Nathan clapped his hands. “Yay! No more crying, mister!”

I chuckled, ruffling his hair. “You’re right, champ. No more crying.”

I sprinted to my car like a man on fire.

By noon, I was at the airport. I didn’t take the jet—I wanted something quieter, something that didn’t scream CEO on the run. I booked the next flight to Arkansas,

barely remembering to text Sierra and my assistant.

“Going to Arkansas. Will explain later. Please kiss Karla for me”

Cancel my meetings—I’m on vacation.”

Sierra texted back almost immediately: “Go. Be happy.”

As I sat on the plane, waiting for takeoff, nerves tore through me. My leg bounced uncontrollably, my palms sweaty. The woman next to me gave me a wary glance, but I barely noticed.

My mind was on Brittany.

Would she slam the door in my face? Would she laugh at me? God, had she moved on—was there someone else holding her at night, someone she smiled at over coffee?

I ran a trembling hand over my face.

I remembered the way her laugh sounded when she teased me. The way she fit against me at night, her head tucked under my chin. The way her eyes sparkled when she was passionate about something, how fiercely she loved, how she called me out when I was being an ass.

I thought about the last time I’d seen her—her face crumpling as I told her goodbye, the way her shoulders shook when she walked away.

My stomach twisted.

The plane began to taxi down the runway, and I squeezed my eyes shut.

Please, I thought. Let me fix this. Let me have one more chance.

As we lifted into the air, I felt tears sting the backs of my eyes.

I whispered to myself, so low no one else could hear: “I’m coming, Britt. I’m coming for you.”

And this time—I wasn’t letting go.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:53 am*

Ace

I can't feel my fingers. They've been numb since the moment I stepped off the plane.

Arkansas air hits me in the face as I push out of the airport, thick and heavy, like it knows I shouldn't be here. The cab ride is a blur — I barely register the driver's chatter or the radio murmuring in the background. All I hear is my heartbeat, pounding out a panicked rhythm in my ears.

Brittany.

Her name has been a prayer on my lips since Corinne handed me that damned address, scribbled in shaky handwriting on a napkin. Corinne had looked at me with something like pity, like she knew I was walking into a storm I wouldn't survive.

"She's not the same girl you left behind," she'd warned softly, arms crossed, eyes sharp. "You don't get to just show up and expect her to fall into your arms, Ace."

I had nodded like a fool, pretending I understood. But sitting in this cab now, clutching that crumpled napkin, I realize — I don't understand anything at all.

When the cab pulls up to Pine Ridge Apartments, my chest constricts so tight I think I'm about to pass out.

The buildings are faded yellow with chipped paint, wind chimes clinking softly from balconies.

Kids' bikes are scattered on the lawn. It's...

small. Modest. And yet, it feels like the most unreachable place on earth.

I climb the steps slowly, each footstep a war against myself. My fist hovers in the air at her door.

Knock.

Nothing.

Knock, knock.

Still nothing.

I'm about to turn away when the door swings open — and there she is.

Brittany.

She's barefoot, in leggings and an oversized sweatshirt, her hair twisted up in a messy bun. Her face is bare, no makeup, no effort — and she's never looked more beautiful. But there's a sharpness to her now, a hardness in her eyes that wasn't there before.

The trash bag in her hand drops to the floor with a soft thud.

"Ace?" she says, breathless — but not the way I hoped. Not soft, not longing. Shocked. Unsteady.

I open my mouth, but nothing comes out. My heart is trying to climb out of my chest.

She steps back, eyes narrowing. "What the hell are you doing here?"

“Britt—” I swallow hard. “I needed to see you. Please, just—can I talk to you?”

Her laugh is sharp, brittle. “Talk to me? Now you want to talk to me?” She crosses her arms over her chest. “Where was this sudden urge when you left me breaking into pieces on the floor of our apartment? Where was this when I called and you ignored me for days, weeks?”

I flinch. “I was wrong—”

“Damn right you were wrong!” Her voice cracks, and I see the shimmer of tears in her eyes, though she blinks them back fiercely. “You don’t get to stand here, Ace. You don’t get to show up like some tragic hero and expect me to open the door.”

The hallway feels too narrow, the air thick between us. My mouth is dry as I force the words out. “I left Sierra. I... I signed the papers. I ended it. I’m here because I can’t stop thinking about you.”

Brittany lets out a shaky breath, pressing her hands to her forehead. “Jesus Christ,” she whispers. “Do you think that fixes this? Do you think that magically erases everything you put me through?”

“I don’t—no, I just—”

She cuts me off with a sharp shake of her head.

“Do you even know what you did to me, Ace?” Her voice breaks, trembling now.

“I spent months in a hospital learning how to exist without you. I had to learn how to breathe, how to stand, how to stop waking up screaming your name. And when I finally—finally—got to a place where I could eat without shaking, laugh without guilt, you think you can just... walk back in?”

My legs buckle, and I lean heavily against the wall. “I know I broke you, Britt. I know.” My voice is hoarse. “But I’m here to fix it. I’ll do anything.”

For a long, searing moment, she just stares at me.

Then she laughs softly — but there’s no joy in it. “You’re here to fix it?” she echoes. “Ace, I’m not a project you can patch up. I’m not your redemption arc.”

The door creaks open behind her, and Sylvia steps into view, arms crossed, protective. “You okay, B?” she asks quietly.

Brittany glances over her shoulder, her face crumpling for a split second. “Yeah. I’m okay.”

“Want me to stay?”

“No. I got this.”

Sylvia throws me a look sharp enough to slice bone before slipping back inside.

Brittany blows out a breath, arms wrapping around herself. “Look,” she says, voice quieter now, “I get it. Maybe you realized you love me. Maybe you even mean it. But that’s not enough, Ace. Love isn’t enough when the person you love is the one who shattered you.”

I take a step forward. “I was scared,” I whisper. “Scared of how much you mattered. Scared of messing it up. But, Britt, I need you.”

She holds up a hand, backing away. “Don’t you dare say you need me. I am not your drug, Ace.” Her voice wavers. “I can’t be the thing you run to every time you’re lost.”

Tears burn in my eyes, and I'm not sure I've ever hated myself more. "Please," I choke out. "Please tell me there's still a chance."

Brittany leans against the doorframe, exhaustion settling into her bones. "You want honesty?" She meets my eyes, raw and unflinching. "I still love you. God help me, I probably always will."

My heart leaps, but she cuts it down with a single word:

"But."

"But I don't trust you," she whispers. "And I don't know if I ever will again. You broke my heart years ago. You brought my fears and nightmares to life, you bullied me when I needed you the most, yet I still returned to you. Only for you to destroy me."

The silence between us is a living thing, heavy and suffocating.

"I'm so sorry.....please "

"I can wait," I whisper. "I can prove it."

She shakes her head, tears slipping free now, glistening tracks down her cheeks. "Ace... you should have proved it before you lost me."

My knees buckle, and I sink to the step. She stands over me, arms wrapped around herself like she's holding in all the pieces I broke.

"I'm not slamming the door in your face," she says softly. "But I'm not letting you in, either."



I nod, swallowing down the scream clawing at my throat. “Okay,” I croak. “Okay.”

She kneels in front of me, just for a moment, and brushes her fingers along my jaw — a whisper of the girl I once knew.

“I hope you figure yourself out, Ace,” she murmurs. “But don’t make me your finish line. It’s been fun”

And then she’s gone. The door clicks softly shut behind her, and I’m left sitting on the cold concrete steps, staring at the sky that never looked so empty.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:53 am*

Ace

I don't remember how long I sat on those steps after Brittany closed the door.

Minutes, hours, maybe years.

It was the kind of silence that seeps into your bones, the kind that makes you wonder if you've stopped existing too. The night wrapped around me like a punishment, cold and sharp, and I sat there with my head in my hands, elbows digging into my knees, fingers pulling at my hair so hard it hurt.

I had thought—God, I had actually thought—she'd let me explain. That love would be enough. That if I just stood there, heart in my hands, she would take it, maybe shake her head at me, maybe punch me in the chest, but she would take it.

But the door stayed closed.

And when I finally dragged myself down the stairs, legs shaking like they were about to give out, something inside me cracked wide open.

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The days blurred.

I don't remember when I first started showing up at Brittany's apartment every morning. I just remember being there. Standing outside her door, sometimes with coffee, sometimes with flowers, sometimes with nothing but my own desperate heart.

She never opened.

I'd knock, gently at first, then with more insistence, calling her name like a fool.

"Brittany, please... just five minutes. That's all I'm asking."

Nothing.

"Brittany. Please. Please, just—"

Still nothing.

Sometimes I'd sit on the stairs and wait, heart beating out its miserable rhythm, listening for the sound of her footsteps inside.

Sometimes I heard Sylvia's voice, calm and steady, murmuring to her on the other side of the door.

Once, Sylvia opened the door and stepped outside, arms crossed, her eyes soft with pity but firm with boundaries.

"Ace, go home," she said gently, closing the door behind her. "She's not ready. Give her time."

But time felt like poison.

Every day that passed was another thread slipping out of my hands, another chance falling into the void between us. And the worst part wasn't the door in my face—it was seeing her.

God, it was seeing her.

At the grocery store. Walking down the street. Laughing with Sylvia on the sidewalk. Sitting at the café near the corner, sunlight catching the strands of her hair and making her look like something I didn't deserve to touch.

And every time I saw her, she looked right through me.

Like I was air.

Like I was the ghost she had already buried.

I'd stand there, across the street or behind her in line, hands trembling at my sides, and she wouldn't even blink in my direction. Sometimes my chest would tighten so fast, so hard, that I'd rub at it without thinking, fingers pressing into the ache as if I could dig the pain out of me.

It never worked.

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I started spiraling.

Nights became endless. Sleep was something I used to do, back when my body belonged to me. Now it belonged to the ache, the hunger, the desperate wanting.

I stopped eating.

Stopped showering as often as I should have.

I stared at the ceiling at 3 a.m., wondering if she was sleeping, if she was dreaming, if she was thinking of me at all—or if she had finally, finally learned to stop.

One night, drunk out of my mind on the whiskey I'd sworn off a year ago, I found myself outside her apartment again.

The world spun.

I leaned against the door, forehead pressed to the wood, whispering her name.

"Brittany... baby, please... just let me—" My voice broke on a sob I didn't know was coming. "I can't—I can't do this without you."

The door stayed silent.

I slid down to the floor, crumpling like a man who'd run out of ways to stand. I sat there for hours, maybe longer, until Sylvia cracked the door open just enough to slip through, crouching in front of me with a look that made my throat tighten.

"Ace," she said softly, "this isn't helping."

I let out a sharp, bitter laugh. "I know."

She put a hand on my shoulder, fingers light but grounding. "Go home. Please. She needs space."

I closed my eyes, swallowing the bile in my throat. "Tell her I'm sorry."

"She knows."

"Tell her I love her."

"She knows that too."

But knowing and forgiving, I was learning, were oceans apart.

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The days kept coming.

Brittany turned twenty-eight, and I watched her from across the café, from behind my coffee cup, heart thudding like a war drum in my chest.

She was radiant.

There was no other word for it. Confident, beautiful, with a quiet strength that made my chest ache.

And me?

I was thirty-five, nearly thirty-six, staring at her like a man who had wasted his best years on fear and now realized too late that he was standing on the wrong side of the finish line.

I watched as she laughed with friends, as she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, as she leaned back in her chair and smiled at something Sylvia whispered in her ear.

And every part of me screamed: That's mine.

But she was no longer mine.

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One evening, I sat in my car outside her apartment, watching the lights flicker on in her window, hands gripping the steering wheel so tight my knuckles turned white.

“God,” I whispered into the dark, voice shaking. “What do I do? How do I fix this? Please...”

I hit the steering wheel once, twice, my breath coming in shallow gasps.

When I stumbled out of the car, I almost tripped over my own feet as I made my way to her door. My hands shook as I knocked, then knocked again, panic clawing up my throat.

“Brittany, it’s me,” I called, voice raw. “Please. Please, baby, just talk to me.”

I waited.

The world waited.

No answer.

I slid down to the ground, knees to my chest, forehead resting on my arms.

That’s where Sylvia found me again.

“Ace,” she murmured, crouching beside me. “You can’t keep doing this.”

“I don’t know how to stop.”

She touched my shoulder, her voice kind but firm. “You need to go home.”

I let out a strangled laugh. “Home? Where the hell is that, Sylvia? She was my home.”

For a moment, her face softened, and I thought—just for a moment—she might open

the door, let me inside, let me see her.

But she only squeezed my shoulder and whispered, “Go home, Ace,” before slipping back inside.

The door clicked shut.

The darkness swallowed me whole.

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I began drifting through my days like a man half-alive.

I showed up to work, barely functional, colleagues throwing me worried glances I brushed off with tight smiles. I went to meetings I didn’t remember, sat at dinner tables I couldn’t taste, lay in bed at night staring at the ceiling, trying to remember the sound of her laugh.

And everywhere I went, I saw her.

At the store, a flash of her hair in the next aisle.

On the street, the shape of her shoulders in the crowd.

At the café, the scent of her perfume lingering long after she was gone.

And every time, my chest would tighten, my hand flying unconsciously to rub at the ache, fingers pressing into skin that never stopped hurting.

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One night, weeks after I'd last seen her up close, I found myself standing outside her building again.

I didn't knock this time.

I just stood there, hands in my pockets, staring up at her window like a man waiting for a miracle.

Behind me, the city moved—cars passing, voices drifting, laughter spilling from a nearby bar. But none of it touched me.

All I could think was: I'm running out of time.

I was getting old. Too old for the way she glowed, the way she was stepping into her prime, the way she was reclaiming her life. She was twenty-eight, shining and unbreakable, and I was the wreckage she had crawled free from.

And still, I couldn't let go.

Still, I wanted to believe that if I just stood there long enough, she would appear in the window, look down, see me.

But the window stayed dark.

And I stayed alone.

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When I finally turned to go, the night was cold against my skin, the stars sharp overhead.

I walked without thinking, hands shoved deep in my pockets, head down, heart dragging behind me like an anchor.

And as I walked, I whispered her name under my breath, over and over, like maybe if I said it enough, the universe would hear.

Like maybe if I said it enough, she'd come back.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:53 am*

Brittany

I stared at the ceiling, eyes wide open though the night was heavy and silent around me.

The moonlight slanted through the half-closed blinds, spilling pale silver across my bedroom floor.

My chest ached, but not from any physical wound — it was the hollow kind of ache, the one that doesn't quite let you breathe right, the one that curls around your heart and tightens when you remember what you've lost.

Ace.

His name alone was enough to start the war inside me all over again. My fingers dug into the blanket as I forced myself to turn over, pulling it over my head like it could block out the memory of his voice. The knock on the door last night. The one before. The night before that.

Every single time, I had stood there on the other side of the door, fists clenched, jaw locked, eyes squeezed shut, listening to him whisper my name like a broken prayer.

“Brittany... baby, please... just open the door. Just five minutes. I'll take whatever you can give me.”

I pressed my forehead to the cool wooden door, biting the inside of my cheek so hard I tasted blood. But I never turned the handle. Never gave in. Because the moment I

did, I knew I would break.

I couldn't trust myself around Ace.

Not anymore.

I sat up slowly as sunlight crept into the room. The sound of a soft knock on the front door pulled me out of my thoughts. My heart jumped — for one raw second I thought it was him. Ace, back again, desperate for a conversation, another chance to claw his way into my guarded world.

But when I cracked open the door, it was Sylvia.

“Morning, Brit,” Sylvia greeted softly, her kind eyes studying my face. She was clutching a paper bag, her dark hair pulled into a loose bun, no makeup on, just the natural beauty she always carried so easily.

“Morning,” I said hoarsely, stepping aside to let her in.

She walked in cautiously, like she was testing the air. “Brought you those scones you love,” she offered with a small smile, lifting the bag. “Figured you hadn't been eating much.”

I tried to smile, but it came out more like a grimace. “Thanks, Syl.”

We settled at the kitchen table. She handed me a cup of coffee she had thoughtfully picked up too, and for a while, we sat in companionable silence — until she exhaled, folded her hands on the table, and gave me that look.

“I ran into Ace again today,” she said quietly.

My spine stiffened. My fingers tightened around the mug.

“Brit... he’s not doing well,” Sylvia continued, watching me carefully. “He’s... lost. I’ve never seen him like this. He’s at the gym at all hours, but half the time he’s just sitting in the corner, staring at nothing. And when he’s not there, he’s... here. Outside. Waiting.”

I closed my eyes, exhaling shakily. “Syl, I can’t—”

“I know you’re hurting, Brittany.” Her voice was gentle but firm. “But so is he.”

I shot her a sharp glance. “You think I don’t know that?” My voice cracked, and I hated how raw I sounded. “You think I don’t feel it every time I hear his voice outside my door? Every time I hear him say my name like it’s the only word that matters to him? You think I want to shut him out?”

Sylvia reached across the table, covering my trembling hand with hers. “Then why are you?”

A bitter laugh tore from my throat. “Because I have to.” My chest heaved. “Because if I let him back in, Syl, I’ll lose myself all over again. I’ll forget why I left in the first place. I’ll forgive him too easily, and then when he breaks me again, I’ll only have myself to blame.”

Tears pricked the corners of my eyes. I shoved a hand through my hair, trying to pull myself together, but the emotions were a rising tide now, impossible to stop.

“I love him,” I whispered brokenly. “God help me, I love him so much it hurts to breathe, but I can’t survive another heartbreak. I swore to myself — I swore to you — that I’d protect my heart this time. And that means not letting him near it.”

Sylvia was quiet for a long moment. She squeezed my hand before letting go, leaning back in her chair with a sad, thoughtful expression.

“I get it,” she murmured. “I really do. But Brit... you should see him. He’s not the same. He’s...” She shook her head, swallowing hard. “He’s unraveling without you.”

A sob nearly escaped my throat, but I forced it down, pressing a trembling hand to my mouth.

“Don’t,” I croaked. “Please, Syl. Don’t make me feel sorry for him. Don’t make me second-guess myself.”

Sylvia hesitated, and then her eyes softened. “Okay,” she whispered. “Okay. I’ll back off.”

We sat in aching silence.

But that night, as I lay in bed, Sylvia’s words circled in my mind like restless ghosts.

He’s unraveling without you.

I hated myself for wondering what he was doing right then. For wondering if he was sitting on his couch in the dark, head in his hands, chest aching the way mine was. For wondering if he was sleeping — or if, like me, he was lying there wide awake, drowning in memories.

I hated that I could still feel him. Still sense the echo of his laugh, the rough edge of his voice whispering in my ear, the weight of his arms wrapped around me in the middle of the night.

I curled into a ball, burying my face in the pillow. My heart screamed his name, even

when my lips refused to.

The days passed. He kept showing up. And I kept pretending not to notice.

I'd see his car parked across the street when I left for work — him slouched in the driver's seat, running his hands through his hair, eyes fixed on my door. I knew he waited just to catch a glimpse of me, just to remind me he was there.

Some nights I'd hear him pacing outside, the faint sound of his voice murmuring to himself.

“Come on, Brittany. Just open the damn door. I'm not going anywhere.”

The words would land like stones in my stomach.

And every time, I stayed frozen in place, back pressed to the wall, silent tears streaking down my cheeks.

I didn't know how long this could go on.

I didn't know how long I could go on.

One evening, Sylvia knocked on my door again, stepping inside with a heavy sigh.

“He's outside,” she said quietly, dropping her purse onto the counter. “Again.”

I didn't look up from the dishes I was washing.

“Brittany.” Her voice was soft but insistent. “He's sitting on the steps. Head in his hands. He looks... broken. More than usual.”

A sharp pain sliced through my chest. My knees almost buckled, but I gripped the sink to steady myself.

Sylvia stepped closer. “Are you sure you don’t want to just… talk to him?”

I turned around slowly, water dripping from my fingertips. My throat worked, but no sound came out for a moment.

“I can’t,” I finally whispered.

Her shoulders sagged, a deep sadness filling her expression. She gave a small nod, walking over to squeeze my arm before slipping out the door.

I stood there, trembling.

An hour later, when I finally mustered the courage to peek out the window, Ace was gone.

But the ache in my chest?

That stayed.

And as I crawled into bed, pulling the blankets tight around me, a thought slipped into my mind, sharp and sudden as a blade:

What if I’m breaking both of us?

The thought terrified me.

But more terrifying still… was the part of me that wanted to run out the door and into his arms.



The part of me I was fighting every single day.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:53 am*

Brittany

I was already on edge when I smelled the sharp, heard the terrifying hissing through the kitchen.

Panic clawed at my chest as I dashed through the house, windows flung open, fans switched on. I hadn't even gotten halfway down the hall when a scream ripped from my throat.

There it was.

A snake.

Thin, slithering, forked tongue flicking in and out as it moved across the floor of my bedroom like it owned the place. My knees buckled, the air shot out of my lungs, and the world shrunk into a small, suffocating box.

"No, no, no!" My voice cracked, shrill and desperate. I backed up, slammed into the wall, palms flat against it, trembling, every muscle in my body locked. My heart was hammering so fast it hurt.

The next thing I knew, I was out of the house, barefoot, breathless, running like my life depended on it. I barely registered the sound of tires screeching against pavement or the call of my name.

"Brittany! Brittany, hey! It's me! Calm down!"

I crashed right into a hard, familiar chest. Strong arms wrapped around me before I could fall to the ground. My fists instinctively pounded at his chest, legs kicking out in blind panic.

“Britt, it’s Ace!” his voice cut through the fog, warm, deep, grounding. “Babe, I’ve got you. Breathe. Just breathe.”

I squeezed my eyes shut, shaking violently, hiccuping little gasps. “S-s-snake... Ace... it’s in there, it’s in there, I c-can’t... can’t go back...”

“Shh, hey. Hey. Look at me.” His hands came to my cheeks, tipping my face up. His thumb brushed away a tear I didn’t even realize had escaped. “I’m here. I’m not going anywhere. Just breathe, okay? Deep breaths with me, yeah?”

My throat felt raw, my body curled instinctively toward him. I tried to pull myself together, but the edges of my mind were fraying fast. The world tilted, voices in my head started to echo — childlike, fragile, scared.

I clutched at his shirt, pulling it into tight fists. “Don’t leave... don’t leave me... Ace, please...”

His face softened instantly, the tension in his jaw easing. “I’m not leaving. You hear me? I’m not. I swear.” He swept his hand through my hair, murmuring soothing words I could barely process.

I could feel myself sliding — into the space where I wasn’t fully me, where my mind reverted to that childlike place I’d worked so hard to manage. But this time, it was faint, like dipping a toe in cold water, not drowning.

Ace kept whispering, holding me as if I was the most fragile thing in his arms. “Stay with me, Britt. Just a minor blip, yeah? We’ll get through it.”

I clung to him, my breathing slowing gradually. His scent — cedarwood, something familiar, something I hated that I missed — was anchoring me, pulling me back to the present.

When I finally pulled away, wiping my face roughly, I whispered, “There’s a snake... in my room.” My voice was so small it barely felt like mine.

Ace gave a soft chuckle under his breath — not mocking, just relieved. “Alright, warrior. Let me be your knight today.”

He kissed the top of my head without thinking — without hesitation — like it was still his right. My heart twisted painfully.

I watched him march into the house like he’d done this a thousand times. A few minutes later, I heard a loud, “Yup, that’s a little intruder!” followed by the sound of the bedroom door shutting.

He came back out, phone in hand. “Animal control’s on their way. He’s barricaded in. You’re safe, Britt.”

I nodded, wrapping my arms around myself. My skin was still crawling, but the icy terror had ebbed into a dull tremble.

“Thank you,” I murmured. My eyes flicked up to his, lingering longer than they should have. His face was so familiar, so achingly beautiful it made my chest hurt. Dark eyes, sharp jawline, the faintest scar on his brow — the same Ace who had shattered me five years ago.

We sat on the porch steps, silent at first, the tension like a taut wire stretched between us. The sun was dipping low, casting gold and rose across the sky. I tucked my knees to my chest, resting my chin on them.

He ran a hand through his hair, exhaling heavily. “I didn’t think... I didn’t think this would be how I got to talk to you again.”

I gave a hollow laugh. “Didn’t think it’d take a snake, huh?”

His mouth quirked, but the smile didn’t reach his eyes. “Britt... I know you’ve shut me out. I know why. But I never stopped—”

Suddenly, his phone buzzed on the step between us.

Sierra calling.

My heart gave a sharp, involuntary lurch. I stiffened, trying to pretend it didn’t bother me. But it did. Oh, it did.

Why was she calling him? Why was she still in the picture? They were divorced — I knew that. I had made it my business to know that before I slammed the door on his presence in my life.

Ace glanced at me. “I should get this,” he muttered, almost sheepish.

“Go ahead.” My voice was cool, clipped. My fingers dug into my palms.

Without thinking — or maybe wanting to show me transparency — he hit speaker.

“Ace! I am sorry for disturbing your trip but she is acting out again” Sierra’s voice rang out, high-pitched, annoyed. “Karla’s been asking for you all afternoon. She’s refusing to eat dinner unless you say goodnight.”

My blood froze.

Karla?Who the hell was Karla?

Ace closed his eyes for a moment, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I’ll be there soon, Sierra. Tell her I’ll FaceTime in ten minutes.”

“You should’ve been here already. You promised her you’d tuck her in tonight. You can’t keep disappointing her.”

I felt like the ground had been ripped out from under me.

Karla

His daughter.

With Sierra.

My lungs constricted so tight I could barely take in air. I stood abruptly, the porch steps blurring before my eyes.

"You-----you have a child?" I say shakily

His eyes snaps to me and it widens.

“Britt—” Ace’s voice was sharp now, panicked. He fumbled to end the call. “I... I didn’t know you didn’t know.”

I took a shaky step back, shaking my head. “A daughter?” My voice cracked, barely above a whisper. “You have a child with her?”

“Brittany, listen to me—”

“How old?” I snapped, my arms crossing like a shield across my chest. My fingers dug into my skin. “How old is she?”

Ace flinched. “She’s four.”

Four

My chest caved in, all the air sucked out.

“Four?” My laugh was bitter, hollow. “So, what — all this time, yelling and telling me you loved me, she had your child... you already...”

“It’s not like that,” Ace said quickly, standing now, hands outstretched like he was approaching a wounded animal. “Britt, Sierra and I were done before Karla was born. I didn’t even know Sierra was pregnant until after. It was a drunken mistake!”

The world was tilting. My throat burned, my eyes stung.

“You had a whole child, Ace. A whole child, and you never told me.” My voice cracked, trembling on the edge of rage and heartbreak. “And you come here — waltzing back into my life, acting like you still have some claim on me — and you never thought I deserved to know?”

His jaw clenched, his voice tight. “I wanted to tell you. But you wouldn’t even look at me. You blocked me from every corner of your life. What was I supposed to do — throw it at you over text?”

I pressed a trembling hand to my mouth. “You don’t get to turn this on me. You don’t get to make this my fault.”

“I’m not,” he whispered, stepping closer. His eyes were raw, desperate. “I’m not,

Britt. But you have to understand — Ellie's my daughter. She's the best thing that ever happened to me, even if she came out of the biggest mess of my life."

I let out a strangled, choked laugh, the tears spilling over now, hot and angry. "You were my best thing once."

The words sliced between us, sharp and unplanned, hanging heavy in the golden light.

For a heartbeat, neither of us moved. His shoulders sagged, his eyes shuttered, his hands dropping to his sides in defeat.

I wiped at my face, swallowing down the sob threatening to break free. "I can't do this, Ace."

"Britt—"

"I can't." My voice was firm now, steadier than I felt. "You should go. You have a daughter waiting for you. And I need... I need air."

He took a small step forward. "Please. Don't shut me out again. Let me explain."

But I was already backing away, wrapping my arms tighter around myself. "Go home, Ace."

And for the first time in a long time, he listened.

I watched his car disappear down the road, the sunset casting long shadows over the pavement, and felt the last piece of my heart splinter quietly in the fading light.



## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:53 am*

Ace

I couldn't feel my legs anymore.

I stumbled out of Brittany's building, the door slamming behind me like the final nail in my coffin.

The cold air slapped my face, but I barely registered it.

My chest was tight, like a steel band was crushing my ribs.

I gasped, dragging in shaky breaths, but the pain didn't ease.

My heart wasn't just broken—it was obliterated, shattered beyond repair.

How had it come to this?

I had waited five years. Five agonizing years to stand in front of her, to beg, to explain.

And when I finally did, when I finally touched her skin again, calmed her from that episode—when I felt her trust trembling back to life, even just for a second—it all came crashing down because of one stupid phone call.

Sierra's name flashing on my phone. Brittany's eyes flicking to the screen. The confusion, then the suspicion, then the devastation in her face when she heard the voice on speaker.

I can still hear Sierra's voice. I can still see Brittany's face twisting, pale lips trembling as if the ground had split beneath her feet.

She didn't know. She never knew.

I tried to explain, but it was too late. She shut down. That light I was clinging to in her dim eyes—gone. Slapped out.

Now I was here, stumbling down a street I didn't even recognize, hands shoved in my hair, fingers clutching at the roots so hard my scalp burned. I didn't care if people were staring. I didn't care if I looked insane.

Because I was.

I was insane for her.

I dropped to my knees on the sidewalk, right there in the middle of town. I let out a sound I didn't recognize, half a laugh, half a sob, crumbling into myself as my elbows dug into the concrete.

"God, Brittany," I gasped into my hands. "Please... please, just talk to me. Just once. Please."

Tears blurred my vision, hot and bitter, sliding down my face without permission. I sobbed, loud and raw, my shoulders shaking as people hurried past, their footsteps quickening, some glancing back with pity, others pretending not to see.

I didn't care.

"Hey—hey, Ace!"

I heard the voice distantly, like through water. Fingers grabbed my shoulder, shaking me.

“Ace! Look at me!”

I forced my head up.

Sylvia.

She crouched in front of me, her red hair pulled into a messy bun, concern etched across her face.

“Ace, what the hell are you doing out here?” she whispered sharply, glancing nervously at the people passing. “You’re scaring people. Come on, get up.”

I shook my head. “I can’t. I can’t go back. I can’t go anywhere. She won’t even look at me.”

Sylvia’s eyes softened, her voice dropping. “I know, honey. I know she’s shutting you out. But you can’t fall apart in the middle of Main Street.”

I gave a broken laugh, swiping at my wet face. “Why not? It’s not like I have any pride left. She was it, Sylvia. She was everything. And I destroyed it.”

Sylvia sighed and sat down right on the cold sidewalk next to me, pulling her knees to her chest.

“Listen to me,” she said quietly, “Brittany’s been through hell. You know that. She built walls so high, no one’s been able to climb over them. Not me, not the therapists, not anyone. And you? You’re the one who put some of those bricks in place. You can’t expect her to pull them down overnight.”

I let out a dry, bitter noise. “I’m not expecting overnight. I just—I just wanted her to hear me out.”

“She’s terrified, Ace.” Sylvia’s voice softened further. “You hurt her when she was already in pieces. And now? She’s terrified you’ll shatter her all over again.”

I leaned forward, pressing my forehead to my knees. “I know. God, I know. I keep replaying it. Over and over. All the moments I could’ve done something different. Said something. Shown up for her. And now I’m here, sitting on the sidewalk like some damn fool, and I don’t even know how to fix it.”

Sylvia was silent for a moment. Then, softly, “Ace... do you love her?”

My head snapped up, eyes raw. “What kind of question is that? Sylvia, she’s—she’s everything. She’s in my blood. I can’t—I can’t even breathe right without her.”

Sylvia smiled faintly, her eyes misty. “Then you need to fight for her. But not like this.”

I swallowed hard, throat burning. “I don’t know how to fight anymore. She’s shutting every door.”

“Then stop knocking on the door,” Sylvia said gently. “Start planting something at her window.”

I blinked, confused.

She smiled a little. “Show her you’re here without demanding anything. Be present without pushing. Let her see you’re not leaving. That’s how you earn her trust back.”

I closed my eyes, shoulders shaking with another quiet, helpless sob. “I’m so scared

it's too late, Sylvia. She's twenty-eight, and she looks... God, she looks so beautiful and grown and untouchable. And I'm— I'm thirty-five, falling apart like a damn teenager.”

Sylvia reached out and squeezed my hand. “You're still her Ace. Somewhere inside, she still remembers. But you have to show her the man you are now—not the man you were.”

We sat in silence, the street noise around us blurring into a background hum.

Finally, Sylvia gave my shoulder a nudge. “Come on. Let's get you off this sidewalk. People are starting to whisper.”

I let her pull me to my feet, swaying slightly. I must've looked wrecked—my face blotchy, eyes swollen, shirt half untucked.

We walked slowly, aimlessly.

“Do you want me to talk to her again?” Sylvia asked cautiously.

I shook my head. “No. No more middlemen. If I want to show her I've changed, I have to stop using other people to reach her. I'll wait. As long as it takes.”

Sylvia smiled softly. “Good. That's good, Ace.”

But inside, I felt like I was drowning.

Every night without Brittany felt like a lifetime. Every morning without hearing her voice was a fresh punishment. Every laugh I heard on the street that wasn't hers twisted the knife deeper.

I went home that night, but it wasn't home. It was four walls and a roof and a bed that mocked me with its emptiness.

I walked past the photos of Jasper and Corrine, past the boxes I still hadn't unpacked, and collapsed on the floor of the living room, burying my face in my arms.

"Please," I whispered into the dark. "Please, Brittany... just give me one more chance. I am sorry for being a monster in your life...ill spend the rest of my years rectifying that if you'll only let me."

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:53 am*

Brittany

I sat curled up on the couch, knees pulled tightly to my chest, the late afternoon light casting golden streaks across the floor.

My arms were wrapped around myself, but they couldn't stop the ache in my chest or the tremble in my fingers.

I stared at the wall, eyes burning, heart thudding like it was trying to punch its way out of my ribs.

Ace's voice still rang in my ears. His truth. His child. Karla.

How do you even begin to process that?

The room was quiet except for the faint ticking of the clock. My phone buzzed again on the table, but I didn't reach for it. I couldn't. Not when every nerve in my body felt raw and exposed.

A gentle knock came at the door.

"Brittany?" Sylvia's voice floated through, soft and hesitant. "Can I come in?"

I didn't answer — couldn't. But the door clicked open anyway. Sylvia slipped inside, careful as always, like she was stepping into a room full of shattered glass.

She crossed the room and sat beside me, close enough that I felt the warmth of her

but not so close that I felt crowded. She didn't speak at first, just sat there. The silence stretched between us, thick and heavy.

Finally, I whispered, "I don't want to talk."

"I know," Sylvia murmured. "I just... didn't want you to be alone."

I pressed my forehead against my knees, squeezing my eyes shut as tears pricked again. My voice came out hoarse. "It hurts so much, Syl. It hurts everywhere."

Sylvia let out a slow breath. "Yeah. I know, honey."

Another long silence.

Then she said quietly, "I saw Ace today."

My entire body tensed. I bit the inside of my cheek hard. "Don't."

"I just... I think you should know he's breaking too, Brit," Sylvia said softly. "He's not sleeping. He's not eating. He's been at my place twice, asking if I've heard from you. He's scared out of his mind that he's lost you for good."

A sharp, painful breath rattled out of me. "He should have thought about that before." My voice cracked. "He should have told me."

Sylvia reached out, brushing a strand of hair from my face.

"You're allowed to be angry. You're allowed to hurt."

But Brit, you need to ask yourself — when the anger quiets down, what's left?



Because... sometimes we think we're protecting ourselves by pushing people away.

But really, we're just building walls around our own heart. ”

I shook my head, burying my face deeper into my knees. “I don't know if I can forgive him.”

“That's okay,” Sylvia whispered. “No one's rushing you. But don't let this be the thing that defines everything you've built together. Don't let this be the hill you die on.”

Her words landed like small stones in the still water of my chest, sending ripples through the pain. I swallowed hard, blinking up at the ceiling as fresh tears slipped free.

Sylvia leaned back, her gaze distant, fingers twisting in her lap.

She went quiet — too quiet.

Then, softly, she murmured, “Brit, do you know why I was in that hospital?”

"No, you never told anyone and we didn't want to pry" I replied

"It is something I don't want to talk about because it always brings back bad memories. It is something I always keep locked up, but today I am going to tell you about my past..." she says sadly.

"When I was young, I thought life was all butterfly and sunshine.

I had parents who loved me and gave me everything I ever asked for but everything changed when my dad left suddenly without a trace, mum fell into a deep depression

which some how caused amnesia or dementia, whatever, but she had memory loss.

She abandoned me and turned to drugs, my dad's divorce caused a huge toll on her life more than me.

When I was 16, I started turning to men for attention, and that is when I met Jagger, he was 18 at the time and the heartthrob of our school, we instantly clicked and started drinking and dating and having sex.

Not long after, I got pregnant and then moved in with him.

His place wasn't a place to raise a child but I had no choice, mom's wasn't an option and my dad had remarried and had a different family. .."

She sighs

" Then I had my son Mason, I worked four jobs, balanced with school, soni could give Mason a good life.

The abuse started when I got to college and Jagger turned 3.

It started with a small shove here and there and then lead to him yelling and slapping me.

I should have left Brit, I should have left for the sake of my son but he'd always apologize but I would go back to him and we'd have sex, I knew he was cheating but I needed his attention.

... I should have left until that night, the night I lost him" she bites her lips.

" That night, I had a feeling he was drunk and high but I thought it was just our usual

argument.

..but he viaed off the road and knocked into a tree.

He wasn't looking,I was too angry to buckle Mason's seatbelt well.

That night,I lost my son in my arms,he died in my arms at hospital from internal injuries.

Jagger died on impact from a broken neck.

The autopsy report showed he was high on drugs. ..I lost my world then.."

She gently wiped her tears.

The silence afterward was suffocating, thick with memory and grief.

I reached over, sliding my fingers over hers, squeezing gently. "Syl..." My throat felt raw, my heart twisting painfully in my chest. "I'm so sorry."

Sylvia gave me a small, wobbly smile, tears shining in her eyes. "We all carry things, Brit. Some of us just hide it better."

She drew in a shaky breath, brushing at her cheeks.

"That's why I'm telling you this," she said softly. "Because you still have a choice. You still have time. Don't let your anger be the last chapter in your story with Ace. Don't let it be what you remember when you look back years from now."

I dropped my head into my hands, a choked sob catching in my throat.

Sylvia's arms wrapped around me carefully, her embrace warm and grounding. I let myself sink into it, let the walls crack just a little, let the grief spill out.

For the first time in days, I let someone hold me.

We stayed like that for a long time.

When Sylvia finally pulled back, she cupped my face in her hands, pressing a kiss to my forehead. "You're stronger than you think, Brittany . You always have been."

As she left the room, closing the door gently behind her, I was left in the quiet again.

But it didn't feel quite so crushing.

I sat there in the fading light, my hands clasped together, my heart aching — but this time, there was a flicker of something beneath the pain.

Maybe forgiveness wasn't as far away as I thought.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:53 am*

Ace

I'd been standing outside Brittany's apartment for nearly twenty minutes, pacing back and forth like an idiot with a bouquet of lilies clenched tightly in my fist. My heart hammered against my ribs, each beat louder than the next, drowning out every rational thought I tried to string together.

My palms were sweaty. My throat dry. My heart — shattered.

For the past few days, she hadn't returned my calls, my texts, or the flowers I sent. Hell, I wouldn't have blamed her if she blocked my number. I deserved it.

But tonight, I couldn't walk away. Not anymore.

I took a shaky breath, ran a hand through my hair, and raised my fist to knock. My knuckles hovered just above the wood.

God, please... just open the door.

Before I could chicken out, I knocked. Once, twice, three times — sharp taps that echoed in the quiet hallway.

No sound from inside.

My chest tightened. I knocked again, softer this time. "Britt... please," I murmured, pressing my forehead to the door. "Please open up."

For a few moments, there was only silence. Then... the faint click of the lock. The door creaked open an inch.

And there she was.

Brittany.

Her eyes were red, the skin beneath them puffy, and her hair was pulled into a messy bun like she hadn't slept in days. My heart clenched at the sight of her. She looked like she was barely holding it together. And the truth was, neither was I.

I held up the lilies, swallowing hard. "Hi," I rasped, my voice raw.

She stared at me, her lips trembling, her arms crossed over her chest like she was trying to hold herself in place.

"Ace," she whispered, almost like she didn't believe I was real.

"I... I brought these for you." My fingers fumbled with the ribbon on the bouquet, my heart pounding so loud I was sure she could hear it. "You always said lilies reminded you of your mom."

For a second, something flickered in her eyes — pain, maybe, or softness — but it was gone just as fast.

"I can't... I can't do this right now," she murmured, starting to close the door.

Panic shot through me.

"Wait!" I stepped forward, my hand pressing against the door, voice cracking. "Please, Britt. Please just—don't shut me out. Not yet."

She hesitated.

“Five minutes,” I whispered. “That’s all I’m asking. Five minutes, and if you want me gone, I’ll walk away.”

Brittany let out a shaky breath. Her grip on the door tightened, her nails white from the pressure.

Finally, she stepped back, opening the door just wide enough for me to slip inside.

I exhaled slowly, stepping into the apartment. It smelled like her — soft vanilla and a hint of lavender — and just being here made my chest ache all over again.

She stood across from me, arms still crossed, eyes guarded. “Why are you here, Ace?”

I ran a trembling hand through my hair, feeling the weight of everything I was about to say crashing down on me. “Because I’m an idiot,” I whispered. “Because I’ve screwed everything up, and I can’t lose you.”

Her jaw tightened, and I saw the shine of fresh tears in her eyes. “You should have thought of that before you married someone else.”

The words sliced through me like a knife.

I stumbled back a step, my knees weak. “I didn’t marry Sierra because I wanted to,” I choked. “Brittany, I was forced.”

She scoffed, turning away. “Don’t lie to me.”

“I’m not.” My voice broke. “I swear to you, I’m not.”

Brittany turned slowly, her eyes blazing. “Then tell me. Explain. Because right now, all I can see is the man who broke me.”

I felt the ground sway beneath me. My throat tightened. My chest ached like it was splitting in half.

I took a shaky breath, and the words poured out, raw and desperate.

“My father...” My voice shook. “He blackmailed me, Brittany. He threatened to leak to the press about your mental health — about the times you’d...

you’d regress under stress, act like a child, about the hospital stays you fought so hard to hide.

He wanted to ruin you. And not just you — he wanted to destroy your father’s Senate campaign.

He was sponsoring it. One leak, and it would’ve been over. ”

Her eyes widened slightly, but she said nothing.

“I begged him,” I went on, voice cracking. “I begged him not to do it. But he said the only way was if I married Sierra.”

Tears blurred my vision as I stumbled forward, dropping to my knees in front of her.

“I didn’t love her, Britt. I never did. And Karla...

God.” My chest heaved, and I pressed a hand against it like I could physically hold in the sob.



“Karla happened after a night I got drunk out of my mind because I missed you so much I couldn’t breathe. ”

Brittany’s hands flew to her mouth, her eyes wide, shimmering with tears.

“I know you hate me.” My voice shattered as the first sob tore through my throat. “But please, Britt, don’t think for a second that I stopped loving you. Not once. Not even for a heartbeat.”

Her lips trembled. “Ace...”

I pressed my forehead to her knees, gasping for breath. “I thought I was protecting you. God, I was so wrong. I destroyed everything. I destroyed us.”

Her fingers hovered in the air like she wanted to touch me but didn’t know how.

I squeezed my eyes shut, another sob ripping free. “And the worst part?” My voice dropped to a whisper. “I would’ve walked through hell if it meant keeping you safe. And instead, I ended up being the one who hurt you most.”

For a moment, the only sound in the room was my ragged breathing and the quiet, broken sound of her crying.

I felt her knees buckle as she sank down in front of me, her hands trembling as they hovered over my shoulders. I dared to look up, and when our eyes met, it was like the air was sucked from my lungs.

“I can’t forgive you yet,” Brittany whispered, her voice shaking, her tears falling freely. “Not yet.”

My heart clenched, shattering into pieces.

But then — her hands, soft and trembling, cupped my face. “But I’ll listen,” she whispered. “I’ll listen to everything you have to say.”

A sob broke from my throat, and I buried my face in her hands, clutching her wrists like they were the only lifeline I had left.

“Thank you,” I choked out. “Thank you, Britt.”

We stayed like that, kneeling on the floor, both of us shaking, both of us broken. But in that moment — just that small, trembling moment — I felt the tiniest crack of light push through the darkness.

And maybe, just maybe, it was enough.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:53 am*

Ace

My phone buzzed on the nightstand, the shrill sound slicing through the early morning quiet of my apartment.

I groaned, rolling over, expecting some work email or another meaningless notification. But when I blinked at the screen, my breath hitched.

Brittany.

My heart jolted so hard it nearly burst out of my chest. For a second, I just stared at her name, my thumb hovering over the green button like I was afraid the call might vanish.

Then, without thinking, I swiped to answer.

“Britt?” My voice was rough with sleep, but the second her soft voice came through, every nerve in my body snapped awake.

“Hi, Ace...” she murmured, almost shy, like she wasn’t sure if she should’ve called.

“Hey, hey,” I sat up quickly, running a hand through my hair. “Everything okay?”

There was a pause on the other end, the sound of her shaky breath filling the line.

“Um... I need your help.”

My pulse roared in my ears. “Anything,” I blurted. “Name it.”

She let out a small, nervous laugh. “It’s... stupid, probably. I’ve been trying to fix the cabinet under the sink all morning — it’s leaking everywhere, and I can’t get the pipe to tighten. And the plumber can’t come till tomorrow, and I—”

“Say no more,” I cut in, already swinging my legs off the bed. “I’m on my way.”

She hesitated. “Ace, you don’t have to—”

“I want to,” I said softly. “I’ll be there soon, okay?”

A tiny breath. “Okay.”

By the time she hung up, I was already yanking on jeans and a soft black hoodie, not even bothering to style my hair.

My heart thudded in anticipation the entire drive to her apartment, knuckles tight around the wheel.

It wasn’t about the leaky pipe — I knew that.

It was the fact that she called me. She wanted me there. And God, that was everything.

When Brittany opened the door, the sight of her nearly knocked the air from my lungs. She was in a soft, oversized sweater, bare feet on the hardwood, hair still damp from a shower. She looked tired, vulnerable, beautiful.

“Hey,” I breathed, stepping inside. “Where’s this rebellious pipe?”

She let out a small, self-deprecating laugh and led me to the kitchen, pointing to the puddle beneath the sink. “I think it hates me.”

I grinned, kneeling to take a look. “Nah. It just needed a little charm.”

While I worked, Brittany sat cross-legged on the floor beside me, watching with a bemused smile. We fell into easy conversation, her laughter filling the room like a melody I hadn’t realized I’d been starving for.

When I finally twisted the last bolt and wiped my hands on a rag, I glanced over at her. “All set.”

She beamed at me, eyes shining. “You’re my hero.”

I smirked, standing and stretching. “Well, a hero’s gotta eat. How about I cook us dinner?”

Her eyebrows shot up. “You cook?”

I winked. “I’m full of surprises, sweetheart.”

While I rummaged through her fridge, pulling out pasta, veggies, and some chicken, Brittany perched on the counter, watching me with a mix of curiosity and amusement.

“So,” I said, glancing over my shoulder. “Where’s Sylvia tonight?”

Brittany blinked, surprised. “You... know Sylvia?”

I shrugged, chopping bell peppers with practiced ease. “We’ve crossed paths.”

Her lips twitched. “That’s unexpected.”

I chuckled. “Hey, I’m not as antisocial as you think.”

“She’s at the university tonight,” Brittany murmured, twirling a strand of hair around her finger. “One of her students is going through a rough time — something about family problems, grades slipping. She offered to stay on campus with them, help them sort it out.”

I glanced over, surprised by the warmth in her voice. “That’s... really good of her.”

Brittany smiled softly. “Yeah. That’s Sylvia. She always goes the extra mile.”

I stirred the sauce, feeling a strange pang of respect for this woman I barely knew. “Sounds like she’s a solid friend.”

“She is,” Brittany said quietly, her eyes distant for a moment. “She’s been there through some... really dark patches.”

I hesitated, heart squeezing. “I’m sorry you had to go through those without me.”

Her gaze flicked to mine, something unreadable passing between us — a flicker of old hurt, maybe, or longing, or both.

I cleared my throat, offering a small grin. “But hey, at least now you’ve got a guy who can fix your plumbing and make a killer carbonara.”

Brittany laughed, shaking her head. “You’re ridiculous.”

“Yeah,” I murmured, eyes softening. “But you’re smiling.”

We ate dinner on the couch, plates balanced on our knees, laughing over stupid stories — the time I nearly set the dorm kitchen on fire, her disastrous attempt at baking cupcakes for a fundraiser.

For a little while, it felt like the weight of everything between us lifted, just enough for us to breathe.

But eventually, the night had to end.

I stood by the door, slipping on my jacket, my heart a bittersweet knot in my chest. “Thanks for dinner,” Brittany said softly, her arms wrapped around herself.

“Anytime.” I smiled, brushing a stray hair from her cheek. “Really.”

I turned, reaching for the doorknob.

“Ace?”

Her voice was so soft I almost missed it.

I froze, heartbeat kicking up.

When I turned back, Brittany was standing just a few feet away, eyes wide, hands wringing nervously in front of her.

“I was thinking...” She licked her lips, voice trembling. “Maybe we could... start as friends?”

For a second, I just stared at her, the words not quite registering.

Then they hit me all at once.

My chest tightened, a strange, giddy warmth flooding through me. My face split into the most ridiculous grin, and before I could stop myself, a laugh burst out of me — not mocking, not sarcastic, but pure, unfiltered joy.

“Yeah,” I breathed, stepping closer, hands jammed into my jacket pockets to stop them from shaking. “Yeah, Britt. I’d like that.”

Her lips curved into the softest smile, her eyes glistening. “Okay.”

I took a slow, shaky breath, forcing myself to turn, to walk out, to not ruin the moment by doing something stupid like kissing her right there.

As the door clicked shut behind me, I leaned against it for a second, exhaling hard.

Then I practically floated down the hallway, my feet barely touching the ground, grinning like an idiot as I made my way to the rental car parked at the curb.

Sliding behind the wheel, I let my head fall back against the seat, closing my eyes for a moment. My chest was still tight, but for the first time in months, it wasn’t from pain. It was from hope.

Hope.

God, it tasted sweet.

As I drove away, the city lights flickering past my window, I caught myself humming under my breath, tapping the steering wheel, smiling at nothing like a man completely drunk on the tiniest scrap of a second chance.

And maybe that’s exactly what I was.



Ace

Three months.

Three damn months, and I still couldn't believe this was my life.

If you'd told me half a year ago that Brittany and I would be sitting cross-legged on her living room floor, shoulder to shoulder, arguing over which pasta shape made the superior macaroni and cheese, I would've laughed in your face. Hell, I would've called you delusional.

But here we were.

Macaroni Fridays had become our thing.

Every Friday night, rain or shine, one of us would pick up the ingredients — elbow pasta, sharp cheddar, cream, sometimes bacon if Brittany was feeling fancy — and we'd make a mess of her tiny kitchen, laughing like idiots and pretending we had any idea what we were doing.

Sometimes Sylvia joined us, when she wasn't knee-deep in papers or fending off her lovesick student — some guy who apparently thought moody brooding was the key to winning her heart. Brittany filled me in on all the drama, usually while snorting into her wine glass and half-spilling it on the rug.

And me? I soaked up every second like a man starved.

Tonight was no different.

Brittany was on her knees by the oven, peeking inside with an exaggerated squint. “Do you think it’s supposed to bubble like that?”

I leaned against the counter, arms crossed, fighting back a grin. “It’s macaroni, not a science experiment, Britt.”

She shot me a glare over her shoulder, but the corner of her mouth twitched. “You’re no help.”

“Hey,” I chuckled, pushing off the counter to join her. “I provide emotional support. That’s a critical role.”

Sylvia wandered in from the hallway just then, shrugging off her coat, her dark hair pulled up in a messy bun. She dropped her bag by the door and flopped onto the couch with a dramatic sigh.

“Another love letter?” Brittany teased, straightening and brushing her hands on a dishtowel.

Sylvia let out a groan, dragging a pillow over her face. “I swear to God, if that kid leaves one more note on my office door, I’m filing a restraining order.”

I snorted. “What’s his deal, anyway?”

Brittany laughed as she pulled the dish from the oven, setting it on the counter with a flourish. “Apparently he’s convinced Sylvia just hasn’t noticed how perfect they are for each other.”

Sylvia peeked out from under the pillow, her eyes half-lidded. “I gave him a C on his

midterm. That's all the notice he's getting."

We all dissolved into laughter, the kind that left me a little breathless, my chest tight in the best way.

This. This was what I'd been missing.

As we dug into the macaroni, sprawled out on the floor with mismatched bowls in our laps, I found myself watching Brittany more than I probably should've — the way she tucked her hair behind her ear when it fell into her face, the way her eyes crinkled at the corners when she laughed, the way she always, always made sure everyone else had enough before she served herself.

Somewhere along the line, friendship had turned into this — into something I craved, something that made me high on adrenaline just to be around. It was dangerous, maybe, how much I felt. But God, it was also the first time in years I'd felt alive.

"Okay," Sylvia said, pushing to her feet and brushing crumbs off her jeans, "I'm leaving before I end up in a macaroni coma."

Brittany grinned. "You sure you don't want to stay for Taco Saturday?"

Sylvia groaned. "Don't tempt me. I have papers to grade, hearts to crush."

I laughed, standing to grab her coat. "Be gentle with him, yeah?"

She smirked as she took the coat from me. "No promises, Ace."

When she left, Brittany and I lingered in the kitchen, washing dishes shoulder to shoulder, our elbows bumping, soap bubbles floating between us. It should've been mundane, boring even — but with her, even the quiet moments felt electric.

She nudged me with her hip as I rinsed a plate. “You’re awfully quiet tonight.”

I swallowed hard, fingers tightening on the plate. “Just... thinking.”

“About?”

I set the plate aside, wiping my hands on a towel, heart pounding. This was it — the moment I’d been trying to work up to for weeks.

“About us,” I said quietly, turning to face her.

Her eyes widened, fingers freezing on the edge of the sink. “Us?”

I took a slow breath, shoving my hands into my pockets to keep them from shaking. “Britt... these past few months have been... amazing. You’re amazing. And I know we said we’d start as friends, but—”

“Ace...” Her voice was soft, almost a whisper.

I pressed on, words tumbling out faster than I could stop them. “But I want more. I want to take you out — on a real date. Just you and me. No macaroni, no tacos, no Sylvia grading papers in the corner. Just... us.”

For a second, the room was so quiet I could hear my own heartbeat slamming in my ears.

Then Brittany smiled — slow, warm, the kind of smile that wrapped around my ribs and squeezed. She stepped closer, so close I could smell the faint scent of her shampoo, and before I could say another word, she leaned in and pressed the softest, sweetest kiss to my cheek.

I froze — breath hitching, heart crashing, mind going utterly blank.

When she pulled back, her eyes were bright, cheeks flushed. “I’d love that,” she murmured.

I blinked, still half-stunned. “Yeah?”

“Yeah,” she laughed, giving me a playful shove. “Pick me up tomorrow at seven.”

I laughed, the sound bursting out of me like a dam breaking, all the tension and nerves and wild, giddy hope spilling over at once. “You got it.”

As I walked home that night — because there was no way in hell I was driving when my hands were shaking this bad — I felt like I could’ve floated all the way back to my apartment.

The cold air bit at my cheeks, the city lights blurred in the corners of my eyes, but none of it mattered.

She said yes.

She kissed my cheek.

She wanted us.

I jammed my hands deeper into my pockets, grinning so wide my face hurt, replaying the moment over and over in my head like a favorite song. The way her eyes sparkled. The way her lips felt against my skin. The way, for the first time in months, maybe even years, the world felt... right.

By the time I reached my place, I was breathless, a little lightheaded, and completely,

stupidly happy.

And I knew, without a doubt, that this was only the beginning.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:53 am*

Ace

I don't think I slept a single minute.

I lay flat on my back in the small guesthouse bed, the wooden ceiling fan spinning lazily above me, heart hammering like a drumline. Brittany Ashford had said yes. Not just yes to dinner — yes to us. To this impossible thing that had been quietly, steadily building between us.

And tonight, I was going to give her the kind of night that said everything I hadn't been able to put into words.

By six a.m., I gave up pretending to rest. I threw back the covers and paced the room, fingers running through my hair, rehearsing every moment in my head.

Dinner reservation? Check. Flowers? Check.

Breathable, non-wrinkled shirt that wouldn't make me sweat like a fool in the Arkansas humidity? Check.

But first — a call.

The phone rang twice before Sierra picked up. Her voice was soft, a little groggy. "Ace? Everything okay?"

"Yeah," I said, sinking onto the edge of the bed, scrubbing a hand over my face. "Sorry to wake you. Can I talk to Karla?"

A shuffle, a yawn, and then that small, piping voice: “Daddy?”

My heart squeezed. “Hey, bug. You having fun with Mommy?”

“Uh-huh,” she said cheerfully. “We made cookies! And Mommy let me have three.”

“Three?” I grinned, falling back onto the pillows. “You’re gonna be bouncing off the walls.”

She giggled. “Daddy, guess what?”

“What, baby?”

“I miss you.”

I closed my eyes, breathing through the sudden ache in my chest. “I miss you too, bug. So much.”

There was a pause. “Daddy?”

“Yeah, sweetheart?”

“Are you happy?”

That one stopped me cold. I stared up at the ceiling, throat tight, then forced a shaky breath. “Yeah, baby. I think I’m about to be really, really happy.”

Karla giggled. “Is it because of the princess?”

I laughed softly. “Yeah, baby. It’s because of Brittany.”



“Yay! You can kiss her and be happy forever!”

“Slow down, matchmaker,” I teased, the burn in my chest easing just a little. “One step at a time.”

Sierra came back on the line, her voice warm. “Good luck tonight, Ace.”

“Thanks, Sierra.” My voice softened. “For everything.”

We hung up, and for a long moment, I just sat there in the quiet Arkansas morning, the smell of pine drifting in through the open window, the sounds of birdsong in the distance.

Okay, Rivera. It’s time.

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By late afternoon, I was a mess.

I shaved twice — the second time because I missed a spot under my jaw. I ironed my shirt three times. I sprayed cologne, panicked I’d overdone it, washed it off, and sprayed it again — half as much.

The bouquet waited on the table: white lilies and soft pink roses, delicate, elegant, just like Brittany.

I paced in front of the mirror, practicing.

“Hey, gorgeous, you ready?” Too smug.

“Britt, you look beautiful.” Too stiff.

“Hi.” God, no.

By six-thirty, I was standing at the edge of the driveway, keys jingling nervously in my hand, heart rattling against my ribs, wondering how it was possible to feel twenty-two again at thirty-three.

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The door opened, and there she was.

Brittany Ashford — the girl who wrecked me without even trying.

Her hair tumbled in loose waves over her shoulders, the navy-blue dress hugging her just right. She wore delicate gold hoops, a little shimmer at her throat, and when her eyes landed on me, that soft, hesitant smile — the one I’d chased across a thousand nights — bloomed across her face.

“Ace,” she breathed, and I swear, the whole damn world tilted.

I handed over the flowers. “For you.”

She took them gently, eyes flicking down, then up, and something in her softened. “They’re beautiful.” A beat. “You’re beautiful.”

We both laughed at that, nerves crackling between us, hearts hammering in sync.

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Dinner was at a tucked-away spot she loved — no cameras, no glitz, just quiet candlelight, a small table in the back.

We talked — really talked. About Luné, about the new campaign she was shooting next week, about the jewelry designs she wanted to launch for the fall collection.

About Corinne and her brother back in L.A.

, about why she came here — to breathe, to heal, to figure out what came next and of course to get away from me.

I deserve that.

I told her about Karla. About the way she sings nonsense songs in the car. About the gap-toothed smile and how she calls Brittany “the princess.” About how I didn’t know I was walking around half-dead until Brittany pulled me back to life.

At one point, she laughed so hard she leaned into me, head tilted back, hand on my arm. And just like that, I was wrecked all over again.

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After dinner, we walked near the water, the cool Arkansas night brushing around us. Our hands brushed, fingers tangled, and stayed that way, like they were always meant to.

I stopped her near the railing, brushing a lock of hair behind her ear. “Britt,” I murmured, voice rough, “I don’t think I’ve ever wanted anything the way I want you.”

She sucked in a breath, eyes wide, lips parting. “Ace...”

I cradled her face, thumb brushing her cheek. “Tell me this is real. Tell me this isn’t just a moment.”

Her hands slid up my chest, fingers curling into my shirt. “It’s real,” she whispered. “It’s always been real.”

And then — I kissed her.

Slow at first, like we were testing the edges, then fierce, unstoppable. Her arms wrapped around my neck, my hands pressed into the small of her back, pulling her closer, closer, until the world fell away and there was only us.

When we broke apart, we were both laughing, breathless, foreheads pressed together.

"Brit, I never apologize for hurting you 12 years ago. I was an asshole, and dumb person who didn't know how to handle feelings well. I pushed you to your worst limit and I am so sorry for that. I promise to spend the rest of my life changing the permanent scar I gave you" I tell her

" You really hurt me Ace. You were my biggest tormentor,I really needed you and you joined them. I can't say I forgive you for that part,but I hope someday I'll look back and smile at that memory" she replies and I burst into sobs.

“God, Britt,” I whispered, lips brushing her temple, “I’m so gone for you.”

She smiled against my skin. “Good,” she breathed. “Because I’m gone for you, too.”

---

Later, when I walked her to her door, her fingers still laced with mine, I knew.

This wasn’t a date.

This wasn’t a kiss.

This was the start of forever.

Ace

The morning sun filtered through the blinds, casting soft light on the hardwood floors of the apartment. It felt like an ordinary Saturday, but my life had been anything but ordinary these past few months. Brittany and I had been inseparable, our relationship growing in ways I hadn't expected.

I was staying at her place, the apartment she shared with her friend Sylvia.

Sylvia was hardly ever here—she spent most of her time lecturing at Arkansas State University.

In the beginning, I was a little unsettled by how empty the place felt without her presence, but now, I had come to love the quiet moments with Brittany. It was just us, and it felt right.

I sat at the kitchen table, a cup of coffee in hand, as Brittany busied herself with breakfast. Her long hair was pulled into a messy bun, and she wore an oversized sweatshirt that hung off her shoulders. She looked so beautiful in the simplest of things. I couldn't help but smile to myself.

“What are you grinning at?” Brittany's voice broke through my thoughts, her smile teasing as she slid a plate of scrambled eggs and toast across the table.

“Just thinking about how lucky I am,” I replied, meeting her gaze.

She raised an eyebrow. “Lucky? Or just really in love?”

I chuckled. “Both.”

I was in love, that was certain. But the love I had for Brittany wasn’t just about the passion or the chemistry between us.

It was deeper than that—it was about the life we had built together.

Every moment with her felt like the start of something new, something exciting.

But today, as we sat across from each other in the quiet of her apartment, the future seemed to weigh on my mind more than it ever had before.

“I’ve been thinking,” Brittany said, her voice soft but purposeful. “About moving.”

I paused, setting my coffee down. “What do you mean?”

She leaned back in her chair, her eyes searching mine.

“I love LA, don’t get me wrong. But I love Arkansas now, too.

It’s become home in a way I didn’t expect.

I’ve been talking to Jasper and Corrine about moving the headquarters of my company here.

I think it would be good for the business—and for me. ”

Her words hit me like a ton of bricks. I hadn’t seen this coming.

Brittany had always been so attached to LA—her roots were there.

But here, in Arkansas, she had found something different, something she was passionate about.

And while part of me understood her desire to make this move, another part of me felt the panic creeping in.

“Are you sure about this?” I asked, trying to steady my racing heart. “I mean, this is a big change. For you, for your company...”

She nodded. “I’m sure. I’ve already spoken to Jasper and Corrine about it. They’re on board. They’re looking for a different environment for the kids. I think it’s the right move.”

I could see the excitement in her eyes. She was serious about this—this wasn’t just a passing thought. I swallowed the knot that formed in my throat.

“And you?” she asked, her voice softer now. “What do you think?”

The question hung in the air between us, a reminder of the crossroads we were at. I wanted to be supportive, to follow her lead, but I knew there was a problem. A big one.

I leaned forward, my elbows resting on the table. “I want to be with you, Brittany. You know that. I’d do anything for you. But the thing is...” I trailed off, trying to find the right words. “I have Karla to think about. Sierra is not going to just pack up and move here. It’s not that simple.”

Brittany’s expression softened, her hand reaching across the table to cover mine. “I get it, Ace. I really do. But have you thought about what this could mean for Karla? You don’t have to make the decision alone. We could figure this out together.”



Her words gave me some relief, but the reality of the situation still hung over me. Karla was my daughter, and her stability was everything to me. I couldn't just uproot her life without her having a say in it. Sierra, her mother, wouldn't let me make that decision without a fight.

"I'll talk to Sierra," I said, my voice low. "I have to."

Brittany nodded, squeezing my hand. "I know you will. And no matter what happens, we'll figure it out. I'm with you, Ace."

The sincerity in her voice made my heart swell. I didn't deserve her, but I wasn't going to let her go. Not when I had the chance to build a future with her.

---

Later that day, I stood by the window, looking out at the view of the city. My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I pulled it out to see Sierra's name flashing on the screen.

I took a deep breath before answering.

"Sierra," I said, trying to keep my tone neutral.

"Don't tell me you're thinking about moving Karla to Arkansas," she said, her voice tight with concern. "You know how I feel about that."

"I know, I know," I replied quickly, trying to keep the peace. "But listen, this isn't just about me. It's about Brittany too. She wants to move the headquarters of her company here, and I... I don't want to lose her. I'm asking you to consider this."

There was a long pause on the other end of the line, and I could hear Sierra exhale sharply.

“I can’t just pick up and leave,” she said finally. “Karla’s life is here. Her friends, her school—everything. You know how important stability is for her.”

“I do,” I said softly. “But this could be good for her too. We’re not just talking about a job here. We’re talking about a new chapter. I want to give Karla the best future possible.”

Sierra sighed. “I don’t know, Ace. It’s not easy for me either. I don’t want to stand in your way, but this is a huge decision.”

“I understand,” I said, my voice pleading. “But I need you to at least think about it. I’m not asking you to move tomorrow, but if I could get your blessing, it would mean the world to me. To all of us.”

Another long pause. Then, finally, she spoke. “Fine. I’ll think about it. But you have to promise me that Karla’s well-being comes first. No matter what.”

“I swear,” I said, relief flooding through me. “You have my word.”

---

That night, as I lay in bed next to Brittany, I could still feel the tension in my chest. But something had shifted.

I had spoken to Sierra, and she had agreed to consider the move.

That was the first step. I knew there was more to do, more to figure out, but for the first time in a long while, I felt like the future with Brittany might actually be possible.

Brittany turned to me, her hand resting on my chest. “You okay?”

I nodded, brushing a strand of hair from her face. “Yeah. I think so.”

She smiled softly, her eyes shining with affection. “I’m proud of you, Ace. You’re doing the right thing. For Karla. For us.”

I kissed her forehead, feeling a deep sense of gratitude for her unwavering support. She was right. I was doing the right thing. For Karla, for me, and for us.

“I don’t deserve you,” I whispered, my voice filled with emotion.

Brittany smiled, her lips curving up into that soft, knowing smile I loved so much. “You do. You just have to believe it.”

And in that moment, I did believe it. I believed in us. In our future. In the life we would build together, no matter how complicated the path was.

I closed my eyes, holding her close, and for the first time in months, I felt at peace. Whatever came next, we would face it together. And that was all I needed.

Everything was going to be okay.

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:53 am*

Ace

The sunlight bled softly through the plane window, warm and golden across Brittany's face as we descended into LA.

She had her head against my shoulder, fingers interlaced with mine.

I kissed the top of her head and closed my eyes briefly, breathing her in.

Home never felt like a place anymore. It was her. Wherever she was.

We were back to finalize everything before the big move to Arkansas.

Selling my apartment, packing up Sierra's things, and most importantly, letting go of everything that tried to break us.

Brittany hadn't met Karla yet — Sierra's daughter, my little girl in every way that mattered.

She was the last piece Brittany hadn't seen.

The next morning, we pulled into the quiet, familiar neighborhood where Sierra's parents still lived.

Karla was already outside, sitting on the porch with a doll in her lap, her curls bouncing around her face like a halo of mischief.

She stood when she saw me, beaming, and ran straight into my arms.

"Daddy! You said you'd be here yesterday," she pouted into my chest.

"I know, baby girl. The plane was slow. Can I have a hug to make up for it?"

She wrapped her arms tight around me. My heart cracked open every single time.

Brittany stood a few steps behind me, watching us with wide, curious eyes. Karla peeked over my shoulder, then whispered, "Is that your friend?"

I crouched and looked between them. "That's Brittany, sweetheart. She's very special to me. Want to say hi?"

Karla blinked at her, took a shy step forward, then frowned in that exaggerated toddler way. "You're really pretty," she said, then added with absolute confusion, "But you're... Daddy's girlfriend?"

Brittany knelt down to Karla's level and smiled gently. "Yes, I am. It's a little weird, huh?"

Karla nodded solemnly. "Does that mean I have to share you with Daddy now?"

I held my breath.

Brittany reached out and tucked a curl behind Karla's ear. "Only if you want to. But I don't want to take him from you. I want to be in your life too. Maybe we can all share."

Karla looked between us for a long moment, then smiled. "Okay. But you gotta like unicorns."

Brittany grinned. "I love unicorns."

And just like that, they were a team.

Later that day, I finally did what I'd been avoiding for years.

Jasper stood by his grill in the backyard, flipping burgers while his youngest, Colt, tried to climb up his leg.

The house was filled with noise and laughter — Kyle and Astrid chasing each other through the sprinklers, Nathan trying to get Celic to dance to the music playing from the patio.

Corinne was inside with Brittany, helping her look at houses near theirs in Arkansas.

"You've been quiet," Jasper said, handing me a beer. "That usually means you're about to do something dumb or emotional. Which one is it today?"

I took a long sip and exhaled. "Both."

He raised a brow.

I set the beer down. "I've been in love with your sister for a long time. Since before Sierra. Before going to college. Before everything. Before I had any right to. I am also part of the reason she got into depression and anorexic" I tell him

Jasper froze, spatula mid-air.

"I didn't say anything because I knew you'd kill me. Or worse, look at me like you're looking now."

He didn't speak. Just stared.

"But I need you to know, I love her. I've always loved her. I just didn't believe I deserved her. Until now."

The silence stretched.

Before I could comprehend anything, I knew what was coming, Jasper's fist hits my face and I stumble back, clutching my bleeding nose.

"I deserve that" I mutter

"You deserve fucking words! How can you do this to her! You are fucking piece of shit! You are lucky my wife wouldn't approve of this and I can see Brit is happy, or else I would have had you bleeding on the floor" he hisses quietly.

There is another stretch of silence as he paces back and forth.

Then he stops and lets out a sigh,

Then he said, voice low, "Do you love her enough to stay? To build a life and not run when things get hard?"

"I'm already building it. I'm all in, Jas."

He clapped a hand on my shoulder. "You better be because you're a lucky son of a bitch. And I'm happy for you. Don't mess it up."

That night, Brittany stood in front of her mother's door, hands shaking slightly. She'd been quiet all afternoon.

"You don't have to do this today," I said.

"Yes. I do."

She knocked once. The door creaked open, revealing her mother — same cold eyes, same tight smile.

"What do you want, Brittany?"

Brittany didn't flinch. "I want you to know that you were a shitty mother. You hurt me in ways I'm still trying to recover from. And I'm done carrying the weight of your cruelty."

Her mother sneered. "You think you're better now? With him?"

"No," Brittany said calmly. "But I'm healing. And if you want to be part of my life — our life — you have to change. Otherwise, I'm closing this door and not looking back."

I stood behind her, not saying a word. Just a silent wall of support.

Her mother opened her mouth, then closed it. Brittany turned and walked away.

And just like that, she was free.

Two days later, I took her to the place that had been waiting for this moment for years.

It was an old hiking trail outside LA. At the top, the cliffs opened out onto a horizon so wide and endless, it felt like the world paused for breath.



The sun was sinking low, casting the sky in streaks of peach, lavender, and gold.

The breeze carried her hair around her face, and my chest ached with how beautiful she looked.

"Why here?" she asked.

I smiled. "Because this is where I used to come when I thought life had nothing left for me. And now, it's the place where I ask for everything."

She looked at me, heart in her eyes.

I took a deep breath, reached into my pocket, and dropped to one knee.

"Brittany Ashford... You saved me. You didn't even mean to. You just existed, and somehow, that made me believe in life again. I've loved you since the moment you showed up at Jasper's party with your fire and your broken edges and that goddamn laugh that made me feel alive."

Her hand covered her mouth.

"I want to build a life with you. With Karla. With all the chaos that comes with it. I want to wake up beside you every day and still be in awe that you chose me. So, will you do me the honor of being my wife?"

Tears slid down her cheeks, glittering in the sunset.

"Yes," she whispered. Then louder, "Yes! Yes! A thousand times, yes."

I slipped the ring onto her finger, stood, and pulled her into me. Her arms wrapped tight around my neck, and I kissed her like I'd waited a lifetime.

The wind howled around us, the world bathed in golden light, and for the first time, everything was still.

This was it.

She was my beginning.

And my forever.

As we stood on that cliff, the sun dipping beneath the edge of the earth, Brittany leaned into me, her head on my chest.

"You know what I realized today?" she said.

"What's that?"

"I'm not afraid anymore. Not of love. Not of moving forward. Not even of becoming someone's wife."

I kissed her forehead. "You've always been brave. You just forgot for a while."

She smiled, eyes on the ring glinting in the last of the sunlight. "We're really doing this, huh?"

"Yeah, baby," I said, holding her tighter. "We really are."

I never believed I deserved a happy ending. But this — this woman, this moment, this life — it was better than any ending.

It was a beginning.

## Epilogue

### Brittany

The scent of roses drifted in the air like music—faint, sweet, intentional.

Everything around me glowed. Not from the chandeliers dripping with crystals or the thousands of fairy lights strung like stars across the glass dome above us, but from the warmth in my chest, the kind that only love this real could bring.

I stood in the bridal suite, staring at myself in the mirror.

My dress—custom Chanel—was everything I had ever imagined and more.

Inspired by Sofia Richie's timeless gown but elevated, more sophisticated, with delicate hand-embroidered lace at the bodice, a drop waist that hugged every curve with regal confidence, and a dramatic cathedral-length veil trailing behind me like a queen's shadow.

I looked... like someone else. No, not someone else.

Like the version of myself I had fought so damn hard to become.

"You're glowing," Corinne whispered behind me. She adjusted my veil, her eyes glassy. She looked breathtaking herself in a sleek champagne satin gown that clung to her statuesque figure like liquid moonlight.

I swallowed, blinking back the tears. "I'm scared I'll ruin my makeup."

"Who cares," Tate said, bursting through the doorway in his dusty-rose tailored tux, holding a flute of champagne in one hand and my bouquet in the other. "You're the

bride. Ruin the damn makeup. Sob. Scream. Marry that man and let us ugly cry with you."

Sylvia laughed from her chair, reapplying her lipstick. "Tate, sit down before you spill champagne on the bride's veil."

"Bride butler privileges!" he announced, prancing to my side with a mock bow. "Your bouquet, Your Royal Hotness."

I took it, smiling at the soft pink peonies and ivory gardenias, wrapped in white silk ribbon. My hands trembled slightly.

"Deep breath," Corinne said gently. "You're not just marrying anyone. You're marrying Aceson. He's your home."

A knock interrupted us.

"Karla wants to see her bride," someone called from the door.

Corinne opened it and there she was. Four years old, her curls pinned back with tiny pearls, a delicate flower crown sitting crooked on her head, and her fluffy white dress making her look like a petal spun into life.

"Hi, Brittany," she said shyly, holding a tiny basket of rose petals.

I knelt down, brushing a strand from her cheek. "You look like an angel, baby. Are you ready to be the most important part of the wedding?"

She giggled. "I thought you were the most important. Daddy said you are."

My heart flipped.

“Can I walk with you?” she asked.

“Of course you can.” I kissed her cheek. She smelled like strawberries and innocence.

Then came the knock that made my breath catch.

“It’s time,” someone said. And when I turned, my father stood there.

He looked dashing in his black tux, his senator’s posture upright and proud, his eyes rimmed in red. He stared at me like I was the sun.

“Hi, Daddy,” I whispered.

“Oh, sweetheart.” He stepped forward, pulling me into a hug. “You take my breath away. You always have.”

I closed my eyes, inhaling the familiar scent of cedar and citrus, grounding me.

“I’m honored to walk you down that aisle today.”

“I’m honored to be your daughter,” I said, my voice shaking.

He looked over my shoulder. “Is she ready?”

We turned to Karla, now standing beside Sierra, who had just entered quietly, her eyes full of proud tears.

Sierra came to me, taking my hands. “I’m so proud of you, Britt. And thank you—for loving Karla like your own. For loving Ace the way he deserves.”

“I love you,” I whispered.

She smiled. "I love you too. Now go—he's waiting."

The music began—soft strings building slowly. My stomach fluttered.

Tate winked. "It's time."

The aisle was a path of white rose petals, the soft crunch under our feet as Karla and I walked together in perfect rhythm.

The entire glass dome had been transformed into a fairytale garden, open to the soft sky of late afternoon, drenched in golden light.

Ivy hung from the ceiling beams, and chandeliers floated above like enchanted stars.

Everyone stood. I caught glimpses—Jasper with Nathan on his lap, Astrid adjusting her little brother's bow tie, Kyle already crying like a baby, and Colt babbling loudly in Corinne's arms.

Then I saw him.

Aceson Rivera.

He looked like everything I had waited my whole life for. Black tux, no tie, a boutonnière matching my bouquet. His hair brushed back just the way I liked. But it was his eyes that undid me—wide, wet, wonderstruck.

He didn't smile. He cried.

Tears streamed silently down his cheeks, and for a moment I forgot how to breathe.

Karla ran ahead, dropping petals as she skipped.

My father held my hand tighter. “You ready?”

I nodded.

“I’ll never stop walking beside you, Brittany. Even after this.”

I leaned into him slightly as we made our way forward.

When we reached the altar, Ace reached for me, trembling.

My father kissed my cheek and whispered, “Go. Be happy.”

Ace took both my hands, his grip tightening.

“Hey,” I whispered.

He laughed softly. “Hi, angel. You’re... you’re it. You’re everything. I’m gonna pass out.”

The officiant smiled knowingly. “Friends and family... we are gathered today to witness the union of Aceson Rivera and Brittany Ashford.”

The words blurred. I could only feel him. His thumb brushing over my wrist, his breath hitching every time I looked up at him. I could hear my heartbeat in my ears.

"You may now say your vows."

Aceson turned to me, voice thick.

"I've loved you longer than I'll ever admit out loud.

I loved you when I didn't know how to name it, when I was scared of it, when I thought I didn't deserve it.

And I love you now, freely, wildly, like I was made to hold your heart.

You're my home, Brittany. I vow to protect you, to respect you, to never walk away—no matter what.

I vow to be your peace. I also vow to make up for all the disgusting things I've done to you"

I was sobbing. Not quiet sobs. Ugly, shoulder-shaking ones. And I didn't care.

My turn.

"Aceson... you've seen me at my lowest. And you stayed.

You didn't try to fix me—you held space for me to find myself.

And somehow, in that mess, I found you. I vow to never run from you.

I vow to be soft when life is hard. To be brave when you're afraid.

To always remind you that no matter what comes—we are stronger together.

You're not just the love of my life. You are my life and I forgive you. "

“By the power vested in me...”

“I now pronounce you husband and wife.”



I didn't wait.

I grabbed him by the lapels and kissed him like he was air and I'd been underwater for too long. People cheered. Karla clapped and shouted, "Yay, Daddy!"

And just like that—I was his. He was mine.

The reception was a dream. A garden under the stars. Live violins. A champagne fountain. Celebrity chefs and three-tier cake decorated in edible crystals.

Karla fell asleep halfway through the speeches on my lap, holding my hand.

Jasper gave a toast about losing his best friend to his sister, and cried mid-sentence.

Corinne danced barefoot by the end of the night, holding Celic in one arm, glass of champagne in the other.

Sylvia caught the bouquet. Tate demanded a solo under the spotlight.

Allen even stopped by with Astrid for a dance or two.

It was a mess of love. A perfect, wonderful mess.

Later that night, just before we left, Aceson pulled me aside.

"We made it," he whispered, brushing my hair behind my ear. "You're my wife."

"Say it again."

"My wife. My Brittany. My miracle."

I cupped his face, kissed his tears, and said, “Let’s go home, husband.”

And under the stars, with the world behind us and forever ahead, we did.

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:53 am*

Three Years Later

Today is the twins' second birthday.

I woke up before the sun did. It was still dark outside, that deep-blue kind of quiet that belongs only to mornings like this.

The kind that holds memories. I didn't even hear the birds yet.

Just the slow, soft breaths of Aceson sleeping beside me and the rhythmic whir of the baby monitor that sat permanently on my nightstand.

Even though the twins were technically toddlers now, I still checked that monitor like they were fragile little porcelain dolls.

I blinked up at the ceiling, my fingers curled over the warm blanket.

My heart was full-too full. It pulsed so hard in my chest it almost hurt.

Two years ago, at this exact time, I was in an OR, pale as hell, half-conscious, and terrified.

Two years ago, my babies were pulled from me before my body was ready to let them go.

I should be sleeping, I know. But how could I sleep when today is their day?

I turned toward Ace. His face was peaceful in sleep, his lashes fanned against his cheek, and the smallest part of his hand touched mine. Just a graze. I slid my fingers into his palm, squeezed gently, then rolled out of bed without waking him. Not yet.

I padded across the wooden floor of our bedroom, wrapped in my satin robe.

The early morning light had started creeping in through the big windows overlooking our backyard-the same backyard where a pastel bouncy castle would be inflated in just a few hours.

Karla helped pick it out. Of course she did.

I stopped by the twins' room.

The door creaked when I opened it, and there they were.

Amaya, curled in a ball like a little sunflower, her wild curls fanned against her pillow.

Atis, sprawled out like a king, pacifier still in his mouth, blanket barely covering his tiny body.

Two years. Two full years of love, exhaustion, hope, and healing.

Tears stung my eyes as I leaned against the doorframe.

"Mama's here," I whispered.

I tiptoed to Amaya first and gently tucked her in.

She didn't stir. Her lashes fluttered a little.

Her tiny fingers clutched the edge of her blankie-one that Karla picked out the day we brought them home.

I kissed her forehead. Then I did the same with Atis, brushing the dark hair off his forehead.

He looked so much like Ace it almost broke me sometimes.

I sat on the rocking chair in their room and let myself cry. Not loudly. Not the kind of cry that makes noise. Just tears. I clutched the armrests and let them fall freely.

I remembered the moment the doctor told us I wouldn't be able to carry children.

I remembered the silence. The way Ace's hand tightened in mine, not with anger or frustration, but with protection.

I remembered how I broke down in the bathroom afterward, thinking I'd never be a mother.

And Ace, my Ace, just held me through it all.

"Brittany?" I heard his voice behind me.

I turned. He was leaning against the doorframe, in his boxers, his hair messy, sleep still clinging to his face. But his eyes... his eyes were on me.

"I didn't want to wake you," I whispered, brushing my face quickly.

He walked in and crouched beside me.

"You're crying," he said gently, brushing his thumb under my eye.

"I know," I laughed through a sob. "I'm just... it's their birthday, Ace. I can't believe they're two. I can't believe we made it here."

He took my hand. "I can."

His voice cracked.

"I always believed in you. In us. Even when things got hard. Even when the doctor told us we couldn't. Britt, you never gave up. You carried them. You brought them into this world, even if it almost broke you. You are the strongest woman I know."

I saw it. The gloss in his eyes. He was crying.

He exhaled sharply and lowered his forehead to my lap, his hands wrapping tightly around my waist. "I was so scared. That night... when they rushed you in. I thought I was going to lose you."

I cradled his head and ran my fingers through his hair. "But you didn't. We're here, Ace. We're home."

He nodded against my leg. "Yeah. We are."

We stayed like that for a while. Just the two of us, in a room that once felt like a dream and now smelled of baby lotion and stuffed animals. The sun started rising higher, casting golden rays across the floor. And soon, the house started stirring.

Karla's laughter echoed down the hallway. Jasper's voice followed-teasing, loud. Corinne was probably right behind him, already setting things in the kitchen.

"Should we wake the twins?" I asked.

Ace stood and kissed my forehead. "Let's do it together."

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The twins blinked awake, confused by the streamers Karla had somehow already taped across their cribs. "Happy birthday!" I whispered.

"Mama," Amaya mumbled, rubbing her eyes.

Atis reached for Ace immediately.

"I got you, little man," Ace said, lifting him with ease. Atis snuggled into his chest like he belonged nowhere else.

Karla peeked in, bouncing with energy. "Can I take them downstairs? Please, please, please!"

I laughed. "Slow down, Karla. You'll scare them."

Karla rolled her eyes dramatically, but I saw the love in them. She adored the twins. Protected them like a lioness.

Soon, the whole house was buzzing. The smell of pancakes and syrup filled the air. Jasper manned the kitchen like a pro while Corinne arranged cupcakes with pastel frosting. And tried to stop her twins from eating everything.

"Birthday breakfast is sacred!" Jasper announced.

"Only if you don't burn it," Corinne teased.

The backyard was transformed. Jasper and Ace had worked all week on it. Fairy

lights were strung between trees. Balloons floated everywhere. The bouncy castle stood proudly in the middle, pink and blue.

"Think we overdid it?" I asked Corinne.

She scoffed. "Please. This is modest. Wait until they're five. I nearly had a heart attack when mine did"

I took a deep breath and looked around. The laughter, the mess, the joy... this was everything I ever wanted.

Later that day, after cake and games, after the twins had gone down for their nap and the house was quiet again, I sat outside with Ace. He poured me a glass of white wine, and we sat on the porch swing.

"I think this was the best day of my life," I said.

"Better than our wedding?" he smirked.

"Well... you cried that day too."

"I'm not ashamed," he said with a chuckle. "Real men cry when they marry the love of their life."

I rested my head on his shoulder. "You cried today too."

He didn't deny it.

"I look at them, Ace... and I still can't believe they're ours. I was so sure I'd never get to do this. And now... they're here. Running around in diapers, stealing my makeup, calling you 'Dada.'"



He kissed my forehead. "I knew you were meant to be a mom."

I turned to face him. "Do you ever feel sad that we can't have more?"

His eyes softened. "I'd be lying if I said the thought doesn't cross my mind. But then I remember what we went through. And I look at you. And them. And I know this-this is enough. We're enough."

Tears welled in my eyes again.

"I was so scared," I admitted. "When the doctor said my body was too damaged. I felt... broken."

"You were never broken, Britt," he said fiercely. "You were healing. And you still are. But never broken."

We held each other.

Later that night, after everyone had gone home and the house had fallen quiet again, I stood by the twins' cribs. They were both sound asleep. Amaya had her arms wrapped around her stuffed bunny. Atis had kicked his blanket off again, as usual.

I brushed a hand over each of their foreheads.

"I'm so lucky to be your mom," I whispered.

I turned to see Ace standing in the doorway, watching me.

I smiled. "I think today was perfect."

He crossed the room and pulled me into his arms. "You make every day perfect."

And in the stillness of that night, with our babies safe and asleep, with love wrapped around us like a warm blanket, I let myself believe it.

We were whole.

We were home.

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:53 am*

Three Years Later

Three Years Later

The satin curtains swayed slightly with the evening breeze, whispering against the glass like secrets. I stood in front of the floor-length mirror, adjusting the diamond studs on my ears—one of the newer designs from Luné Jewelry.

Not flashy, just a subtle glimmer, the kind that made people lean in. The twins were unusually quiet, which meant only one thing—trouble.

“Dinner is at eight, right?” I called, half-turning toward the open walk-in closet where Ace was still shirtless, trying to decide between his navy or black button-up. The man was thirty-nine and somehow still looked like a GQ cover.

“Yeah. Jasper texted. He and Corinne will be here soon. Sylvia’s bringing that husband of hers too—what’s his name again? Milo? Or Mikkel?” he asked.

“You aren’t even close, Ashton,” I corrected, rolling my eyes with a small smile. “The baby husband. Sylvia really went cougar on this one.”

Ace chuckled, running a hand through his still-damp hair. “Well we must admit, he was the persistent one”

“Yeah he was .”

I smoothed the hem of my silk dress and grabbed the silver necklace from the vanity

table. Just as I was fastening it, something caught my ear. A soft murmur. Barely there. Coming from down the hallway.

I frowned, tilting my head.

“What is it?” Ace asked, pulling his shirt on now.

“I think I hear them. The twins.”

I tiptoed across the hallway, bare feet silent against the marble floor. The nightlights cast long shadows on the walls, flickering like the beginning of a dream. I stopped at their door, heart already softening.

I peeked inside and nearly melted.

There, sitting cross-legged on the plush rug, was Amaya—my five-year-old daughter—her face a canvas of disaster. She had somehow managed to reach my makeup drawer.

Lipstick smeared across her cheek like war paint, glitter dusted across her nose, and a swipe of mascara dangerously close to blinding her in one eye.

And right beside her was her twin brother, Atis—my son, the charming menace—with a small brush in his hand, gently pushing her curly hair back with the care of a seasoned stylist.

“Stay still, Maya,” he said seriously. “You said you want to look like Mommy, right? Mommy doesn’t squirm when she’s getting pretty.”

“But it itches,” she whined, blinking dramatically. “And I can’t see.”

“That’s because you put eyeliner on your eyelid and your eyebrow,” he muttered, pulling her hair into a crooked ponytail with the elastic he must’ve stolen from my bathroom.

I covered my mouth with both hands, trying to contain the laugh and the sudden overwhelming surge of love.

Ace came up behind me and peered over my shoulder. His arms wrapped around my waist, pulling me gently against him.

“They’re...wow,” he whispered, laughing quietly. “She looks like a confused drag queen.”

I smacked his arm. “Shut up. They’re adorable.”

He rested his chin on my shoulder. “They really are.”

We watched in silence as Atis tilted her face to the side. “You look beautiful,” he told her in all seriousness. “You’re gonna be a model just like Mommy.”

“I know,” Amaya said proudly. “I’m already practicing my walk.”

They got up and started their little runway, right there between their beds, Amaya swinging her nonexistent hips while Atis clapped like her biggest fan.

And just like that, I teared up.

I almost died bringing them into this world. Their arrival had nearly ended me—two months of bedrest, preeclampsia, emergency delivery. I remembered screaming for Ace, the sterile lights of the hospital, the suffocating fear. But I’d do it all over again for this moment.

They were miracles. Ungrateful little brats who painted on my furniture, stuck gum under the counter, and constantly snuck cookies—but they were mine.

They looked so much like Ace it was almost annoying, like I had carried them just to birth carbon copies of their father.

Same deep-set eyes. Same ridiculous dimples.

And still, I loved them beyond comprehension.

A soft cry broke the moment.

Ace and I turned our heads at the same time.

Austin.

Without a word, we walked together to the nursery, the light automatically dimming as we stepped inside.

Our two-month-old son lay in his crib, squirming gently, his tiny fists clenched as if he were fighting off invisible shadows.

He was already so expressive—always furrowing his brows like he had important things to say.

I reached in, picking him up slowly, supporting his tiny head. “Shhh... Mommy’s here.”

Ace stood beside me, reaching to stroke the baby’s soft curls—curls that were darker now, thickening just slightly. “He’s getting so big already,” he murmured.

Austin's warm little body nestled into mine, and I rocked gently. "He's perfect."

"I still can't believe he's ours," Ace said, his voice lower now, rougher.

I nodded. "Neither can I."

We'd found him in the alley between our house and Jasper's. Just lying there. A baby, no more than a week old, wrapped in a hospital blanket and placed in a basket like some twisted fairy tale. Ace had seen him first. I remember the way his voice cracked when he called for me.

We rushed him to child services, terrified, hearts in our throats. We stayed with him every day. They found out his mother was a drug addict, his father dead, no family to claim him. The case worker asked if we wanted to foster.

Ace didn't even look at me when he said, "We want to adopt."

It took weeks. Paperwork, interviews, checks. But the day they said yes, I broke down sobbing. He was our son now. And the moment we brought him home, it felt like he'd always been ours.

I looked up at Ace—and to my surprise, there were tears in his eyes.

"Ace?" I whispered.

He cleared his throat. "Sorry. Just... I look at him, and I think about how easily we could've missed this. Missed him."

I placed my hand over his heart. "You didn't. You found him."

He covered my hand with his own, voice shaking. "I just want to be better. For him."

For them. I grew up not knowing where I belonged. I won't let that be their story."

I reached up, brushing a tear from his cheek.

"They already know," I whispered. "They're loved. So deeply. Especially by you."

Ace leaned in and kissed my forehead, then pressed his lips to Austin's tiny one.

A knock on the door broke the silence.

"Dinner time!" Jasper called out playfully from the stairs. "Bring the rugrats!"

We walked down together, arms full of love and children. My nieces and nephews were so happy to see them as if they don't see them every day. The only one absent was Kyle, who was visiting his dad in Los Angeles, Astrid had practice so she didn't go with her brother.

The dining room was alive with laughter and soft jazz, the chandelier casting golden light on the table. Karla—now eleven—was seated next to Corinne, helping her set the last of the wine glasses. She grinned when she saw us.

"Is that my baby brother?" she asked, getting up to kiss Austin's forehead. "He smells like milk."

"Don't we all," Corinne quipped, laughing as she adjusted her form-fitting white dress. Jasper pulled out her chair like a gentleman. Still hopelessly in love after all these years.

And then there was Sylvia.

She walked in like a damn Vogue cover, in a black velvet gown with her signature



red lipstick and high ponytail. Her husband, Ashton, followed her in—tall, tan skin, ten years her junior, and very obviously smitten.

“You’re late,” I teased.

“Fashionably,” she said smoothly. “Besides, Ashton was having... wardrobe issues.”

Ashton chuckled, wrapping an arm around her waist. “Her zipper got stuck.”

“Liar,” she whispered, kissing his jaw.

I exchanged a look with Corinne and grinned. Oh yeah. Readers are going to love Sylvia’s book.

We ate, we drank, we laughed. The kids played nearby, Amaya showing off her 'runway walk' while Atis narrated like a sports announcer. Karla kept pretending not to laugh, but I saw her biting her cheek.

And somewhere in the middle of all of it—between a toast from Jasper, a joke from Ashton, and a wink from Ace—I looked around and felt it.

This life.

This family.

It was everything.

Later that night, as we lay in bed—Austin asleep in his bassinet, the twins tucked in with their books—I curled into Ace’s side and placed a hand on his chest.

“Hey,” I whispered.

“Hm?”

“You cried.”

He chuckled softly. “No, I didn’t.”

“Yes, you did.”

“...Okay, maybe a little.”

I smiled against his skin. “It was beautiful.”

“I love you,” he said, holding me tighter.

“I know.”

He laughed. “Cocky.”

“I learned from the best.”

Outside, the night deepened. The stars blinked above the mansion. Inside, beneath our roof, were children born from love, and one gifted to us by fate. And tomorrow—well, tomorrow was another page.

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:53 am*

Brittany

Twelve Years Later

It still doesn't feel real.

I sat at the edge of our bed this morning, clutching a framed photo from when the twins were just babies—tiny, wrinkled, with soft tufts of dark hair, and their father's serious brows even then.

The house was too quiet, too still, except for the distant sound of birds and the soft hum of the espresso machine Ace turned on downstairs.

They were graduating today.

My babies.

I was already a wreck. I hadn't even brushed my hair. My robe hung loosely around my shoulders, tissues gathered on my lap. My chest ached with pride and ache all at once.

"Britt," Ace's voice called softly from the doorway.

I looked up. His eyes softened when they met mine. That same look—the one he gave me when we signed the adoption papers for Austin, when I walked down the aisle to him, when I held Amaya after my emergency c-section.

"They're just graduating, sweetheart," he said with a soft chuckle, though his voice cracked just a bit. "They're not disappearing."

"You say that like it's not breaking me," I whispered, looking down at the photo. "It feels like my heart is walking out the door in two pieces."

He came closer and knelt in front of me. His hand reached for my face, brushing away a tear. "You gave them the world, Brittany. Look at them now. Strong. Kind. Brilliant. Beautiful. And they have your fire."

I laughed through the tears. "No, they have your stubbornness. Especially Atis. That boy will argue with a wall."

"Gets it from his mother," Ace teased.

I swatted at his shoulder gently, and he caught my wrist, kissed the back of my hand.

"I can't believe Amaya is going to New York. She used to cry if I left her at ballet for more than an hour. Now she's moving across the country."

"She's following Karla," he said, his voice laced with quiet pride.

Karla. Our Karla. Still the same bright-eyed girl with dreams bigger than the sky. Now, a powerhouse marketing manager for Rivera Industries in Manhattan. Sierra and I still joked about how she'd been walking in heels before she could even write her name.

"She sent a photo of the apartment this morning," I said. "It's stunning. All three of them living there... it just feels full circle."

Austin padded into the room then, hair a mess, eyes still sleepy. He climbed up on the bed beside me and yawned dramatically.

"Is today the day the twins leave and I get to be the favorite child forever?" he asked, grinning.

I pulled him into a hug. "You were always the favorite, you little sneak."

He smirked. "That's what Amaya says. But she also said I was born in a cabbage patch, so I don't trust her."

I froze.

Ace stifled a laugh.

"Wait," I said, pulling back. "Austin... you remember what we told you, right? About how you came into our family?"

He nodded, his big, soulful eyes suddenly serious. "Yeah, I remember. You and Dad told me when I turned twelve. And I told you then, and I'll tell you again: I don't care whose belly I came from. You're my mom. He's my dad. End of story."

Ace wiped a tear quickly with the back of his hand, hoping I didn't notice.

I noticed.

I kissed Austin's forehead. "You always make me cry, you know that?"

"It's a gift," he said with a shrug, and climbed off the bed. "I call shower first. Gotta look good for all the graduation ladies."

"You're twelve!" I shouted after him, laughing.

He shouted back, "Twelve and fabulous!"

The day moved in a blur. I helped Amaya with her makeup one last time in her room. The girl had inherited every drop of my glam gene. She even tried contouring Austin's face once.

"Mom," she said, her voice suddenly quiet. "Are you okay? You've been... emotional all week."

I swallowed. "You're my daughter, Amaya. My baby. I almost lost you. And now you're this beautiful young woman, going off to college and the runway and God knows what else."

She blinked, her mascara wand hovering mid-air. "You're not losing me. You're just getting a version of me who does her own laundry now."

I laughed, pulling her into a hug.

In the hallway, Atis adjusted his tie in the mirror. "How do I look, Ma?"

I just stared at him. This boy, my miracle boy. Born so small, now standing taller than Ace. Broad shoulders, gentle eyes. He looked just like his father.

"You look like the man I prayed for," I said honestly. "Just... don't break too many hearts at Columbia."

He grinned. "No promises."

Ace came up behind me, resting his chin on my shoulder. He had cried at the ceremony. I knew he would. He tried to play tough, but the moment Amaya walked on that stage, tears streamed down his cheeks.

"They did it," he whispered.

"We did it," I corrected. "We made a family."

That evening, Jasper, Corinne, Sylvia, and her younger husband—God, the man barely looked older than Atis—joined us for dinner.

Sylvia was glowing. She hadn't said much about her relationship publicly, but tonight, watching the way he pulled her chair out, his hand resting gently on the small of her back—there was something brewing there. Something deeper. Something worth reading about.

Corinne clinked her glass, rising for a toast. "To family. To growth. To the kind of love that stretches, bends, and never breaks."

I caught Ace looking at me across the table. His eyes full of love, of history, of everything we'd been through. And everything we still had ahead of us.

After dinner, I stood in the hallway and watched the twins pack up their last few things.

"Call me every day," I said.

"Mom," Amaya groaned, rolling her eyes. "We haven't even left yet."

"Still. Call me. Text me. Just... let me breathe."

Atis came over, wrapping his arms around me. "You're the best mom in the world. Thank you. For everything."

I broke. The sobs came. Ugly, unfiltered, raw.

Ace joined us, pulling all three of us into his arms. Even Austin tried to squeeze in, making it an awkward but perfect family hug.

"I love you all," I said through the tears. "So damn much."

Ace whispered, "We know. And we love you back, Britt. Always."

As they pulled away, getting into Karla's car, I stood on the porch and waved until the car disappeared from view.

Ace wrapped an arm around my waist, pulling me close.

"Ready for the next chapter?" he asked softly.

I leaned into him. "With you? Always."

The End .

Next In The US Series

The Fall of Us

Book Three in the US Series

Sylvia Coleman once had it all—a happy home, a loving family, and the kind of childhood that felt like a dream. But dreams don't last. When her father walked out without a word, her mother shattered. Depression and drugs became her escape, and Sylvia's world spiraled.

Dragged through the wreckage of her mother's mistakes, Sylvia found herself in the arms of Jagger—a dangerous man with an even darker world.

Years of pain, control, and silent endurance followed, until the birth of her son, Mason, gave her a reason to fight.



He was her light, her everything... until one night stole him away.

One car crash. Two bodies. A life in ruins.

And Sylvia locked away in an asylum with nothing but ghosts for company.

Years later, she's rebuilt the pieces. A respected lecturer. A woman with walls higher than ever. But peace is fleeting—and temptation wears a familiar face.

His name is Ashton. Her student. And completely off limits.

He's drawn to her darkness. She's terrified of his light. But the more she pushes him away, the deeper he falls—and the more she realizes her past isn't done with her yet.

The Fall of Us is a gritty, forbidden age-gap romance woven with trauma, heartbreak, and the slow-burning ache of two souls daring to heal each other. This is not a love story—it's a story about falling, breaking, and choosing to rise anyway.