







# Too Pucking Late (2-Hour Quickies #1)

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**Category:** Sport

**Description:** A stripper as my fake date to convince Dad I'm qualified to run his billion-dollar company?

If my dad hands Carmichael Chemicals to Matthews-the-Monkey,

the misogynistic snake will kill my life's work—the Clean Water for Veterans initiative.

But Daddy thinks I'm not CEO material, because I'm happily single.

My brother suggests I bring his hockey-star best friend as my fake date to the upcoming executive retreat.

Clock is ticking. I've got no choice but to ride out this BS.

When I meet Ken Branch right outside Dad's mansion, ready to walk in holding hands,

my stomach drops.

Broad shoulders, biceps straining his sleeves, dark designer jeans that fit like sin

He's panty-melting hot, sure—but he's also the "Thrustin Timberlake" I hooked up with three years ago.

The pole dancer who gave me the biggest Os of my life after a bachelorette party.

The worst part? My body remembers him all too well.

And he smirks at me like he already knows how I taste.

He does.

I should call this charade off.

But it's too pucking late.

**Total Pages (Source):** 18

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:24 am*

Bree

"Ladies, get those dollar bills ready..."

The bass thumps through my chest as the club's host grabs the mic. "... because our next performer is about to make you forget your own name. Give it up for... Thrustin Timberlake !"

The lights dim, and Justin Timberlake's 'Sexy Back' starts playing—because of course it does.

"Oh my God," Clara squeals next to me, already waving a handful of bills. "This is exactly what you need after that asshole Trevor."

I take another sip of my martini, determined not to let thoughts of my ex-almost-fiancé ruin Brittany's bachelorette party.

But when the spotlight hits the stage, my drink nearly slips from my fingers.

Holy. Chemical. Reaction.

The man who walks out makes every woman in the room stop breathing.

Six-foot-plus of raw muscle, moving with a predatory grace that screams 'athlete', not 'dancer'.

'. His abs ripple under the stage lights, a thin sheen of oil making every cut and ridge

gleam.

But it's his eyes that catch me—bright green and somehow both playful and intense as they sweep across the crowd.

He's wearing only black boxer briefs, and dear God—they do nothing to hide how generously he's built. His cock is impossible to ignore—thick, solid, and unmistakably half-hard, pressing forward with every step.

My fingers actually twitch with the urge to wrap around him, to feel how hard he'd become in my palm.

My mouth waters as I imagine the heat of him against my skin, how he'd pulse under my touch.

Every move he makes makes it that much harder not to picture exactly how he'd feel—hot, heavy, and perfect—if I just reached out and squeezed.

When he grabs the pole with one hand, the muscles in his arm flex in a way that makes my pussy clench with need, slick and aching. A tattoo sleeve runs down his right arm, the designs flowing like art over his bicep.

"Now that," Clara whispers, "is what I call chemistry. I'm ready to combust. Naked. On his face."

I can't even snark back at her terrible science pun. Not when Mr. Thrustin is now climbing the pole with fluid grace, his entire body moving like liquid metal. He inverts himself, thighs gripping the pole, and performs a slow spin that showcases every perfectly defined muscle.

Justin Timberlake croons through the speakers like a goddamn sex demon: "Dirty

babe...”

Women are already losing it. Bills are raining down like confetti. A brunette in a tiara tucks a twenty into his waistband, and he doesn’t even look at her. Doesn’t smile. Doesn’t say thank you.

He just keeps moving — sinuous, controlled, unstoppable.

“You see these shackles, baby, I’m your slave...”

A group of bridesmaids shriek. Someone wolf-whistles. Someone else actually moans.

“I’ll let you whip me if I misbehave...”

That’s when it happens. He locks eyes with me.

And winks.

Pressure builds low and tight, and I have to loosen my grip before I shatter the damn martini glass.

"Ten bucks says he's got a boring day job," I mutter, trying to maintain some semblance of my usual cynicism. "Probably sells insurance or something."

“Who cares if he sells crypto? I’d still let him climb me like one of his poles.”

What he's doing right now is executing a series of moves that defy both gravity and my ability to maintain professional detachment. Each position flows into the next with controlled power, telling a story of strength and seduction that has every woman in the room leaning forward.

When he drops into a split, thighs flexing with controlled power, one hand grips the pole while the other traces down his chest, following that cut 'V' of muscle disappearing into his briefs. The room temperature spikes ten degrees.

I can't tear my eyes away. The stage lights catch the definition of his abs, and there's something mesmerizing about the way his body seems to understand physics in ways I've only seen in textbooks.

"Speaking of chemistry," Clara nudges me, "he hasn't taken his eyes off you for the last thirty seconds."

She isn't wrong. His gaze pins me like a live wire — all heat and challenge. He hoists himself into another impossible hold, muscles flexing, tongue swiping across his lower lip like he knows exactly what he's doing to me. It's obscene. And it's working.

"If you don't want him, I'll take him. I've already got student loans and low standards."

I force myself to look away, taking another sip of my drink. "I'm done with men, remember? Especially hot ones who make their living pole dancing."

"You're done with gold-diggers," Clara corrects. "This is just eye candy. Very, very high-quality eye candy."

The song changes to something slower, and he transitions into his finale—a move that has him spinning down the pole in a controlled descent that showcases every muscle group I definitely shouldn't be cataloging with such scientific precision.

"You're staring," Clara sing-songs. "And I'm 95% sure you're ovulating."

When the music ends, the crowd erupts in whistles and applause. I watch him

disappear backstage, trying to ignore the way my heart is racing. It's just the martinis. And maybe the heat in here. Definitely not those green eyes or the way they kept finding mine.

"I need another drink," I announce, standing up.

"Want company? Or are you gonna go confess your filthy thoughts to a bottle of vodka?"

"Nope and maybe. Stay here and make sure Brittany doesn't try to call off her wedding again."

The bar is quieter, tucked away from the main stage. I slide onto a stool and signal the bartender for another martini, extra dirty. Just like my thoughts right now.

"Make that two," comes a voice behind me—low, rich, and rough enough to scrape over every nerve ending like velvet sandpaper. The kind of voice that could talk you into sin and make you beg for more.

Thrustin—God, I hope that's not his real name—settles onto the stool next to me. He's wearing a fitted black t-shirt now, but it does nothing to diminish the impact of his presence.

"Nice routine," I say, aiming for casual and probably missing by a mile. "The conservation of angular momentum on that last spin was particularly impressive."

His eyebrows shoot up, and his lips curve into a genuine smile. "Did you just explain my finale with physics?"

"Sorry. Occupational hazard. I tend to see everything through a scientific lens."



"Don't apologize. It's hot when a beautiful woman actually understands the mechanics behind what I do."

The bartender sets our drinks down, and he immediately pays for both before I can protest.

"I can buy my own drinks," I say, but there's no heat in it.

"I know you can. But maybe I'm trying to impress the woman who understands angular momentum."

"And maybe," I say, taking a sip of my martini, "I don't want to be impressed by someone who takes his clothes off for a living."

His eyes darken slightly. "Ouch. Afraid I'm after your money, Princess?"

The question hits too close to home. "Princess? And what makes you think I have any?"

He smirks. "Just a hunch."

"Enlighten me."

"The way you carry yourself. The designer watch. The fact that you're drinking Grey Goose instead of well vodka." He shrugs. "You're a Princess. And I'm observant."

Princess. I roll my eyes, but the word clings. Like he already had me figured out.

"Great. Another man who notices my bank account before my brain."

"Actually," he says, leaning closer, "I noticed how your eyes lit up when you talked

about physics. And how you've been fighting your smile all night, like you're afraid to admit you're having fun. The watch? That was just proof I'm right about you being way too good for this place."

I blink at him. That's... not what I expected.

"So what's your story?" he asks. "What's a woman who understands angular momentum doing at a pole dancing show?"

"Bachelorette party. My friend's making the biggest mistake of her life, but we're all pretending to be happy about it."

"Not a fan of marriage?"

"Her fiancé thinks one career is enough—for both of them. So obviously, she picked his. So no, not a fan of giving up your dreams for a man." I take another sip. "Brittany—that's the bride—is trading her PhD for a ring and a kitchen. But sure, let's celebrate."

His jaw tightens. "That's messed up."

I blame the martinis. Or maybe it's the lingering effect of watching him work that pole. Or maybe I just want to forget Trevor with someone who looks at me like I'm dessert.

Whatever the reason, I impulsively kiss him.

He responds immediately, one hand sliding into my hair while the other grips my hip. His mouth is hot and demanding against mine, and I moan when his tongue slides against mine.

"My place," he says against my mouth. "Roommate's away."

I nod, already wet from the way his hands are roaming my body. He leads me out to his car, and the drive is a blur of wandering hands and heated kisses at red lights .

The moment his apartment door closes behind us, he pins me against it. His cock is hard against my stomach as he kisses down my neck, and I arch into him, desperate for more contact.

He lifts me, and I wrap my legs around his waist. His cock presses against my core through our clothes as he carries me to his bedroom, dropping me onto his bed. I pull him down for another kiss, rough and hungry.

"Condom?" I ask between kisses.

"Nightstand."

His shirt comes off first, and seeing that dancer's body up close makes my pussy throb. I run my hands over his abs while he unzips my dress, pushing it down. When my bra follows, he groans at the sight of my bare breasts.

His mouth finds my nipple, sucking hard while his fingers work my other breast. I arch up, grinding against his erection. "Fuck, I need you inside me."

He strips us both, and I get my first look at his cock—thick and hard and perfect. He rolls the condom on while I spread my legs, already dripping wet.

"You're so fucking wet," he growls, sliding two fingers inside me.

I gasp as his fingers curve inside me, hitting exactly the right spot. His thumb finds my clit, circling it while he watches my reactions with those intense green eyes.

"Stop teasing," I demand, pulling him closer. "I want your cock."

He positions himself between my thighs, the head of his cock sliding through my wetness. When he pushes in, I dig my nails into his back. He's thick, stretching me perfectly as he fills me inch by inch.

"Fuck," I moan as he bottoms out. He feels incredible, and when he starts moving, I wrap my legs around him, urging him deeper.

He fucks me hard, each thrust making my breasts bounce. I reach down to rub my clit, chasing my orgasm. His rhythm gets faster, rougher, and I can feel my pussy starting to clench around him .

"I'm close," I pant, working my clit faster.

He responds by driving into me harder, the sound of skin against skin filling the room. When my orgasm hits, I cry out, my whole body shaking as pleasure rips through me. He follows right after, his cock pulsing inside me as he comes.

We collapse, both breathing hard. He rolls off me, disposing of the condom while I catch my breath. The sex buzz mingles with the martinis, making everything pleasantly hazy, but my body feels boneless, satisfied in a way I haven't been in a very long time.

"I should go."

"You can stay," he offers, and for one insane second, I wanted to say yes. To see if those eyes still look at me the same in the morning.

But I know better.

"Want to freshen up or do I go first?" he asks, propping himself on an elbow.

"You go ahead."

The moment the bathroom door clicks shut, I slip into my dress, pull five hundred-dollar bills from my clutch, and tuck them into an envelope I found. I leave it on his nightstand. Every man has his price—some just take it up front instead of stealing fifty grand later.

I pull my phone to order an Uber. Three texts from Clara. Shit. Some friend I am, ditching her and Brittany's bachelorette party for a hook-up.

I take one last look at the bathroom door before leaving. He'd seemed different, smart even. But in the end, they're all the same. His comments about noticing my wealth were not a coincidence—stupid I'm not.

Well, at least Daddy's money was good for something tonight.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:24 am*

Bree

Three Years Later

"I'd rather lick the inside of a lead pipe, Ashton."

"Dad won't make you CEO of Carmichael Chemicals if you show up alone to another company event."

I swivel in my chair to face my brother. "So what? He'll give our family's company to Vince Matthews because I don't have a date?"

"Because he thinks you're all bars and clubs—"

"That has nothing to do with how I could run this company."

"You're right. You're perfectly qualified. I'm just a hockey player who thinks H<sub>2</sub>O is water and my locker room smells like sulfate of something."

"Sulfur," I correct. "And that's exactly my point. I have two degrees in chemistry. I've developed projects that could transform this company. But Dad won't even look at them because he's too busy worrying about my marital status."

"He wants the company to stay in the family. And if you don't give him hope for that..."

"He'll hand over our grandfather's legacy to Matthews? A man who blocks every

innovative project because it might cut into his profit margins?"

“Exactly!”

"Matthews already shut down our ag project," I say, anger rising at the memory. "He said it wasn't 'cost-effective' to help small farmers. And now he's trying to shut down my veteran housing water treatment project."

"The filtration system?"

"Do you know what's in the water at those VFW housing complexes?"

Lead levels that would make Flint blush.

But Matthews says there's 'no clear ROI' in helping veterans.

" I stand up, too frustrated to sit still.

"So yeah, I'd rather die than pretend to be some docile, marriage-minded woman just to please the board. "

"It's just for the anniversary week, Bree. The gala, the charity dinner, the——"

"A whole week of pretending to be someone I'm not?" I laugh without humor. "Playing the perfect corporate wife while Matthews schmoozes the board members who still think women belong in the kitchen, not the boardroom?"

"If you don't, Matthews wins. He'll be CEO, and you know what happens then. He'll gut R&D, lay off half your team——"

"And turn Carmichael Chemicals into another soulless corporation that poisons

communities for profit." I sink back into my chair. "Just like when he covered up that contamination issue in the east side development."

"Wait, what contamination issue?"

"The one that conveniently disappeared from our records right before the board vote."

"I didn't know that. The more reasons for you to do whatever it takes to convince Dad it should be you."

"Even if I wanted to date—which I don't—where would I find someone? I'm supposed to hop on Tinder between running lab trials and fighting Matthews for basic funding?"

"I might have a solution—"

"My project is my priority right now. I don't have time for dating drama or inevitable heartbreak when some guy realizes I won't quit my job to pop out babies."

"Actually, I was thinking more like a fake date—"

"What, like a male escort?" I snort. "That'll look great in the society pages."

"Bree, why not just play along?"

"Why not? Because I refuse to become Mom."

Ashton stiffens. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"She compromised who she was to please Dad. She gave up everything, Ash. A



promising career in ballet, her dreams of dancing professionally— all because Dad offered her this 'amazing' life."

"He never asked her to give up dancing. She chose—"

"Is that what you think?" I lean forward. "Men never ask directly. It starts small. 'Teach part-time so you can be home more,' 'The kids need their mother.' Until one day you wake up and realize your ballerina slippers are gathering dust in the attic."

"Our cousin Lily loves being home with her kids. She's never complained—"

"Of course she doesn't complain. She always wanted to be a wife and a mom. Some women do—others don't. That's our right. But I'm sure you think all women need babies to be complete."

"Bree—"

"No."

"Would you at least consider it? For me?"

I laugh bitterly. "See? Another man using emotional blackmail to get what he wants. You just proved my point—and beautifully, I must say."

"I can see why you crushed it on the debate team. Maybe you should've been a lawyer instead of a chemist."

"Right, because the only reason I became a chemist was to please Dad? Every woman's success must be about a man, right?"

"I take it back. You should've been a psychologist."

“To be a better mom?”

"Stop it. Actually..." Ashton shifts his weight, and I recognize his 'I have a brilliant idea' face. Usually right before suggesting something stupid. "One of my teammates might be perfect for this."

“For what?”

“To play your fake date.”

"A hockey player?" I stare at him. "A hockey player has nothing in common with me. Plus—didn't you just say your whole team smells like sulfur?"

"He's different."

"Different how? Does he shower more than the others?"

"He's smart. Very smart. Quiet, intellectual type. He even looks like Clark Kent."

"Which teammate?" I narrow my eyes. "Do I know him?"

"No, he's new. A rookie we picked up this season, but we've become good friends."

"So your solution is setting me up with some guy who probably thinks Marie Curie is a porn star?" I shake my head. "Great. A week of nodding along while he explains what a slapshot is, because that's all he can talk about? Nice image will Dad get of me."

"Would you just—"

“No, Ashton. NO.”

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:24 am*

Ken

"They're trying to bait us. Don't bite."

I catch Oscar's warning a second too late—my shoulder slams into the boards from a dirty check, teeth rattling. The puck squirts free, and I recover fast, whipping it across the ice to Ashton, who's already skating like a devil toward the crease.

He passes back just in time. I slap it into the top corner of the net.

Horn. Roar. Another goal for the Dayton Devils. Our pro team is a feeder league for the NHL—scouts are always watching. Every goal could be the one that gets me called up.

Ashton barrels into me for our celebration, grinning like he's ten years old again. "That's how we do it!"

We're up 3-1 in the third, and the Kings are spiraling. Dirty hits, late checks, one of their defensemen just tried to decapitate Petrov. Tempers are boiling.

Next shift, I'm on edge. The Kings dump the puck and chase. I pivot hard, slash it across the ice to Ashton. He catches it, dodges two defenders, and returns it slick as hell just outside the crease. I tap it in .

My second tonight.

Oscar slaps my helmet as we skate off. "Hot hands, Branch. Dinner's on you."

Final buzzer sounds with a 4-1 finish.

"Branch and Carmichael strike again!" the announcer booms. "The dynamic duo does it one more time, folks!"

Locker room's a mix of sweat, noise, and victory buzz. Guys are hooting, towels snapping, gear clattering into bags. I'm toweling off when Ashton corners me, still half-dressed and cocky as hell.

"You remember how you said you owed me for helping you adjust to the team?"

I narrow my eyes. "Don't like where this is going."

"I'm calling it in."

I squint at him. "What do you want?"

"You to be my sister's date. Anniversary week, gala, schmoozing the board."

I blink. "Your sister?"

"She needs a plus-one. My dad's on her case about being 'unbalanced.' An asshole named Matthews is circling like a vulture and ass-kissing Dad to be CEO. This might help her keep her spot in the family—as it should be."

"And she's agreed to this?"

"She will."

"Right. Because what woman doesn't want a fake date she's never met? She also loves surprise dental work and tax audits?"

"She's brilliant. Head of R&D. Runs a lab. She just needs someone who won't embarrass her or try to sleep with her."

"And you thought of me because?"

"Because you've got a brain. Quiet, observant. Ivy League."

"I didn't go to an Ivy League college."

"Whatever. You clean up nice. You know when to shut up in a room full of billionaires. And you're not gonna try anything."

I raise a brow. "You mean you trust me not to hump your sister."

"Exactly. I've seen you with women. You've got standards, but more importantly, you've got restraint. And if you step one toe out of line—I can still kill you."

"Wow. I feel so honored."

He claps me on the shoulder like it's settled. "Tux fitting's Tuesday. I'll send you the schedule."

He walks off like the whole damn thing is a done deal.

The locker room empties, music off. Quiet.

"Drink?" Oscar asks from behind me. "Right now you look like you could use one."

"Always do."

"Exactly."

Twenty minutes later, we're at Murphy's. It's our usual spot—dark wood, sticky floors, zero chance of running into the type of women who want to date hockey players.

"He wants you to what?" Oscar chokes on his beer.

"Play boyfriend to his sister. Some corporate princess who needs arm candy for daddy's company events. "

"And you said yes?"

"I didn't say anything. He just... decided."

"Since when do you do favors for rich people?" Oscar signals the bartender for another round. "Remember that charity gala last month? You said you'd rather clean sewers again than spend another night watching trust fund babies pretend to care about the poor."

"I did clean sewers. Summer before junior year."

Oscar starts counting on his fingers. "Sewers, roadkill cleanup—"

He doesn't know half of it. Doesn't know about the semester I spent pole dancing. Letting drunk rich women stuff bills in my waistband while I gritted my teeth and faked confidence. Humiliating—but I needed the cash. Now? I've got a real salary. My own place. My name stitched across a pro jersey.

But I haven't forgotten where I came from. Or how I feel about people who think wealth equals worth.

My teammates will never know.

“Don’t forget night security at the morgue.”

"Man, your scholarship really didn't cover shit, did it?"

"Not even books. But it wasn't that bad. Nothing says 'good morning' like scraping raccoon pancakes off Route 9 at 3 AM while hungover. Puts things in perspective when even the roadkill looks better than you."

"And the morgue?"

"Quietest co-workers I ever had. Great listeners. Plus free air conditioning in summer."

“Jesus, Branch. You didn’t survive college. You fucking clawed through it.”

"Not everyone's daddy bought them new skates every season." I take a long pull from my beer. "But that's exactly why I shouldn't do this. I don't belong in their world. And I already know how it feels to be the entertainment. "

"Their world?"

"Rich people who've never had to choose between buying textbooks or eating that week."

"Ashton's not like that."

"Ashton's different. But his sister? Probably thinks grit is something you exfoliate with."

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:24 am*

Bree

"Matthews will be the next CEO," Dad says without looking up.

I grip the chair's armrest, knuckles white. "Just like that?"

"It's time to be realistic, Brianna." Now he meets my eyes. "You're brilliant. Always have been. But you frighten people. You frighten men."

"Good. They should be frightened. I have access to chemicals that could dissolve their golf clubs."

As usual, I deflect with humor. But the truth is, the words hit like a blow—echoing the same criticism I've heard since childhood. Too loud, Brianna. Too competitive. Boys don't like girls who always have to win.

"Excuse me?"

"Your mother knew how to balance strength with grace." He adjusts his perfect row of fountain pens. "She understood the value of... softness. Femininity."

My throat tightens. Every dance recital, every science fair—he'd always found a way to compare me to her. Your mother made it look effortless. Your mother knew how to smile more, compete less. Your mother was a ballerina, not a chemical engineer—that's a man's profession.

"I don't scare men."



"When was your last relationship?" he continues. "That Trevor boy. We know how that ended."

My cheeks burn. "You don't know anything about my personal life."

"Exactly my point. You're thirty, successful, beautiful. Yet somehow always alone. Always pushing men away with your... intensity."

Intensity. When I beat Tommy Williams at debate. When I chose Chem Club over cheer.

I swore I'd never grovel for his approval again. Never fake it for a man. And yet—

"Actually," the words spill out before I can stop them, "I've been seeing someone."

Dad's eyebrows shoot up. "Oh?"

"Yes. Someone you'll like." My heart pounds against my ribs. "He's a professional hockey player."

Dad straightens. Hockey. His weakness. "One of Ashton's teammates?"

"Yes." Oh God, what am I doing? "He's... coming to dinner tomorrow night. To meet you."

"Tomorrow?" A smile tugs at his lips. "What's his name?"

Shit.

"I'll let him introduce himself. He's... very modest about his accomplishments."

"A hockey player who's modest?" Dad chuckles. "Now that I have to see."

"Seven." I stand before he can ask more.

"Brianna—"

"Give me one week, Dad. Delay your decision until after the anniversary gala. That's all I ask to show you exactly what balance looks like."

I'm halfway to the door when his voice stops me. "You know, your mother gave up dancing for something better."

"No." I turn back. "She gave up dancing because you made her believe that was love."

"One week, Brianna. One week."

The door clicks shut behind me and I lean against it, heart racing. What have I just done?

The door clicks shut behind me and I lean against it, heart racing. What have I just done?

I pull out my phone with shaking hands.

Me: Fine. I'll do it. Bring your friend to Dad's tomorrow at 7 for dinner.

Three dots appear immediately.

Ashton: You sure?

Me: No choice now. I just told Dad I've been dating him.

Ashton: Wait, what?

Me: Just make it happen. And Ash?

Ashton: Yeah?

I stare at my phone, reality sinking in.

Me: What's his name?

Ashton: Ken Branch

Me: Great. Tell Ken Branch to be ready at 6:30. And... tell him to shower.

I slide down the wall, letting my head fall back. Ken Branch. I don't even know what he looks like. For all I know, he could be another Trevor waiting to happen.

My phone buzzes.

Ashton: He'll be there. Clean and everything.

Let's see how comfortable Dad feels when his precious hockey player turns out to be just as intense about my dreams as I am. Even if I have to coach him every step of the way. Fake it. Script the whole damn thing. Games have winners. I don't lose.

Me: Ashton, one more thing.

Ashton: What now?

Me: If this blows up in my face, I'm taking you down with me.

Ashton: Wouldn't expect anything less, sis.

One week to prove Dad wrong—to save my projects, my team, my future.

One week to pretend to be in love with a man I've never met.

What could possibly go wrong?

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:24 am*

Ken

The Carmichael mansion looms ahead, all stone and columns and old money. The kind of place that used to make me feel small. Back when I cleaned rich people's pools or danced for their bored wives.

I park my old black Camaro between a Bentley and a Lambo. Classic cars. The type bought with inheritance, not hard work.

Why did I agree to this?

But I know why. Because Ashton's different. He's never looked down on me, never cared that I grew up eating ramen while he had a personal chef. He's just... Ashton. My linemate. My friend.

And now I'm pretending to date his sister.

A sleek Aston Martin pulls into the circular drive just as I'm getting out. The car door opens, and a female figure steps out with a fluid grace that makes my breath catch. Leather jacket, tight black pants, spiky hair. Even in shadow, she's smoking hot.

Please let that be Ashton's sister.

Then she walks into the light .

And my whole world stops.

"You!" we say at once, her green eyes wide.

"Princess." The old nickname slips out before I can stop it.

"No." She backs up a step. "No fucking way."

"Small world, huh?"

"You're Ashton's teammate?" Her voice rises. "You're the intellectual he promised?"

"Disappointed?" I can't help the edge in my voice. "The woman who left cash on my nightstand like I was a cheap hooker."

"Weren't you?"

The words hit like a body check, but I force a smile. "Careful, Princess. Your fake boyfriend might not appreciate that attitude."

"Don't call me that." She runs a hand through her short, spiky hair. "And you can't be my fake anything. This is... this is insane."

"Yeah? Tell that to your brother. The one who doesn't know about our... previous encounter."

Her eyes narrow. "Are you blackmailing me?"

"Wouldn't dream of it, Princess. Though I do still have that envelope. Should I frame it?"

"I'll double it if you walk away right now."

"You sure? Because you need a date. I promised Ashton. And neither of us wants him to know about that night."

"Because it would ruin your tough guy image? The stripper thing?"

"Exotic dancer," I correct, enjoying how it makes her flinch. "And no. Because Ashton's my friend. He trusted me with his sister's reputation."

She laughs, but there's no humor in it. "My reputation? That's rich, coming from someone who—"

"Who what? Worked his way through college? Did what he had to do to survive?" I step closer, close enough to smell her perfume. "Not all of us had trust funds, Princess."

Something flickers in her eyes. Guilt? "I didn't—"

"Know? Care? Does it matter?" I shrug. "Ancient history now. But we're stuck with each other for the next week, so maybe dial down the judgment."

"I can't do this." She shakes her head. "I'll tell Dad something came up, that you—"

"That I what? Turned out to be a stripper? Good luck explaining how you know that."

"Exotic dancer," she mimics. I almost smile.

Despite everything, I almost smile. She's quick, I'll give her that.

"Look," I say, "it's one week. We pretend, we smile, we convince Daddy you're not destined to die alone. Then we never see each other again."

"You make it sound so simple."

"It is simple. Unless..." I let my gaze travel down her body, remembering how she felt under me that night. "You don't trust yourself around me?"

Her eyes flash. "Trust myself? With what? Your sparkling personality?"

"You seemed to enjoy my personality just fine that night. And other 'assets' too."

"I was drunk."

"Not that drunk."

She opens her mouth to reply, but footsteps crunch on gravel. We both turn to see Ashton walking toward us, grinning.

"Hey! You've met already?"

I catch Bree's eye, see the panic there. "Yup. We've met all right."

"Great!" Ashton claps me on the shoulder. "Then this won't be awkward at all."

Not at all.

"Shall we?" I offer Bree my arm, the perfect gentleman .

She stares at it like it might bite her. "This is the worst idea of my life."

"The second worst of mine."

She glares at me but takes my arm. "It's too fucking late now anyway."



As we walk toward the house, I lean down to whisper in her ear. "By the way, Princess? I did shower in advance this time."

Her grip bites through my jacket, and all I can think about is those same hands wrapped tight around my cock while she sucks me off, eyes locked on mine.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:24 am*

Bree

She air-kisses both my cheeks, her attention never wavering from him. "And this must be the hockey player we've heard absolutely nothing about."

Her perfume hits like a chemical weapon. I resist the urge to calculate its toxicity levels.

"Ken Branch." He takes her manicured hand with just the right amount of deference. "Thank you for having me."

"Oh, the pleasure is all mine." Melissa practically purrs. "I simply adore hockey players. So... physical."

Dad appears behind her, his silver hair perfect as always. "Branch? The rookie who's been lighting up the scoreboard with my son?"

"Yes, sir." Ken's smile is perfect—confident but not cocky. "Though Ashton makes me look good."

"Nonsense. That goal against Pittsburgh? Pure genius."

And they're off, diving into hockey talk that might as well be Klingon. I watch, fascinated despite myself, as Ken works the room. He's... good at this. Too good. Every gesture calculated, every response measured.

Like he knows exactly how to play to his audience.

"Drink?" Melissa offers, already signaling the staff. "We have an excellent Bordeaux—"

"Just water for now," Ken says. "Game tomorrow."

Dad's approval radiates like nuclear fusion. "Discipline. I like that."

Melissa leans in, her voice syrupy-sweet. "Speaking of discipline," she purrs, "you must tell us how you met Brianna. She's been so... secretive."

What does discipline have to do with how we met? Only in Melissa's head, I guess.

Ken smiles, slow and lethal, and rests a hand on the small of my back. The touch sends electricity up my spine, damn it. "It was a few years ago. I was working in the entertainment industry—just a temporary detour—and she was looking for a very specific kind of... service."

I nearly spit out my wine.

"Not exactly the kind I was offering. But the attraction? Instantaneous. We ended up talking—art, dance, music, life. And though it didn't go anywhere then... well, some impressions are hard to forget. When we ran into each other again, all those feelings she left me with came back—stronger."

My stomach drops .

"She has that effect," Dad says proudly. "Takes after her mother—brilliant and beautiful."

"And balanced," Melissa adds with a sharp smile. "Right, dear?"

Before I can respond, Ken squeezes my waist. "Actually, what impressed me most was her passion for her work. The way she lights up talking about her projects... it's incredible."

Damn, he's good.

"Projects?" Dad's eyes narrow slightly. "You mean the water treatment initiative?"

"Among others." Ken's thumb traces circles on my back. "Though I have to admit, most of it goes over my head. I just know she's making a difference."

The perfect answer. Supportive but not threatening. Admiring but not overwhelming.

Who is this man?

"Dinner is served," the butler announces, saving me from my spiraling thoughts.

Ken pulls out my chair. Of course he does.

"So, Kenneth," Dad starts. "Tell me about your plans. After hockey, I mean."

"Investments, mostly." Ken's voice is casual, but I catch the tension in his shoulders. "Real estate, some tech startups. I believe in diversifying."

More approval radiates from Dad. I want to scream.

"And family?" Melissa probes, leaning forward to showcase her assets. "Surely a handsome man like you wants children?"

Ashton interjects, grinning. "Ken actually loves children, Dad. Let me tell you about his Thursday afternoons..."

Ken shoots him a warning look. "Ash—"

"He spends them at Children's Hospital," Ashton continues, ignoring Ken's discomfort. "He runs this street hockey program in the cancer ward. The nurses say he's the only one who can get Tommy to take his meds."

Something twists in my chest as Ken stares at his plate.

"The kids just need a distraction," he mutters. "It's nothing special."

"Tommy's eight. Terminal. Hadn't smiled in weeks—until Ken showed up with a plastic hockey stick."

I study Ken's profile, seeing something new there. Something real.

"To your question, ma'am. Yeah, we definitely want children—someday." Ken's hand finds mine under the table. "When the time is right. When we're both ready."

The 'we' hits like a chemical burn.

"Aww," Melissa says. "Call me Melissa. I'm not that old."

"Of course not. Melissa it is then."

"Well, if we're doing that then call me Ashton," dad says.

"Thank you Ashton. Does that mean I'll need to start calling my friend 'Little Ashton'?"

Dad seems to enjoy the joke.

“Hey!,” says my brother. But my father ignores him. Good thing these two control their locker room banter in front of dad.

"And you're... comfortable with Brianna's career?" Dad asks carefully.

"Why wouldn't I be?" Perfect innocence in Ken's tone. "Her drive, her brilliance... she makes me proud every day, Ashton."

Wine definitely goes down the wrong pipe this time. Ken pats my back, concerned boyfriend mode activated.

"You okay, baby?"

"Fine," I wheeze. "Just... went down wrong."

"Like that time in the lab?" He grins. "When you got so excited about that breakthrough you inhaled your coffee?"

He's making it up, but it sounds real. Sounds like something I'd do.

How does he know me so well already?

"Our Brianna does get... intense about her work," Melissa says, somehow making it sound like a character flaw.

"That's what I admire about her." Ken's voice is soft. "Her intensity, precisely. She doesn't do anything halfway."

Dad's watching us, something shifting in his expression. "No," he says slowly. "She never has."

The rest of dinner passes in a blur of perfect responses and casual touches. Ken navigates every potential landmine with surgical precision. Hockey stories for Dad. Investment talk for Melissa. And for me... these little moments of recognition that feel almost real.

"Coffee in the study?" Dad suggests after dessert.

"Actually," Ken checks his watch, "I should head out. Early practice tomorrow."

"Of course, of course." Dad stands, genuinely disappointed.

As Dad and Ken exchange some final chatter about the Devils' upcoming season, I whisper to Ashton, "Your friend's a better actor than I expected."

"Actor?"

"He had Dad eating out of his hand. The perfect mix of ambition and humility. Talking about investments and family like some kind of—"

"Those aren't acts, Bree." Ashton's voice is quiet. "Ken does invest in real estate. And tech startups. And yeah, he spends every Thursday at that hospital. But that's not why I picked him. I picked him because he's not going to try anything I wouldn't like."

Something twists in my chest. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because you're looking for reasons not to trust him. And I get it—your track record with men sucks. But Ken's different."

"Different how?"

"He's not stupid enough to actually fall for my sister."

The words hit like acid. "Wow, Ashton."

"Bree—"

My dad's voice cuts in. "So, Ken, we'll see you at the anniversary trip? You know, the executive retreat?"

"Wouldn't miss it. Thank you for having me." Ken turns to me. "Walk me out?"

Outside, the night air hits like clarity. We're alone—except for the two silhouettes clearly visible in the bay window, peeking behind the curtains. And Ashton, lurking by the front steps.

"They're watching," Ken murmurs, his voice low and wicked.

"All of them."

He steps into my space, heat rolling off him. His fingers graze my cheek, then trail down to my jaw—slow, deliberate, possessive.

"Then let's give them what they came for, Princess."

His mouth crashes onto mine.

It's not gentle. It's not polite.

It's the kind of kiss that demands attention—makes people whisper, makes women jealous, makes men wonder.

His hand slides to the back of my neck, anchoring me as his tongue teases mine—confident, coaxing. Too confident.



I shouldn't respond. But I do.

My fingers curl into his blazer, gripping tight while the ground tilts beneath me.

The kiss is nothing like our first time. That was all heat and hunger. This... this is a performance. A show for our audience.

But my body doesn't buy it.

It only knows his taste. His heat.

The way his mouth feels like that memory—the one I've touched myself to more times than I'll ever admit.

When he finally pulls back, his lips are slightly parted, eyes hooded and dark. "See you tomorrow, Princess."

I'm left thinking that the worst part isn't that he's good at pretending. The worst part is that I'm starting to wonder if he's pretending at all.

I watch him as he heads to his Camaro, my lips still tingling.

In my car, I grip the steering wheel until my knuckles turn white. Ken's voice echoes in my head: Not all of us had trust funds, Princess.

My phone buzzes.

Dad : He's a good man, Brianna. Don't push this one away.

I close my eyes, remembering the way Ken defended my work. How he touched me like he meant it. How he looked at me when no one was watching—like he saw right

through me.

Maybe that's what terrifies me most.

Another buzz.

Ken : You were right. This was a terrible idea.

Me: Second worst.

Ken: Get some sleep, Princess. Tomorrow's another show.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:24 am*

Ken

"Hey man!"

I'm about to get in my car when Ashton's voice stops me. I turn to face him, already knowing what's coming.

"What the fuck was that kiss?"

"You wanted convincing. Your dad was watching."

"I asked you to pretend, not to maul my sister."

"Dude, you asked me for a favor and I do everything I do right. If you wanted some lame pretender who'd give your lie away, you picked the wrong man."

Ashton's jaw clenches. "Just... keep it professional. I'll be watching."

"Because everyone loves to be micromanaged, right?" I unlock my car. "You should be focusing on prepping me for war, not on being a jealous asshole. Want to help your sister or not?"

"Fine. Tomorrow at Murphy's, 6 PM. We'll go over everything you need to know for the trip."

"Copy that, boss."

Friday morning finds me pulling into the private airstrip, my old Camaro looking decidedly out of place among the luxury vehicles. Through the terminal windows, I can see Matthews holding court with several board members, wearing an Italian suit, clearly tailored to impress Bree's dad.

"Ken!" Mr. Carmichael waves me over. "Come join us."

"In a minute, sir." I spot Bree near the back of the terminal with Clara and Melissa. "Just want to say hello first."

"Ashton, call me Ashton. I'm not that old."

Clara's eyes light up when I approach the group of women. "So you're the famous Ken. Bree's told me everything about you." She winks. "Especially your... impressive knowledge of gravitational physics."

Bree chokes on her coffee.

"All good things, I hope?" I press a kiss to Bree's temple, feeling her stiffen.

"Oh, the best things!" she adds with a wink. "I'm Clara Mitchell, PR Director at Carmichael—Bree and I were lab partners in college before I switched to the dark side of corporate. I'm her friend, co-worker and voice of reason. Sometimes."

"Nice to meet you, Clara."

The flight attendant announces boarding, and we file onto the private jet. Matthews immediately claims the seat next to Mr. Carmichael, launching into what sounds like a rehearsed speech about quarterly projections.

I settle across the aisle, close enough to hear Matthews tearing into R&D's "wasteful"

spending. When he suggests cutting the water treatment program, Bree's shoulders tighten several rows up.

"Actually," I cut in, "I've been reading about that project."

Matthews looks at me like I crawled out of the cargo hold. "Have you now?"

"The ROI's strong—especially with the tax credits from environmental initiatives. Add the PR boost from helping veteran communities? It's marketing gold. And, you know, basic decency."

He sneers. "Didn't know you were a chemical engineer."

"I'm not. But I understand numbers." I hold up my phone. "Lead levels are off the charts. This is what Carmichael was built for."

Mr. Carmichael leans forward. "You've researched this?"

"Just doing my homework, Ashton. When Bree talks about her work, I listen. Like she does for mine."

Matthews tries to pivot, but I can tell I've won this round. And maybe bought Bree's project some time.

The rest of the flight, he keeps trying to make me look dumb. But Ashton Jr. didn't just brief me on family dynamics—he made sure I knew the business.

When we land, Mr. Carmichael invites me to join their tennis match tomorrow morning.

"Love to," I say, "but Bree and I have plans to play golf."

"Golf?" He blinks. "Bree plays?"

"Oh yeah, she's been taking lessons. Knows it's useful for informal meetings with investors." I smile. "She works hard at everything she does."

His approval is palpable. Matthews looks like he's swallowed something sour.

"Now if you'll excuse me," I stand, "I should check on Bree."

I find her in the back of the plane, pretending to read something on her tablet.

"Your father's impressed," I say quietly.

"With your performance?" Her voice is acid. "Yeah, you're really earning that Oscar."

"With you, actually. The golf lessons thing? Shows initiative."

She glances up. "There are no golf lessons."

"I know. But tomorrow morning, while they're playing tennis, we'll find a quiet spot on the course to... relax. They'll never know what kind of game we're actually playing."

Her cheeks flush. "And when my father asks about our game?"

"Leave that to me." I wink. "I'll find a caddy who's very good at being discreet."

She studies me for a long moment. "Why are you doing this?"

"Doing what?"

"Helping me. With Matthews, with Dad. You could just coast through this all-inclusive vacation, but instead..."

"Maybe I don't like seeing good work dismissed by assholes in expensive suits that think they're better because they have money."

"Or maybe you're just that good at pretending to care."

I lean closer, close enough to smell her perfume. "Keep telling yourself that, Princess."

Her breath catches, but before she can respond, the plane begins its descent.

Welcome to the Hamptons, where nothing is what it seems .

And I'm starting to wonder if that includes whatever's happening between me and Bree.

Because the way she looked at me when I defended her project?

That wasn't pretend at all.

And that's a real fucking problem.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:24 am*

Bree

"You take the bed," Ken says when we step into the suite my father assigned us. "I'll take the couch."

I glance around the room, familiar from childhood summers—but I still feel a little floored. Floor-to-ceiling windows. Private balcony. A massive king-size bed and a sleek leather sofa that screams do not touch more than comfort.

Ken lets out a low whistle. "This is what he gives the fake boyfriend? Damn. If this is hospitality, I'd hate to see what guilt buys."

"Don't be ridiculous. That couch is too small for you."

"I've slept in worse places."

The casual comment hits harder than it should. I remember what Ashton said about Ken working his way through college. About surviving.

"Look," I say, "we're both adults. The bed's big enough to share."

His eyes darken. "Bad idea, Princess."

"Why? Afraid you can't keep your hands to yourself?"

"More like afraid you can't. "



Before I can respond, my phone buzzes. "Cocktails on the beach in thirty minutes," I read.

Ken grabs his bag. "I'll change in the bathroom."

I watch him disappear behind the door, trying not to remember how he looked without clothes. Trying even harder not to think about sharing a bed with him tonight.

Because we will.

The beach party is in full swing when we arrive. String lights twinkle overhead, and the ocean provides perfect background music. Board members, executives and their spouses cluster around elegant tables, while servers weave through with champagne and hors d'oeuvres.

I expect Ken to stick close, hiding behind my social connections.

Instead, he works the crowd like a pro, laughing with the men, charming the women.

He doesn't talk shop—he listens, jokes, teases. Whatever men talk about when they're flexing in business-casual.

And they're eating it up. Even Ashton claps him on the back with an approving grin, like I'm not the only one who underestimated his friend.

Every few minutes, though, his eyes find mine across the party.

Each look feels like a touch.

"He's good," Clara appears at my elbow with two glasses of champagne. "Almost too good."

"What do you mean?"

"The way he keeps checking on you without hovering. The casual touches that look natural but are perfectly timed for maximum impact. The stories about you that sound completely real."

I accept one of the glasses. "He's just playing his part. "

"Is he? Because I just watched him shut down Matthews' attempt to undermine your project. Again."

I follow her gaze to where Ken stands with a group of board members. Matthews is there, clearly agitated, while Ken looks perfectly calm.

"What happened?"

"Matthews-Monkey tried to suggest your water treatment program was too risky. Ken asked him to explain exactly which chemical compounds he was worried about. In front of everyone."

"And?"

"And Matthews couldn't name a single one. Ken then went into this detailed explanation of how the system works, complete with safety protocols and FDA guidelines. It was..." She fans herself. "Kind of hot, actually."

"He must have memorized it."

"Or maybe he actually gives a damn about your work. And about you." Clara sips her champagne. "Unlike my lottery tickets that don't give a damn about me. Twenty bucks a week, and still no private island." She pats her purse where I know tonight's

ticket is tucked away.

Before I can answer, Ken appears with a plate of appetizers. "You should eat something," he says, offering me what looks like a fancy crab cake. "You skipped lunch on the plane."

I start to reach for it, but he holds it to my lips instead. The intimate gesture makes my pulse spike, especially when his thumb brushes my lower lip.

"How thoughtful," Mrs. Patterson coos from nearby. "What a catch you have there, Bree."

Ken's eyes never leave mine as I take the bite. "I'm the lucky one," he says, and for a moment, I almost believe him.

Later, as the party winds down, Ken finds me near the water's edge.

"Ready to head up? "

I nod, suddenly very aware that we'll be sharing a room. Sharing a bed.

The walk back to the house is quiet. Tension hums between us—strange and electric and unspeakably loaded. In our suite, Ken grabs sleep clothes from his bag.

"I'll change in the bathroom."

When he emerges in blue sleep pants and a gray worn t-shirt, I'm already in bed, wearing the burgundy silk gown I definitely didn't pack specifically for this trip.

He slides in beside me, keeping carefully to his side. "Goodnight, Princess."

"That's it?"

"What else were you expecting?"

"I don't know. Maybe some discussion of how you suddenly became an expert in toxic chemicals?"

He rolls to face me, and in the dim light, his eyes are serious. "I told you, I do my homework."

"Why?"

"Because this matters to you."

"But why does that matter to you?"

He's quiet for a long moment. "I told you. Maybe I'm tired of watching assholes like Vince Matthews win. Maybe because I believe in your project. Or because I see that you deserve the position and people deserve corporate CEOs like you. Maybe I like you—you know I don't, but maybe I do."

"We should sleep."

"Right. Sleep." He rolls away, putting careful distance between us. "Goodnight, Princess."

"Goodnight."

But sleep doesn't come. Not with the memory of his hands on my skin. Not with the heat of him just inches away .

Not with the terrifying realization that maybe none of this is pretend anymore.

My phone buzzes on the nightstand.

Clara : Just saw Matthews-Monkey cornering your father after the party. Something about "concerns" regarding the water treatment project.

Ken's voice comes through the darkness. "Everything okay?"

"Matthews is making his move."

The bed shifts as he rolls to face me again. "Then we'll stop him."

"We?"

"Yes, we." His hand finds mine under the covers. "You're not in this alone anymore, Princess."

And that's when I kiss him.

My mouth's on his—hot, insistent, and not even a little polite. I kiss him like I'm starving. Like I just realized I've been pretending for days and I can't do it for one second longer.

And he kisses me the same way.

I clutch his shirt, yanking him closer until his body presses fully against mine, heat and muscle and barely contained control. He groans into my mouth, one hand sliding down my side, gripping my hip through the silk.

"Fuck," he whispers, pulling back just enough to look at me. "Say the word and I'll

stop."

I drag him back to me. "Don't you dare."

Our mouths crash again, messy and hungry. His hands roam over my body like he's been memorizing it in his dreams. When he cups my breast through the silk, his thumb brushing over the nipple, I arch into him with a gasp.

"Jesus, Bree. "

He peels the gown up slowly, reverently, as if unwrapping something sacred. When I lift my hips to help him, he groans and presses a kiss to my stomach, then lower.

"You're soaked, baby."

I don't respond. I can't. His mouth is already on me, his tongue teasing, tasting, driving me to the edge in seconds. I fist the sheets, biting back a cry as he sucks gently on my clit, fingers stroking inside me with devastating precision.

When I come, it's like my body splinters apart. Heat crashes through me in waves, my legs trembling against his shoulders. He doesn't stop until I'm gasping and pushing weakly at his head.

Then he climbs up my body, kissing me again with the taste of me on his tongue.

"Still think this is pretend?" he growls against my lips.

"Shut up and fuck me, Ken."

His eyes flash. "I was hoping you'd say that."

He strips quickly, and my breath catches. "God, he's gorgeous. Broad chest, abs, and that cock—thick, long, already hard. I bite my lip.

"Eyes up here, baby."

He kneels between my legs, sheathing himself with practiced ease, then presses the head of his cock against me.

"Ken. Please."

He thrusts in, slow and deep, stretching me until I gasp. We both freeze, eyes locked, the air between us electric.

"Fuck," he mutters. "You feel like heaven."

Then he starts to move, rolling his hips with fluid, perfect control. Every stroke hits deep, his pelvis grinding against my clit just right. I wrap my legs around him, dragging him closer, needing more.

"God, yes... ju st like that..."

His hands grip my hips, pulling me onto his cock with each thrust. Our rhythm builds, frantic and raw, sweat slicking our bodies together. He buries his face in my neck, biting gently as I claw at his back.

"I'm not going to last," he pants. "You feel too fucking good."

"Come with me," I gasp. "Ken, I'm—"

Pleasure rips through me again, harder this time. I cry out his name as I shatter beneath him, muscles clenching around his cock. He groans, hips jerking as he comes

deep inside me, holding me tight like he never wants to let go.

For a long moment, we just lie there. Breathless. Tangled. Silent.

Eventually, he rolls to his side, pulling me with him. His hand finds my waist. My head finds his chest.

No words. Just warmth.

And for the first time in a very long time, I don't feel alone.

Not even a little.



## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:24 am*

Ken

The Hamptons morning sun fills our suite as I watch Bree get ready for sailing. She's humming while she applies sunscreen, still glowing from last night. My body stirs at the memory—her taste, her sounds, the way she came apart in my arms.

"You're staring," she says, catching my eye in the mirror.

"Can't help it." I move behind her, pressing a kiss to her neck. "You're beautiful in the morning."

She leans back against me, fitting perfectly. "Last night was..."

"Yeah." I turn her to face me. "It was."

Her fingers trace my chest, and I capture her hand, bringing it to my lips. This feels dangerous—too real, too right.

"Ken." Her voice is soft. "I've been thinking."

"Dangerous habit."

"This is working, isn't it? Us? The way you handle Matthews, how Dad respects you..."

"It's working. "

“We are a great team.”

“Happy you feel the same way I do.” I study her face, trying to read where this is going.

“I guess I do. I’ve realized you’re just what I needed. So... what if...” She takes a breath. "What if we didn't stop?"

"Stop what?"

"This. Us." She steps back, reaching for her purse. "I talked to the board's compensation committee yesterday."

My stomach drops. "About?"

"A special consulting contract." She pulls out an envelope and hands it to me.

"One hundred thousand per month, plus benefits. Here’s the first check.

The official version would be that we're hiring you for PR to the company, but you and I would know it's really a contract for you to keep being my ‘partner.’”

The room goes silent except for the distant sound of waves.

“I see.”

“That would be another little secret just between you and me."

“And by benefits you mean you’d keep sleeping with me?”

“Well, I haven’t heard you complain about that.”

I stare at the envelope, remembering another one just like it, left on my nightstand three years ago.

"Wow. That's generous." My voice is cold now. "Better than the five hundred. I guess this means I've been promoted."

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:24 am*

Bree

"But as I think about it," Ken says, voice calm but cutting, "you're not really promoting me. You're reversing roles. I'm not the whore anymore. Now it's you."

The words slice through the morning light like a scalpel.

For a second, I can't breathe. "Why would I be a whore?"

He looks at me like I'm the stupidest smart person alive. "Because whores get paid to fuck someone. That's what you think I did, right? Slept with you hoping for a payday? Well now you'll be fucking a man—me—so you can collect juicy paychecks from your dad."

I clutch the envelope like it might defend me, like it can explain the stupid, desperate thing I just did. But all I can do is stare at him—shirtless, furious, beautiful—and watch everything fall apart.

"I didn't mean it like that."

He lets out a soft, bitter laugh. "No? Then how did you mean it, Princess? A loyalty bonus? Or just pre-paying for the next time I make you come? "

"Ken—"

"You're offering to pay me. Tell me, how is that different from what you believed I used to do?"

"Because I—" I stop, horrified at what I almost said.

"Because you what? Appreciate me?" He steps closer, heat rolling off him. "Or because you think throwing money at something makes it real?"

"That's not fair."

"And you're just learning that now, Princess? At least when I danced, I knew what I was selling. My body, my time, my pride sometimes. But never my self-respect."

"And this affects your self-respect how?"

"Because I actually started to care." The words explode out of him. "Because last night meant something. Because I thought maybe you were seeing me as more than just some stripper you could throw money at."

My heart cracks. "Ken—"

"But I was wrong. Once a whore, always a whore, right? And everyone is a whore—just with a different price tag. That's how you rich people think."

"That's not—"

"True? Then why offer me money the morning after we sleep together? Again?"

The parallel hits me like a chemical burn. Three years ago, I left cash on his nightstand because I thought that's what he wanted. Now I'm doing it again, just with more zeros.

"So tell me, Ms. Righteous—just because I was a pole dancer and you were whatever it is you were at the time—I'm a whore and you're not? Because if I remember right,

we both were in that bed. And you kissed me first. And I paid for your drink. Oh, I remember everything, not just your moans.”

"Stop! "

"You know what's funny? Last night, when you were under me, crying out my name, begging me to make you come... I actually thought we were more than our past. Than stripper and client. Than rich and not rich."

Each word cuts deeper than the last.

"We are," I whisper.

"Are we? Because from where I'm standing, nothing's changed. You still think you can buy whatever you want. And I'm still just a sack of flesh to be purchased."

"Ken, please—"

"The only difference between then and now is that back then I knew what it was. Last night? I let myself believe..."

He stops, running a hand through his hair.

"Believe what?"

"Doesn't matter." He starts gathering his clothes. "What matters is I was wrong."

"Where are you going?"

"To find another room. I'll keep playing my part this weekend—for Ashton, not you. But after that? I never—ever—want to see you again."

He pulls on his shirt, and I watch helplessly as he moves toward the door.

"Ken, wait—"

"You know what's ironic?" He pauses, hand on the doorknob. "I spent years doing whatever it took to survive. Cleaning sewers. Working security at a morgue. Taking my clothes off for strangers. And not once—not once—did I feel as cheap as I do right now."

The door closes behind him with a soft click.

I sink onto the bed, still clutching the envelope.

The bed where last night he held me like I was precious. Where he whispered my name like a prayer. Where he made me believe—for one stupid night—that love wasn't just another transaction..

My phone buzzes.

Clara : Sailing starts in 30. Where are you?

I stare at the message through blurring eyes. Right. The show must go on.

I head to the bathroom to fix my makeup, to hide the evidence of what just happened. In the mirror, I see what Ken saw—a woman so afraid of being used for her money that she tried to buy the one man who might actually care about her.

Another buzz.

Ashton : Ken just asked to stay with me tonight. What did you do? Did he try to touch you?

I don't answer.

What would I even say?

That I handed his best friend his worst fear on company letterhead?

The envelope with the check sits on the bed like evidence of my crime. I pick it up, ready to tear it to pieces, but stop.

Because destroying it won't undo what I did.

Won't erase the look in his eyes.

Won't change the fact that I just ruined everything .

My phone has been buzzing nonstop, but I haven't moved from the bed. Eventually, I force myself to answer the only person who won't judge me.

Me : Not feeling well. Skip sailing for me.

Clara : Girl, your dad will flip.

Me : Don't care. Need sleep.

Clara : Ken didn't let you sleep last night, huh? ??????

Me : We had a fight. He left.

Clara : That's it. So we're not going sailing. Coming over. Have tissues and mini bar ready.



Ten minutes later, Clara bursts in, arms full of contraband. "I raided the kitchen. Ice cream, chocolate, and those weird European cookies you stress-eat. "

"I don't stress-eat European cookies."

"Sure. That's why there were crumbs all over your lab coat after Matthews killed your sustainable agriculture program." She drops everything on the bed. "Spill."

I tell her everything. The perfect night. The morning after. The check. His face when he realized what I was offering.

"Holy explosion, Batman." Clara whistles. "You really offered him money to keep dating you?"

"It seemed logical at the time."

"Logical? Sister, you tried to put your boyfriend on payroll."

"He's not my boyfriend."

"No? Then why are you curled up in bed looking like someone cancelled Christmas?"

I throw a pillow at her. "I'm not—"

"Save it. I've known you since freshman year. This isn't your 'Trevor was a gold-digger' face. This is your 'I actually care and I screwed up' face."

"I don't have faces."

"You have an entire periodic table of faces. And right now? You're showing all the reactive elements at once." Clara opens the cookies. "So let's break this down like a

lab report. What's really eating you?"

"Besides the fact that I just lost the best man I've ever—"

"Nope. Deeper. Why did you offer him money?"

"Because..." I grab a cookie. "Because it made sense. He's good at this. The board respects him, Dad loves him—"

"And?"

"And what?"

"And you're falling for him."

I nearly choke. "I'm not—"

"Please. I saw you two at the beach party. The way you looked at him when he defended your water treatment project? Pure chemistry."

"That was acting."

"Was it? Because I've seen you act interested in men before. This was different." She steals my cookie. "You know what I think?"

"I'm afraid to ask."

"I think you offered him money because you're terrified he might actually care about you."

"That's ridiculous."

"Is it? Think about it. Trevor wanted your money. Every guy before him wanted your money. Even your dad—"

"Leave my dad out of this."

"Why? He's the one who taught you that love and money are the same thing."

I sit up. "He did not—"

"Melissa."

One word. But it hits like a bomb.

"That's different," I whisper.

"Is it? He bought himself a trophy wife after your mom died. And now he's trying to buy you a traditional future with his company presidency as bait."

"Clara—"

"And you know what's really messed up? You hate Melissa because she's a gold digger. But this morning, you tried to turn Ken into one."

The truth of it stings. "I didn't mean to."

"No? Then what did you mean to do?"

"I don't know! Keep him? Make sure he stayed? Prove that for once I was in control of—" I stop, horrified.

"Of what?"

"Of when the other shoe drops." The words come out small. "Of when he realizes I'm not worth staying for."

Clara's face softens. "Oh, honey."

"Don't. Just... don't."

"You know what the difference is between Ken and Trevor?"

"Muscles?"

"That too. Think harder. And do not give me private measurements."

"Eww."

"I knew it!"

"You shut up! Okay—that maybe Ken actually has principles?"

"Ken didn't want your money in the first place. Ashton picked him—not because he'd impress your dad with his bank account, but because he knew Ken would treat you right."

I remember Ken's face when he talked about the kids at the hospital. The way he defended my project without being asked. How he made me laugh even when I was trying to hate him.

"And now I've ruined it."

"No, what you did was try to ruin it before he could. Classic Bree move." Clara opens the ice cream. "You know what's really ironic?"

"What?"

"Ken didn't break your heart. He just showed you it was still there."

I stare at her. "When did you get so wise?"

"Please. I've been watching you sabotage potential happiness since college. I'm practically a PhD in Bree-ology." She hands me a spoon. "The question is, what are you going to do about it?"

"Nothing. He made it clear he's done with me."

"No, he made it clear he won't be bought. Different thing entirely."

"What's the difference?"

"The difference is one door is closed forever. The other?" She grins. "Just needs a different key."

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:24 am*

Ken

I crashed on Ashton's couch last night—told him her snoring was too much. He laughed, offered bourbon. Didn't ask questions. That's why he's my brother.

My phone buzzes just past nine, dragging me out of the shallowest excuse for sleep. My neck's wrecked from the couch, and I'm already in a mood before I even check the screen.

Matthews : Ken? Vince Matthews. Got your number from Ashton.

The name makes my jaw clench.

Me: What's up?

Matthews : Tennis match?

Me: Your ass ready to be handed to you?

Matthews : My ass is laughing. Court in 30?

Me: Make it 45. Need to grab my gear .

I end the call, staring at the ceiling for a moment. Maybe hitting something—even just a tennis ball—will help.

The walk to Bree's suite feels longer than it should. I use the keycard, half-hoping

she'll be there, half-dreading it. But the room is empty.

Empty except for the evidence of her morning: discarded ice cream containers on the bed, those weird European cookies she stress-eats scattered across the sheets. Two spoons. Clara's work, probably.

My bag is where I left it, but there's an envelope propped against it. Not the same one. This one doesn't have the company logo, just a plain white envelope. My name in her handwriting.

I shouldn't read it.

I do anyway.

Her perfume hits me as I open it—that subtle mix of flowers and something expensive I could never name. I try not to remember how that scent filled my nose when I kissed her neck last night.

Ken,

I've spent an hour trying to write this. Nothing sounds right. Nothing fixes what I did.

You were right about everything. About me trying to control things with money. About me being no better than the people who treated you like a commodity. About me being terrified of actually feeling something real.

The truth is, I've spent so long protecting myself from men who want my money that I forgot how to recognize someone who just wants me.

What I did was unforgivable. I took everything genuine between us and turned it into a transaction. I became exactly what I hate—someone who thinks love can be bought.

You deserve better. You always did.

I'm sorry.

- B

I should crumple the letter.

I don't.

I fold it carefully, tucking it into my bag.

Then I change into tennis whites.

I catch our reflection in the mirror—or rather, the ghost of it. Her pressed against my chest last night, laughing as I kissed that spot behind her ear that made her shiver.

I grab my racquet, and head for the courts.

I don't let myself think about the way her words made my chest tight.

Don't let myself remember how she looked this morning, soft and happy before I saw that envelope.

Don't let myself wonder if maybe...

No. Kicking assholes' asses first. Feelings later.

Or better yet, never.

I towel off after the match, enjoying how Matthews is still gasping for air, face red as



a lobster.

I bet this asshole's used to people kissing his ass, throwing games to stay in his good graces.

Wrong guess, dickhead.

I played him like a lab rat in a maze—gave him just enough hope to get cocky. By the third set, he could barely lift his racquet, but his ego wouldn't let him quit. Then I crushed him so hard he nearly had a heart attack on the court. Pretty sure his ego's still twitching on the baseline.

"Drink?" he wheezes, trying to sound casual. Like his designer tennis whites aren't soaked through with sweat.

"Pass." I start packing my gear.

"Come on. One cognac. In celebration of a good match."

I eye him. "You lost 6-2, 6-1, 6-0."

"Exactly why I need a drink." He attempts a smile. "And why you deserve one."

Something in his tone makes me curious. "Fine. One drink."

He leads me to the house's private bar—all dark wood and leather, trying too hard to look old money. Matthews moves behind the bar like he owns it, which tells me everything I need to know about him.

"Make yourself comfortable." He pours two cognacs, heavy on the pour. "You know, I've been wanting to talk to you."

"About getting tennis lessons?"

He forces a laugh. "About business, actually. You've impressed a lot of people this weekend."

"Just doing my job." I accept the drink but don't taste it.

"That's exactly what I mean. Your presence, your understanding of the industry, the way you handle yourself..." He leans forward. "Have you ever considered corporate PR?"

I keep my face neutral. "Can't say I have."

"Well, start considering. Because I'm prepared to offer you a position. Two million dollars a year to be the face of Carmichael Chemicals."

The number hangs in the air. Two million. More money than I've ever seen.

"Generous offer." I study my glass. "But I already have a job."

"Hockey?" He waves dismissively. "That's temporary. One bad hit and it's over. This? This is security."

"And what exactly would this job entail?"

"Being our spokesperson. Supporting our initiatives. Using that charm of yours to help modernize our image." His smile turns predatory. "Especially after tomorrow's announcement."

"What announcement?"

"When old man Carmichael names me as his successor."

I take a careful sip of cognac. "Thought that wasn't decided yet."

"Oh, it is. He just doesn't know it yet." Matthews pulls out an envelope. "Which brings me to the timing of this offer."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning I know you and Bree aren't what you seem. My staff notices things. Like separate rooms last night."

I keep my expression bored. "Fascinating surveillance system you've got."

"I also had someone look into your past. Interesting career choices before hockey."

There it is.

"That's not public knowledge."

"Nothing's really private these days. But..." He slides the envelope closer. "Sign this non-disclosure agreement and this contract, and I'll make sure your past stays buried. Carmichael never needs to know about your more... creative employment history."

I pick up the envelope but don't open it. "And if I don't sign?"

"Then tomorrow becomes very uncomfortable for everyone. Especially Bree."

My hand tightens on the glass. "Leave her out of this."

"I'm trying to. Sign the contract, take the money, and this all goes away. You get rich,

I get my spokesperson, and Bree..." He shrugs. "Well, she was never going to end up with someone like you anyway."

I stand, tucking the envelope into my pocket. "I'll have my lawyers review it."

"Of course. But these opportunities? They're time-sensitive."

"These projects you want me to push—does Carmichael know about them?"

Matthews waves dismissively. "The old man's stuck in the past. Once I'm CEO, we'll modernize. Streamline. Maximize profits."

"By cutting the water treatment program?"

"Among others. This company needs fresh blood, new ideas."

"Right." I finish my cognac. "I'll let you know."

"By tomorrow morning," he calls after me. "Clock's ticking."

I walk out without looking back, the envelope heavy in my pocket. Another rich asshole thinking he can buy whatever—whoever—he wants.

Tempting offer, no doubt.

Back in Ashton's suite, I pull out my phone and the envelope.

And try to sleep—knowing I won't.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:24 am*

Bree

The dress feels wrong. Everything feels wrong.

I check my reflection for the hundredth time, but it's not the emerald silk that's the problem. It's the empty bathroom doorway behind me. No Ken hogging the mirror, no terrible dad jokes while he fixes his tie, no playful arguments about counter space.

His side of the closet is bare. Even his scent is gone.

The envelope isn't in the trash—I checked. Twice. Not that it matters. Paper can't fix what I broke.

A knock startles me. Probably Clara with more cookies I won't eat.

But when I open the door, my heart stops.

Ken fills the doorway in a perfectly fitted tux, his glasses catching the light. He looks devastating. And completely untouchable.

"Hi." His voice is carefully neutral.

"Hi." Mine isn't.

"Ready? We should arrive together."

I blink at him. "You're still—"

"I've told you, I don't quit. And I won't leave Ashton hanging." He adjusts his cuffs, a gesture so attractive it hurts. "Shall we?"

The walk to the ballroom is silent. No hand at my back, no whispered jokes, no stolen touches. Just the echo of our footsteps and the weight of everything unsaid.

The ballroom sparkles with old money and new tension. Matthews holds court near the bar, practically glowing with confidence. When he spots us, his smile turns predatory.

"Branch." He raises his glass. "Thought about my offer?"

"Hard pass." Ken's voice could freeze hell.

"What offer?" But Ken's already steering us away.

"Later," he says. "We don't want to miss the speech."

Dad takes the podium, and my stomach clenches. This is it. The moment that decides everything.

Ken is sitting beside me, close but not touching. Last night, he would have held my hand. Would have whispered something ridiculous to make me laugh. Would have been mine .

"As many of you know," Dad begins, "I've been considering retirement."

The room holds its breath. Matthews straightens his tie.

"This decision wasn't easy. We had several excellent candidates."

Matthews shifts in his chair, like he's actually getting ready to move toward the stage. Subtle as a heart attack.

"Vincent Matthews, for example—" Dad gestures, and applause breaks out. Matthews waves, already victorious. "—has shown tremendous drive and business acumen."

My chest tightens. This is it. I've lost everything.

"However," Dad continues, "recent events have made me reconsider many things. Including what this company truly needs."

"My daughter, Brianna—" Dad's eyes find me. "Has shown remarkable vision. Her water treatment initiative, her commitment to innovation while honoring our legacy..."

Ken shifts beside me. Still not touching, but I feel his presence like electricity.

"But more importantly," Dad continues, "she's shown me something I'd forgotten. Something my father taught me long ago, when he started this company."

Matthews' smile starts to slip.

"That success isn't just about profit margins. It's about making a difference. About leaving things better than we found them."

My heart pounds so hard I can barely breathe.

"Which is why I've decided..." Dad pauses, and the silence stretches like crystal about to shatter. "That the next CEO of Carmichael Chemicals will be..."

I grab Ken's hand without thinking. He lets me.

"...me."

Wait. What?

"Because watching Brianna's passion this week, her dedication to what matters—it reminded me why I love this job. Why I'm not ready to leave it."

The room erupts in applause. Matthews looks like he's swallowed poison.

"And while I'm staying on as CEO," Dad continues, "I am creating a new position. Chief Innovation Officer, responsible for the programs that will carry us into the future."

He looks directly at me. "Brianna? Would you join me up here?"

I can't move.

"Go," Ken whispers, and his hand squeezes mine before letting go. "This is yours. "

My legs carry me somehow. The lights are too bright, the applause too loud. Dad hugs me, and for once, I don't care about showing emotion in public.

"The water treatment program?" I whisper.

"Full funding," he murmurs back. "And wait until you see the budget for R&D."

When I turn to face the crowd, my eyes find Ken automatically. He's watching me with something that looks like pride. Like maybe—



But then his expression shutters, and he's moving toward the exit.

No. Not again.

"Excuse me," I tell Dad, already moving. "I need to—"

"Go," he says softly. "Some things matter more than speeches."

I catch Ken in the hallway. "Wait."

He stops but doesn't turn. "Congratulations."

"That's it? You're just leaving?"

"My job's done. You got what you wanted."

"That's not—" I move in front of him. "Look at me."

He does, and the raw hurt in his eyes steals my breath.

"I didn't want the title," I say. "I wanted to make a difference. To show him I was more than just his daughter who needed a husband."

"And now you have."

"But I lost something more important." My voice cracks. "I lost you."

"You never had me." His jaw tightens. "Remember? I was just a transaction."

"No. I mean, yes, that's what I tried to make it, but—"

"But what? "

"But it wasn't true. None of it was true." I step closer. "You weren't for sale. You never were. I just... I got scared."

"Of what?"

"Of feeling something real. Of wanting someone who wanted me, not my money or my name or my company." I force myself to hold his gaze. "Of falling in love with someone I didn't deserve."

He goes very still. "What did you just say?"

"I'm in love with you." The words come out steady despite my racing heart.

His jaw tics. He doesn't move. Doesn't breathe. Just stares like the words sucker-punched him.

"And I know I ruined everything, but I need you to know that what I did—trying to buy you—it wasn't because I thought you were for sale. It was because I was terrified of losing you when you realized I wasn't worth staying for."

His expression doesn't change. "And now?"

"Now I know I was wrong. About everything. About you." I take another step closer. "The way you defended my project. How you make me laugh. How you see me—really see me. The way you play with those kids at the hospital not because it looks good, but because you care."

Still nothing.

"Say something. Please."

"You got your promotion without playing their game," he says finally. "Without compromising who you are."

"Because of you. Because you showed me I was worth more than that."

He reaches into his jacket and pulls out an envelope. For a horrible moment, I think it's my check.

It's not.

"Matthews offered me two million dollars to be his PR guy after he became CEO." He hands me the envelope. "Plus a promise to bury my past. All I had to do was support his 'modernization' plans."

"I can't believe this. I mean—"

"He was going to gut R&D," Ken continues. "Shut down your program. Cut safety protocols to boost profits. He had it all planned."

"Why are you showing me this?"

"Because you deserve to know what you were fighting. And because—" His voice roughens. "Because I need you to understand something."

"What?"

"That night at the club? When you left money on my nightstand?"

"His eyes hold mine. It hurt. But eventually I've understood."

You thought that's what I wanted, what I was.

But this morning? When you tried to buy me again?

" He shakes his head. "That broke something in me.

Because I thought you knew me. The real me. "

"I do. I just forgot for a moment. Because it's easier to believe someone wants your money than to believe they might actually—"

"Want you?" His hand comes up to cup my cheek. "Bree, I've wanted you since that first night. Even after you left. Even after you broke my heart. Even when I was trying to hate you."

My breath catches. "You don't hate me?"

"I tried. But how could I hate the woman who made me believe in something bigger than survival?"

He pauses, gaze locked on mine. "Princess, I've been paid to take my clothes off before, but I've only ever stripped my heart bare for you."

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:24 am*

Ken

Her eyes shine with unshed tears, and something in my chest breaks. I kiss her—soft at first, barely a whisper against her lips. But when she makes that little sound in the back of her throat, my control snaps.

I back her against the hallway wall, one hand tangling in her hair while the other grips her hip. She tastes like champagne and forgiveness, and I can't get enough. Her hands clutch my jacket, and I can feel her trembling.

"Ken," she gasps when I move to her neck. "We should—"

"Our room, yes," I finish.

The walk to our suite is torture.

"I missed you," she whispers. "Even when it was just hours, I—"

I practically drag her to our suite, fumbling with the keycard while she works my bow tie loose. The moment the door clicks shut, I have her against it.

"Wait," she pants as I start unzipping her dress. "I need to tell you—"

I silence her with another kiss, pouring everything I can't say into it. How she terrifies me. How she completes me. How I never want to go another hour without her.

"Tell me later." I drop to my knees, sliding the silk up her thighs. "Right now, I need to taste you."

Her head falls back against the door. "Ken..."

I press open-mouthed kisses up her inner thigh, breathing in the scent of her arousal. Her lace panties are already soaked, and when I trace her through them with my tongue, her whole body shudders.

"Please," she whimpers.

I hook my fingers in the lace, dragging it down her legs. Then I lift one of her thighs over my shoulder and lick into her, slow and deep.

She cries out, hands fisting in my hair. I take my time, exploring every fold, every sensitive spot I'd memorized that first night. When I suck her clit between my lips, her legs start shaking.

"I can't—" She tugs my hair. "Need you inside me. Please."

I stand, and she attacks my shirt buttons while I kick off my shoes. We leave a trail of formal wear to the bed, and when I finally lay her down, she's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

"You're staring," she says, reaching for me.

"Can't help it." I settle between her thighs, brushing hair from her face. "You're everything."

"Everything?" She traces my jaw. "Even after I—"

I capture her hand, kissing her palm. "Even then. Even now. Always."

When I push into her, we both gasp. She's tight and wet and perfect, and the way she arches beneath me makes my heart stutter.

"Look at me," I command softly.

Her eyes meet mine, dark with desire but also something deeper. Something that makes my chest ache.

"I love you," she whispers, and I almost lose it right there.

Instead, I start moving—slow, deep strokes that make her moan. Her nails dig into my back, urging me closer, deeper. I want to devour her, to mark her, to make her understand that she's mine in ways money could never touch.

"Ken, please..." She wraps her legs around my waist. "Harder."

I pick up the pace, driving into her with controlled power. Her breasts bounce with each thrust, and I capture one nipple in my mouth, sucking hard enough to make her cry out.

"Touch yourself," I growl against her breast. "I want to feel you come around my cock."

Her hand slides between us, fingers circling her clit. The sight nearly undoes me—her pleasure-flushed face, her lips parted, her body taking me deeper with each thrust.

"That's it, Princess. Show me how good I make you feel."

"So good," she pants. "I'm close... don't stop..."

I feel her start to tighten around me, her movements getting desperate. "Come for me, baby. Let me feel it."

She shatters with my name on her lips, her pussy clenching around me in waves. I follow right after, burying myself deep as I come harder than I ever have in my life.

We lie tangled together after, her head on my chest, my fingers tracing patterns on her back. For a long moment, neither of us speaks.

"We should go back," I say finally. "People will notice we're gone."

She burrows closer. "Don't care. This matters more."

"Hey." I tilt her chin up. "Trust me?"

"Yes."

"Then get dressed. We've got one more thing to handle."

She studies my face. "What?"

I kiss her forehead. "Let's just say the night's not over yet."

The ballroom glitters with victory champagne when we return. Bree's hand is warm in mine, fingers intertwined with the kind of certainty that makes my heart race. Golden light spills from the chandeliers, catching the ice sculptures—hockey players mid-shot—until they shimmer like diamonds.

My teammates are scattered around the room, some dancing, others huddled around cocktail tables.



Tuxedos and jewel-toned gowns create an elegant blur that would've felt over-the-top on any other night.

But tonight, with champagne flowing and the glow of our win still pulsing through the room, it all feels right.

Or maybe that's just the aftershock of having Bree in my arms less than an hour ago.

She adjusts the strap of her emerald dress—the same one that had pooled at her feet upstairs. My fingers twitch at the memory. Even now, I can still feel her shaking under me, taste her skin on my tongue.

"You're staring," she whispers, lips curving.

"Can you blame me?"

A blush colors her cheeks, but her eyes sparkle. "Keep looking at me like that and we might need to disappear again."

"Don't tempt me." I tear my gaze away, scanning the crowd. "We need to find Ashton."

Ashton. My teammate. My brother in arms. The man who trusted me to help his sister—not fall in love with her.

"There." Bree points toward the bar.

Ashton stands in a cluster of teammates, champagne in hand, mid-story, probably embellishing a play. His bow tie is crooked, his grin wide and easy.

"Ken?" Bree squeezes my hand. "Maybe we should wait. Let him enjoy the

moment.”

“No.” I lift her hand to my lips. “No more waiting. No more pretending.”

We weave through the crowd. A few people turn to watch us—our clasped hands, the closeness between us. Let them look. After tonight, there’ll be no need for whispers.

Wilson notices first, his brows shooting up before he elbows Peterson, who nearly chokes on his drink. The ripple spreads until Ashton finally spots us.

"There's my dream team!" His voice is upbeat, but there's an edge to it now. "Mission accomplished, huh? Now we can all go back to normal."

The surrounding guys start to drift. Wilson backs away entirely.

"Actually," I say, voice steady, "we need to talk."

"Talk?" Ashton’s smile flattens. He sets his glass down with deliberate care. "What's left to talk about? Dad bought the whole act. Problem solved. Unless..." His gaze drops to our joined hands. "Unless there's something you're not telling me."

The band plays on behind us, but everything feels still. Like we’re suspended in a pocket of air, just the three of us.

"I'm in love with your sister."

The words land like a slap. Simple. Final.

Ashton laughs, sharp and humorless. "Very funny."

"I'm serious." I tighten my grip on Bree's hand. "This started as a favor, but—"

"But nothing." He steps forward, jaw clenched. "This was supposed to be simple. Help Bree out, keep Dad off her back. That was the deal."

"Plans change."

"Not when they involve my sister." His tone drops. "You gave me your word."

"I did. And I meant it when I gave it."

"So what changed?"

"I did." Bree's voice is calm, strong. "We both did."

Ashton scowls. "Stay out of this, Bree."

"Like hell I will." She moves beside me. "This is about me too. More than you know."

His eyes flash. "What does that mean?"

"It means..." She glances at me. I nod. No more secrets. "Ken and I met before. Years ago."

"What? That's not possible."

"At a club," she says. "We had a connection. Spent one night together, but the timing wasn't right."

"You what?" The color drains from his face. "Both of you knew? And neither of you

told me?"

"We didn't recognize each other until right before dinner at Dad's," Bree explains.

"And by then it was too—"

"Too fucking late," I finish.

"So you both let me play matchmaker like a clown?" His voice cracks. "While you were hiding a past?"

"We tried to ignore it," Bree says. "Tried to just do what you asked. But what we have... it's bigger than us."

I face him directly. "If you don't want to be my friend anymore, I'll get it. But I'm not letting her go. Ever."

"So you're choosing her over me?"

"Yes. If that's the choice you're giving me, then yes. And it's final."

Bree steps into his arms, hugging him tight. "Please be happy for me, Ash. You didn't ruin anything. You actually gave me exactly what I needed. You gave me him."

He stands rigid. The tension crackles around us.

Then, finally, his shoulders sag. "It's about you, not me." He hugs her back, then meets my eyes over her shoulder. "But if you hurt her..."

"I won't."

“How can you be so sure?”

The answer is easy. “Because I’ve already tried living without her. Never again.”

His stare lingers. Then something in him shifts—recognition, maybe. Of what this is. Of what she means.

He pulls me into a rough hug. “You better mean that, asshole.”

“Every word.”

Bree laughs and tries to join the hug, but Ashton groans and pulls away.

“Okay, enough with the group hug. I need a drink. And zero details about how this happened.”

“What, you don’t want to hear about—” Bree starts.

“Nope.” He snags two champagne flutes from a passing tray. “Not listening.”

He hands us each a glass and raises his own. “To my sister and my best friend. May you both be very happy and never, ever tell me anything about your sex life.”

“Deal,” I say, grinning at Bree.

She winks over her glass. “No promises.”

He groans. “I’m going to need therapy.”

“Put it on my tab.”

“Oh, you bet your ass I will.” But he’s smiling now, genuine and warm. “Just... be good to each other.”

“Always,” Bree and I say in unison.

He shakes his head and mutters something about rom-coms, heading back to the team. A few guys clap him on the back as he rejoins them.

“Well.” Bree turns to me, eyes bright. “That went better than expected.”

I pull her in close, not caring who’s watching. “Worth coming back to the party?”

“Mmm.” She fingers my bow tie. “But now that we have my brother’s blessing...”

“Back upstairs?”

Her smile goes wicked. “Last one naked buys breakfast.”

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:24 am*

Bree

The VIP suite has a glass wall looking down onto the ice—elevated enough to see the whole rink but close enough to feel every hit and hear every slice of skates.

I glance around at our ‘Heroes Night’ guests: Clara nursing a beer beside me, two vets from my advisory board near the refreshments, and a crew of kids from the oncology ward where Ken volunteers weekly.

Charlie, one of his favorite troublemakers, is pressed against the glass, practically vibrating with excitement.

His hospital liaison stands nearby, smiling.

"So explain this to me again," Clara says as the teams take the ice. "They hit the little black thing with sticks?"

Charlie spins around from his spot at the window. "Want me to explain hockey, Miss Clara? Ken taught me everything!"

"Hit me, professor."

Charlie launches into an enthusiastic explanation, complete with hand gestures. "So there's three periods, and Ken plays forward, which means he scores goals. And when one player gets three goals in one game, that's a hat trick!"

"A hat trick?" Clara smirks at me. "Like Magic Ken making his clothes disappear?"

Now that's a trick I'd throw my hat for—"

"Clara!" I glance at Charlie, but he's already back to watching warmups.

"He did it!" Charlie suddenly shouts, waving frantically. "Ken winked at us! Did you see?"

I saw. Ken always checks our box during warmups, and tonight his smile seems extra confident.

NHL scouts are watching tonight. One good game, and Ken could be out of the minors for good. This game could change everything.

Below the jumbotron flashing "Heroes Night," the Dayton Devils and the visiting L.A. Kings line up for the opening faceoff. Ken and Ashton flank their center, matching intensity in their stance.

"Those are our boys," I tell Clara, who's fanning herself with a flimsy white slip of paper, crinkled at the edges.

"Is that this week's lottery ticket?"

Clara waves it like a fan. "Mega Millions rollover. Two hundred thirty-two fucking million."

I blink. "You and ninety million other dreamers."

"Yeah, well... someone's gotta win." She tucks it back into her purse. "Manifesting my filthy rich era. Anyway, keep going."

"Ken and my brother work together on the first line—"



"Translation: they're the good ones," Charlie pipes in. "The ones who score lots."

The puck drops, and the game explodes into motion. Ken intercepts a pass, drives toward the Kings' zone with that fluid grace that first caught my eye three years ago. But this time he's not dancing around a pole—he's slicing through defenders like they're standing still.

"Damn," one of the veterans—Mike—mutters appreciatively. "Kid's got wheels."

"And other assets," Clara whispers, making me choke on my drink.

The first period is brutal. The Kings came to play dirty, targeting Ken and Ashton with late hits and cheap shots. After one particularly vicious check sends Ken into the boards, I grip my armrest so hard my knuckles go white.

Charlie's nose is pressed to the glass, eyes tracking Ken like he's watching a superhero in real time. "He's okay," he assures me. "Ken's tough. He told me hockey players are like warriors—we both have to be strong when it hurts."

To these kids, every goal he scores is theirs too. Ken doesn't just visit on Thursdays—he brings them along for the ride. Teaches them strategy, shows them post-game footage, breaks down plays like they're training for the big leagues.

So when Ken hits the ice tonight, it's not just for a scout or a stat. It's for them. For every little warrior in that oncology ward who thinks stickhandling through chemo might just be possible if Ken can pull off a hat trick.

My throat tightens.

I can't help but think he'd make a ridiculously good dad. The kind who'd show up every time. The kind who'd make every scar feel like a badge of honor.

Too bad I've never pictured kids in my future.

I shake the thought off like stray confetti. Focus, Bree.

The second period starts with the Devils down 1-0. Ken and Ashton work their magic, setting up plays that have the Kings scrambling. Five minutes in, it happens—Ken steals the puck at center ice, passes to Ashton, gets it back through two defenders, and rifles it top corner.

The arena erupts. Jimmy jumps up and down. "That's one! Two more for a hat trick!"

"Speaking of tricks," Clara starts, but I elbow her before she can finish.

With two minutes left in the second, Ken strikes again—a beautiful solo effort, deking past their star defenseman before sliding it five-hole. 2–1, Devils.

"Did you see that move?" Annie demonstrates with her hands. "He went whoosh and then zoom and then—"

"Goal!" we all finish with her, laughing.

"Wait, what did I miss?" Clara looks up from her phone.

"Seriously? How did you miss that goal?"

"Sorry, I was checking my lottery app."

"Anything good?"

"Nah. Another losing ticket."

“Sorry.”

"Yeah. At this point, I've spent enough on tickets to buy my own hockey team." She eyes the ice appreciatively. "Which, now that I think about it, wouldn't be the worst investment. These hunks are... talented."

"So you're finally appreciating hockey?"

"Hockey maybe. Hockey players?" She fans herself with her phone. "I'd like to own the whole team. For purely professional reasons, of course."

“Of course.”

The third period is war. The Kings get desperate, taking runs at anyone in a Devils jersey. Ken takes another massive hit but gets up grinning, that familiar fire in his eyes. I've seen that look before—usually right before he proves someone wrong about who he really is.

With five minutes left, Ken intercepts a sloppy Kings pass. The crowd rises as he breaks away, just him and the goalie. Time seems to slow as he dekes left, pulls right, and—

The arena explodes.

"H at trick!" Charlie screams, his IV tubes swaying as he jumps. "Just like he promised!"

Clara throws her hands up in celebration. "Holy mother of all things sweaty!"

I watch as Ken takes a final lap around the ice, acknowledging the roaring crowd. He pauses below our box, raising his stick to Charlie.

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:24 am*

Ken

After the final buzzer, the whole arena erupted.

Clara and the kids were ushered upstairs to the VIP lounge while the team hit the showers.

I stayed behind, dodging press and pretending to re-lace my skates.

Bree disappeared with her makeup bag and garment bag in tow—something about “big plans” and needing ten minutes alone.

I showered fast and hard, letting the water clear my head while the rest of the team suited up and left for the Heroes Night Gala .

These post-game events aren’t unusual—every season has a few charity nights where we get to celebrate, drink, and pretend we’re not all walking bruises.

There’s usually a sponsor speech, a PR toast, and a lot of back-patting—which I actually don’t mind.

But tonight, I just needed a minute alone.

"Nice hat trick."

My head snaps up. Bree stands in the doorway—fresh from the hospitality suite, clearly changed and ready for war—or seduction. Probably both. She’s wearing a

black dress that makes my mouth go dry. Her spiky hair is styled to look elegantly messy, and those green eyes burn into mine.

"You shouldn't be in here." But I'm already moving toward her.

"Why?" She closes the door behind her, the click echoing in the steamy space. "Afraid someone will catch us?"

"Everyone's at the gala."

"Exactly."

I reach her in three strides, pressing her against the door. The towel around my waist does nothing to hide how much I want her. She runs her hands over my damp chest, nails scraping lightly against my skin.

"Someone's feeling confident after that win," she whispers, her lips inches from mine.

"Someone's dressed to kill." I trace the neckline of her silky dress. "Did you wear this just to torture me?"

"Maybe." Her hand slides down my abs, stopping at the towel. "Or maybe I wanted to give my hockey star a proper celebration."

The hunger in her eyes makes my cock throb. When she tugs the towel loose, letting it fall to the floor, I can't wait another second.

Her nails dig into my chest as I crush my mouth to hers. She tastes like beer and victory, and when I slide my tongue against hers, she moans into my mouth.

"Been thinking about this all game," I growl, trailing kisses down her neck. My hands

find her ass, squeezing as I lift her. She wraps her legs around my waist, the silk of her dress riding up her thighs.

“Show me.” She grinds against my cock, bare and ready.

I carry her to the massage table, setting her down on the edge. Her dress has ridden up to her hips, revealing black lace that makes me groan. "Wore these for me?"

"Maybe. Or maybe for what's coming next upstairs. "

"Liar." I push her thighs apart, running my fingers over the damp lace. "You're soaked, baby. Been thinking about my cock all night?"

Her only answer is to arch into my touch as I push the lace aside. I drop to my knees, spreading her thighs wider. She's dripping wet, her pussy glistening in the locker room light.

“Careful,” she murmurs. “We can’t leave behind evidence for a forensics team,” she gasps as I lick a slow stripe up her slit.

“No promises, ma’am.” I circle her clit with my tongue, teasing until she's squirming. Two fingers slide inside her easily, and I curl them just right, making her cry out. Her thighs start trembling as I suck her clit, working my fingers deeper.

"Please," she pants, one hand fisting in my hair. "Make me come."

I increase the pressure, fucking her with my fingers while my tongue works her clit. Her pussy clenches around my fingers as she comes, back arching off the table.

Before she can recover, I stand and line my cock up with her entrance. "Ready for more?"

"Yes," she moans, pulling me closer. "Give me that thick cock."

I push into her slowly, groaning at how tight and wet she feels. Her nails dig into my shoulders as I bottom out, filling her completely.

"So fucking deep," she pants, wrapping her legs around my waist.

I start moving, each thrust making her breasts bounce in that silk dress. The table creaks beneath us as I pick up the pace, driving into her harder.

"Look at me," I command, gripping her hips. "Watch me fuck you."

Her eyes lock with mine, dark with desire. I reach between us to rub her clit, feeling her pussy squeeze around my cock.

"Harder," she demands. "Make me feel it tomorrow."

I pull out suddenly, making her whimper at the loss. Grabbing her hips, I flip her onto her stomach, pushing her dress up to her waist. Her perfect ass is on display, and I give it a sharp slap that makes her moan.

"Like that, Princess?" Another slap, harder this time. Her skin turns pink under my hand.

"Yes," she gasps. "More."

I slam back into her, gripping her hips hard enough to bruise. The new angle lets me hit deeper, and she cries out with each thrust. Her pussy grips my cock like she never wants to let go.

"Touch yourself," I growl in her ear, maintaining the punishing rhythm. "I want to

feel you come on my cock."

Her hand slides between her legs, and I can feel her fingers working her clit as I pound into her. The table rocks beneath us, the sound of skin slapping against skin echoing through the locker room.

"Fuck, you feel incredible," I groan, watching my cock disappear into her over and over. Her pussy's so wet I can hear it, and the sight of her fingers working her clit while I fuck her drives me wild.

I grab her hair, pulling her head back gently. "You close, baby?"

"Yes," she pants. "Don't stop. Please don't stop."

I increase the pace, drilling into her with everything I have. Her whole body starts to shake, and I can feel her pussy getting tighter around my cock.

"Come for me," I demand. "Let me feel it."

She screams my name as she comes, her pussy clenching around me in waves. The sight of her coming undone pushes me over the edge, and I thrust deep one final time, my cock pulsing as I fill her.

I collapse over her back, both of us breathing hard. My cock is still buried deep inside her, and neither of us seems eager to move. I press soft kisses along her shoulder, tasting the salt of her skin.

"Turns out the only thing harder than my abs is falling out of love with you, Princess."

"Cocky much?"



"You like it."

"Damn, I do." She sighs, soft and satisfied. "Now we should get cleaned up. The gala..."

"Let them wait." I pull out slowly, turning her to face me. Even with her dress slightly rumpled, she's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. "I'm not done with you yet."

She laughs, pressing a kiss to my chest. "Down, boy. My makeup artist will kill me if I show up looking like I just got fucked in a locker room."

"But you did just get fucked in a locker room."

"And it was amazing." She straightens her dress, running fingers through her spiky hair. "But the next round will have to wait until after the gala. I have plans for you tonight."

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:24 am*

Bree

The arena's event hall glitters with victory champagne and designer dresses. Heroes Night banners hang alongside Carmichael Cares logos, and the space buzzes with an energy that has nothing to do with hockey.

Clara appears at my elbow, champagne in hand. "Ready for this?"

"Almost." I smooth my dress, grateful we had time for quick touch-ups after the locker room. My fingers brush the small box in my clutch, and my heart races. "Where is he?"

"Making his grand entrance with the team." She nods toward the double doors where players in tuxedos file in. "Look at Matthews kissing your dad's ass."

Sure enough, Matthews hovers behind my father, clutching a folder and nodding too enthusiastically.

He wasn't just demoted, but exiled . His new title —'Special Board Liaison'— might sound important, but everyone knows it's code for fetching coffee and getting ignored in emails. He's been stripped of all real authority—not fired, just publicly neutered.

The kind of punishment where no one even bothers to hate you anymore.

Karma wears a name tag and carries a briefing binder, apparently.

Ken enters with Ashton, and my breath catches. The tux fits him perfectly, and those

glasses... God. He catches my eye across the room and winks.

"Earth to Bree." Clara waves her hand in front of my face. "You're drooling."

"I am not." But I can't stop staring as he works the room, charming veterans and board members alike. He high-fives Charlie, the cancer patient from the VIP box, then engages seriously with one of the veterans from my water treatment advisory board.

"Ms. Carmichael?" The event coordinator appears. "We're ready for your speech whenever you'd like."

My hand shakes slightly as I reach for the microphone. This is it. No turning back.

"Ladies and gentlemen." The room quiets. "Welcome to Heroes Night Post-Game Gala."

"Tonight we celebrate many kinds of heroes," I continue. "Our veterans, who sacrificed everything. Our young warriors fighting cancer. And yes, our Dayton Devils, who showed us what teamwork really means."

Ken stands near the front, those green eyes locked on mine. He has no idea what's coming.

"But tonight, I want to talk about a different kind of heroism.

The courage to choose love when it terrifies you.

The bravery to admit when you're wrong." My voice shakes slightly.

"Three years ago, I met a man who challenged everything I thought I knew about

worth and value.

I walked away because I was scared. Because I'd learned to measure everything—and everyone—in dollars and cents. "

The room is dead silent now. Even Matthews has stopped preening.

"I used to think love meant power. Then I met a man who made me feel safe being powerless—just for a minute.

And that changed every thing." I step down from the podium, walking toward Ken.

"He taught me that real strength isn't about control.

It's about trust. About choosing someone who makes you better, who fights for your dreams as hard as you do. "

Ken's expression shifts from confusion to something deeper as I reach him.

"I chose you once," I say, my voice carrying in the quiet room. "I want to do it again, every day, for the rest of my life."

I pull out the ring box, and gasps ripple through the crowd. Ken's eyes widen as I open it, revealing the platinum band engraved with '\$500 well spent.'

"Kenneth Branch," my voice steady now, "will you marry me?"

Ken takes the box from my hand, holding it up for the crowd to see. His smile is blinding.

"She's tried to give me expensive gifts before," he says, grinning at me. "Didn't

always end well." A ripple of laughter rolls through the room. "But this one?" He opens the box again. "This one I'll accept. Because this time, I know it's about love."

Then he reaches into his pocket and pulls out another box—smaller, sleeker. My heart stops.

"As usual, she beat me to it. Except on the ice." He winks. "But I had this ready. Brianna Carmichael..." He drops to one knee, and I cover my mouth to hold back a sob. "Will you wear this ring and let the whole damn world know you're mine?"

"Yes," I whisper, then louder: "Yes. A thousand times yes."

He slides the diamond onto my finger, then stands and pulls me into a kiss that makes the room erupt in cheers. I barely hear them, lost in the feel of his lips on mine, his arms around me.

"I love you," I murmur against his mouth.

"I love you more." He pulls back just enough to meet my eyes, his voice low and just for me. "You tried to buy my body once, and my heart once. But this ring? This means I'm giving you everything—no price tag needed, Princess."

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:24 am*

Ken

One Year Later

Moonlight spills through our bedroom windows, casting silver shadows across Bree's skin. She's wearing one of my old Devils jerseys and nothing else, her spiky hair adorably mussed from our shower.

"Dad was different tonight," she says, curling into my side. "The way he looked at you during dinner... I've never seen him so proud."

I pull her closer, breathing in the scent of her shampoo. "The water treatment program's success helped."

"Mmm. I wonder what he'd think if he knew you used to be a pole dancer."

"He'd probably love me more." I kiss her temple. "Your father appreciates people who work hard and never give up."

"Speaking of ne ver giving up..." She traces the scar on my shoulder from an old hockey injury. "You never told me how you started dancing."

I run my fingers along her spine, remembering. "You know my aunt raised me after my parents died in the crash. But I never told you about the day she caught me crying because I couldn't afford new hockey gear like the other kids."

Bree props herself up on an elbow, watching my face.

"She sat me down and said, 'Kenny, life's going to keep throwing punches.

Your choice is simple: let them knock you down, or learn to dodge and counter.

" I smile at the memory. "That's when she suggested I take that job at the 'dance studio'—said it would build strength for hockey.

Legs, arms... She was right. Everything I did to survive made me stronger for the ice.  
"

"Your aunt sounds amazing."

"She was. Still is." I roll us so she's beneath me. "Now, want to appreciate some of those other skills I learned?"

"Always." But she stops my wandering hands. "Wait. I need to tell you something first."

I pause, studying her face in the moonlight. She looks nervous but determined, those green eyes bright with something I can't quite read.

"I want to have your baby."

The world stops. My heart actually skips a beat.

"What?" I whisper, searching her face. "I thought... didn't you once say you didn't see kids in your future?"

She laughs softly. "That was before you. Before I saw you with Charlie at the hospital, teaching him wrist shots even when he was too weak to stand. Before I watched you build that playground at the veteran housing complex just because their

kids needed somewhere safe to play."

My throat tightens. "Bree..."

"I want it all with you," she continues, her voice thick with emotion. "The midnight feedings, the first steps, the tiny hockey jerseys. I want to see you teach our kid how to skate. I want to watch you be the father you never got to have."

I roll onto my back, pulling her with me so she's straddling my hips. "You're serious?"

"Dead serious." She leans down, pressing a kiss to my chest, right over my thundering heart. "So much so that I quit taking the pill."

My breath catches. "How did you know I'd be on board?"

She smiles. "The same way I know everything I need to know about you—because of the way you look at me."

I laugh, equal parts awe and arousal. "You're a genius."

"A genius who wants to make a family with you. If... if that's what you want too?"

I flip us again, pinning her to the mattress. "If that's what I want? Princess, I've been dreaming about putting a baby in you since the first time I saw you hold Tommy."

Her eyes go dark with desire. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." I kiss down her neck, pushing the jersey up. "Though maybe we should get married first. Before the baby notices we're living in sin."



She laughs, the sound turning into a gasp as I find her breast with my mouth. "We are engaged."

"Mhmm." I swirl my tongue around her nipple. "But I'm thinking we should speed up the timeline. We keep saying we'll plan the wedding after the next campaign... but this might move things up. I want you to be Mrs. Branch before you start showing."

"Mrs. Branch?" She arches into my mouth as I suck harder. "Pretty presumptuous of you."

"Says the woman who proposed to me first." I move to her other breast, loving how her breath hitches. "Besides, you're already wearing my jersey."

My hand slides between her legs, finding her already wet. "So fucking responsive," I growl, circling her clit with my thumb. "Always ready for me."

"Only you," she pants, spreading her legs wider. "Ken, please..."

I push two fingers inside her, curling them just right. Her pussy clenches around them as I work her slowly, deliberately. "Please what?"

"I need you inside me." She pulls at my shoulders. "Need you to fuck a baby into me."

The words make my cock throb. I withdraw my fingers, positioning myself between her thighs. "Say it again."

"I want your baby." Her eyes lock with mine as I push into her. "Want you to fill me up, make me yours completely."

I start moving, each thrust deep and purposeful. She wraps her legs around my waist,

pulling me closer, deeper. The jersey bunches around her waist, and the sight of her wearing my number while I fuck her drives me wild.

"Touch yourself," I command, picking up the pace. "Show me how you want it."

Her fingers find her clit, working in tight circles as I pound into her. Her other hand grips my bicep, nails digging in. "So close..."

"That's it, baby." I can feel her getting tighter around my cock. "Come for me. Let me feel that pussy squeeze my cock while I fill you up."

She comes with my name on her lips, her whole body shaking. The sight of her coming undone pushes me over the edge, and I thrust deep one final time, emptying myself inside her.

I collapse beside her, pulling her close as our breathing returns to normal. She traces lazy patterns on my chest while I play with her hair.

"I love you," I murmur against her temple. "Both of you."

She laughs. "I'm not pregnant yet."

"How do you know? I vote we keep practicing. Just to be sure."

"Mmm." She yawns, curling into my chest. "Give me five minutes."

I pull the covers over us, holding her close. My wife. The mother of my children. The woman who saw past the stripper to the man beneath. Who chose me, fought for me, believed in me.

"Hey babe," I finally say.

“What?”

"Come to think about it—after that performance? Pretty sure Ashton Carmichael IV is already cooking."

She smacks me with a pillow. "HELL, NO."

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:24 am*

Bree

Ken just turned off the light when frantic pounding echoes through our house. The doorbell rings repeatedly, urgent and desperate.

"Who the hell?" I mumble, reaching for my robe. "In this weather?"

The storm outside is pure drama—lightning cracking, wind howling, rain battering the windows.

Ken's already pulling on sweats. "Stay here—"

"Not a chance." I follow him downstairs.

Ken cracks the door—and there she is.

Clara.

Soaked. Breathless. Shaking.

Mascara halfway down her face. Her hair is plastered to her head like a drowned poodle. She looks like she ran through a car wash with attitude.

"Clara?" My heart races. "What's wrong? Are you okay?"

She beams. Absolutely glowing.

“I WON THE FUCKING LOTTERY!”

Ken just blinks . “What?”

She holds up her phone, screen glowing in the darkness, like it’s the Holy Grail. “Six hundred twenty million dollars, Mega Millions rollover. I checked it four times. It’s real.”

I scream. She screams. We both start jumping up and down like idiots.

Ken winces. “My eardrums.”

"Wait!" Clara stops mid-jump. “I need to send a text to your dad.”

"My dad?"

"Yup,"

She types furiously, then smirks.

Clara: I QUIT!

"Clara!" I laugh.

"Hold on, one more." She types again, grinning maniacally.

Clara: S orry-not-sorry. I'm suddenly FILTHY FUCKING RICH!

THE END