



Obsessive Stalker

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Category: Erotic, Romance

Description: Damien Barlowe always gets what he wants. And he wants her.

I've been on the run for a while now. Stealing money from the rich and redistributing it to the poor. Just call me Robin Hood, but subtract the bow and arrow and add a few tattoos.

Kristen comes from the Redding family empire. Born into a life of privilege, but determined to make her own way in business. We crossed paths once before, but she got away. Now I'm back and I'm determined to have her. And I'll give her the world, more than even her wealthy upbringing could provide.

She's made it clear she won't go down without a fight. But I don't intend to fight her. No. Instead, I'll bring her to her knees. Tease her until she's begging for me. Only then, will I finally claim her as mine.

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Page 1

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 7:40 am

Prologue

Flashback: One Month Ago

Kristen

Damien walks in without a word, pulling a metal stool from the table where I'm seated. He clutches a rag in his hand, holding it to his still bleeding nose.

"I'm surprised the table isn't upturned," he mutters as he takes a seat across from me, voice muffled by the rag.

He trains his brilliant green eyes on me. The look is unnerving, the same way it felt before, before I even knew what a dangerous man Damien is.

I had my suspicions, of course. My intuition about people is usually correct.

"How did you know?" he asks me.

"Know what?"

"How did you know to be afraid of me?" he asks. "In the hall earlier. Before you knew who I was."

I straighten, the plastic ties around my wrists digging painfully into the skin as I do so. The way that he's looking at me has me wishing I could cross my arms over my chest, but my hands are bound behind my back, thrusting my chest towards him and

leaving me defenseless. It feels vulnerable and uncomfortable...but there's something else, too.

Something that I shouldn't be feeling in a situation like this.

"You think I was afraid?" I ask calmly. "That's cute. I wasn't afraid. I just knew you were full of shit."

"How?"

"Please. It's not like it was hard. I grew up around money," I say. "Even the wealthiest fund managers don't dress like you. For a casual business conference, no less. Your watch alone is worth at least ten million. And I know your suit is in the four figures. A lowly advisor sent to scope out opportunities because his boss is too busy doesn't dress that way. I figured you were bigger than you let on, a higher up...or you're some kind of criminal here for the wrong reasons. Clearly it's the latter."

Damien tilts his head, his gaze like a hot laser, his broad shoulders shifting beneath his blood-stained oxford shirt as he folds his hands on the table between us, leaning forward.

"What's your name?" he asks.

"You saw our presentation earlier," I snap. "You already know my fucking name."

"Kristen Martinez-Redding," he says, his voice like a caress wrapping the air around me. "Daughter of Martin Redding and granddaughter of the late Louis Redding."

I stare at him.

“I wouldn’t expect a privileged princess like you to need funding for your app,” he muses. “Surely, your dear father can provide everything that you need.”

“I hardly speak to my family,” I reply. “And I certainly don’t ask them for handouts.”

He lifts his chin, an appreciative expression on his face.

“I love a self-made woman,” he says. “One who knows how to fight, too. How did you learn to throw a punch like that?”

“It’s a long story,” I reply. “Cut the binds on my wrists and I’ll give you another demonstration of my technique.”

Damien laughs heartily, standing and pushing the stool back underneath the table. The metal legs drag against the concrete floor, a shrill noise that slices through the quiet.

He walks slowly around the table, every step taking him closer to me until he’s standing directly behind me. He checks the ties around my wrists, adjusting them so that they’re not quite as painfully tight.

I shiver as his hands pull my hair back, smoothing it down with his palms before settling his hands on the tops of my shoulders.

I shouldn’t enjoy the feeling of his hands on me. He’s a bad man. A scary man. But my body defies my brain’s logic, my nipples hardening as his hand glides up my shoulder and to my neck. When his fingers gently grip my throat, my breath becomes shallow. Arousal pools between my legs. I press my thighs together as I squeeze my eyes shut.

I’m not sure whether I want Damien to take his hands off of me...or keep going.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 7:40 am

“You know what I’m going to do with you after this is over?” he asks me, his voice a deep but quiet rumble that sends shivers down my spine.

Without even raising his voice, he’s terrifying.

Chewing my tongue in my mouth, unwilling to give this man even a hint of the fear that I’mverymuch feeling right now, I shake my head.

He leans down so that his face hovers over my shoulder, his hot breath in my ear as he whispers the next words, his lips brushing against my cheek.

“I’m going to take you home with me,” he says.

“No.”

The word exits my lips automatically. Fear and lust combine, making my brain foggy, my body buzzing with need even while my mind is screaming for safety, trying to form a plan of action, some way to get out of this impossible situation.

When he lifts his hands from me, I want to groan in disappointment. Exhaling slowly and opening my eyes, I watch as Damien crosses the room to the door. Before he opens it, he turns to look at me.

Even with his face stained with blood, he’s the most handsome man I’ve ever seen.

“Believe me, pet,” he says with a smile. “Once you see what I have planned for us, you won’t want to say no. I’ll get a yes from you. I wouldn’t touch you otherwise.”

“I hate you.”

I’m not sure why these words spring forward as the retort of choice. There are a dozen other options. Fuck you, for example. Or Please let me go, I promise I won’t tell anyone about the kidnapping if you let me go.

Instead, those three words spill over my lips, hurtled across the room at Damien as though I expect their impact to result in some sort of pain for him.

But of course, it doesn’t. He just smiles, and I can see in his eyes that he feels it, too. The lust. The magnetic pull. The...spark.

All of the things I shouldn’t be feeling, he feels them too.

“Hate me for now,” he replies. “But as you already know, love and hate are two sides of the same coin. I’d rather have you hate me than feel nothing at all. Make no mistake, you belong to me now. Try to escape, and I’ll hunt you down. I don’t mind a game of chase. But trust me kitten...run away from me and I’ll enjoy every second of punishing you for it.”

1

Kristen

I wake up from my dream drenched in sweat. Getting out of bed, I run to the bathroom where I pat myself dry with a towel and pee. Then I wash my hands, splashing some water on my face and looking at myself in the mirror.

The woman staring back at me is someone I hardly recognize. I’m still getting used to my new hair. After bleaching it blonde all my life, the deep auburn color that my mother’s hairdresser applied to my strands earlier this week still feels like it belongs

to a stranger.

The detective assigned to my case thought it would be wise to disguise myself as best as possible. It's been over a month since the kidnapping and I'm still staying in my parent's vacation home, a massive twelve bedroom home right off of Lake Tahoe.

With its beautiful view of the lake, its luxurious bathroom featuring a clawfoot soaking tub, and the large flatscreen television in the living room with access to seemingly every show and movie ever made, the house has everything I could ever need. Which is fortunate, because I'm still not allowed to leave.

Groceries are delivered every Monday. And every Friday night, my mother comes by with burgers and fries from a nearby restaurant. She says she's coming by because she's worried about me, but I know her too well to believe that.

After asking me how I'm feeling and pretending to listen to my answer, she inevitably asks about the day of the kidnapping, pressing me to recount every last detail of my encounter with Damien Barlowe.

Today is no different. I take my time eating the burger even though I'd like to scarf it down; I've never been comfortable eating in front of my mother, who's been fixated on my weight since as long as I can remember. When I was younger she would push diets onto me. I tried everything. Slim Fast shakes were a staple in our home, so much that I can't even think about the chalky brown texture of the low-carb mixture without wanting to gag.

Any time I eat with her, she raises her brows, and I know what she's thinking but won't dare to say to me aloud to me anymore, now that I'm a grown woman.

"Are you sure you want to eat that?"

The sentence echoes between my ears every time I sit down to eat anything especially indulgent. Birthday cake is permanently ruined for me, thanks to the way that she would cut me a very thin slice of it while giving my friends more generous portions. Now a grown woman, I mark my birthdays with apple pie from my favorite bakery instead.

Even though I hardly speak to my mother anymore - especially before the kidnapping - her voice is always with me, as is her critical eye.

I'm surprised she even agrees to bring me burgers, though I see the gesture as another sign that my mother's true reason for being here every week, driving in from the Bay Area when she'd much rather spend her time at the country club, or attending the many Friday night events she's invited to by her circle of wealthy friends.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 7:40 am

Though I chew slowly, eventually I finish the burger as my mother sits at the table, looking down at her phone and pretending she's not waiting for me to finish so that she can finally drill me for information.

"So," she says as I swallow the last bite, pocketing her phone. "I wanted to ask you about Damien."

Damien.

The man who kidnapped me. The same man whose face haunts my nightmares. Only, I'm not sure they're nightmares. Like nightmares, my dreams of this man make me wake up in the middle of the night, heart pounding, drenched in sweat, adrenaline coursing through my veins.

But unlike nightmares, my heart doesn't pound out of my chest with fear. Instead, it pounds with need.

It's always the same. We're back in the basement at the hotel, in that tiny room with the table and chairs. He walks in, those emerald green eyes glowing with a promise of what's to come. He crosses the room, stands behind me, and smooths my hair back like he did in real life. Only instead of his hands going to my shoulders, they go to the buttons of my shirt. Unbuttoning slowly until the shirt slides down my arms. Then those large hands dip beneath the cups of my bra, and...

And then I wake up. Out of breath, body tingling, the space between my thighs wet and hot and aching.

With shame, I usually finish myself, my fingers stroking between my legs as I close my eyes and replay the dream again and again, imagining what would have happened next, if I didn't wake up when I did.

I shouldn't be lusting after the criminal who kidnapped me and threatened my life.

But I am.

"Our investigator was able to trace his location to Brazil this week," she continues.

"What?" I ask, sitting straight up, suddenly feeling very awake and interested in talking to my mother.

She shakes her head and frowns, her sleek white-blonde bob swinging over her shoulders.

"Kristen, you sound almost disappointed," she says. "I thought you'd think this is good news. He's been traveling abroad, while we've been concerned that he's in California searching for you."

"I do think it's good news," I reply quickly.

Do I? Am I sure? Am I sure I haven't actually been hoping that Damien would make good on his promise?

I'm terrified of Damien. But that doesn't seem to matter when it comes to the sexual attraction I felt towards him. It was immediate, from the moment he shook my hand.

There are times when I think it wouldn't be a bad thing if he found me here in Tahoe, taking me away from the pristine lake house. As it always did when I was growing up, the world that my parents carefully constructed for me feels stifling, not to

mention boring. Being kidnapped by Damien was the opposite of that. It brought me alive.

And when his hands touched me...

“Do you have any idea why he’d be in South America?”

I shake my head, lying to my mother once again. I know exactly why he’s in South America. But I promised Vincent, Damien’s old friend and former partner in crime, that I wouldn’t tell. That I’d leave this between him and Damien, allowing their underworld of crime to go undisturbed by law enforcement and my parent’s investigators.

My mom sighs, picking at the sad, wilted, dressing-less salad in front of her.

“I just don’t understand all of this,” she says. “A man kidnaps you and your friend at a business conference, but doesn’t harm you, doesn’t assault you, doesn’t plan to hold you for ransom. Then you escape and, days later, he sends you that threatening text message from a burner phone, promising that ‘this isn’t over’. What isn’t over, Kristen? What could that mean?”

I shrug, avoiding her eyes.

“I don’t know,” I say, refusing to disclose the sexual tension that Damien and I experienced, the flames that rose low in my belly and that I know he felt too.

That there might be a sexual motive for Damien’s interest in me has never crossed my mom’s mind. And I already know why. Because in her world of calorie counting and cardio, fat girls don’t get the guy.

Especially not a guy like Damien.

Kristen

After walkingmy mother through the details of the kidnapping for the hundredth time, she finally leaves.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 7:40 am

Waving her hand merrily as though she and I are the best of friends and not a mother and daughter with a strained relationship who've only been brought together by the circumstances, she climbs into her BMW sedan and speeds around the corner.

The relief I feel is immediate, washing over me like a cool ocean wave. Closing the door and locking it, I walk to the kitchen and fetch the pint of rocky road ice cream that I'd been saving for tonight. Knowing I'd want something comforting after the visit from my mother.

I take the ice cream to my upstairs bedroom, where I change into a pink cotton pajama set before turning out the lights. Settling into my bed in the dark, I grab the television remote, ready to flip through Netflix and find some fluffy romantic comedy to fall asleep to.

“Is there a reason you're concealing information from your own mother?”

I scream, kicking off the blankets while my hand fumbles in the dark towards the nightstand. I open the top drawer. I've got the can of mace in my hand when the intruder's hand circles my wrist, catching it while his other hand pries the mace from my shaking fingers.

“Darling, you know I love the way you fight me,” he says. “But just once, I'd like to have a simple conversation with you, without any weapons involved.”

Damien's deep, rumbling voice and familiar cologne confirm his identity. But even if it didn't, I'd know it's him just by his hands.

They're the hands I memorized on sight, weeks ago. Hands that I can recognize even in the darkness, just by the way that they feel - the long fingers and wide palms, the rough calluses, the dry and comforting warmth that they transfer to my skin as it sizzles beneath the contact.

"Is this all?" he asks with disgust. "Your life is in danger, with the threat still at large, and they left you with a can of mace? You should be armed with a .22 at the very least."

With a hand still around my wrist, he tosses the mace back in the open drawer. I wrestle against him but it's pointless. He overpowers me easily, climbing on top of me in the bed pinning me back against the pillow by the shoulders.

He leans over me to the nightstand beside us and turns the lamp on. Immediately the room is flooded with warm light, casting shadows on his chiseled face, his green eyes alight from the glow.

Seeing him here in the flesh is better than any dream, worse than any nightmare. My body responds to him just as it did before, every nerve ending on fire and crying out for him. His grip on me is tight, powerful, reminding me that Damien is big enough, strong enough, to crush me between his fingers...but I don't feel afraid.

"A .22?" I ask, glaring at him. "Why such a small gun? The one I shot you with was much bigger, and I think I handled it just fine."

"You handled it well," he agrees softly, his eyes growing warm. "I have the scar to prove it."

My eyes wander his torso. Somewhere behind the black tee shirt that hugs his muscular body so well, his skin is marred with the evidence of our last encounter.

“I thought it would have killed you,” I whisper.

“Next time aim higher,” he replies.

“Next time?”

“I’m sure there will be a next time,” he says. “At least one more attempt to kill me, before falling in love with me. If not, I’ll be disappointed. Your fighting spirit is the reason I chose you.”

I shove against him and he releases me, pulling away and standing up. Backing against the headboard, I pull my knees to my chest.

“What the fuck are you talking about? Chose me for what?”

He smiles, wicked flames in those beautiful green eyes.

“What did I tell you before?” he asks. “Did you think I wouldn’t come back for you? That I wouldn’t find you?”

“But you were in Brazil,” I breathe.

Fuck. Why did I say that?

His smile grows.

“Miss me?” he asks. “Yes, I’ve been traveling and wrapping up some business. Had to, before I could come see you. Not to mention heal from the bullet they extracted from my chest. Were you disappointed when I didn’t come for you sooner?”

“No. Of course not.”

The lie is obvious, lingering between us as Damien stares me down, his gaze like an X-ray through the cotton pajamas I'm wearing. I'm conscious of the fact that I'm not wearing a bra, my nipples easily showing through the thin fabric, and the shorts barely cover the bottom of my ass, riding up whenever I move.

Damien is aware of this too. His eyes wander away from my face and travel hungrily down my body.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 7:40 am

I remember his promise from before. That he won't touch me in that way without my permission.

Does he think I'll give permission? And if so...is he right?

My eyes dart to the door and he laughs.

"Kitten, I think you know me well enough by now," he says. "You know I've secured the door. As well as the perimeter of the property. The cop they stationed on the corner is as lazy as he is gullible; it wasn't hard to lure him away. Once again, I'm disappointed in the security measures in place. A single cop. A can of mace. Is there not a man in your life who cares for your safety? Your father, perhaps? Or a boyfriend?"

"My father doesn't give a fuck about me," I reply. "And don't pretend you don't already know I don't have a boyfriend. Like you didn't stalk me and find out."

He laughs.

"So you do know me well," he says, his voice rich and thick like honey. "You have several admirers. But you don't have a boyfriend, that's true. Not that it would matter if you did. Boyfriends can be dealt with."

There's danger laced through every word.

"Your mother doesn't understand why I'm after you," he continues. "She thinks I want your money. Your trust fund. As though I go through all of this trouble to steal

such a small sum.”

He strides around the bed to the other side, and I cower against the pillows. He turns his back to me, taking a framed photo off the wall and looking at it.

“This is the house in East Hampton,” he comments, looking down at the candid shot of me at eight years old, in a pink dress, smiling and holding an ice cream cone. “I admit, one of the reasons for my delay is that I checked that house first. I thought for sure that your parents would hide you there.”

“You went to our house in the Hamptons?” I ask faintly.

He turns to me, his eyes smoldering and dark.

“Why would your father hide you here?” he asks, though it seems to be a question he’s asking himself rather than me. “Here, where you’re secluded. Here, with only a single cop, no security cameras, and nobody around to hear your screams?”

I shiver at the mention of my screams and back away on the bed, the little bit of distance left to get away from him before I fall off the side.

“It’s as though he wants me to capture you,” he says to himself. “I’ve looked at this every way that I can, have watched this home for two weeks, trying to see if there’s some sort of catch, some trap he’s laying. You’re a sitting duck. Wide open for the taking.”

He turns to me.

“You said you don’t speak to your father. Why?”

“It’s a long story,” I reply.

He walks around the bed and sits across from me now. I watch as he turns the picture frame around, opening the back panel and removing the photograph and folding it in half.

Then he tucks the photo in his pocket, tossing the now empty picture frame down on the comforter.

“He hasn’t done much to protect his little girl and I want to know why,” he says.

“Because he doesn’t care,” I say quietly. “I’m a nuisance to him. He wanted a son. Instead, he got only daughters. I’m the youngest, the last baby my mom could have before she had to have an emergency hysterectomy after giving birth to me. Basically, I’m the reason my mother couldn’t have more kids. So not only did I make the mistake of being born a girl, but I also eliminated any possibility of my father having a son.”

Damien stares at me and I can tell he’s listening, thinking hard about my words. Then he reaches a hand to my face, tucking a stray lock of hair behind my ear and then cupping my cheek.

“You should have been protected.”

“Yes. From you,” I agree.

“From any threat that might come your way,” he replies. “I’m not a threat, my dear. But your parents don’t know that. They should have done everything possible to protect you. I shouldn’t have been able to break in so easily. What were they thinking, hiding you in a secluded home with enough bedrooms to ensure you never heard me pick the lock and open the door from the other side of the house?”

My cheeks heat beneath his touch and I can’t seem to break my gaze away from his.

He has this hypnotic hold over me. I'm holding my breath, waiting for whatever he will say next.

“But you'll be protected from now on,” he continues. “My lovely fiancée. And soon, my wife.”

Wife.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 7:40 am

“That’s why you’re here?” I ask. “To steal me away and...and force me to marry you?”

He gives a curt nod, stroking his thumb across my cheek.

“You promised you wouldn’t force yourself on me,” I frown.

“I was referring to sex when I said that,” he says. “I’ll never make you do anything with me that you don’t want to do, sexually. However, I’m more than happy to bend your will when it comes to holy matrimony.”

“Why?”

“Because you belong to me now,” he says simply. “I told you before. I knew it as soon as you put that bullet in me.”

“I’ll do it again,” I vow.

“I look forward to it.”

He leans forward, still cupping my face in his hand, and brushes his lips against mine softly. It’s just a hint, a whisper of a kiss, and I long for more, stifling the moan that wants to escape from my lungs.

When he pulls away, I blink hard, trying but failing to clear the haze of lust that his kiss inspired.

He takes my hand.

“Come, Kristen,” he says, his voice harder than before, more commanding. “We’re leaving this place. Now.”

3

Damien

I should have known. One kiss, one moment shared, doesn’t change the fact that Kristen doesn’t trust me.

My respect for her would lessen if she did. But I can tell that she wants me, that she’s wet for me even just from a single touch of my hand to her face. There are certain things she just can’t hide from me, and her arousal is one of them.

Still, as soon as I take her hand and try to lead her out of the room, she changes in an instant.

“Fuck you, I’m not coming with you!”

She reaches for the cell phone on the nightstand but I grab it before she can, deftly pocketing it in my dark blue jeans before taking her by the wrist and pulling her to me.

I’m too enraptured by her beauty, by the way that her curvy body feels against me, that I don’t notice her other hand reaching behind her, grabbing the empty picture frame from the bed.

She swings it around in one quick, swift motion.

Glass shatters over my head and rains down around us. For a half-second, my grip on her wrist loosens. She takes that opportunity to run to the door, opening it and hurtling herself out. I don't know how the little minx does it, but she dives through the outstretched arms of the men flanking the door, rushing down the stairs.

"Don't harm her," I bark to the men rushing after her. They've been warned that they're not to hurt a hair on her head. But I don't trust anybody but myself when it comes to her well-being.

I rush after them, pushing past and getting to Kristen just as she reaches for the back door by the kitchen.

She turns around and I feel a burning sensation near my collar bone. I look down and there's a neat slice through my shirt, blood pooling beneath it.

Kristen aims the small kitchen knife at me, her hand shaking.

"Leave me alone," she says, her voice high and warbling. "I'm warning you."

Holding a hand to my men to signal them to stand down, I grab her wrist and take the knife, throwing it on the kitchen island nearby. Then I draw my gun.

She shrinks away, screaming in fear. Slowly, I take the gun and turn it around, handing it to her by the handle.

"You want to hurt me?" I ask her. "Do it properly."

Page 7

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 7:40 am

She stares at me, reaching slowly for the gun, as though expecting a trap. When she's got the gun in her hand, she turns it over in her palms, holding it out from her body as though it's something repulsive.

I turn my back to her, speaking to my men.

"Leave," I say to them. "Wait outside."

"Sir -"

"Leave," I say through gritted teeth. "Now."

They do as I say. I turn back to Kristen and she's still holding the gun in her hands, looking down at it.

"Go on, pet," I say to her, coming closer so that there's hardly a foot between us. "This is your opportunity. Do your worst."

But of course, she doesn't. Taking a step to her, I rake my fingers through her freshly dyed hair, a reddish brown hue that looks good wrapped around my fist. I pull gently, aiming her face at mine.

"You're a fighter, Kristen," I tell her. "And I fucking love that about you. But you're not a killer. Sometimes I've wondered whether you missed my heart with that bullet on purpose. You're right that you can handle a gun. So, why did you miss your target at such a close range?"

“I didn’t want to miss,” she whispers. “I wanted to kill you.”

“You’re good at lying to other men,” I tell her. “But you can’t lie to me, darling. I know when you’re telling the truth. And I can tell when you’re concealing things from me.”

“I’m not lying,” she insists. “I wanted you dead.”

I shake my head, then bring my hand to the waistband of her pajama bottoms, tugging gently.

“You’re a bad liar,” I say again. “Go on. Tell me another lie. Be as convincing as you can be. Answer this question for me: If I slid my fingers between your legs right now, would I find you soaked for me?”

She hesitates and I wait for the lie to escape her pretty lips. But she surprises me.

“Yes,” she whispers.

My cock hardens at the way her voice has gone soft, breathy, femininity and submission laced in that single ‘yes’ that make me want to let instinct take over, to take the gun from her and bend her over the kitchen island, fucking her mercilessly until she comes on my shaft and I come too, planting my seed deep inside of her.

But I won’t take her like that until she asks me to. Until she begs for it.

“Give me the gun,” I tell her.

With her hands still shaking, she hands it to me.

“Please,” she begs. “I don’t want to go with you.”

“You’ve got to stop lying to me, kitten,” I tell her. “You’ll learn in time that it’s useless. I see right through you just as well as you saw through me the day that we met. I know you want this. You want to see where this goes and most of all, you want to find out if being fucked by me is as good as you imagine it being while you’re masturbating late at night, getting yourself off with your fingers while you moan my name.”

Her eyes widen.

“You think I don’t know?” I ask her. “I’ve been in and out of this house for at least two weeks. Watching you. Listening to your conversations. Listening to you lie to your mother and to the police, overhearing you saying my name every single fucking night while you play with your tight little cunt.”

“You’ve been stalking me,” she accuses.

“I had to make sure you were ready to be taken,” I say. “I scoped out the house, the safety measures, and...most importantly, you. After our first encounter I had a feeling you’d make the perfect wife but watching you for the last several weeks confirms it. What a good girl, lying to the police, keeping your mouth shut about everything you heard and saw that day.”

“I’m not doing that for you.”

“I don’t care why you’re doing it,” I reply with a grin. “I only care that you’re willing to do it. You come from money and in my experience, spoiled, sheltered little girls like you are usually more than happy to tattle to the authorities. But not you.”

“I’m not a ‘little girl.’ I’m twenty-three years old,” she bites out. “And I’m not sheltered...not anymore, anyway. I’ve seen shit, I’ve been through more in my life than you think. And I’m not some naïve rich girl that you can fuck with whenever

you want.”

“I underestimated you,” I agree. “Not something I’ll do again.”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 7:40 am

I close the distance between us, expecting her to recoil and back against the door behind her. She doesn't, though. I see her chest rising and falling faster, shallow breaths as she watches me and waits for what I'll do next. I glide my fingers down her torso, ending at the waist of her pajama pants once again.

"Tell me you don't want this," I say in a low voice.

She doesn't say anything.

"Tell me," I press. "Lie to me."

"I don't want to lie to you," she whispers. "I just want to know what you're planning. You scare me."

She's telling the truth. I scare her, and I know it. But weaved into the fear is desire, heat, a need that she doesn't want to acknowledge, but that I desperately need her to.

"You want this," I say, dipping my fingers beneath the waistband, feeling the tender skin between her hips. "Tell me that you don't."

"I do," she says between shallow, strangled breaths.

There it is. The permission I required, the permission I desperately hoped she would give to me and knew that she would eventually.

I slip my hand lower, finally stroking the wet slit that I watched her play with just last night. I press my finger against her, sliding between the soft lips, gliding my fingertip

upwards and then in circular motions around her clit.

She flattens against the wall, tilting her head up and moaning.

Touching her after restraining myself for so long is threatening my self-control. The urge to throw her on the countertop, to rip every stitch of her clothing off and fuck her mercilessly is almost too much to resist.

But I know it's too soon. Know that I scare her more than I make her feel safe, for now, and that as long as this is the case, I'll always be the bad guy in her mind. Maybe a bad guy who knows how to get her off, but still a bad guy.

Not a husband.

I feel her legs shaking, her body tensing around my fingers, and I can tell she's fucking close.

"You fucking love it," I growl. "Don't pretend. You can't hide what you want from me, pet. And there's no need to. Whatever you want, you simply have to ask. Needing this isn't something to be ashamed of. Feel how good this is, feel how good it is to surrender and let me give you the pleasure that you so badly need."

She's close, so fucking close. I stroke her faster, apply more pressure, and now she's basically grinding against my hand, matching my pace with her own as she climbs to the peak. It's glorious, watching my girl like this, watching her get herself off using my fingers.

But right when she's about to come, I pull my fingers away.

She cries out in frustration. Opening her eyes, she glares at me.

“What the fuck?” she asks through hitched breaths.

“I’m having fun,” I say. “But not so fast, angel. Orgasms are for good girls, and you’re far from it tonight.”

I lift my hand to my lips and suck her juice from my fingers, my eyes on her the whole time. She watches, still trembling against the wall, looking as though her legs might give out at any moment.

But though her legs are weak, her smart mouth is as strong as ever.

“You’re an asshole.”

I shrug. This isn’t news to me. I am an asshole. That’s exactly how I’ve made it this far in life, how I built my empire brick by brick and eventually foundher.

If I wasn’t an asshole, we would have never been brought together. In fact, I would have been dead a long time ago. Because weak men don’t survive in my world.

“You cut me,” I tell her, gesturing to my chest. “You ran from me. Though it pains me to do so, you’ll need to be punished for that.”

Her eyes widen.

“Did you think I was going to let that go?” I ask with a light laugh. “You might be my bride, my favorite, my jewel, but that doesn’t mean I won’t discipline you. Clearly you need it.”

“Fuck you.”

Page 9

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 7:40 am

“Don’t push me,” I reply, the smile leaving my face. “Or you’ll only make your punishment worse. I’d hate to hurt you. How do you think your father would feel, knowing his daughter is in danger?”

“I told you before,” Kristen spits. “I don’t care what he thinks. I hate the man.”

“My darling, how could you think we don’t belong together when we have so much in common?” I ask, my lip curling.

4

Kristen

My body istense as Damien loads me into the back of the large SUV, black with blacked out windows to hide the occupants inside. I’m afraid of what he’ll do once he joins me in the seat next to mine, his promise of punishment still ringing in my ears.

But instead of reaching for me to do whatever it is that he has planned, he ignores me.

The car pulls away from the road, the driver obscured by a partition between our seat and his. The interior of the car seems totally customized, minor details of understated luxury and added functionality. The partition is just one example but there are others.

There are also more sinister features of the vehicle, like the straps that wrap over my hips and chest, holding me tightly to the seat.

I shift in the seat and Damien’s eyes flicker to me.

“Promise to behave, and I’ll remove the handcuffs,” he says, gesturing to the silver cuffs that glint at my wrists.

“Fuck you,” I seethe.

He chuckles, turning away, his attention on the phone in his hands. He’s typing rapidly, shooting text message after text message to various recipients. I try to get an angle to view the screen, but it’s impossible. He tilts the screen away from me, finishing his last message before pocketing the little black phone.

My own phone, with the pink case and cracks in the glass screen, was left behind at the house in Tahoe. But not before one of Damien’s men programmed it so that it would send routine text messages to a handful of my top contacts, with Damien’s phone able to send additional text messages so that they appear to be coming from me.

Nobody will notice I’m missing for at least a week at this, assuming that my mom returns next Friday for our usual hamburger and interrogation date.

It’s a thought that makes me sad and fearful. We drive past the luxurious homes in the wooded neighborhood. Lights are on in the windows, people having dinner or watching movies with loved ones without any idea that I’m out here, being abducted and taken away against my will by a man who simultaneously infuriates me and turns me on.

After he pockets the phone and continues to gaze out the window, ignoring me, I can’t take the silence anymore.

“Where are we going?”

“My home, of course,” he says, turning to me. “Where else does a wife belong but

with her husband?"

"You're not my husband," I say. "Good luck marrying me. I'll say those vows to you when hell freezes over."

"Sweetheart, it's endearing that you think I need you to say the words," he says, his eyes glittering in the dark interior of the car. "I could have us married tomorrow if I wanted."

I feel his hand on my thigh, sliding upward until it dips beneath my shorts, reaching the apex of my thighs. I regret donning this pajama set tonight, so thin and practically transparent, without a bra or underwear beneath. It makes it that much easier for him to tease me, to touch me where I know I shouldn't enjoy it or want it but very much do.

"You're still wet for me," he says with approval. "Soaked. My little slut."

"Don't call me that," I snap.

"A slut?" he asks.

"I'm not a slut," I say. "It's a misogynistic word and besides, I don't sleep around with a bunch of guys. In fact, I've never even -"

"Being a virgin doesn't preclude you from being a slut," he says, pushing a finger inside of me. "And I didn't say you were just any slut. I said you were mine. Like it or not, this is the way your body responds to me, the way it's always responded. You think I didn't know? That first day, when we met? I knew. You can't hide it from me, and furthermore, I don't want you to."

"I don't..."

I can't finish the sentence, can't continue to fight this fight with him, because his finger begins to thrust in and out of me, pushing against a spot deep within me that makes my whole body light up with pleasure and need.

"Don't," he warns me, his voice rough and in my ear. "Don't lie to me. Not about this."

Page 10

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 7:40 am

“Don’t call me a slut,” I reply through clenched teeth. “I don’t care how you say it. I don’t like it, and I never fucking will.”

His lips reach mine and he kisses me softly, merciful even though his hand between my legs isn’t, his tongue caressing mine.

He pulls away but keeps his face inches from mine, his eyes glowing down at me.

“Fair enough, kitten,” he says. “I won’t use that word for you ever again. Your wish is my command.”

He pushes further inside of me, deeper than ever, while his thumb strokes my clit much like before in the lake house, quick circles that send me right back to the peak of pleasure.

“And to make it up to you, I’ll even allow you to come,” he breathes, his voice deep and smooth like velvet. “Go on. I know you need it. Show me how good it feels to be owned by me.”

I can’t help it. I do exactly as he says, as though my body is on strings, a puppet for him to play with. My moans are muffled by Damien’s free hand clamping over my mouth. I scream behind his fingers in ecstasy, and in that moment, I do feel owned.

I feel completely and utterly owned by this man.

Damien

Kristen tastes so sweet that it takes all the restraint I have to pull away from her after she climaxes, returning to my seat and licking the juice from my fingers instead of devouring her whole the way I want to, burying my face between her legs and making her scream like she did just now, again and again and again.

“Where’s Hazel?”

“Who?”

“My best friend,” Kristen says. “The one you kidnapped a month ago to get back at your stupid drug dealing buddy.”

“Right,” I say. “I don’t know where Hazel is. I haven’t made contact with her since she escaped and rode off into the sunset with dear old Vince.”

There’s no bitterness in my voice. I spent so many years believing that Vincent was my enemy, that he was responsible for the demise of my brother. When the truth is, my brother fled the country on his own, a coward with his tail tucked between his legs, leaving a mess behind for therealmen – Vince and me – to clean up.

“I owe Hazel an apology,” I continue. “She and her fiancé each, after the inconvenience I caused them last month.”

“Inconvenience?” she replies. “Is that what you’d call this, too? Kidnapping me from my bed and taking me away from everyone I know?”

“Darling, you were already separated from everyone you know,” I say to her. “Isolated and locked inside like an animal. I didn’t do that; your father did.”

“Because of you,” she insists. “Because he had to hide me from you.”

We’ve been driving for about an hour now, further into rural California. The roads have become narrow and unpaved, without lights to guide our way. Cloaked beneath darkness except for the headlights. Our car is flanked by two others, in front of us and behind.

I’ve taken every precaution, protecting Kristen better than I protect myself most of the time, even during my trip south to locate my piece of shit brother.

Because until I figure out Martin Redding’s motive for enabling such an easy capture of his daughter, I can’t afford to be careless.

When we pull up to the makeshift helicopter pad, located in a clearing among the trees that belongs to a friend who owes me a favor, I pause before getting out of the car. Waiting for the gunfire, for the ambush that I fully anticipate will come.

But it doesn’t.

The driver lowers the partition between his seat and ours.

“They’re saying it’s all clear,” he says without turning his head. “Redding still in Seattle, his wife en route to San Francisco as expected.”

“You’re following my parents?” Kristen gasps next to me.

“And the others?” I ask, ignoring her.

“They still think you’re in Brazil,” he replies. “Still searching for you there. We’ve got a decoy. Tomorrow he’ll travel north to Venezuela. As it is now, they’ve only got two agents on this case.”

I frown.

“Only two?”

“And the detective assigned to protect the target, here in Tahoe,” he replies.

“I’m sitting right here,” Kristen says. “I have a name and it’s not ‘the target.’”

We continue to ignore her, though I can’t help but smile a little at Kristen’s smart mouth. Just as feisty and resistant as I remember her being the first time we met. The cut on my chest still burns, reminding me that she’s still very much untamed, the wild woman with a backbone of steel that I’ve been obsessed with since I first laid eyes on her.

And now, she’s mine.

“I just don’t understand,” I mutter. “Why would he make it this easy? What could be the purpose?”

“Don’t know, boss,” he says. “But we’ve got new information on his finances. The man has drained two accounts in the last year alone, over forty million dollars.”

“Where did it go?”

“It’s not clear,” he replies. “We suspect gambling debts.”

“I want more on that,” I say. “Find out who he owed. Find out whether he’s still

gambling.”

“Leave my family alone!”

“Quiet,” I growl to Kristen.

“Fuck you!”

I direct my attention to the driver.

“Thank you for the update,” I say. “Now, I’d like to have a private conversation with my fiancée while we wait for the helicopter.”

Without another word, he pushes a button and lifts the partition between us again. Satisfied that it’s sealed, blocking out all noise, I turn to Kristen.

“You have a lot to learn,” I say to her. “One rule that you won’t cross is that you don’t interrupt me when I’m doing business.”

“Your business involves me,” she replies, her eyes aflame. “And my parents, too. What next, you’re tailing my sisters?”

“Your sisters aren’t of interest to me. Only you.”

“Why are you following my parents?”

“Because they’re of interest to me,” I reply. “Most of all, your dear old dad. I knew that he wasn’t keeping his nose clean, even prior to my meeting you. But since he insists on this annoying investigation into my affairs -”

“Because you kidnapped me,” she interjects.

“- I decided to investigate him, too,” I continue. “And we’ve found some interesting things. You might think I’m a bad man. But I could tell you some things about your father that would make me seem like a saint.”

“Like what?” she asks. “He gambles? Big deal. My mom’s known about that for years. He even went to treatment for it. He loses money, but he always earns it back.”

“Yes he does,” I agree. “Ever wonder how?”

“How what?”

“How he earns it back,” I reply.

She’s quiet.

“He works,” she says after a pause, but her voice has lost its confident edge. “He works in finance.”

Page 12

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 7:40 am

Right now, I pity Kristen. She's more innocent than she thinks, inexperienced not only in sex but in the ways of evil men as well. The daughter of a man who built his empire on the backs of others, exploiting human beings and corrupt governments in order to add more money to his own bank accounts.

"Your father is a bad man," I say to her.

"What do you know? Why are you saying that?"

I shake my head. I don't want to go on, feeling protective of my new treasure and her heart. She's gone through enough already – most of it, my fault. I don't want to be the one to reveal to Kristen that her father is a monster.

"What do you mean, he's a bad man?" she asks again.

I hear the rapid staccato of helicopter blades, far above us but descending fast. The pilot lands in the clearing in front of us, flooding the dark woods around us with light and gust of air.

"Come," I say, releasing Kristen from the straps that bind her in place to her seat.

Not trusting her to comply, to walk to the helicopter on her own two feet, I lift her out of the car and carry her in my arms.

I expect her to fight me, to wrestle away, but she doesn't. Instead, she leans her head against me. I wonder if she's even aware of the way she nuzzles my chest, the way that her body continues to betray her by giving into mine.

Kristen

All around me is softness.

I roll over in the bed, enjoying the way the silky sheets feel against my bare skin. And the smell. The smell of the bed is like heaven, like pine trees and leather and fresh rain.

It smells just like...

“Fuck,” I gasp, sitting up in the bed, realizing it’s not my own. In my grogginess, it takes me a moment to realize I’m completely naked from head to toe, the comforter falling down into my lap and leaving my breasts exposed to the air, exposed to Damien who’s standing at the end of the bed.

He’s half dressed in only a pair of loose gray sweatpants that hang low on his hips, exposing the stretch of skin above his groin that is sprinkled with dark hair, the lines on hips that go inward and disappear beneath the waistband, leading to his cock.

“Glad you’re awake,” he says. “Breakfast will be here shortly.”

Like a picture coming into focus, I gradually remember the details of yesterday.

My mom’s visit. Damien, breaking in. My attempted escape and subsequently, allowing him to put his fingers down my shorts, to put his fingers inside of me and bring me to orgasm as though he’s not every bit the terrifying kidnapping monster that he is, welcoming him inside of my body as though he’s not the same man I’ve been hiding from for over a month.

I remember getting into the helicopter but after that, nothing.

“Did you fucking drug me?” I ask him, pulling the blankets over my body.

“What?”

“You,” I say. “You knocked me out. You did something to me after we got into the helicopter. I know it.”

Damien stares at me. His face looks truly blank, no hint of malice or trickery in them, no hint of a smile or a smirk.

“I don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about,” he says in a low voice. “You fell asleep in the helicopter and then again in the car on the way here. You were so tired when we got here, I carried you upstairs and put you in bed. You slept through it all.”

I shake my head, not believing that I could possibly fall asleep last night under such terrifying circumstances. I run my hands over my body beneath the blanket, my breasts, stomach, hips, down to my vulva where I expect to feel...

Different?

I expect to feel different. Because if Damien drugged me and slept with me last night, I want to know. And I expect that losing my virginity would have some sort of physical evidence, some soreness between my legs...or maybe even blood on the sheets. But when I check, there’s nothing.

Damien watches me do this, his face going from blank to angry.

“You insult me, darling,” he says. “What are you looking for? If you’re expecting evidence that I assaulted you in your sleep, you won’t find it. I told you before, the only way I’ll touch you in that way, is if you consent...preferably while begging on your knees for me.”

Page 13

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 7:40 am

His words both scare me and arouse me at the same time, that special mixture of fear and lust that Damien always seems to inspire within me, making me wet with only a few sentences and that intense, deep green stare.

“I’ll never beg on my knees for you,” I breathe.

He smiles, coming closer to sit on the edge of the bed beside me. I can’t help but watch his body as he does, those firm muscles shifting beneath smooth, tanned skin. There’s a twisted scar on his chest and beneath it, a fresh cut from the knife I wielded last night.

I’m confused by the way the sight makes me feel guilty, makes me feel sorry for him. Those healing wounds on his chest both came from me, not to mention the broken nose I’d given him last month. All in self-defense, all more than justified, and yet I feel bad that I caused him pain.

Last night he gave me a gun and I could have pointed it at him and pulled the trigger. I could have ended all of this madness, ending his life and ending this game of hide and seek once and for all.

But I didn’t.

And I cannot, for the life of me, understand why. I can’t understand anything about the way that I act around Damien, the way he makes all of my hard edges go soft, makes me want to give in and relax, let him call the shots and take the reins.

I’ve never been the type to let a man tell me what to do. In fact, I abhor most of the

men I met while growing up in my father's wealthy circle. Country clubs, private schools, horseback riding with his colleagues' sons. He was trying to marry me off before I was even old enough to get married, trying to get rid of me like the dead weight that I am to him.

Daughters are only good for marrying off to the highest bidder, building family connections, broadening my father's network of wealthy friends.

Damien leans over, pulling the blanket from my grip and sliding it down my body to reveal my nakedness again.

"Rest assured, my dear," he says quietly. "I'm very much attracted to you. And I plan to take you as soon as you give me the word. In fact, if you're disappointed to learn I didn't take advantage of you last night, I'm happy to allow you to take a ride on my cock today...right now, if you'd like."

I narrow my eyes.

"No," I say, pulling the blanket back and holding it over my body firmly, waiting for him to yank it back down and push me down onto the bed, to open my legs with his powerful hands and drive his shaft inside of me the way that I fantasized about it for so many nights before, nights when I woke up in a sweat, images of Damien in my mind, breathless and wishing I could have the real thing.

But as he promised, he respects my 'no', pulling back and standing up.

"Very well," he says. "You can get dressed. There are a number of outfit options in your closet for you. Oh yes - you seem surprised, pet. But you shouldn't be. I've been anticipating your arrival for a while now, and you'll find that I prepared well."

"I don't need you to buy clothes for me," I say.

He smiles.

“There are a lot of things I intend to do for you that you don’t need,” he says. “Any wife of mine will have more than her basic needs met. You’ll never want for anything as long as you’re with me. Not clothing, food, shelter...not joy, intimacy, or pleasure, either.”

Pleasure.

Just another promise, another heated word that carries with it a certain weight, triggering that warmth in my core, that wetness between thighs.

As though he knows exactly what he’s done to me, Damien comes back to the bed, cupping my chin in his hand, bringing his lips to mine but not kissing me, just a millimeter of distance between us.

“Don’t think I’ve forgotten about your punishment, though,” he says softly, his eyes glowing. “I have some business to deal with today, but I’ll be back tonight to administer your discipline.”

My eyes widen.

“Bad girls get punished, my dear,” he reminds me. “So do your future husband a favor today, and be a good girl while I’m gone.

7

Damien

“Good evening.”

Good evening?

Tell me that this motherfucker didn't just say "good evening" to me.

I glance around the room. I expected to meet somewhere remote, somewhere neutral, but Martin Redding insisted on meeting on his turf. One of his properties in Seattle, far from his wife and his children, including the daughter that he still believes to be hidden in the Tahoe safe house.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 7:40 am

I'm disgusted with everything about this man, from the way he makes his money to the way he seems to have no regard for the safety of his wife and daughters. If I knew my daughter was in danger, you wouldn't find me away from her for a moment. I would build a fortress around her...with me standing by at the fucking gate.

Here he is, lounging in his living room as though we're old friends, his arm draped over the back of the leather couch behind the shoulders of a woman half his age who looks like she's had every plastic surgery available, from her unnaturally pert nose to her inflated lips and breasts.

"Does your wife know about your whores?" I ask him, nodding to the woman.

"She does," he replies pleasantly, sliding his arm around her waist. She looks pleased by the sudden attention, smiling greedily at him as though he's a meal she'd like to devour.

Gold diggers. Yacht girls. Escorts.

Whatever the label, it doesn't matter to me. There's a circuit of them, passed from one wealthy man to another like casual entertainment. And those are the women who do it willingly.

But there are others. Women who don't get a choice in the matter. And since looking into Martin Redding, I've learned that his specialty is brokering those transactions, handling human beings like commodities, trafficking them in and out of the country to satiate the appetites of people who are more monster than man.

“I specifically stated it would be just the two of us,” I say. “Two of us, and our men wait outside.”

“Marissa hardly counts,” he chuckles. “And besides. She’s here for your benefit, not mine. If you’d like, she can take you to the guest bedroom and suck you off before you and I discuss matters. Or, if you’d rather -”

“No whores,” I growl. I look at Marissa. “Leave. Now.”

Her eyes widen, and she looks to Martin for direction. He looks at me warily, the casual smile gone from his face, and then nods to Marissa.

Scoffing at me, she gets up and leaves. I lock the door behind her, then turn back to Martin.

“No more games,” I say to him. “Let’s get to the fucking point of this meeting. Your message said you wanted to meet about Kristen. Why?”

“Have a seat,” Martin pats the couch cushion beside him.

I ignore the gesture, coming to stand across the room facing him.

“What is it about Kristen?” I press.

“I was going to ask you the same question,” Martin says, raising a brow. “You seem very...interested in my youngest daughter. God only knows why. However, I’m willing to end this game of cat and mouse for the right price.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” I ask. “Speak clearly, Redding. I’m not here to fuck around with you.”

“Alright,” Martin says, sitting up straighter on the couch. “You’re right. Why beat around the bush? I’ll speak plainly since that’s what you prefer. You’re obviously attracted to my daughter. You want her for yourself. I thought that you would take care of the matter on your own without my intervention; it’s not as though we’ve done a thorough job of concealing her.”

“So,” I say. “You’re doing it on purpose after all. You want me to take her.”

He chuckles.

“Good, good,” he says. “So you’ve scoped out the house in Tahoe. Wonderful.”

“What do you want?” I ask him. “You want, what? For me to kidnap your daughter? Is that it?”

“Yes,” he replies, his answer surprising me.

I narrow my eyes.

“Why?”

“I have my reasons,” he replies. “Just like you have your reasons for desiring ownership over Kristen.”

I don’t like the way he says that.Ownershipover Kristen.

Do I want to own Kristen? Frankly, yes. She belongs to me and she belonged to me as soon as I saw her at that business conference, especially after she showed me how smart, strong, and brave she can be.

There’s no better woman for me. I’ve never met a woman who I thought could keep

up with me before, a woman who could be a true partner to me, until I met her.

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 7:40 am

But the ownership I desire over Kristen isn't the kind of ownership that Martin speaks of. He speaks of the subjugation of women, debasing them and reducing them to objects.

And there's a vast, vast difference in the kind of ownership I desire.

I want all of Kristen. And that includes her pleasure, her joy, her happy memories. And I want to be responsible for Kristen, taking care of her every need and desire, ensuring that she is safe and protected. I want positive ownership over her, to care for her like the treasure she is.

But I can't explain any of this to a man like him. It's not something he could understand. His mind is old, decayed, stuck in its ways, rotted from the inside from decades of evil.

"Here's the deal," Martin continues, his face twisting into a smirk. "I scratch your back, you scratch mine. You want Kristen, fine. We'll deliver her to you on a silver platter."

"You don't even know me," I say. "And yet you'll give your daughter over to me, a complete stranger? Never seeing her again, potentially? I could be a killer, a rapist, a..."

"Get off your fucking high horse," Martin says, his face turning angry. "As though we're not cut from the same cloth. You have your business, I have mine. I won't ask why you desire Kristen, and you won't ask why I need her to disappear."

Disappear.

“What are your conditions?” I ask.

“Conditions?”

“Don’t fuck with me,” I say. “What do you get out of this? What are the conditions? You’re not giving your daughter to me for nothing.”

“Oh, my conditions,” Martin says, nodding his head. “I see. You’ll love this. My conditions are few, Damien. All I really ask is that you change her identity. A new name, a new social security number...everything must be wiped clean, with the woman by the name Kristen Redding presumed dead by the authorities. Of course, I will help you with this free of charge. As you know, I’m very good at making people disappear.”

He winks at me and I feel sickened. I want to cross this room right now and strangle him, right now. I’ve never wanted to murder a man more than I want to murder Martin Redding right now for the way he talks about his daughter, for the way he acts as though Kristen is something for him to casually discard.

But we’re on his turf, with his men just outside. So instead, I just nod.

“Of course,” I say.

“We’ll finalize the details next week,” Martin says with a dismissive wave of his hand. “You can go without the object of your desire for a little longer, yes? Just to give me enough time to get things in order.”

“Yes,” I say with a curt nod. “One week. No longer than that.”

He chuckles again.

“So eager,” he says. “Fair enough.”

“I still don’t understand what you get out of this,” I say. “Making your daughter disappear...”

Martin looks at me, his eyes dark and hollow even while his mouth curls into an unpleasant smile.

“We all have our reasons,” he says. “It’s best for everybody that you don’t go prying into mine.”

8

Kristen

I stay in the bedroom for hours after Damien leaves, pacing the room, exploring the closets, thinking about how the hell I’m going to get out of this situation.

But Damien seems to have thought of everything. He wasn’t kidding when he said he prepared for my arrival.

Not only is there a closet full of expensive clothing tailor made for my body, but there are toiletries in the bathroom that match my own set back at the house in Tahoe. This gesture feels almost...touching.

For a moment I look at the bottles of my preferred brand of shampoo and conditioner, lined up side by side in the oversized walk-in shower, and feel a warmth towards Damien that I haven’t experienced before. Not lust, not the hot desire that courses through my veins whenever he touches me. It’s a different type of warmth. Almost

like love.

But then I remember Damien is my kidnapper, and I'm his captor.

Just because he's made your cage comfortable, that doesn't mean it isn't a cage.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 7:40 am

My hair feels greasy and damp, my skin oily. I know I need a shower but I can't bring myself to get into the stall and turn the water on. It feels too much like a trap. Last night I let my guard down in a way I shouldn't have. And then again this morning I found myself silently begging for him to climb on top of me and take me.

I can't do that again, I can't let my lust for this man cloud my judgment and make me weak. Damien knows what he's doing, knows that he has this effect on me, and he's exploiting that.

Last night he handed me a ticket out of this mess, he put a lethal weapon in my hand, and even then, I backed down. Couldn't bring myself to point a gun at him and pull the trigger for the second time.

Why not?

I take a rag and clean myself as well as I can without stepping into the shower, then put on the most understated clothes I can find in the closet - a pair of light wash blue jeans and a plain black shirt - and do my best to ignore the large section of lingerie.

Oh yes. Damien is definitely aware of how he affects me. He's counting on it.

Feeling angry, I storm out of the bedroom and almost run face-first into a solid wall of muscle. Only, it's not Damien.

"Miss Redding," the man says. "I was just about to check on you. Mr. Barlowe is on his way back and wants you to join him for dinner."

“Dinner?” I ask faintly. “Isn’t it early for that?”

The man glances at his watch.

“It’s half past five now,” he says. “Mr. Barlowe’s estimated time of arrival is six-fifteen. He’d like you to join him for dinner at six thirty.”

My mind feels cloudy, confused most of all by the fact that it’s already time for dinner. Without a clock in the bedroom, a watch, or my phone, I feel disoriented and disconnected from the outside world and from time itself.

That’s probably what he wants. Don’t kidnappers like to do that to their victims? It makes them more dependent, or something.

“Tell Mr. Barlowe to go fuck himself,” I say to the man.

And then, because I don’t actually feel as brave as my words to the man make me seem, I rush back inside the bedroom and close the door, locking it. I hold my breath and wait for a moment, waiting for the guy to pound on the door, pick the lock, or even simply break it down.

But he doesn’t.

I search the room for the tenth time, looking for anything that could be useful when Damien gets here. There’s nothing, though. No nail clippers or scissors or tweezers in the bathroom, no shaving razors.

So I do something drastic, taking one of the ornate vanity mirrors off the wall in the bathroom. Covering it with a couple of thick bath towels to hopefully muffle the sound of shattered glass, I take a heavy boot from the closet’s selection of brand new shoes and swing it down hard, breaking the mirror into several large, narrow shards.

It's a makeshift dagger. One that will cut its user just as much as its intended target. But cutting my hand open is a small price to pay for freedom.

According to my best guess, it's been about half an hour since the guard told me of Damien's impending arrival, which means I've got fifteen minutes until he's here.

I spend the rest of the time cleaning up and preparing for him to come back. I take a quick shower, and then I change into one of the lingerie sets that he bought for me. It's deep purple, mostly see-through mesh that leaves little to the imagination.

For some reason, the idea of Damien seeing me in this feels more vulnerable than him simply seeing me naked. Did he pick this out imagining me wearing it? And if he did, will I measure up to the picture he had in his head?

After unlocking the bedroom door, I straighten the sheets and blankets before climbing into the large, silky bed, hiding the dagger beneath my pillow before stretching out into a seductive pose.

Minutes later, I hear Damien climb the stairs. There are muted voices outside the door for a second, Damien and his guard dog exchanging updates, words that I can't make out.

And then the door handle turns. I watch as Damien slowly walks in, his eyes looking over the room slowly before arriving at the bed, at me. His eyes take me in slowly, doing a once over and then another. Though I'm hardly wearing anything, I feel hot under his gaze now, my body awakening to him the way it always does even while my mind orders it to stay focused on the goal at hand, to not allow him to win this time.

"Kitten," he says quietly, not moving from the spot in front of the door. "What did I tell you before I left? Do you remember?"

Frowning, I shake my head.

“I told you to be a good girl while I was gone. You have not been a good girl. Lex just updated me on your interaction with him. He also said that when he saw into the room earlier, it looked as though it had been ransacked. You’ve been snooping. Searching for something. What did you find?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” I say to him, careful to keep my voice even but casual, to hide my lie. “I looked around, took a shower, tried on some of the clothes you got for me...that’s how I found this.”

I run a hand down my side, resting it on my hip. I want to cringe at the action, at the forced way I’m trying to play the role of seductress. None of it feels natural to me. How could it, when I’ve never actually seduced a man before?

Page 17

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 7:41 am

Sure, I've charmed men before. But...that's different. I've never been this naked in front of a man before, never felt so exposed and seen.

"My dear, you know I can't believe you," he says, shaking his head. His green eyes look dark and threatening as he stares me down. "I claimed you as mine because you are smart. Much too smart to not prepare for my arrival. So tell me, what is it?"

"What do you mean?"

"The weapon you chose," he says, his eyes growing even darker as he takes a slow step forward and then another, getting closer to the bed. "A hairbrush, perhaps? Or maybe you removed a shoelace from one of the shoes, and plan to strangle me."

"No," I whisper. "I don't want to hurt you."

He shakes his head.

"You're only making things harder for yourself by lying to me, pet," he says, his voice growing softer. "You already know I have to discipline you for your actions last night. Don't make matters worse. Tell me what you found, hand it to me now, and we can pretend it never happened."

For a second, I consider handing him the shard of mirror. It would be so easy. Maybe he would be forgiving, be merciful, if I did as he said and opted for honesty.

But doing this would guarantee I'd never get out of here, never escape. If not now, then when?

I sit up on the bed, backing to the headboard with my butt pressing against the pillow.

“I don’t know what you mean,” I tell him. “Yes, I did look around. Your guard isn’t lying about that. But...I didn’t find anything.”

“Once again, I know you too well to believe that,” he says. “If you won’t surrender it on your own, I’ll take it from you myself.”

He comes closer now, but not close enough for me to take a swipe at him. I don’t dare move, afraid of what he’ll do if I do. My heart pounds as he moves closer, closer, closer...until he’s finally within reach.

It’s now or never, right?

“Please, Kristen -”

I swing at him but my movement falters when he says my name. He doesn’t call me pet, or kitten, or darling or dear. He says Kristen, and when he does, his voice is softer than ever before, almost pleading with me, a tone that feels both safe and welcome.

Just like last night, he catches my flailing arm before I can even make contact. As soon as he pins me back against the pillow, I know it’s I know it’s over. But I don’t care. I have nothing to lose. Fighting back is all that I have left.

“Stop it,” Damien growls as I thrash against him. “Dammit, stop it, Kristen. Stop it now!”

Damien pries the mirror from my hand and tosses it in the trash, then comes back to the bed and reaches for me. I scream again and recoil, waiting for the punishment to come.

“Her hand is cut badly,” he says, speaking to someone on the other side of the bed. “Get help.”

I don’t know when I stopped fighting, or when I began to cry. All I know is that I’m on the bed, curled in a ball and sobbing. Maybe this whole situation has finally driven me insane, maybe I only had a little bit of sanity left and this last altercation has broken it.

Damien disappears to the bathroom, coming back with a thick white hand towel that he presses to the palm of my right hand.

“I hate you,” I sob.

“I know, baby,” he murmurs, brushing the hair away from my face. “I know.”

9

Damien

It’s all so much more fuckedup than I ever imagined.

Stealing Kristen away was always the plan. But I never imagined it happening like this.

Never imagined that I’d be stealing her from a bigger monster than myself. All this time I predicted that I might be the worst thing to ever happen to her, this beautiful flower, fiery yet pure. But it turns out that the real monster was already here, the man who raised her and who would discard her for the value of the life insurance policy he took out on her only one month ago.

One month ago, the day of the encounter at the business conference.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 7:41 am

He either expected for me to return for her all along...or he planned to make her vanish either way, framing me as the cause.

That's why he demanded that I change her identity, that we make her "disappear" as one of the terms of our agreement. I agreed reluctantly and will never forget the sickening grin he gave me in reply. Will never forget his words, that we're "cut from the same cloth."

If only he knew how wrong he was. Then he might have been able to prevent his inevitable death at my hands.

Because no man will speak about my girl in that way and live to tell the tale.

I don't care if he's her father, I wouldn't care if he was her brother or her husband or her dearest, oldest best friend.

He was dead as soon as he revealed to me who he really is.

A weak man, a gambling addict who would rather sell his own daughters than be held accountable for his actions go to some white collar resort prison for a few months and be released early like all men of his type do.

No. That would require sacrifice on his part. It would require taking responsibility, doing the right thing, and most importantly, being a protective shield over Kristen and her sisters rather than the thing they need protecting from.

Kristen isn't the only one he's got his eye on. There are new life insurance policies on

all three sisters, one after the other, as though he bought the one for Kristen and then tacked on the other two for good measure.

I came home ready to explain all of this to Kristen, but she's not in a state to hear all of this now. I realize I haven't seen her cry before. All this time, she's held strong. Now she looks broken, and it's because of me. My actions, my hands.

The doctor numbs the area and disinfects the cut before stitching it up.

"It's deep," he warns me before he leaves. "Thankfully, no tendons were reached, but healing will be uncomfortable."

I listen to his aftercare instructions from the corner of the bedroom while Kristen watches from the bed, sitting with her hand in a bandage and a hollow look in her eyes. When he leaves, she speaks.

"I thought doctors took some kind of oath," she says. "Aren't they supposed to do no harm?"

Shaking my head, I go to the bed. She doesn't recoil, but watches me warily, her arms crossed over her chest, over the terrycloth robe that's wrapped tightly around her body now.

"Was today your last escape attempt?" I ask her.

She shrugs.

"What do you want me to do?" she whispers. "Just accept this? Accept being kidnapped, being forced to marry you?"

"That's exactly what I want you to do," I reply.

“As soon as you let your guard down,” she continues. “As soon as you turn your back or loosen up, I’ll try again. You have to know that. You have to know that this marriage will never be anything more than what it is now.”

I reach for her and once again she doesn’t recoil. Taking her hand in mine, I interlace our fingers and cradle her hand in my other palm.

“What if this is for the best?” I ask her.

“What do you mean?”

“Would you believe me if I told you that being with me is the safest place for you right now?” I ask her quietly.

“No,” she replies immediately.

I look at her.

“And even if that were true,” she continues, her brown eyes staring into mine. “I deserve the freedom to choose where I am. Whether I choose a safe place or not. That should be up to me.”

I shake my head.

“It stopped being up to you the moment I saw you,” I say to her. “When I say that you belong to me, I mean it. I’ll keep you safe no matter what it takes.”

“Kidnapping me is about keeping me safe?” she asks.

Page 19

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 7:41 am

I exhale slowly.

“It didn’t start out for that reason,” I say to her. “No. I won’t make that a secret, pet. Kidnapping you was about satisfying my desire to have you. Originally. But now...”

“But now what?” she whispers.

I look at her.

“Your father is a bad man, Kristen,” I say to her.

“You said that last night and you still haven’t told you what you meant,” she says impatiently. “All you said is he gambles. Which I already know about. If that’s supposed to scare me -”

“It’s more than the gambling,” I say, my voice strangled.

I’m caught between my need to protect this woman from her own father, and my need to protect her from the harsh reality of the world around her. How I wish I could shield her from all of this shit, hide her away in a manufactured paradise, all of the comforts my money can provide for her. That was the original intent. But now things are different. Kristen was in danger, and still is as long as her father is alive and scheming. So are her sisters.

“More than gambling,” Kristen repeats flatly. “So...what? Embezzling? Because I’ve suspected that for a long time and honestly, you’re not making a compelling case for why I’m better off with you.”

“Embezzling, gambling...other things,” I reply evasively. “Things that make your father desperate and willing to blur the line between right and wrong even more than he already does on a routine basis and Kristen, you have to know that a desperate man is a dangerous man.”

Kristen lets go of my hand and falls back on the bed, her hair fanning out on the pillow behind her.

“If you’re going to speak in riddles and dance around the details, then don’t even bother telling me anything,” she says quietly. “It’s just you fucking with me again. You come into my life and mess it up and now you’re messing with my head, too. I feel like I’m going crazy.”

Her voice breaks on the last word.

“If I tell you the truth,” I say slowly. “Will you stop this behavior? Will you stop fighting me at every turn and trust that I’m acting with your best interests in mind?”

She looks at me.

“That’s a lot to ask,” she replies. “Considering what you’ve done.”

“I know,” I reply.

She pulls her knees to her chest and casts her gaze downward at the bed in front of her.

“I’m not going to make a promise like that,” she says. “I’m not going to say I’ll never fight back, or that I’m just going to accept being your prisoner for the rest of my life. That’s crazy.”

“Fair enough,” I reply. “Then don’t promise me forever. Just promise me one week.”

She looks up at me.

“One week,” I repeat softly, almost pleadingly.

All I can do when I look at Kristen is envision the danger she was in before I took her, danger she didn’t even know about. She thinks I’m the thing to fear but the real thing to fear is the man who might have bought Kristen off of her father if I hadn’t taken her when I did, or the way that Kristen’s father might have gotten rid of her, made her “disappear” otherwise.

I want to wrap her in my arms and protect her, show her that I mean well. That I intend to keep her safe, whatever it takes.

But this would all be so much easier to do if she would stop trying to hurt me, stop hurting herself in the process.

I hate to see her bleed, I hate to see her cry as well. She’s started up again, tears rolling down her cheeks. Tears that I put there, my broken girl who was so strong in the beginning, such a fighter.

“One week,” she agrees. “I’ll stop fighting you for a week but that’s it. I’m not going to promise anything else.”

“One week is all I need,” I reply, thinking of her father’s timeline for getting affairs in order, how he plans to make it seem like she was kidnapped and possibly murdered, collecting that life insurance for himself. Probably moving onto his other daughters soon as well.

“Now that I’ve agreed to that,” Kristen says, wiping her tears away and straightening

up. “Tell me what’s going on.”

I nod, standing from the bed.

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 7:41 am

“I will,” I say. “Over dinner. Come now, darling, I know you must be starving. I want you to eat before I share this. You may not feel like it afterwards.”

Her eyes widen, but she doesn’t protest when I take her by her good hand and beckon her to come with me.

10

Kristen

I wait impatiently for Damien’s housekeeper to serve us before I open my mouth again.

“What’s going on with my father?”

“Eat,” he orders, pouring wine into each of our glasses.

The table in his dining room is vast, so impossibly large that I wonder if he’s ever managed to fill it, if he ever even hosts people in his home. I’ve only seen a few areas of his house – the bedroom and bathroom, the hall, the stairs, and now the dining room – and what I’ve learned is that while the house is large and expensively furnished, it also carries with it an air of loneliness, of stagnation and inactivity. I get a sense that Damien doesn’t spend much time here, that maybe he’s only in his own house right now for the purpose of watching over me.

But though the dining room table is large, we sit side by side, our elbows close enough to touch, close enough for me to inhale that woodsy scent with every breath

that I take, close enough for our proximity to have the effect that it always has over me.

I take an obedient bite of the mashed potatoes on my plate and then put my fork down, watching him expectantly.

The corner of his mouth quirks up.

“Please don’t make me force you to eat,” he says to me. His voice is low, but his easy smile counteracts the threat in his words.

“You wouldn’t -”

“I would,” he interjects, his voice growing cold. “I would do that, and more. Please don’t mistake my gentleness this afternoon for weakened bounds, pet. I’m going easy on you because you’ve been through a lot and now you’re wounded. You escaped punishment this evening as planned, but only narrowly. Eat well, and I’ll answer your questions as promised.”

I hesitate for just a moment more. He picks my fork up, scooping up a bite of potatoes and thrusting it towards my mouth.

“Okay!” I gasp out. “Stop. I can feed myself. For god’s sake.”

I take the fork from him and our fingers brush together, electricity between us as usual. I look at him and can see in his eyes that he felt it too, his eyes going warm again, a hungry look on his face.

“Finish,” he says, pulling his hand away from me. “If you want answers, you’ll finish your meal. You haven’t eaten since yesterday, thanks to your refusal to leave the room while I was gone.”

I bite back the retort on my tongue and begin to eat. Damien watches me for a moment before picking up his own fork and doing the same. We eat in relative silence, with Damien taking his time and me scarfing down the food as quickly as I can.

I finish my food before he's even halfway done with his, and then look at him pointedly. He sighs, putting his fork down.

"Impatient girl," he comments. "Fine. What do you want to know?"

"I want to know why you told me my father is a bad man."

He sighs.

"Right into the worst of it," he says.

"Stop stalling," I press. "I ate my food. You said you'd tell me everything. So tell me."

Damien sighs again and I wait for the reprimand, but it doesn't come. His green eyes look at me, fiery and intense, but the fire doesn't seem directed at me. It's like a storm from within, something troubling him that he can't get out.

"Your father," he begins. "Is in a lot of debt. We don't know how much, but we know it's approaching three hundred million. That's what we've been able to discover but we assume there could be double that."

I take this information in. Even though I grew up in a wealthy family, it's still hard for me to comprehend an amount of money that high. Three hundred million dollars might as well be half of that or ten times as much - once you get past a few million dollars, the quantity of wealth becomes too much for me to wrap my head around.

“Okay,” I say slowly. “So he’s in a lot of debt. He’s done this before. He can’t help himself, it starts at the casinos playing the slot machines and then it escalates to-”

“It’s not just gambling debt,” he says quietly.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 7:41 am

“Oh,” I say softly.

He looks down and then back up at me again, those murky green eyes like deep pools of water that I could lose myself in easily if I let myself have the chance.

“The source of the debt isn’t as worrisome to me as the way he intends to pay it off,” he says.

“How does he intend to pay it off?” I ask, my mouth going dry.

He looks pointedly at me.

“What?” I ask, my eyes widening. “Me? What, are you going to...are you going to pay him for me or something?”

He shakes his head.

“He took a life insurance policy out for you,” he says. “About a month ago. Right after we met. He’s been counting on me returning for you, and either you turning up dead...or never turning up at all. That’s why it was so easy for me to break in, that’s why it’s been so easy to abduct you even while there’s supposedly an investigation going on and detective watching over you. It’s because it’s not true. Nobody is investigating shit, not really. It’s a half-effort so that law enforcement can claim they did their best. They’re on your father’s payroll, we verified that this afternoon.”

A whole host of emotions flow through me, from anger and shame to sadness. I knew my father was a bad man, a horrible and abusive man who never valued me or my

sisters or hell, even my mother.

But I didn't think he was capable of...this.

"He's an evil man," Damien says quietly. "Using his daughters to pay his gambling debts."

"Daughters?" I look up.

Damien nods slowly.

"My sisters," I gasp, standing from the table. "They're -"

"They're safe," Damien interjects. "No thanks to your father, of course. We've got a few men on them now. I won't let anything happen to them or to you, Kristen. You have my word."

"What was he thinking?" I wonder. "Does he really think he can make all three of his children disappear and there wouldn't be any questions, that nobody would look into it?"

He smiles grimly at me.

"He's a powerful man," Damien says. "Like I said, he's got authorities on his payroll. And he also has something else - a scapegoat."

"What do you mean?"

"Me," he says simply. "Today he offered you to me voluntarily. I think this is his way of getting me to let my guard down. He plans to allege that I kidnapped you and killed, but not only this, he plans to frame me for the disappearance of your other two

sisters as well.”

“He’s going to kill my sisters,” I say quietly. “Or have them killed, more like.”

Damien nods and I feel sick to my stomach. Not just at the horrifying plans of my disgusting dad but also at the way he intends to frame Damien for it all, to make him the bad guy while he collects on life insurance policies to pay off his debts.

He doesn’t deserve to take the fall for all of this. As terrifying as Damien is to me, he’s not a murderer. And he’s not out to get both my sisters as well.

No. The only one who should pay for this is my father. The fucked up, sick man who never, ever took responsibility for anything.

“You were right,” I breathe, looking at Damien.

“About?”

“My father,” I reply. “He’s so evil, he makes you look like a saint.”

He smiles sadly, then takes my hand and pulls me to his lap. I allow it. I feel this need, this pull towards him that I can never fucking explain but not only that, right now I need him in a new way. I need his comfort, for him to assure me that things are going to be okay.

Because although I’ve spent my life being independent and solving things on my own, this problem is too big, too dangerous for me to begin formulating a plan out of.

Damien directs my lips to his, tilting my face up by the chin and kissing me soft and slow. When he pulls away, he’s got that fire in his eyes again.

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 7:41 am

“I need you to tell me what to do,” Damien says.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that none of this is a problem anymore, if your scumbag of a father isn’t in the picture.”

I stare at him. Fiery eyes against clear, open ones. My body feels tired but not as tired as my mind does. I’ve spent the last twenty four hours in fight or flight mode, thinking I needed to defend myself against Damien when it was my own father who was the threat all along.

It’s not entirely surprising. I knew my father's friends growing up, his business associates. Several of them are in federal prison already. It’s not hard to infer that my father might have been involved in the same activities that landed his friends in prison.

He’s always been capable of something like this. Looking back, the clues and evidence are all there.

“Kristen,” Damien says, his voice urgent.

“You’re asking me if it’s okay for you to kill my father?” I ask slowly.

“Yes,” he says immediately. “Ordinarily, I would have done it right away rather than coming home to you.”

“Why didn’t you?”

He looks at me, his hands traveling around my waist, holding me close to him.

“Because you already think I’m a heartless monster,” he says in that deep, soft voice. “I feared that if I killed your father and then returned to tell you the news after the fact, you’d never believe me about my reasons. You’d turn away from me for good. Right now we still have a chance. I still have a fucking chance. And I’d like to keep it that way. So...here I am. Asking you whether it’s okay to do the thing that I know must be done. And if you tell me not to do it, I don’t know what I’m going to do. I’ll never be able to rest again knowing that he’s out there, that a man like that posed so much danger to you and is still allowed to live.”

His voice grows darker, more threatening with every words that he speaks until eventually I realize he’s not really talking to me at all, more like thinking aloud, announcing his violent intentions and desires to the room while his eyes go black. He’s not here in the room with me right now. He’s somewhere else, imagining what he’d like to do to my father, and now I’m reminded of how terrifying Damien really is. Of what he’s capable of.

Damien is a bad man, a scary man, and right now he’s determined to keep me safe whatever the cost.

“Okay,” I say quietly.

Damien looks at me, the frown lines between his eyes fading ever so slightly as he returns to the present and to me.

“Okay,” he agrees. “I’ll make sure it’s done tonight.”

And just like that, my father’s fate is sealed. I’m certain of it, because I’m certain that

this isn't something Damien is going to allow to fail. Like the vengeance he sought on Vincent only a month before, the first time he abducted me, he won't rest until the situation is made right.

Until my father is dead.

"Just, one thing," I whisper to him.

"Anything, kitten."

"Don't...don't let him suffer too much," I say.

He looks surprised and disappointed at the same time.

"You have no idea how sorry I am to hear you ask me that," he says in a bitter voice.

"But okay. Fine. No torture."

Torture.

He was already planning on it.

Would have done it, had I not asked him not to.

Everything about Damien Barlowe should send me running. I've done nothing but try to get away from him, all this time. And right now I think any logical person would continue to try to get away. But I don't want to.

Wrapping my arms around his neck, I lean my head on his shoulder and inhale deeply, wanting to memorize the smell of him, the feel of his hands on my waist, his body against mine.

Because my murderous stalker might turn out to be the only man who has ever treated me like I'm worth a damn.

11

Damien

The execution is quick.

Martin begs for his life and I let him run his stupid mouth for a little while before finally pulling the trigger, enjoying watching the little worm plead for his pathetic life.

It was tempting to do the usual, the worst in fact that I ever do to men like him. But I promised Kristen that there would be no torture, and I'd rather give Martin more mercy than he deserves than break a promise to my love. Even if she'd never find out that I did so.

"How do you want us to deal with it?" one of my men ask, looking down at Martin Redding's lifeless body at my feet. "The usual way?"

I shake my head.

"Let them find a body," I order him. "His debtors need to know that he's dead."

They'll settle his estate, and what's left of it will go to his wife. She'll be destitute but I don't feel too bad for her, knowing what I know of her now. It turns out his wife was more privy to the details of her husband's misdeeds than we thought. Not an accomplice, but in the know enough to realize that her husband was a danger to her children, especially Kristen.

And she did nothing to protect her.

As far as I'm concerned, she's lucky she gets to live at all. Living in poverty for the rest of her life is the closest thing to justice I could wish for her.

"Where should we leave it?" the man asks. "Here?"

I shake my head.

"No," I say. "Let's put it somewhere interesting...the front steps of the courthouse should work. Let's show those corrupt fucks what actual justice looks like."

When I get back to my place, one of my guards is standing by downstairs.

"Where is she?" I ask.

"Kitchen," he says, nodding in its direction.

"She should be sleeping," I reply.

"Yes, sir," he says. "We tried to tell her that. But she kept insisting she wanted to bake."

"Bake," I say dryly. "My fiancé tries to kill me twice in two days and says she'd like to bake in the kitchen, where the knives and hot things are, and you...let her."

He nods, as though he too understands how ridiculous the situation is.

"I'll escort you there," he says. "Lee hasn't let her out of his sight the entire time. I

know how it sounds. But I honestly think she just wanted to bake something.”

I curse under my breath and lead the way to the kitchen. As soon as I walk in, the sights and smells surprise me.

Kristen, showered and clean in a long blue robe that I bought for her, her hair pulled back in a neat ponytail. She’s humming to herself, seemingly relaxed as she mixes batter in a bowl.

When we arrive in the doorway, she looks up. Specifically, she looks at me. Her eyes are bright, happy and sad at the same time.

“Hey,” she says softly.

“Hey,” I reply.

I’m scanning the scene. The knife block is full, nothing missing there. But the kitchen is full of things she could use as a weapon, all sorts of sharp and heavy implements that I wouldn’t have trusted her with earlier today.

Something’s changed. I’m nearly certain of it. But I can’t be sure. Because my girl is smart, she’s sly, and I can hardly keep up as it is.

I glance at Lee and he shrugs.

“What are you doing?” I ask Kristen.

“Do you like chocolate cake?” she asks me. “I thought it would be nice to celebrate. I turn twenty-four tomorrow.”

Fuck.

“Tomorrow,” I say. “Tomorrow is your birthday. I forgot. I’m sorry.”

She smiles fully now, no longer reluctant.

“You know, of all the things I expected you to apologize for, forgetting my birthday isn’t it,” she says.

I look at Lee and the guard beside me.

“You’re dismissed,” I say to them both.

They look as though they want to argue, but again, they know better. My men are trained to follow orders, even when the orders seem to defy logic. And my order right now, to leave me alone with a woman who’s attacked me every time she’s gotten the chance, does defy logic.

“You shouldn’t be making your own dessert,” I say. “It’s your birthday. Others should be baking for you.”

“You’re welcome to take over if you want,” she says, raising a brow.

I come closer, taking the spoon from her hand. The batter smells fucking amazing, but not as amazing as Kristen looks.

She doesn’t move away from me when I come close to mix the batter, leaning against the counter and watching me.

“I always have pie on my birthdays normally,” she murmurs. “Never cake.”

“That’s unconventional,” I comment.

“Someone ruined birthday cakes for me a long time ago,” she shrugs. “So I always have birthday pie. But you don’t have the ingredients for pie in your pantry and...”

“And?”

“And I thought maybe you could help un-ruin birthday cake for me,” she says, looking up at me shyly.

“Who ruined birthday cake for you?” I ask. “And why?”

“If I tell you, are you going to kill them, too?”

“Maybe.”

She laughs, but I don’t.

Because I’m not fucking kidding.

“It was a long time ago,” she says, shaking her head. “I feel dumb that I let it affect

me so much, but that's how it is. I've always been heavy, including when I was a kid. And this person used to cut me the tiniest piece of birthday cake ever because they didn't want me to gain weight. We're talking razor thin slices of cake. It was practically pointless."

"Your own birthday?" I ask. "Like it was your birthday and your cake?"

She nods.

"That's fucked up," I say. "You should get to eat whatever the hell you want. Especially on your birthday. Your weight is fine. Your weight is perfect, actually."

Her cheeks color.

"Don't do that, don't lie to me and tell me I'm not bigger."

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 7:41 am

“I’m not lying to you,” I say. “Yes, you’re plus size. Who gives a shit what size you are? You’re the most tempting woman I’ve ever fucking seen. So much that I’ve stolen you twice now.”

And I’ll do it again and again if you try to run away, sweetheart.

“You really think so?”

“Of course I fucking do.”

I continue to stir the batter. Out of the corner of my eye I see Kristen reach for my robe and my defenses go up in the blink of an eye. Dropping the spoon in the mixing bowl, I take her and shove her against the cabinets behind her.

“Nice try, kitten,” I say, my face inches from hers.

Her eyes are wide, shocked, and she trembles against me.

“I wasn’t going to...”

“What is it now, baby?” I ask her, patting down the front of her robe, the pockets, searching for the hard and sharp object she’s concealing. I find nothing but her soft curves. “A knife? A hammer, maybe? What did you find for me this time?”

“Nothing,” she gasps. “I just wanted to show you.”

“Show me what?” I ask.

“Your surprise,” she says, pushing against my chest. “If you’d let me finish. God.”

I back away warily.

“You can’t blame me for being on guard,” I say to her, still watching her hands for any sign of sudden movement.

“I know,” she breathes. “But I don’t have anything. Not like that. I wanted to show you what I found in the closet. Something you bought for me.”

With my muscles tense, still ready to move fast in case this is a trap, I watch as Kristen unties her robe and lets it drop to the floor.

12

Kristen

Damien watches me warily as I let the robe drop. But once it’s on the floor his gaze changes from suspicion to desire. Pure, unfiltered desire.

“I didn’t expect to see you in this for a long time,” he murmurs, coming closer. “If ever.”

“You said you’d force me to marry you,” I point out.

“Yes,” he replies, his voice growing hoarse. “Marry me, but not sleep with me. That was never my plan, Kristen. I’ve told you a thousand times that I won’t take you until you ask. Until you beg.”

He steps towards me and walks us both backwards until I’m pressed against the cabinets again, his hard cock pressing against my stomach as he runs his hands over

the white lace cups of my lingerie. It's bridal lingerie with a touch of kink - a mix of delicate floral lace and thick straps with rose gold buckles and circular loops located on various parts of the straps. Along with the bodysuit, there were white cuffs, four of them for my ankles and wrists. They have loops too, convenient places for ropes and chains to be attached.

When I first saw it this morning, it scared me. I ignored it, opting for the purple lingerie to use in my trap, leaving the bridal BDSM gear in the back of the closet.

But I couldn't take my mind off of it. Especially after dinner, when Damien left to "take care of business" as he put it, leaving me alone to wait up for him, wondering where we go from here, after Damien deals with the danger, when it's back to just him and me together in this house, with him determined to march me down the aisle and marry me.

"And even then, even if you begged me for my cock, I didn't picture fucking you in this ensemble for a while," he says, brushing his fingers against the cuff on my wrist. "It takes comfort to do the things I had in mind when I bought this. It's not something you do for your first time."

"Why not?" I ask.

His green eyes meet mine.

"Because it requires trust," he says simply. "To surrender control and submit to another person, you have to trust them. Trust that they won't hurt you. Trust that they won't abuse the control. Trust that when you say stop, when you say the safe word, that they'll respect your wishes."

"And who says I don't trust you in that way?"

“Because earlier...”

“Earlier isn’t now,” I say. “Earlier I thought you were a monster.”

“I am a monster,” Damien replies.

“No you’re not,” I shake my head.

“Yes,” Damien says roughly, his hands reaching down to cup my ass. “Believe me, pet. I’m a monster. The kind that haunts your nightmares.”

“I’ve never had a nightmare about you,” I breathe. “Only good dreams. And I want to find out if it’s as good in real life as it is when I’m dreaming about it at night.”

Damien is quiet.

“I’m begging for it,” I say, sliding down the cabinet door behind me, dropping to my knees. “Please, Damien. I want you to fuck me in this. I want you to show me what you planned when you bought this for me, and I don’t want you to hold me back. Please.”

I reach for his zipper, then pull his cock out. It’s so thick, so long, and I have no idea how something like it could fit inside of me. I stroke the length of it and then position my mouth at the tip, parting my lips and gliding my tongue over the head. Groaning, he braces himself against the cabinet door and leans his hips in, sliding his cock past my parted lips and into my mouth.

I've never done this before, so I'm just guessing, uncertain in my movements. I make a vacuum and suck hard, and his growl of approval tells me that I'm on the right track. He thrusts more deeply into my mouth hits resistance, my hands on his thighs to hold him back while my eyes begin to water. He's so big that I can hardly fit him inside my mouth and he's about to hit the back of my throat.

He slides his length out slowly, all the way, and I watch it in fascination, the way he's coated in my spit now, his own arousal still leaking from the tip.

"That's enough of that for tonight," Damien hisses. "I don't want your mouth tonight. I want your cunt."

My heart jumps at his words and I feel nervous and excited at the same fucking time.

Damien pulls me up to my feet and holds me close to him, stroking my hair, looking down at me.

"I don't want to hurt you," he says. "But this is going to hurt. It will feel good too, I'll make sure of it. But it will hurt the first time."

"I don't care," I say. And then to eliminate any further reluctance from him, I say, "Please. I want you to do this. Please."

That's the magic word. His jaw tightens and he seems to make up his mind. In a swift movement, he picks me up and slings me over his shoulder, slapping my bare ass cheek with his hand hard enough to make me yelp in pain.

"Then let's go," he says.

“What’s the safe word?”

“Purple,” I breathe.

I didn’t choose the word at random. It’s the color of the ceiling, the only place I’m able to look now that Damien has restrained me.

It’s only now that I realize fully what Damien meant when he said that this would require me to surrender control to him. With my wrists and ankles tied down on the bed in an X formation, I’m so bare, so open to him, and if I ever want to get out of this room again it’ll require him to free me from the ropes that are holding me in place.

“Good girl,” he murmurs.

The bed is in the center of this deep purple room, covered in the same silky sheets that Damien has upstairs. Damien stands at the foot of the bed, completely naked, his cock hard and pointed between my legs.

I wait with ragged breaths for him to do the thing I’ve waited for, for so long. But when he climbs into the bed he doesn’t position his cock between my legs.

“Not yet,” he says, reading the disappointment in my body language.

He lowers himself between my legs, bringing his face so close to my pussy, and then I feel his tongue on me.

“Fuck,” I gasp, my arms pulling at the ropes. I can barely move an inch, can barely see what Damien is doing, my gaze on the purple ceiling above me until I close my eyes and see nothing at all, the feeling too intense for me to keep my eyes open through it all.

“I knew you’d taste good,” Damien says, coming up for air. He pushes a finger inside of me and I groan in pleasure. “I fucking knew it. I’ve wanted to taste your sweet pussy since I first laid eyes on you. I’ve wanted to conquer you since you put that fucking bullet in me. And now look at you. Begging for me.”

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 7:41 am

He's right. He's so right. None of the words that spill from my lips as I writhe beneath him are intelligible, just a wordless plea for more. Begging for more, begging for his cock just like he promised I would.

"Look at you. You've never even had a cock before, you've waited all this fucking time, and now you're begging for mine," he continued. "I'll be the first cock inside of you and I'll be the fucking last. You belong to me now."

"Yes," I whimper. "Don't stop. Please."

"I love that fucking sound," Damien says. "I love it when you beg for me."

He dips his head between my legs again and licks me harder, faster. My hips buck. With my legs tied to either end of the footboard, I'm helpless beneath him, at his mercy as he devours me.

I nearly scream in frustration when he pulls away from me abruptly.

"Not yet," he says, climbing over me, the head of his cock brushing against my sensitive clit. "I want to feel you coming around me. I want you to come on my cock while I take you for the first time."

He pushes against me. I'm soaked, but he still struggles to enter me.

"It's not going to fit," I whisper.

"It'll fit," he growls. "You're going to take all of my cock, and you're going to beg

for it.”

“Oh god,” I groan as he pushes harder against me, his cock parting my slit and pressing inside.

The head of his cock is inside of me and already I can feel the pain that Damien warned me of. He’s so large and it feels impossible that he’s even inside of me this much. And he still has so much length to go.

He pauses his hips and dips his head down, grabbing a handful of my breast and sucking my nipple hard, and then the other.

“Oh, please,” I gasp.

“I could listen to you begging for my cock all day,” he says in my ear, then drags his tongue from the top of my neck to the curve of my collarbone. Then he pushes his hips against me. Another inch of his shaft slides into me, and then another.

“Good girl,” he murmurs in my ear. “Taking my cock so well. Your body was fucking made for this. You were made to take my cock, Kristen. To take my come.”

He pushes farther and then farther. Every inch brings new pain, a faint pinching along with the stretching sensation. He’s so fucking big, I can’t believe it when I feel his hips hit my thighs, signaling that he’s all the way in.

“You’re fucking mine now,” Damien says. “I’ve been thinking about this since I met you. I’ve been watching you ever since then, Kristen. Watching you day and night. Watching you play with your little cunt while you say my name. Like you were teasing me. Like you fucking knew I was there watching you.”

I shouldn’t be turned on by his admission, the fact that he was stalking me for a

month, determined to have me after failing to keep me and take him home the first time. But I want him too and I revel in the feeling of being wanted so much, so badly by this powerful man.

He leans back on the bed so that he can see my body, brushing his palms on my inner thighs as he begins to rock against me, his cock pushing in and out of me, just an inch at a time but even that feels like it's almost too much. And then his fingers are on me, stroking my clit using my own wetness as lube, bringing me back up to new heights, the pleasure mounting inside of me, tightening like a rubber band begging for release. He pushes his cock into me harder, faster, pushing me from the inside while he torments my clit with his fingers, his powerful body pressing me down into the bed with every movement.

"Come for me," Damien growls. "Come on my cock while I fuck you. Let go. Come."

I can't hold back anymore. I do exactly as he says, surrendering everything to him, tightening around him as I let the waves of pleasure flow through my body, from my core to my tethered limbs.

He doesn't hold back after I climax. If I thought it was a lot before, it's nothing compared to now. Fully thrusting, pulling his cock almost all the way out of me and then shoving it back inside. At first, it's pain and pleasure at the same time. Slowly, the pain ebbs away, giving way to pure pleasure, the best feeling of fullness as his cock drives inside of me, his hips slamming into me. He's brutal, unrelenting, forceful in the way he pushes inside of me, owning every inch of me from the inside out.

I can tell when he's coming because he leans down, caging my head between his arms as he kisses me hard on the mouth, his tongue pushing past my lips and sliding against mine while his cock swells and pushes more deeply inside of me than ever

before, emptying himself deep within me, every last drop.

We both fall down from the peak together, catching our breath. And I feel changed, different, though not just from the physical sex. I feel different about Damien, having seen the way he planned to use my body, the pleasure he promised coming true, as well as his promise to keep me safe, to be careful with me.

In just one day, my feelings about this man have completely switched up, turned around. From hate to love in such a short span of time.

“Damien,” I breathe, smiling.

“Yes?”

“I think you were right yesterday in the car,” I say.

He looks at me questioningly.

Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 7:41 am

“I think I am a slut. For you only,” I add quickly. “For you, I think I could definitely be a slut.”

Epilogue

Damien

It's been a year since the day I took Kristen from the lake house. The trust and love has only grown since then, and today I'm proud to say that Kristen walked down the aisle to me -voluntarily.

“You make a beautiful bride,” I say to her for the hundredth time, kissing her neck.

“Damien,” Kristen whispers. “There are people watching us.”

“Let them watch,” I growl. “They already know you belong to me. They saw you say your vows. They see the ring on your finger.”

“Yes, but just because we're married that doesn't mean you can practically mount me in public,” Kristen laughs.

I pull away and give her a look.

“No,” she says, her eyes widening. “That's not a dare.”

I look at the crowd of onlookers, friends and family gathered to watch our first dance as husband and wife,

“I don’t know,” I say. “I think public sex could be the next frontier for us. We’ve explored so much already. Why not?”

“Don’t you dare,” she says.

I grin.

“Okay, so not at our wedding,” I say. “What about our honeymoon? We’ll be out of the country...nobody we know in our day to day life would be around.”

“No way,” Kristen says.

“Our honeymoon suite has a balcony,” I remind her. “I could always fuck you over the rail of that.”

“No.”

“What about the pool?” I say. “I could take you in the pool.”

“Gross. A pool? No thanks.”

I smile.

“Okay,” I say. “What about in the car I arranged to take us to the airport? It’s got blacked out windows...a partition between us and the driver...soundproofing. Nobody could hear your screams, nobody could see you getting fucked like a little slut in your pretty white dress.”

She doesn’t respond, but I can tell her breathing has changed, her chest rising and falling faster against mine. The way it always does when I talk to her like this, especially when I drop the ‘s’-word.

“You know I wouldn’t let anyone see you,” I continue softly.

“I know,” she says. “You’re too jealous to allow that.”

“Not jealous,” I say. “Possessive. Possessive because you belong to me and nobody else. Any other man looking at you in that way is looking upon what’s mine.”

She doesn’t reply.

“Do you disagree?” I challenge her, enjoying our playful banter and not ready to stop, to have to return to the crowd and greet all of our guests, to do the wedding speeches and bouquet tosses and toasts and all the other obligatory wedding stuff.

Like my wife, I was excited for our wedding...but not because I like weddings; I was excited because today Kristen is officially legally bound to me. Forever, if I have anything to say about it.

And now that she belongs to me, all I want is to take her away from here and have her, fuck her in this dress knowing she’s officially Mrs. Kristen Barlowe.

Wife of a billionaire, a criminal reformed into a decent man. Through good deeds, maybe I’ll eventually make up for the bad ones in y past. But even if I don’t manage to do that, marrying Kristen might just be enough to save my wicked soul.

She’s the light in my life, the positive in the darkness that used to be all that I know. Reunited with my best friend Vince, she was the final missing piece in my life. The woman. My woman.

“I don’t disagree,” Kristen says finally. “I belong to you, Damien. Only you.”