



The Hitman's Forbidden Obsession

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Description: He was hired to kill her. Now he'll kill anyone who tries to touch her.

Dante Reed doesn't ask questions. The job comes in, the money hits his account, and the target disappears. Permanently.

But the second he sees Avery Sinclair, everything changes.

She's soft. Curvy. Too innocent. And yet he knows, down to his soul, that she's his.

Instead of pulling the trigger, he makes a vow: He'll protect her. Obsess over her. Make her his.

Avery has no idea the gorgeous older man who sweeps her off her feet was paid to end her life.

She just knows he makes her feel seen. Desired. Treasured in ways she's never known.

Until the truth comes out... and then she's forced to question everything they built.

Total Pages (Source): 26

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 1:53 am

Chapter One

Dante

The woman behind the bar gives me a smile I don't return.

Not because she isn't pretty. She is. Young, polished, maybe a little too polished. Hair too neat. Smile too practiced. She's been trained to serve luxury with a side of flirtation. It's all part of the experience.

I glance away and notice from the corner of my eye when she turns her attention to the next customer.

I take a slow sip of my bourbon. Neat. Two fingers. It burns on the way down and I welcome the heat. Not because I need it, of course. I haven't needed anything in years. But it keeps my hands busy while I wait.

The bar is all dim lights and darker shadows, tucked into the back of the kind of hotel that costs more per night than most people make in a month. The air smells like expensive perfume and ambition. It's late, but not dead. People here don't sleep until the deals are done. Until the secrets are buried.

And there are plenty of secrets here.

My table's angled toward the room, the mirror behind the bar giving me a clean sweep of the entrance. I clock the couple near the fireplace. She's laughing too hard, while he's checking his phone every three seconds. The woman to my right is here to

be noticed; but I'd bet good money the man she's waiting for won't show. The guy near the back corner is carrying concealed. He's favoring his right hip, and too stiff in the shoulders to be a civilian.

I don't look like a threat, and that's the point. My suit is dark, tailored, forgettable. Not flashy enough to draw attention, but sharp enough that I blend in at a place like this.

People don't look at me twice. That's how I like it.

I'm here for a job. The kind of job that ends in silence and a still body. Nothing new. Nothing personal.

She arrives right on time.

I know it's her before she even crosses the room. Mid-twenties, designer heels clicking too loud against polished marble. Red lips. Blown-out hair. That high-maintenance glow of someone used to getting what she wants without asking twice.

She's beautiful. But cold.

Not like ice. Ice is natural. This is something practiced. A mask lacquered on thick. She's trying too hard to project power, which means she doesn't actually have any.

She spots me, and her posture shifts. Chin lifts. Hips sway. The look she gives me tells me she thinks she's in control here.

She's not.

She slides into the table across from me without asking, and drops her expensive clutch onto the table like it's worthless. Her perfume clouds the air, sweet and

suffocating.

“I didn’t realize you’d be so handsome,” she says, giving me a once-over.

I don’t answer. I just stare and watch her fidget.

She flags the server and orders a drink. Some limited-edition French champagne that comes with a four-digit price tag. I watch her fingers wrap around the stem once it’s delivered.

She doesn’t take a sip.

“So,” she says, leaning forward just enough to show off the sharp lines of her dress. “You came highly recommended.”

I let the compliment fall flat.

This isn’t a social call. She knows what I do. I know what she wants. There’s no need to pretend this is anything but transactional.

She holds my gaze for a beat too long, still trying to flirt. Still trying to control the room.

“Do you have the details I need?” I ask, drawing the topic of conversation back to business.

The woman sighs, clearly frustrated that she’s not getting the attention she feels she deserves. Then she reaches into her clutch and slides a thin manila envelope across the table.

“Her name is inside,” she says. “Photo. Address. Routine. You’ll find everything you

need. I want her... taken care of.”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 1:53 am

She stumbles on the words, clearly carrying the guilt of what she's doing. But she does it anyway.

“And the payment?” I ask.

“I paid the agreed amount to the account you specified.”

I nod. I already knew that, but I wanted her to say it. Confirmation that we're both on the same page. When I'd given her the number I wanted for the hit during our earlier call, an obscene figure with six zeros, I'd expected her to balk. But she hadn't. She'd made the payment within the hour. Given the fact she can't be any older than twenty-five, I imagine she's using her Daddy's money to make dirty deals. Or maybe her rich husband's.

One quick glance at the big diamond on her finger beside a simple gold band tells me it's the poor husband footing the bill.

I don't really care, though, so long as I get what I'm owed.

I finally open the envelope. Skim the details without really taking any of them in yet. I just make sure I've got everything I need. The photo is turned face down, but I don't touch it.

“I'll take care of it,” I tell her, my voice firm enough to let her know the conversation is over.

She doesn't get the hint, though.

“You don’t want to know why?”

I look at her then. Just long enough to let her see that I’m not interested in her story. Her motives. Her drama.

“No,” I say. “That’s none of my business.”

“Fine,” she says, standing. “Just make sure she disappears.”

She’s halfway across the lobby before I let out a slow breath and take another sip of my drink.

The bourbon burns a little less this time.

I stare at the envelope on the table like it’s just another job. Another forgettable set of coordinates in someone else’s vendetta. But something feels different this time. Some instinct I can’t name is clawing at my insides, telling me this is no ordinary job.

I flip the photo over and the world stops.

She’s sitting at a restaurant table, a cake in front of her, one of those sparkler candles frozen mid-glow. Her hands are clutched under her chin, elbows on the table, as she leans forward just slightly, smiling straight into the camera.

No. Not just smiling. She’s beaming. Unfiltered joy radiating off her like sunlight through stained glass.

She’s wearing a floral summer dress. Soft, feminine. The neckline dips just enough to tease the generous swell of her breasts, the fabric stretched lovingly over a body made for sin. My palms itch with a need to touch her. I want to sink my fingers into her soft curves, anchor her to me while I wreck her soft and slow. She’s everything

ripe and sensual and holy in one perfect frame.

There's a touch of makeup on her. Just enough to highlight what's already devastating. Glossy lips. Long lashes. Those warm, doe-brown eyes filled with a light that should never know darkness.

My hands curl into fists under the table.

Fuck.

It's not just that she's beautiful. It's not just that she's soft, and curvy, and sweet-looking enough to make a lesser man fall to his knees.

It's that this picture, this tiny, frozen moment of her birthday, feels like something sacred. A slice of innocence. Joy. Life.

And someone wants to erase it.

To erase her.

The sound I make in my throat isn't human. I look at her and all I can think is: Mine.

Mine to protect. To worship. To ruin, if she'll let me.

I want to press my mouth to every inch of her and whisper filth between prayers. I want to wrap my arms around her and never let another soul close. I want her safe, spoiled, sated, and so full of my attention she forgets the world ever tried to take her from it.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 1:53 am

She's mine.

She doesn't know it yet, but I'm coming for her.

Not to kill her.

To claim her.

Chapter Two

Dante

The black SUV feels like a tomb, but I don't move. I'm parked across the street from the library, my eyes glued to the glass front of the building like a moth to a flame. Early afternoon sunlight filters through the windows, lighting up the quiet sanctuary inside.

There she is. Avery. My angel.

She moves with an effortless grace, stacking books, helping patrons, laughing softly with coworkers like she doesn't have a care in the world. Like there isn't someone out there plotting her death. And even though I can't hear it, I already know that laugh sounds like a prayer.

Her pale pink dress hugs curves that should be for my eyes only. Petite but lush. Innocent but ripe. I see the way the fabric clings just enough, the way she nibbles her lower lip whenever she's concentrating. Every motion she makes is like a hymn

written in flesh and bone.

She's not just beautiful. She's pure. Soft. Too damn soft to survive in a world like mine.

I'm the devil sitting across the street, watching an angel whose light could burn me to ash. But that light... God, it makes me want to corrupt her. To pull her into my darkness and make her moan my name until her sweet voice is hoarse.

I shouldn't be here. Not just because of what I am, but because I'm supposed to be the one who ends lives, not saves them. Yet here I am, watching her, driven by some sick kind of obsession.

She's my angel, and no one is going to hurt her on my watch.

I'll shadow every step she takes, shield her from every threat. Because she belongs to me.

And I'll protect what's mine, no matter the cost.

A yellow school bus pulls up across the street, its brakes hissing like a beast exhaling steam. A moment later, a wave of tiny bodies pour into the library. The kids, who are maybe in first or second grade, are being herded by two harried looking teachers.

As I watch, Avery steps out from behind the front desk with that soft, radiant smile already blooming across her face. She kneels to greet the kids, crouching low so her summer dress fans out around her like petals. She speaks to them on their level, her face animated, arms moving as she gestures, expressive and warm.

She's glowing.

And it hits me all over again, like a punch to the chest. No. Deeper than that. Like a shift in the earth beneath me. A rewiring of instinct. Of purpose.

She was made for this.

Not just the books. Not just the library. But the way her eyes shine when one of the kids hugs her. The way she tilts her head to listen, giving a little boy her full attention while he babbles about... whatever it is that kids babble about.

That softness in her, it's real. Not a mask. Not a performance. It's who she is.

And it's everything I never knew I needed.

I grip the steering wheel, knuckles whitening. She was made to be mine, and the idea that someone wants to hurt her seems like the worst crime on earth. I want her bound to me in every possible way. I want to bury myself inside her, claim every sweet, fertile inch of her until she's full of me.

I want to see her glow like this every damn day, with our child in her arms and my ring on her finger.

I'd give her anything she asks for. A thousand books. A house in the clouds. Her name written in the stars.

But most of all, I want her round with my baby. With all the babies I plan to have with her. A whole future together built on love and happiness.

Because she deserves it. The peace. The joy. The kind of safety you don't have to earn.

And I'm going to make sure she gets it, even if I have to burn the world to the ground

to keep it that way.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 1:53 am

My phone buzzes against the dash, pulling me out of my thoughts.

Rafe.

I don't take my eyes off Avery as I answer. "Talk."

He chuckles. "Good to hear you too, Dante. You're lucky I'm better with code than you are with manners."

"Name," I say, cutting through the banter. "And the address."

He pauses, sobering up. "I managed to track the payment. It came through a buried chain of crypto wallets from someone called Victoria Sinclair." I hear keys tapping in the background as he reels off the address. The same address in Avery Sinclair's file.

My pulse goes still. My body doesn't move. Not a twitch.

But inside? A switch flips.

"You okay, Dante?" Rafe asks. "Need help with anything else?"

"No. I'm good."

I end the call and drop the phone onto the passenger seat. My hand curls into a fist against my thigh, and I know I am not good. Not at all.

Victoria Sinclair. Same last name. Same fucking house.

I say her name again in my mind like it's venom on my tongue.

Who the hell hires a hitman to take out one of their own relatives? A jealous sister? A cousin she doesn't get along with?

No.

I think of the woman from the bar. Mid-twenties. Polished. Poison in heels. Not enough warmth behind her smile to pass for a blood relative.

Too young to be Avery's mother. Too bitter to be a sibling.

Stepmother. That fits.

The kind of woman who marries for power. Sees a young beautiful girl as a threat. Wants the house, the money, the control... without competition.

And Avery? Avery is pure light. She wouldn't see it until the knife was already in her back.

My angel's been living with a snake, and I bet she didn't have a clue.

My jaw tightens as I watch her through the window. She's crouched again, tying a little girl's shoe, smile bright and guileless. Innocent. Defenseless.

And I was supposed to kill her?

I grip the steering wheel until the leather groans. My knuckles go bloodless. Leaning back in my seat, I drag in a breath so deep it scrapes across the cage of my ribs,

Avery isn't safe. Not in that house. Not for another goddamn second.

Which means this is it. I'm done watching. It's time to make my move.

I straighten in my seat and roll up my sleeves, like I'm heading into the fight of my life. And maybe I am, because I'll do whatever it takes to make sure nobody ever lays a finger on my angel.

"She doesn't know me yet," I murmur to myself. "But she will. By the end of tonight, she'll never want to leave my side."

I kill the engine and step out of the car, the heat from the sun washing over me. My stride is measured as I cross the street, every step deliberate. Focused.

When I reach the front doors of the library, I pause for a second, my hand on the handle and my breath low in my lungs. Fate stands on the other side of the glass.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 1:53 am

Then I push forward, and the world narrows to a single point.

Avery.

She's across the room, bent at one of the lower shelves, slipping a children's book into place. The light filters down through the windows and hits her hair like a spotlight. Soft. Glowing.

The kids are buzzing with energy around her, teachers calling out names, trying to wrangle them all towards the exit. A few laugh. One cries. But she's calm in the chaos. Graceful. Steady.

And then she looks up, her eyes finding mine, and everything else drops away.

She freezes. Her lips part on a sharp inhale, like the breath has been stolen straight from her lungs. And then a sweet blush rises. Slow, pink, innocent.

My chest tightens, my own breath stolen.

There it is. That spark. That flash of something wild and wanting on her face,

She feels it too. She's already mine.

I take a step forward, slow and sure, the ghost of a smile tugging at my mouth. And the moment stretches, full of all the firsts waiting to happen between us, and no chance in hell of turning back.

Chapter Three

Avery

Who the hell is that?

I freeze with a worn copy of *The Giving Tree* in my hands, my breath catching somewhere between my lungs and my throat. Because the man who just walked through the doors looks like he'd be more at home on a movie set than in a library.

Tall. Broad. Confident in that dangerous, movie-villain kind of way. He's wearing tailored slacks and a dark blue shirt, sleeves rolled to the elbow like he wants everyone around him to notice his strong, veiny forearms. And God, do I notice them. His hair's dark and a little tousled, like he ran his fingers through it instead of bothering with a comb. And his jaw... wow. It looks sharp enough to cut glass, shadowed with the kind of stubble that makes me want to reach out and touch it.

His eyes lock onto mine like he was looking for me. Like he knew I'd be standing here, halfway through re-shelving a stack of children's books, sweating mildly and wishing I'd chosen to wear something a little nicer to work this morning.

And then he smiles.

It's not a passing smile. Not the kind you give to a stranger out of politeness. No. It's slow. Personal. Laced with something I can't name but definitely feel low in my stomach, and in other places that I definitely shouldn't be thinking about at work.

I look away fast.

Which is dumb, because that only makes it worse. My cheeks go up in flames, my pulse thudding loud enough in my ears to drown out the sound of the teachers calling

the kids back to the bus.

I really need to pull myself together.

So he's hot. So what? That doesn't mean he's interested in me. Guys like that don't look twice at girls like me. Not when they could have their pick of influencer models and Pilates instructors who don't spend their mornings wiping jam off the covers of library books.

I hug the book against my body like it might protect me from whatever the hell that look was. Which is when I realize my arms are awkwardly crossed in front of my stomach, like some subconscious part of me is trying to shield my softest parts from someone who probably wouldn't want to see them, anyway.

That's when he starts walking towards me.

Oh no.

Oh, no no no.

Each step is smooth, unhurried, like he knows exactly what kind of effect he's having and enjoys it. The air around me thickens. I seriously consider ducking behind the biography section and fake-shelving some Churchill until he leaves.

But I don't. I just stand there, frozen like some wide-eyed idiot, hoping I don't spontaneously combust.

He stops in front of me, just close enough that I have to tilt my head to meet his gaze. And sweet hell, those eyes up close? Dark, unreadable, with flecks of something lighter. Maybe gray or green or blue. I can't even tell because I'm too busy drowning in them.

“Hi,” he says, and I swear my brain forgets how language works. His voice is low. Smooth. Like velvet dipped in sin.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 1:53 am

“H... Hi,” I manage. Oh great. Now I stutter.

He offers his hand. “I’m Dante.”

My name’s stuck somewhere behind my teeth. His hand is large, calloused, warm. I hesitate a second too long, caught between the instinct to keep hiding behind my crossed arms and the overwhelming need to feel him.

I give in and take it.

His grip is firm but careful, like I’m something fragile. His thumb brushes over the back of my knuckles.

And he doesn’t let go.

Tingles shoot from my hand straight up my arm, scattering into my chest like fireflies. My whole body is suddenly aware of him. How close he is, how he smells like spice and something darker. Masculine. Unapologetic.

I try to breathe. Try to remember my own name. Try not to think about how badly I want to know what that voice sounds like when he’s whispering filthy things in my ear.

He finally releases my hand, but his eyes don’t stray. Not once.

“I’m Avery,” I say eventually, my voice quieter than I mean it to be,

His smile deepens. “Avery,” he repeats, helping me to realize just how much I like it when he says my name.

And now I’m wondering what it would sound like if he groaned it against my skin.

No. Nope. This is a library. I am a librarian. This is not an appropriate place to give in to the kind of fantasies I want to have about this man.

I clear my throat and glance down, suddenly feeling overwhelmed by the huge mountain of a man standing in front of me.

“Can I help you find something?” I ask, because apparently I’ve forgotten how to speak like a normal person and that’s the best I can do. “In the library, I mean.”

He doesn’t answer right away. Just watches me like I’m the only person in the room with him right now.

Then, softly, he says, “You’re beautiful, you know that?”

My brain short-circuits. There’s no way he just said that. Not to me.

My first instinct is to laugh, except nothing about his expression says he’s joking. No smirk. No hint of irony. Just steady, matter-of-fact confidence, like he’s saying the sky is blue, or the earth is round.

I shift my weight, suddenly fighting the urge to run off and find a place to hide. Although, the truth is, there is nowhere else I would rather be, even if his attention is intense enough to leave me more than a little flustered.

“Thank you,” I murmur, and the next words fall out afterwards even though I don’t mean them to. “But you don’t have to say that.”

“I’m not the kind of guy who says things he doesn’t mean,” he replies, completely unbothered. “And I don’t lie. Especially not about something this obvious.”

I blink up at him as my brain takes a few seconds to catch up to what he’s saying.

One corner of his lip quirks upwards into a small grin that should not be as sexy as it is. “You walk into a room and light it up. You smile, and people lean in. You’ve got that quiet glow people notice. Including me.”

Okay, so apparently I’m going to die here. In the picture book section. At the hands of the most confident, infuriatingly attractive man alive.

My cheeks are burning. My heart is racing. And he’s still just watching me, like my flustered reaction is his favorite thing to witness.

I try to laugh it off. “Do you always come on this strong?”

His eyes flicker with something. Amusement maybe. Or hunger. “No. Never. But then I’ve never met anyone as breath-taking as you before now, either.”

A soft whimper escapes, and I quickly clamp my lower lip between my teeth to prevent any more from following it out.

His eyes widen slightly when he hears the noise, his nostrils flaring. Oh. That look in his eyes is definitely hunger. That’s all too obvious now. And he’s looking at me like I’m the sweetest dessert.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 1:53 am

I squeeze my thighs together in a futile attempt to dampen the tingling sensation that has appeared between them.

“I want to take you out to dinner tonight,” he says, his voice steady. “When your shift ends here.”

“Tonight?” I ask, my voice little more than a surprised squeak.

He nods. “I know it’s sudden, but I don’t want to wait. When you see something worth chasing, you chase it.”

Oh.

My knees feel weak, and I lean casually against the shelf beside me, relying on it to keep me upright under the force of his attention.

My voice is small when it comes. “Okay. Sure. Dinner sounds... great.”

His lips twitch like he knew all along that I’d say yes. “Good.”

I let the word hang between us for a beat longer than necessary, then clear my throat and glance back towards the children’s section. “I should probably... get back to work.”

The smile he gives me is something softer now. Like he’s looking right through me and seeing every single naughty thought I’ve been desperately trying to suppress. “Of course,” he says, voice warm as velvet. “I’ll be right here when you’re done.”

I blink. “Here?”

He turns to a little display table a few steps away and grabs a hardcover without even looking at the title. “This looks good.”

And before I can ask anything else, he walks over to the small couch in the corner of the library and sits down like he’s got all the time in the world. Like watching me shelve books and talk to customers is a perfectly normal way to spend an afternoon.

I stand there for a second, frozen, gripping the book in my hands and forgetting where it was supposed to go.

He’s really just... staying to watch me work?

A ridiculous grin tugs at my lips, and I duck my head, turning away quickly so he doesn’t see it.

My face is already burning. And now my heart is doing a strange, fluttery thing every time I feel his eyes on me. Which is constantly. Because even though I’m trying not to look, every time I sneak a glance over my shoulder, he’s right there. Still watching. Still smiling.

It’s flattering. Overwhelming. Addictive.

I move through the stacks, pretending to straighten books that are already perfectly aligned, just to give myself a reason to take another peek at him.

He hasn’t touched the book he grabbed. Hasn’t looked away once.

And that should make me feel self-conscious... but it doesn’t somehow. No one has ever looked at me like this before, and I think I might actually like it.

He's looking at me like I'm already his, and he's just waiting for me to figure it out.

A part of me hopes he is right.

Chapter Four

Dante

Avery sits across from me in a quiet booth, tucked into the back corner of a dimly lit Italian restaurant. White linen tablecloth, flickering candlelight, soft strings playing overhead with some old Sinatra song.

And her.

She's the centerpiece of the whole damn place.

Her eyes track everything with curiosity, but when they land on me, it's like everything else fades out. I doubt she realizes she's doing it, but she keeps brushing her fingertips against the edge of her water glass, like she needs something to anchor her.

Like I've unmoored her just by being here.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 1:53 am

And I can't deny the pride that swells up in my chest at the knowledge she seems to be just as affected by me as I am by her.

I take her in slowly, letting my eyes linger. The soft curves under her dress. The way her hair catches the light. The warmth in her face that doesn't belong to someone used to being admired like this.

But she will get used to it. I'll make sure of it. She's got an entire lifetime ahead of her now, with me showing her every day just how damn perfect she is.

The server comes and goes, scribbling down our orders and refilling our drinks before disappearing again. The moment we're alone, she reaches for her phone, fingers tapping nervously.

"Sorry, I just need to quickly text my dad," she says with a quiet smile. "He's expecting me home for dinner."

My ears sharpen at the mention of her father.

"Close, are you?" I ask, keeping my tone light. Curious. Like I'm just making small talk.

"Yeah," she says without hesitation. "Always have been. He's the best guy I know."

There's that warm smile again. The one that melts my fucking heart every time I see it. But I nod slowly, filing that information away. If I'm going to keep my angel safe, I'll need to know as much as possible about her and her family.

“What about your mom?”

Her expression shifts, just a flicker. Still soft, but touched with something that looks a lot like sadness.

“She died when I was really young,” she says. “But I have a stepmom now. Victoria. She’s great.”

I keep my jaw still as I have my suspicions confirmed. Her stepmom. My fingers wrap around the stem of my glass instead of curling into a fist.

Avery likes her. The woman who paid to have her killed. She thinks Victoria is great, and that makes my stomach turn.

To make things worse, that bitch is probably using the old man’s money to hire me to take out his daughter. The one he loves. The one he raised after losing his wife. Sick doesn’t even begin to cover it.

And meanwhile, Avery just sits there, glowing under candlelight, thinking the world is still a good place.

“Sounds like a solid family,” I finally manage, low and even.

Avery tilts her head slightly, studying me across the candlelight. “What about yours?”

It’s a simple question. Soft. Curious. But it lands like a brick to the chest.

I could lie. But something about the way she looks at me makes it feel impossible to give her anything but the truth.

I lean back in the booth and slide my fingers around the rim of my glass. “I didn’t

have much of one.”

Her eyes don’t widen. She doesn’t rush to fill the silence. She waits, just listening. So I keep going, slow at first. Careful.

“Bounced around foster homes growing up. Never stayed anywhere long enough to unpack. You learn early not to get too attached. People come and go, and if you let yourself care, it just hurts more when they disappear.”

Avery’s expression shifts, like I’ve handed her something fragile, and she’s holding it gently in her hands.

“So I joined the military the second I turned eighteen,” I continue. “I needed a way out. Somewhere to go that wasn’t just... waiting around to be unwanted again. The structure was good for me. It gave me purpose. Kept me focused.”

I never tell anyone this. Hell, half the time I pretend I don’t remember most of it. But for her, it just spills out. Like my past is begging to be known by her.

Her voice is soft. “And now?”

Now I kill people for money, angel.

But I don’t say that.

Instead, I give her a half-truth. “Now I work for myself. I still like the discipline. The quiet.”

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 1:53 am

She nods, then laughs softly, sounding nervous. “Can I tell you a secret?”

I keep my face neutral, but my pulse spikes. Does she know she’s in danger? Or does she know who I really am? I don’t trust myself to speak, so I nod my head, tilting the corners of my lips up into a smile for her.

Avery nibbles on her lower lip for a moment before speaking. “This is kind of my first real date, you know. Like... dinner, conversation, whatever else is supposed to happen.”

I blink, and the earth tilts. “Really?”

Her cheeks are bright red, her fingers still playing with the edge of her water glass. “You’re surprised,” she says, almost shyly.

“Of course I’m surprised,” I reply. “A girl as incredible as you. How is that possible?”

Her shoulders rise and fall in a tiny shrug. “I just never met anyone I liked enough to go out with, I guess.”

Jesus Christ.

Something primal and sharp detonates in my chest, and I vow to myself that I’ll give her every first she’s never had. Every damn one. And I’ll ruin her for anyone else while I do it.

“Well, then,” I say, leaning forward. “I guess we’ll just have to make it a good one, won’t we?”

Her smile is tentative. Cute as hell. “I guess so.”

For the rest of the date, I can’t stop staring at her lips while she’s talking. Can’t stop watching the way she tucks her hair behind her ear when she gets self-conscious. The way she laughs, her eyes shining with warmth and something unguarded.

I want to touch her. Constantly. My fingers twitch restlessly as I battle with the urge.

She starts talking about her job at the library and her favorite childhood books, but I’m only half-listening because my blood’s rushing like a drumbeat in my ears.

I bet my angel doesn’t even know what she’s doing to me.

When the plates are cleared and I’ve paid the bill, we step outside. The air is cooler than before, and stars are starting to blink in the night sky. She wraps her arms around herself, and I notice the goosebumps standing out on her bare arms.

I don’t have a jacket to give her. Didn’t think I’d need one. So I do the next best thing.

I slide an arm around her shoulders and pull her close to my side. Her body fits against mine like it belongs there. Like she was made to be tucked under my arm. She doesn’t pull away. In fact, she leans into me, warm and soft.

We walk a few steps, her heels tapping lightly on the sidewalk, her perfume wrapping around me like a goddamn drug. My jaw flexes. My patience frays.

I can’t take it anymore.

I stop walking and she tilts her head to look up at me, a question just forming in her eyes.

Before she can ask it, I back her into the shadows. Her back hits the brick wall with a soft thud, and I cage her in with my body. My hand slides to her waist, my other braced beside her head. Her breath catches as she looks up at me with wide eyes and parted lips, like she knows exactly what's about to happen.

I dip my head just enough for our faces to hover close.

"I've been thinking about doing this," I murmur, voice low and rough, "since the second I saw you."

Then I kiss her.

Not gently. Not cautiously.

Hard. Hungry. Like I've been starving for her for my entire life.

She gasps against my mouth, soft and startled, but she doesn't hesitate. Her hands fist in the front of my shirt, yanking me closer like she needs me the way I need her. It's not sweet. It's not careful. It's messy, wild, desperate.

She parts her lips and I take full advantage, deepening the kiss, claiming her mouth like it's mine. Because it is. The first swipe of my tongue against hers has her moaning into me, and Jesus, I feel that sound like a bullet to the spine. My hand curls around her waist, dragging her tighter against me, and I feel every soft curve press into me like she was carved to fit.

She tilts her head, angling for more, like she wants to drown in it. Hell, I'll let her. I'll gladly go under with her.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 1:53 am

I bring my hand up to her face, cupping her jaw to tilt her head further, kissing her harder, deeper, until her whole body is trembling. I can feel it. But she's not scared. She's burning, just like I am.

I kiss her deeper, slower, letting her feel every ounce of the heat I've been holding back. I want this imprinted on her. I want her lips swollen from my mouth. I want her walking away from the kiss and remembering exactly who she belongs to.

Because that's what this is. A claim.

I don't care who sees us. Let every bastard out there know she's got someone now. Someone who'll burn the goddamn world down if they so much as breathe near her.

When I finally pull back, it's only because I have to. Because if I don't, I'll take her right here, up against this wall, under the stars where anyone could see. And she deserves more than that for her first time.

She's breathing hard, lips kiss-bruised and parted, eyes glazed like she's still spinning somewhere between reality and whatever the hell just happened.

I rest my forehead against hers, jaw clenched tight, trying to get a grip on myself.

Trying, and failing, not to fall completely.

"Come back to my place tonight," I whisper against her lips.

Her lashes flutter. Her hands stay fisted in my shirt like she's afraid I'll vanish if she

lets go.

Avery hesitates. I feel the flicker of caution, or decency, maybe, trying to reassert itself. And that panic I never let anyone see surges up fast and hot.

I don't know what I'm going to do if she says no. I only know there is no way I can let her go home. Not when she's sleeping under the same roof as someone who wants her dead.

I'd never forgive myself.

Then she looks up at me, lips curling into a breathless smile that damn near knocks me off my feet.

"Okay," she says softly. "Yeah. Let's go."

Relief crashes through me like a tidal wave. I press a quick, almost reverent kiss to her lips before pulling back again.

Then I take her hand in mine, small and warm and perfect, and lead her toward the car, jaw tight with the effort it takes not to haul her over my shoulder and run.

Because she said yes, and now she's coming home with me.

And I don't think I'm ever letting her go.

Chapter Five

Avery

The door closes behind me with a soft, final-sounding click.

I stand just inside the entryway, frozen for a second, taking it all in. Dante's place is... stunning. All clean lines and expensive finishes, dim lighting casting everything in a soft, golden glow. It smells like him too, warm and masculine, and I'm not sure if I want to explore or just stand here and breathe in the scent of him like some kind of lovesick maniac.

I take a few hesitant steps forward, trying not to feel too out of place in a house that looks like it belongs in a magazine. My stomach flutters. I've never been in a home like this. I've never been on a date like that. I've never... done any of this.

My heart is still racing from the kiss outside the restaurant. From the way he's looked at me ever since he walked into the library earlier today. I fold my arms loosely over my stomach, suddenly aware of just how real this is. I'm in his house. With him. And I know exactly what's about to happen.

That's when I feel him step up behind me.

His arms slide around my waist, strong and sure, and every nerve in my body lights up like a switchboard. I don't have time to think before his lips find the side of my neck, soft at first. Like he's giving me a chance to stop him.

As if I could.

A tiny sound slips from my lips before I can catch it, and I feel his smile against my skin. My breath catches, legs going a little weak. Every last trace of nervousness burns away beneath the heat of his mouth. He kisses a spot just beneath my ear, and I swear something inside me melts.

"Relax," he murmurs, voice low and sinful against my skin. "You're with me now."

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 1:53 am

A shudder works through me, and then I'm leaning back into his chest, eyes drifting closed, surrendering to the moment. He kisses my neck again, a little harder this time. It's not enough.

He must sense that, because the next thing I know, he's turning me in his arms, pressing me against the wall as his lips find mine again.

God, his lips. They're firm and insistent, kissing me with a hunger that makes my stomach clench. His tongue slides against mine, slow and sensual, and it's the most intoxicating feeling. He tastes like scotch and the faintest hint of something dark and spicy. It's addicting.

One hand threads through my hair, cradling the back of my head, angling me just right to take the kiss deeper. He's still caging me in with his body, pinning me against the wall like he can't stand the thought of not touching me. I like that. The way his strength and size surround me. How it makes me feel safe and wanted all at once.

It feels natural, somehow. Like he's always supposed to be holding me this way.

I slide my hands up his chest and wind them around his neck, clinging to him, and the low noise he makes against my mouth is pure sex. His free hand finds the hem of my dress, his fingers skimming the backs of my thighs, and then his hands are sliding up under my skirt, cupping my ass through the thin fabric of my panties.

Oh, God.

I gasp into his mouth, and the corner of his lips turn up.

“I’ve been dying to do this,” he whispers. “I’ve been thinking about getting my hands on you all day.”

His words send a bolt of liquid heat straight between my thighs, and I rock my hips against him involuntarily. He groans, deep and primal, and I can feel his erection digging into my hip.

My head is spinning. I can’t believe I’m here, in his arms, being kissed senseless. I’m not sure I’m actually awake. Maybe this is a dream. Maybe...

My thoughts fracture and fall apart when his hands slide around to the front, and then his fingertips are grazing the insides of my thighs, tracing up, up, higher, until he’s brushing against the soaked fabric of my panties.

“I can’t wait to hear you moan my name, angel,” he whispers.

And then his fingers are there, sliding the fabric aside and stroking up against my clit.

My hips jerk, and a broken whimper slips out. I cling to his shoulders, trying not to melt completely into a puddle at his feet.

“Fuck, Avery. You’re already soaked for me.”

I don’t even try to reply. All I can do is hold on and kiss him back, trying to match the intensity. He kisses me deeper, stroking slow circles over the most sensitive part of my body, and I have to break the kiss, gasping, because oh, God, that feels good.

“Don’t stop,” I manage, the words barely more than a whisper.

His fingers keep moving, and I’m rocking against his hand, panting, lost in a haze of pleasure, when his fingers move lower, and then one thick digit is sliding inside me.

“Dante,” I gasp, clinging tighter to him.

“There it is,” he growls. “Just like that.”

And then his finger is thrusting slowly, dragging over spots inside me that make me tremble and whimper and arch my back. I’ve never felt anything like it. Never imagined it could feel this good.

Another finger joins the first, stretching me, filling me up, and his palm grinds against my clit with every slow thrust. I can’t stop the sounds that are coming from my throat. Can’t keep from writhing against his hand, needing him deeper, wanting more.

“I’m going to make you come so many times you’ll be lucky if you can walk straight tomorrow, Avery,” he growls against my ear.

If any other man had said that to me, I would have assumed they were all talk. But with the way Dante is expertly stroking his fingers inside me, hitting spots that make me tremble and shake, I have no doubt he’s going to make good on that promise.

“Let go, angel,” he whispers. “Just let go.”

And then his fingers are speeding up, hitting deeper, harder, and his mouth crashes down on mine. My entire body goes rigid, my cry muffled by his lips as the orgasm hits me. The world blurs around the edges, and the only thing I’m aware of is Dante and the feeling of him working me through the release.

He drags every last aftershock from me until the only thing holding me upright is his body pinning me against the wall. When the tremors finally die away, he’s pulling his fingers free. His hand disappears from under my skirt, but I’m too boneless and weak to protest.

He brings his fingers to his mouth and licks them clean, eyes locked on mine.
“Delicious.”

Heat explodes in my cheeks, and I have to look away, unable to handle how shamelessly sexy he is. He doesn't let me hide for long, though. He tilts my face back up, his mouth covering mine in a slow, thorough kiss that tastes like me.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 1:54 am

He pulls back with a smile.

“We’re just getting started,” he says, sliding an arm under my knees and lifting me off my feet.

My breath catches. His muscles bunch under my hands, and then we’re moving. He carries me effortlessly, despite the fact that I’m not exactly a lightweight. I bury my face in his neck, breathing him in, letting his warmth seep into me.

It doesn’t take long before we’re stepping into his bedroom. I only catch a glimpse of the dark wood and black bedding before I’m laid down gently on the sheets. He’s on top of me a second later, his big body pinning mine to the mattress, his mouth finding my neck.

I wrap my arms around him, letting him nip and suck, reveling in the sensation of his weight bearing down on me.

He’s got a hand up my dress again, and then his thumb is tracing slow circles over my clit while he kisses down my neck, over the tops of my breasts, along the edge of my dress. I can’t help arching up into his touch, gasping at the sensation, and then his hands are on the zipper at the side of my dress, working it down.

He’s tugging the fabric off, baring me inch by inch, and he’s so focused on the task that I have to fight the urge to cover myself with my hands. He’s undressing me like it’s a privilege, not a chore. Like he can’t wait to see all of me.

By the time the dress is tossed away, I’m trembling.

I've always been self-conscious of my body. Too curvy. Too much everywhere. My stomach is soft, my thighs full and thick. There are stretch marks on my hips and my breasts. I know men aren't interested in that.

I've never had a guy see me this way. Not completely bare and vulnerable.

"Christ," Dante says, staring down at me. His voice is thick and his eyes are darker than I've ever seen them.

Heat surges through me. He doesn't seem to mind. Not the curves, or the marks, or the imperfections.

In fact, he looks hungry. Starved.

"You're so fucking beautiful," he says, voice rough with emotion.

"I..."

He shakes his head, cutting off my words. "No. Don't even try to argue with me, Avery."

Then his lips are back on my skin, kissing a path down over the curve of my stomach, along the insides of my thighs, and I'm squirming against him, unsure how much more I can take.

His eyes flick up, finding mine. Holding them.

"You're going to come on my tongue," he says, and it's not a request.

He peels my panties off, sliding them down my legs before discarding them on the floor. Then his mouth is on me a second later, hot and insistent, licking and sucking,

and I'm lost. I fall back against the pillows, fingers tangling in his hair, hips rocking, chasing the feeling. He makes a low noise of approval, and the vibration makes my toes curl.

He licks and teases, making me writhe and whimper, his hands gripping my thighs hard, keeping me spread open. It's so filthy, and so hot, and so good. And the whole time, he keeps watching me, those dark eyes drinking in every sound and every reaction.

Like I'm the most gorgeous thing he's ever seen.

"Dante," I gasp, the word falling from my lips.

He groans, his mouth working faster, tongue lashing over my clit, and I'm arching off the bed, so close to the edge, my breath coming in shallow pants.

"Come for me, angel," he says, voice muffled.

And then he's licking me, faster and harder, his grip tightening on my thighs, and oh, God, I'm falling. I'm flying. I'm lost somewhere in a storm of pleasure, and his mouth is relentless, working me through it, only slowing when the aftershocks are finally done.

"You taste like fucking heaven," he says, his lips curving.

His mouth is wet with my release. My face is burning. My whole body is trembling and languid and sated, and yet, somehow, I still want more.

He moves up the bed, settling over me again, his lips finding mine.

"So sweet," he whispers. "I could get addicted."

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 1:54 am

A thrill shoots through me. Then his mouth is on mine again, kissing me like I'm his lifeline. Like he needs me. Like he's just as addicted as he claims.

His tongue is still flavored with me, and that realization has heat coiling in my stomach.

I'm the one who deepens the kiss. My legs part, wrapping around his waist, and the motion makes me gasp, because his erection is hard and thick and pressed right against the most sensitive part of me.

But he's still wearing far too many clothes. So I begin unbuttoning his shirt. I fumble a little, and his hand comes up to cover mine, helping me. He shrugs the shirt off, and then it's just skin and muscle and heat and strength.

He's all smooth lines and hard planes, the cut of his muscles clearly defined, and I can't help staring. My hand runs down his chest, exploring. His breath hitches, and I glance up. He's watching me, jaw clenched, eyes dark with hunger.

The bulge in his pants is impossible to miss, and suddenly, I can't focus on anything but that. I'm nervous and excited and scared and desperate all at once.

"Can I..." I bite my lip, glancing up at him. "Can I touch you, Dante?"

His nostrils flare, his jaw ticking. But he nods.

My hand drifts lower, fingers shaking a little as I undo the button on his pants. When the zipper is down, he shifts a little, helping me pull the pants down his hips and over

his thighs. He kicks them away, and then his cock is jutting up, thick and heavy and bigger than I expected.

I'm frozen for a second, just staring at it, wondering how that is supposed to fit.

Dante must read the nervousness on my face, because his lips quirk, and then his hand is threading through my hair, cradling the back of my head.

"Relax," he murmurs, dipping his head to kiss the side of my neck. "I'm going to take good care of you, angel. I promise it will feel so good."

And somehow, the tension does drain away. Because I trust him.

I reach out, wrapping my hand around his length. He lets out a low groan, and the sound is like fuel to the fire in my belly. I run my palm over him, feeling the soft skin and the throbbing heat, and it makes me ache between my thighs.

He kisses a path over my collarbone, down to my breast, taking my nipple into his mouth. I let out a startled moan, and he bites down, making a bolt of heat shoot straight between my legs. His tongue soothes the sting, and then his teeth are scraping over the sensitive peak, and I can't stop touching him.

I stroke him up and down, my thumb running over the swollen head, spreading the drops of liquid that have gathered there.

"Fuck, Avery," he groans against my skin, thrusting into my hand. "You keep that up and this is going to be over before it starts."

Then his hand is wrapped around my wrist, gently tugging my hand away.

I'm not disappointed for long. He positions himself between my thighs, the head of

his cock nudging gently against my soaked pussy lips.

“I’m going to make you mine now, angel. I’m going to pop your sweet cherry and then I’m going to flood your womb with my cum. Because once I’ve had you, I’m never, ever letting you go. I can’t.”

A shiver rolls down my spine. His eyes are dark and intense, his expression fierce, and I know he means every word.

His words should scare me. It’s too much, too soon. But it’s the sexiest thing I’ve ever heard.

“Please,” I whisper. “Please, Dante.”

And then he’s kissing me again, slow and deep and so tender it makes my chest ache. His hips move, and the head of his cock is right there, pushing slowly inside. I tense automatically, and he kisses me harder, deeper, until I relax.

“I’ll never hurt you, Avery,” he says against my lips.

“I know,” I tell him.

He groans and his hips move forward, pushing the thick, blunt head inside. It’s tight and a little uncomfortable, and then there’s a sharp pinch.

“Relax,” he growls.

And I do, sinking back into the pillows, giving myself over to him completely.

He slides in another inch, his breath coming harder.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 1:54 am

“God, Avery. You’re so fucking tight. You feel like heaven.”

I shift a little, trying to ease the pressure, and it pushes him deeper. He grits his teeth, his jaw clenching. I can see the strain on his face. I can tell how much it’s costing him to go slow. To let me get used to the intrusion.

I slide my hands down his back, digging my nails into his skin. “More,” I whisper.

“Angel,” he groans. “Don’t. I don’t know if I can be gentle much longer. You feel too fucking good.”

“More, Dante. Please.”

He swears under his breath, and then his hips are pressing forward, and oh, God, he’s so deep. I’m so full. It hurts, but in a way that makes me tremble, that makes a wave of liquid heat pool between my thighs.

His eyes lock on mine.

“Mine,” he says, his voice a low, possessive rumble.

Then he’s thrusting, and it hurts and feels incredible and I can’t catch my breath.

His pace is slow at first, dragging himself almost all the way out, until just the head is inside, and then sinking deep, bottoming out. He grinds against me with every thrust, his pelvis grinding over my clit, and soon, the pleasure is outweighing the discomfort.

My back arches, my hips moving to meet him, and his lips find mine, kissing me hungrily.

“You’re so perfect,” he whispers against my lips. “You were made for me.”

I can’t think. Can’t speak. I’m lost in him, clinging to him, rocking up into him, moaning with every stroke.

“That’s it, angel. Take my cock.”

“Yes,” I gasp, and his teeth scrape over my bottom lip.

“Such a good girl. My good girl.”

He’s thrusting faster now, harder, and my body is humming with need.

“Dante,” I say, my voice high and breathy. “Oh, God.”

“Are you going to come for me, angel? Are you going to let go and soak my cock with that sweet honey?”

“Please,” I say. “Please, Dante, yes. Oh, God, please.”

“Let go, Avery. Come for me.”

He slides a hand down between our bodies, his fingers stroking my clit, and oh, God, the sensations are too much. My back arches, my mouth opens in a silent cry, and then the orgasm is hitting me. It’s different than the last two, so much stronger. Wave after wave of pleasure, and the whole time, he’s working me through it, his hips thrusting, his lips at my ear, his words dirty and sexy and claiming.

“That’s it, Avery. Fuck. Yes. Soak my cock. Good girl. I want to feel your pussy squeezing me tight. Come all over me.”

He doesn’t stop, his fingers relentless on my clit, and oh, God, the climax won’t let up. The orgasm seems to stretch on forever, and by the time the tremors finally subside, I’m limp and panting and barely able to move.

Dante’s thrusts are coming harder now, faster. His face is strained, his jaw clenched, his muscles taut. He’s so beautiful. I can’t take my eyes off him.

“I’m going to fill you up, Avery,” he growls. “Are you ready for that? Ready for my cum?”

“Yes,” I whisper. “I want it. Please, Dante.”

The idea that I can please a man like him, that he wants me so much, is intoxicating.

“Christ, angel,” he says, and then he’s thrusting harder, and with a final deep stroke, he’s coming.

His entire body tenses, his cock pulsing, and the sensation of his release sends another wave of pleasure through me.

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 1:54 am

“Dante,” I say, gasping his name.

“Mine,” he growls.

His mouth covers mine, his tongue plunging between my lips, his cock jerking inside me, filling me.

When his release is finally over, he collapses beside me, gathering me in his arms. He rolls, putting me on top of him, and I settle against his chest, my head on his shoulder.

We lie like that, neither of us speaking. His hands are in my hair, and I can feel the beat of his heart under my cheek.

“I’ve got you, angel,” he murmurs, stroking my hair. “Forever. I’ll always take care of you and keep you safe.”

A small smile tugs at my lips, and I snuggle closer, letting the steady beat of his heart lull me to sleep.

Chapter Six

Dante

The library is quiet.

Late afternoon sun filters through the tall windows, gilding everything it touches in

soft gold. Dust hangs suspended in the air like time itself has slowed down. I'm sitting in one of the heavy leather chairs tucked into a corner, doing nothing but watching her.

Avery.

She's shelving books a few aisles over, not even aware of the absolute destruction she's causing just by existing in my line of sight. Her hair's tied up, loose strands curling against her cheek. She keeps tucking one behind her ear, and every time she does it, my blood gets hotter. I'm not even sure I've blinked in the last five minutes.

God, she looks good in that damn pencil skirt. And even better when she bends over to put a book on the bottom shelf. I swear she turns her back to me purposely every time she does it, showing off the delicious round curves of her ass. She might have been innocent when I first met her, but she's quickly turning into a little temptress.

And when it comes to my angel, I'm all too happy to be led into temptation.

It's been three days since she first came home with me. Three days of her in my bed, in my kitchen, in my space, soft and sweet and mine. She hasn't gone back to her house once, and I haven't let her out of my sight. I've spent every minute either touching her or aching to. I'm in too deep and I know it. But knowing doesn't stop the need.

And it sure as hell doesn't ease the guilt chewing its way through my chest.

She doesn't know I've been lying to her every minute we've spent together. Doesn't know the woman who married her father is trying to put her in the ground.

And I haven't done a damn thing to stop it... because I can't stop touching her long enough to think.

It should've been handled already. I should've gone to Victoria's house the day after Avery unofficially moved in with me and made sure she never so much as breathed in Avery's direction again. But I didn't. Because I didn't want to break the spell.

Because I'm selfish.

Because every time Avery looks at me with that wide, trusting smile, I feel like maybe I can be someone better. Like I can be the kind of man she deserves. If only for a little while longer.

But it's running out. That grace period. The peace. Eventually, I'm going to have to deal with the woman who paid me to murder the girl currently humming while she alphabetizes the romance section.

Avery glances up just then and catches me watching. Her face lights up like it always does when she sees me, and she gives a little wave like we're two teenagers at school instead of what we are... whatever the hell that is. Dangerous. Fragile. Collapsing.

And just like that, guilt slides sideways into something darker. Something hungrier. I shift in the chair, jaw clenched tight. I've been sitting here for hours just watching her move, and it's killing me. The way she walks. The way she talks to people. The way she looks at me like I'm the hero in this story and not the loaded gun she's unknowingly sleeping beside every night.

I want to get her out of here. Take her home. Bend her over the first surface I see and remind her that she belongs to me. That she chose me.

And God help me, I'll do it. Just as soon as the clock hits five.

The minutes crawl.

I spend them watching the tiny hand on the wall clock and pretending I'm not imagining Avery spread out across my bed again, gasping my name. Every passing second makes it worse. Every soft smile she throws my way across the room sinks its claws in deeper. She bites her lip as she shelves the last few books, and it's pure agony. I'm seconds away from dragging her out the door like a caveman.

Finally, the clock ticks to five.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 1:54 am

I'm already halfway out of my seat when I see her walking toward me, that little bounce in her step... but something in her expression flickers. Hesitation, nerves, maybe even guilt. When she stops in front of me, she's got that sweet, sheepish look on her face that always makes my chest do something stupid.

"I, um..." She brushes a curl behind her ear, avoiding my eyes for a second. "My dad called earlier. He wants us to come over for dinner tonight."

"Dinner? With... your dad?" I repeat slowly, already feeling my carefully plotted plans for the evening unravel.

"Yeah. He says it's time he meets the mystery man who's apparently swept me off my feet." She gives a soft laugh and shrugs. "I didn't know how to say no."

I'd had a very different kind of evening planned. One that involved her bent over every available surface in my home, soft and breathless and begging me to breed her. I'd been counting down the hours. Now I've got to trade all that for small talk and keeping my hands off her while pretending not to fantasize about spilling blood if Victoria so much as looks at Avery wrong.

Frustration pulses sharp and hot through my veins. But so does something else.

Relief.

Because maybe this is exactly what I need. A controlled environment. Her dad present. A perfect excuse to look Victoria in the eye and remind her that I'm not her hired killer anymore. I'm Avery's man now. Her protector.

She won't try anything with witnesses around. And if I play it cool, I can rattle her cage and still walk out of there with my girl safe at my side.

I drag in a breath, smoothing my face before she can pick up on the war in my head. Then I reach out, tucking a knuckle under her chin to make her meet my eyes.

"Of course," I say gently. "I can't wait to meet your dad."

Her bright smile is everything, and God help anyone who tries to take that from her.

The outside of the house is exactly what I expected.

Elegant. Expensive. Dressed up in false warmth like a stage set, meant to look lived in, but there's no soul in it. It's just manicured shrubs, and a front door so polished it probably has its own cleaning schedule.

Avery doesn't notice any of that. She's practically glowing as we walk up the front steps, her hand snug in mine, her excitement bleeding into every step. "He's gonna love you," she says with a smile, squeezing my fingers.

He better. I'm the reason his daughter's still breathing. For a second, a chill runs down my spine as I consider what might have happened if Victoria had chosen another man for the job. If some other hitman had gotten their hands on my angel.

The door opens before Avery can pull her keys from her purse, and there she is.

Victoria.

For a split second, she freezes. Her eyes find mine and the blood drains from her face

like someone pulled the plug on her bloodstream.

There is it. Recognition. Panic. But she hides it quickly behind a fake smile.

Avery doesn't notice. She's too busy smiling, too caught up in excitement to see the way Victoria stiffens like a deer staring down a scope.

"Hi," Avery chirps. "Victoria, this is Dante. My boyfriend."

I step forward, a polite smile in place, wrapping an arm around Avery's waist in silent warning.

"Nice to meet you," I say smoothly. "I've heard a lot about you."

Victoria's lashes flicker. Her lips curve up. "Have you?" she says, her voice sickly sweet.

Avery, oblivious to the undercurrent of venom threading the air, beams and looks between us. "Victoria married my dad five years ago, and we've been great friends ever since."

My jaw tightens, but I keep my smile fixed. "Is that so?"

Victoria laughs lightly, but her knuckles are white where she grips the door.

"Of course. What's not to love about Avery?" she asks, and I narrow my eyes at the scheming little bitch.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 1:54 am

Before I can answer, Victoria steps aside to let us in, plastering on a brittle grin like her world isn't quietly imploding in front of her eyes.

Avery leads me in, unaware that anything is wrong.

As we move deeper into the house, I take in every detail with a soldier's eye. Exit points. Sight lines. The weight of Victoria's stare burning into my back.

She knows she's not in control anymore. The game has changed, and she doesn't know the rules.

And I'm going to enjoy every second of watching her squirm.

"Dad!" Avery calls out as we enter the kitchen.

A tall man stands by the stove, stirring something in a pan that smells delicious. He's got silver hair at the temples and his eyes are warm when they land on Avery. His presence is calm, steady.

"Pumpkin," he says, smiling widely as he comes to pull his daughter into a hug. "There's my girl."

Pumpkin? That's cute. I make a mental note to tease her about that when we get home.

"This is Dante," she says, eyes shining.

He turns to him, hand outstretched. "I'm Graham. Avery's father."

I take his hand and give it a firm shake. "It's a pleasure, sir."

And it is. Because if he raised my angel alone, I've got no doubt that he's a good man. The kind that never deserved to be shackled to a venomous bitch like the one currently standing behind us, clenching her jaw so hard I can hear her teeth grinding.

I smile a little wider.

This dinner is going to be fun.

After a few minutes of idle chatter, we all move to the dining room. Avery takes the seat beside me, while Graham sits the other side of her, at the head of the table. Victoria settles on the other end, like the crownless queen she pretends to be.

Dinner is good.

The atmosphere is not.

The air is thick with a kind of civility that feels like a wire pulled too tight, one sharp tug away from snapping. The clink of cutlery, the soft murmur of conversation, the forced rhythm of shared small talk.

Victoria is porcelain. Polished. Brittle.

She sits at the far end of the table, wine glass in hand, eyes like glass shards every time they flick my way. She hasn't said much since we sat down, but she doesn't have to. Her silence is thick enough to choke on.

She watches me like I'm a bomb ticking down in her goddamn dining room.

Good.

Avery's father is the opposite. Warm, open, the kind of man who fills a room with presence instead of pretense. He asks about my time in the military, jokes about how fast Avery seems to have fallen for me, nudges her ribs when she turns pink and hides behind her water glass.

The love between them is real. It's obvious he adores her, and that the adoration is returned.

And something bitter twists low in my chest because he's good. A real father. The kind of man who'd lay down his life for his little girl without blinking, and he has no idea he's married to a predator who's trying to have her killed.

I chew, I nod, I smile in all the right places. But every other second, my eyes are drifting back to Avery.

She's so sweet. So happy. So goddamn trusting.

How the hell am I ever going to tell her the truth?

I don't get the chance to dwell on that for too long, because the clink of cutlery signals the end of the meal. Victoria stands and begins gathering plates with a brittle smile stretched too tight across her face.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 1:54 am

“I’ll help with that,” I say smoothly, rising from my seat.

Avery turns to look at me, all wide-eyed and grateful. “Are you sure?”

“Of course, angel.” I press a soft kiss to her temple and slide a hand down her back before collecting a few dishes. “Least I can do.”

Victoria doesn’t say a word as I follow her into the kitchen, but I can feel the heat rolling off her. Rage, fear, contempt. She sets the plates down by the sink with a controlled clatter, then spins on her heel to face me.

And there it is. The sneer. The malice.

“I had no idea becoming her boyfriend was part of your plan to kill her,” she hisses, voice low and venom-laced. “But I don’t care if you want to use the bitch before putting an end to her, I guess. Just don’t take too long about it. I paid you to do a job, after all.”

It’s so casual. So callous. So fucking cruel.

Something in me goes cold.

Not fiery, not explosive. Just frozen solid. A black, glacial fury that sharpens my edges and makes everything go still.

I step forward. Slowly.

Victoria takes an instinctive half-step back, but she's already boxed in, trapped between the edge of the counter and the weight of my presence. I don't touch her. I wouldn't want to.

"You really are a piece of work," I murmur, voice like cracked glass.

Her jaw tightens. I see her preparing a comeback, but I don't give her the chance.

"You want a status update on your little job, Victoria? Fine. Here it is." I lean in just enough to drop my voice to something lethal. "The job's off."

Her eyes flare. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me." I let a slow, grim smile stretch across my face. "I'm not hurting her. I'm not touching a single hair on her head. In fact, I'm going to spend every goddamn day making her smile. Making her feel safe. Loved. Worshiped."

Victoria's face twists with fury. "You little..."

"If you want your money back," I cut her off, "feel free to take me to court. I'd love to hear you explain to a judge exactly what you paid me for."

She goes rigid.

"And just so we're clear," I add, stepping even closer, "every cent you gave me? I'm going to spend it on her. Designer clothes. Vacations. A diamond ring the size of your spiteful little heart. It's all going to her."

I pause, letting the silence stretch like a blade between us.

"Now. Here's how this is going to go," I continue. "You're going to file for divorce.

And then you're going to leave the country. I don't care where. But if you're still within reach this time tomorrow..."

I let the threat dangle in the air like a noose.

I don't say the words. I don't have to.

Victoria's face has drained of color. Her lips are pressed so tight they're almost white, and her eyes, furious and gleaming, can't hide the flicker of fear underneath.

She doesn't speak.

She just stares at me like she's trying to hold her ground, trying to win some silent battle of wills.

But she's already lost.

Because she thought she'd hired a killer. But I'll become her executioner if I have to.

Chapter Seven

Avery

Dante follows Victoria out of the dining room, offering to help with the dishes. His hand brushes my spine as he passes, a fleeting touch meant to be affectionate, but it's tight. Tense.

Something changed in him as soon as he rose to his feet to help my stepmom. I saw it. I felt it.

And I don't know why, but it unsettles me.

Dad takes another sip of wine, smiling across the table. "So, he seems like a good guy."

"Yeah," I say, my voice softer than I mean it to be. "He really is."

Except that strange tension is still lingering like a shadow in my chest, and I can't seem to shake it.

"I think I'll go help too," I offer, standing and gathering two of the empty wine glasses from the table. "Victoria will have a fit if she thinks I'm just letting my boyfriend do all the heavy lifting."

Dad chuckles and nods, lifting his glass in mock salute. "Good idea, pumpkin. Should never piss off the lady of the house."

I smile, but it's a little strained around the edges. "Be right back."

I walk down the hallway with slow, careful steps. The glasses chime faintly in my hands.

The light from the dining room fades behind me, and the murmur of conversation disappears entirely. Ahead, the house is quiet, but not in a peaceful way. It feels like the silence before a storm.

Something about it makes me slow down.

I'm not sure why I pause a few steps from the kitchen door. Maybe it's the way my chest tightens, or the prickling sense that something is... wrong. Off. Like the air is too still. Like I've stepped into a moment I'm not supposed to witness.

And then I hear Victoria's voice, sharp and full of hate.

"I had no idea becoming her boyfriend was part of your plan to kill her. But I don't care if you want to use the bitch before putting an end to her, I guess. Just don't take too long about it. I paid you to do a job, after all."

My entire body goes still, like the air just got sucked out of my lungs. My heart lurches so hard I swear I hear it thud against my ribs. I can't breathe. I can't think.

Did I... hear that right? He plans to kill me?

My knees feel like they're going to buckle.

I flatten myself silently against the wall beside the kitchen doorway, gripping the glasses so hard I'm amazed they haven't shattered already.

Victoria hired someone to kill me?

She hired Dante...

No. That can't be right.

The man who made me laugh. The man who devoured every inch of me like he could never get enough. The man who pulled me closer in his sleep like he was afraid I'd disappear.

That man is a killer?

My thoughts spiral in a dizzy, chaotic rush.

Was I just a job? Is he still planning to kill me? How could he treat me the way he has and call me his angel if he was only going to hurt me?

I don't even realize I'm crying until I taste the salt on my lips. And then I hear his voice.

"You really are a piece of work."

There's a pause, and I squeeze my eyes shut, bracing for whatever's coming next.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 1:54 am

“You want a status update on your little job, Victoria? Fine. Here it is. The job’s off.”

“Excuse me?” Victoria’s sharp intake of breath makes me flinch.

“You heard me. I’m not hurting her. I’m not touching a single hair on her head. In fact, I’m going to spend every goddamn day making her smile. Making her feel safe. Loved. Worshiped.”

My breath hitches. My heart breaks.

“You little...”

“If you want your money back, feel free to take me to court. I’d love to hear you explain to a judge exactly what you paid me for.”

Another pause. A quiet one. I imagine her face, pale and furious.

“And just so we’re clear, every cent you gave me? I’m going to spend it on her. Designer clothes. Vacations. A diamond ring the size of your spiteful little heart. It’s all going to her.”

The glasses shake in my grip.

He’s not going to kill me.

That should be a relief. And in some way, it is. But it’s buried beneath so many layers of shock and betrayal and heartbreak that I can’t even feel it properly.

He's a killer.

He was supposed to be my killer.

And now what? He just decided... not to be? Why?

The hands that touched me so tenderly are the same hands that have ended lives. And yet he says he loves me. That he wants to worship me.

I don't know what to do with any of this.

My chest hurts so badly it feels like it might split in two.

I stumble back from the kitchen, trying to keep the glasses from clinking, but they still knock faintly together. The sound cuts through me like a blade.

I need to get out of here. Now.

I rush back down the hallway, tears falling freely. The moment I reach the dining room, I move straight to the table and set the glasses down far too hard. They shatter into pieces, and the sound is so jarring that Dad jerks his head up.

"Avery? Pumpkin, what's wrong?"

But I can't speak. My voice is gone, buried under the weight of everything I just heard. So I just shake my head and grab my purse with trembling hands.

"Avery!" he calls, alarmed. "Talk to me, pumpkin, please. Tell me what happened?"

But I can't. I can't talk. Can't breathe.

I run.

The night air slaps my face as I burst outside. The porch lights blur through the flood of tears clouding my vision.

I fumble with my keys, dropping them once before I manage to shove them into the lock and climb into my car.

My hands are shaking so badly I can barely hold the wheel. I start the engine and pull away.

I don't know where I'm going. I just know I can't stay.

Chapter Eight

Dante

Victoria's glare is venomous, but I don't flinch. I meet it with the same cold fury, the kind that burns quiet and deep, the kind that doesn't lash out until it's already too late. The air between us crackles. I could choke on the tension.

But before either of us can speak again, the kitchen door swings open hard enough to rattle the frame. Graham barrels in, breath short, face lined with panic.

"What the hell is going on?" he demands. "Avery came to help you two, and then she just left the house in tears. She wouldn't even speak to me. So what happened?"

My stomach drops like I've taken a bullet.

She heard.

Panic seizes my chest with iron claws, and my heartbeat turns to thunder. Shit. She must have heard everything.

I need to move fast. There's no time for explanations. No time for anything but getting to my angel.

"Ask your wife," I snap, slicing a look toward Victoria that's all venom and malice.

Victoria shifts, blocking the path between me and the door like she's considering stopping me. She doesn't know me well enough to realize what a huge mistake that is.

I hold out my hand. “Give me your car keys. We came in Avery’s car tonight, so I need to borrow yours.”

She hesitates.

My gaze darkens and I take one step forward. Just one.

Victoria stiffens. My message is clear: Try me, and you’ll regret it. Graham takes a step forward, too, and I have to respect him for that. He’s just as willing to protect his woman as I am mine, even if his woman is a disgusting excuse for a human being. But that’s not his fault.

“It’s fine,” she says to Graham as she drops the keys into my palm.

I don’t say another word. I’m out the door in seconds, the echo of Graham’s voice behind me rising in demand as the front door slams shut.

The second I get behind the wheel, I yank my phone from my jacket and open the app. A little black icon, hidden behind a folder labeled “Documents.” Not for spying. For safety.

I’d synced it to Avery’s phone the first night she stayed at my place, so that if we ever did get separated for any reason, then I’d be able to find her. And right now, I’m so fucking glad I did.

The tracker kicks in and a dot glows on the screen. It’s moving.

I peel out of the driveway fast enough to make the tires scream. Headlights slash through the dark. My focus tunnels. All I’m aware of is the dot on the screen, the trembling steering wheel beneath my hands, and the raw prayer screaming through my skull:

Please let her be okay. Let her forgive me. Let me make this right.

After driving for several minutes, she stops moving.

The address loads, and it's some seedy, grimy roadside motel on the outskirts of town. One of those places where the neon "vacancy" sign is half-lit and flickering, and the walls are thin enough to bleed regret through the drywall.

Fuck.

My blood surges hot and fast. My girl, my sweet angel, went to a dirty, run-down motel? Alone? God knows what kind of people hang around places like that. Just the thought of her spending the night behind one of those rotting doors, terrified and crying, makes me want to tear the world apart.

I push the pedal down harder, suddenly even more desperate to get to her.

My tires screech as I skid to a stop in the parking lot. The smell of smoke and alcohol and despair hits me as soon as I open the door. I slam it behind me, stalking past the line of broken-down cars toward the room at the end.

Her car is parked in the corner.

I rap sharply on the door, jaw tight. "Avery?"

Silence.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 1:54 am

My heart clenches. “Angel, please, open the door. We need to talk.”

The knob clicks, and then the door creaks open. She’s standing there with red-rimmed eyes and blotchy cheeks. Her shoulders are trembling like she’s barely holding herself together.

And fuck, it feels like something inside me breaks clean in two. I caused that. Caused the pain and fear that’s written all over her face. I vowed to protect her, and it’s clear I’ve done a shitty job.

I step inside slowly and close the door behind me. Then I drop to my knees, willing to do whatever it takes to make her believe how sorry I am for everything I’ve done.

I look up at her, my voice raw. “I know what you heard. I know what it sounded like. But I swear to you, Avery, I was never going to hurt you.”

She says nothing. Just watches me. Silent. Cautious. Fragile.

“I agreed to the job before I ever saw your face,” I continue, words tumbling out now, like the idea of keeping anything from her ever again is the most abhorrent thing in the world. “But the second I saw your photo, I knew I could never go through with it. I couldn’t lay a finger on you. All I wanted to do was keep you safe. Protect you from Victoria. And punish her for even thinking about hurting you.”

Still, Avery doesn’t speak. She won’t even look at me.

Finally, I hear that sweet voice I love, so soft and unsure it shreds me a little more.

“Even if you’re not going to hurt me... you still kill people for a living, Dante. You’re not the man I thought you were.”

I close my eyes. Now that cut deep, but I don’t blame her. I’m the one who screwed up. But even now I can’t bring myself to regret being a hitman, because if that part of my life had never happened, I might never have met her. My beautiful angel.

“You’re right,” I say, my voice broken. “I was a killer. I’ve done things that are unforgivable.”

I look up again, holding her gaze.

“But you... you changed everything, Avery. You made me want more than the life I had. You made me want to be someone better. Someone worthy of you.”

I shift slightly, still kneeling. My voice softens, nearly cracks.

“I swear to you, I’m done. No more jobs. No more killing. That part of my life is over. I don’t want blood on my hands anymore. I just want you.”

I paint the dream like it’s already real, because in my mind, it is.

“I want a wedding. I want to wake up next to you every morning in a home we built together. I want little feet running through the hallway, a backyard full of laughter. I want to spend every day loving you, taking care of you, giving you every damn thing you ever wanted.”

A silence stretches between us, thick and uncertain, before she finally finds her voice again.

“You promise there won’t be any more killing?” she asks. Small. Hopeful. Scared.

I don't hesitate. "I promise. On everything. On my life, Avery. I swear it."

She starts pacing the room, still trembling, like she's walking through the wreckage of a storm. Then she turns back to me.

"And... everything you felt for me?" Her voice catches. "It was real? It wasn't just some game you were playing to try and get close to me? So you could hurt me?"

That one fucking destroys me.

I shake my head fiercely. "No. God, no. Avery, you're the only thing in my life that's ever felt real. There was no game. No con. No pretending."

I take a deep breath, ready to lay my heart bare. "I'm in love with you. And I will spend every day of my life proving it. Giving you the world. Protecting you. Worshipping you. Loving you. Until there's nothing left of me."

She stands frozen for a moment. Then, slowly, she steps forward, her eyes never leaving mine.

She lowers herself down until we're face-to-face again, both on our knees.

"Kiss me," she whispers. "I don't want to think about this anymore. I just want to feel your love. Make me believe in it again."

I don't hesitate.

Page 23

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 1:54 am

Our mouths collide, and it's a clash of pain and hunger and raw, aching relief. We devour each other, like we're trying to consume all the hurt between us and replace it with nothing but heat and hope and forgiveness.

I wrap my arms around her waist and pull her closer, kissing her so hard she gasps, but I don't let up. She presses herself against me, and the feel of her body, so perfect and soft, is enough to make my heart lurch in my chest.

She needs this. Needs the connection, the reassurance that this is real. That we're real. And I'll give her whatever the fuck she needs. Always.

I grip her hair and tilt her head back, angling her mouth for a deeper kiss. Her fingers twist in my shirt, clinging, pulling. She's so hungry. So desperate. It breaks my fucking heart, knowing how much pain I put her through.

I pull back a little, pressing kisses down her jaw and throat. "Let me worship you, angel," I breathe. "I'll show you exactly how much I love you. How much I want you. Just let me take care of you."

She nods, and relief washes over me.

My angel still wants me, after everything I've done. And now it's time for me to claim her properly, with no secrets lingering between us.

Chapter Nine

Dante

We're on the bed a moment later, tangled up in each other, clothes ripping, breaths coming short and fast.

There's no finesse, no slow seduction. It's messy and needy and almost violent. Our kisses are deep and bruising.

She claws at me, moans into my mouth, writhes beneath me.

"Tell me," she breathes. "Tell me again."

"I love you," I rasp, kissing down her throat. "Only you, Avery. Fuck. Always you."

My hands find the buttons on her shirt and I tear them open, baring the lacy bra underneath. The sight of her breasts makes my cock surge, and a low groan slips from my lips.

"You're so fucking beautiful," I growl. "Every inch of you."

She shivers, and I slip her bra down, baring her breasts. They're gorgeous, round and flushed, the rosy pink tips already hard. I take one nipple in my mouth and suck, and the sound that falls from her lips makes my entire body burn.

Fuck.

I bite down gently, and her back arches.

"Oh god," she whimpers.

I release her breast and kiss my way down her soft belly, dragging her skirt and panties off in one tug. The sight of her naked on the bed makes my pulse spike. She's so goddamn perfect. It's like every curve was sculpted by the gods themselves, just

for me.

I strip my own clothes away, and she reaches for me. Her touch is so gentle, so careful. It feels like absolution.

I'm going to prove how much I love her. With my tongue. With my hands. With every single cell in my body.

I spread her legs, my breath catching when I see the pink folds of her pussy glistening in the lamplight. She's dripping wet. The sight is so fucking gorgeous that my cock throbs painfully.

"So fucking beautiful," I murmur, dropping my head.

I kiss along her inner thigh, my lips tracing the delicate silver lines mapped out on her skin like I'm memorizing them. Her breath catches. She's trembling, but I know it's not fear this time. It's pure, undiluted need.

"Please," she whispers, arching toward me.

She doesn't have to beg.

I swipe my tongue over her wet slit, and her taste floods my mouth. Sweet and warm. Addictive. I drag the flat of my tongue through her folds again, savoring every moan, every sigh, every twitch of her hips.

"Fuck," she whimpers. "Oh god..."

Page 24

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 1:54 am

I lick her again and again, stroking my tongue against her clit. Her moans grow louder, and the taste of her slick pussy is so fucking good.

But it's not enough.

I have to show her, to really prove that she's the only woman I'll ever want.

So I reach down and wrap a hand around my aching shaft, pumping once, twice. Then I position my hips between hers and rub the swollen tip of my cock against her pussy, spreading her slickness.

She gasps, and I look up, watching her expression. She's biting her lip, her eyes glazed and wild.

"Do you want this, angel?" I ask roughly. "Do you want to feel every inch of me? You want me to fill you up and claim you properly?"

She nods, frantic. "Yes. God, yes."

I slide my hands under her ass and lift her hips, bringing her closer. Her legs hook around my waist.

"You're the only one," I tell her, and the words are so fucking true that it hurts. "The only one I've ever wanted like this. And the only one I ever will. Understand?"

She nods, and there's something in her expression, something so vulnerable and raw, that it nearly guts me.

“I’m yours,” she whispers.

“Yes,” I growl. “You’re fucking mine, and I’m never letting you go.”

She shudders, and I ease the tip of my cock inside her, feeling her hot walls flutter around me. She’s so tight. So wet. I slide in further, stretching her inch by inch.

“You feel so fucking good, angel.” I groan. “I could never hurt you. I can’t live without you. Not now. Not ever.”

A moan spills from her lips, and she arches, her hips pressing into mine.

I push deeper, burying myself inside her. And then I begin to move.

There’s no gentleness. No holding back. Just raw animal need. I drive into her again and again, her pussy clenching around my shaft. The bed rocks and squeaks beneath us.

“Yes,” she gasps. “Oh god, Dante... harder, please...”

I slam into her, my thrusts rough and deep, and the way she moans, the way she clings to me, tells me she loves every second of it.

She’s mine.

Completely.

I’ll protect her, care for her, love her. Give her everything she needs. For the rest of our lives.

I grind my hips into hers, making sure she feels every inch of my cock. Every stroke

takes her higher, and her breath comes in ragged gasps, her body tensing. She's close, and I want to feel her come. Want to feel her pussy milking my cock as she comes apart beneath me.

"I'm going to fill you with my seed, Avery," I groan, my voice so rough it almost sounds like a growl. "I'm going to plant my child inside you, so everyone knows who you belong to. And I'm going to watch you grow round with our baby, knowing I'm the one who made you a mother. Knowing I'm the only man lucky enough to have been inside you like this. Fuck, angel, just thinking about it is going to make me come."

My words are filthy, possessive, but she responds to them, crying out as her climax hits.

"Oh god," she sobs, her back arching off the bed. "Yes, Dante. Come inside me. Make me yours. I love you, I love you so much."

I can't hold back.

The second her pussy clamps down around me, I'm done.

I groan and drive into her, my cock pulsing as I spill myself inside her, filling her with jet after jet of my hot seed. My hips keep pumping, drawing out every drop, until I finally collapse on top of her, spent.

Our chests rise and fall together, and we lie there in silence, tangled up in each other.

It feels so right.

She feels so right.

“I love you,” I whisper again, kissing her throat. “Forever.”

“And I love you,” she says, her voice soft.

There’s a new note in it, though. A hint of worry.

“What’s wrong, angel?”

She bites her lip. “Victoria...”

“She’s not going to hurt you,” I promise. “Not now. Not ever. She’s not going to touch you, Avery. And neither is anybody else. I won’t let anyone lay a finger on you.”

She smiles. “My protector.”

“Always,” I say, without hesitation. “That’s my only purpose now. That, and filling you with plenty of babies in the future.”

She grins softly and leans in to press her mouth to mine, sealing the vow.

Epilogue

Avery

The early morning light filters through the sheer curtains, painting golden stripes across our bedroom walls. The world is still asleep, wrapped in silence, but I'm wide awake, curled on my side, watching the rise and fall of Dante's chest beside me.

He looks so peaceful when he sleeps.

One big arm is thrown lazily across my waist, fingers curled possessively around the sheet like even in dreams, he's holding on to me. His face is slack with rest, all that hard-edged intensity softened in sleep. But even now, he's beautiful. My husband. My protector. My heart.

It's been just over a year since the night everything shattered... and then was remade.

And I never once looked back. Dante never gave me a reason to.

From the moment I opened that motel room door, to the moment he slid a wedding ring onto my finger only four weeks later at a quiet lakeside wedding, he's never let me question whether I made the right choice.

He's never let me feel alone, or unsafe, or unloved.

Even when I'm wrapped in his arms, even when he's got our daughter resting on his chest, I know his eyes are always open to the world. Watching. Guarding. Waiting for anything or anyone who might try to take what he calls his.

Victoria did file for divorce. And she disappeared not long after.

No one's seen her in nearly a year, and part of me still braces for the day she might crawl out from under whatever rock she slithered to. But Dante's always watching.

He's always ready. And she's been smart enough to keep her distance.

It doesn't haunt me anymore.

My dad was stunned when he was handed the divorce papers, but he still doesn't know the truth about what Victoria did. I couldn't bring myself to tell him, because I didn't want him to think badly of Dante. Because that's not who he is anymore. He's changed, and I want my dad to love him almost as much as I do.

I breathe in deeply, soaking in this moment. This quiet, perfect morning. The man beside me. The family we've built.

My hand drifts down to my stomach, where I feel a flutter of nervous excitement. Because I think it's happened. Again.

My period's not even late yet, but my body feels familiar. The same soreness in my breasts. That same sleepy haze that's been sitting behind my eyes all week.

And call it mother's intuition, but I just know.

I slip out of bed quietly, careful not to wake him. He grumbles in his sleep but doesn't stir. I smile to myself as I pad into the bathroom, shutting the door behind me.

Page 26

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 1:54 am

I already bought the test. It's hidden beneath the sink, just in case. I rip the box open with shaking fingers, my heart hammering in my chest.

Two minutes later, I'm staring down at two pink lines.

Positive.

I press my palm to my mouth, joy and disbelief bubbling in my throat.

I'm pregnant. Again. And this time, there's no fear. No uncertainty. Just love.

I practically float down the hallway, bare feet silent against the hardwood floors, the test clutched in my hand, and my heart beating louder with every step. When I reach our bedroom, the bed is empty. A smile spreads across my face, because I already know where I'll find him.

Sure enough, I peek into the nursery and my entire body melts at the sight.

Dante's sitting in the rocking chair, shirtless, with our three-month-old daughter curled against his bare chest. She's swaddled like a little burrito, her head nestled beneath his chin.

He's whispering to her, his voice a low rumble.

"Don't let those boys mess with you when you get older," he's saying. "Daddy will take care of them. No one will ever be good enough for you. Not a single person on this earth."

I smile, my eyes stinging with tears.

He gently strokes her soft, pink cheek with his fingertip, a world of devotion in every movement. My heart cracks wide open.

And then his head lifts. Our eyes meet.

His smile is slow, sleepy, devastating. “Hey, angel. I was wondering where you’d gone.”

I step into the room, heart in my throat. “I, uh... I have news.”

He stands carefully, never jostling the baby, and crosses to me with his brows raised in question. I hold up the test. His gaze drops, taking in those two pink lines, and then his face lights up.

His eyes snap back up to mine. And what I see there takes my breath away.

“Another one? Already?”

I nod, laughing through the happy tears. “Apparently your swimmers don’t waste time.”

He gives a growl of satisfaction, leaning in to kiss me deeply, then again, then again, until we’re both laughing against each other’s mouths. “Of course you’re already pregnant again,” he murmurs. “My fertile little goddess. You were made to carry my babies.”

I cup his cheek, brushing my thumb along his jaw. “You’re not... overwhelmed?”

“Are you kidding?” he breathes, looking down at our daughter, then at the test again. “I’m the luckiest bastard on Earth.”

He shifts the baby into one arm and pulls me into his other, holding us both like the whole world lives in this room. “We’re gonna need a bigger house,” he murmurs, dropping a kiss onto my head. “Because I can’t wait to fill it with more kids.”

My heart bursts.

“We could buy a place in the country,” I suggest, leaning into his chest. “Maybe with some land. Lots of room to run and play.”

“Anything you want, angel. It’s yours.”

He kisses me again, and I sigh, so full of contentment and joy that it threatens to burst right out of my skin.

“I love you,” I whisper, meaning it.

“I love you,” he murmurs back, the words pressed into my skin. “To the moon and back, Avery. Forever.”

And I know he means it.

This man loves me. Protects me. Worships me. And no matter what life throws our way, I know that will never change.
